

Alcohol use in Western Australia

Young people's drinking patterns and harms.

Alcohol causes significant harm to individuals, families and communities. Alcohol-related harm is a whole-of-community problem that impacts on young people in a range of ways. This factsheet provides key information about 12-17 year olds' drinking patterns and harms experienced from their own and others' alcohol use. Where information about 12-17 year olds is not available, the factsheet summarises information about 12-25 year olds' alcohol use and harms experienced.

National guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol recommend that children and people under 18 should not drink alcohol.¹

Fewer young people are drinking alcohol

The average age at which young people are trying alcohol has steadily increased from **14.7 years** in 2001 to **16.2 years** in 2019.²

In some countries, including Australia, we are seeing declining rates of young people drinking. The reasons behind this shift are being explored and are not yet fully understood. Researchers have suggested a number of possible explanations, including:

- » Social and cultural norms around alcohol have shifted in some countries. Policy changes around the availability of alcohol, government investment in prevention and health promotion in schools and communities, and lower levels of community approval of alcohol use by young people are increasing awareness that alcohol is a harmful product.³
- » Parents play an important role in young people's drinking, and changes in parenting practices, including parental supervision, lack of provision of alcohol, and relationships with children are associated with delayed drinking among young people.^{4,5}

- » Changes in the way young people spend their leisure time, including increased time spent online, playing video games, or watching streamed video content may have resulted in less time for or interest in drinking.³
- » Young people are more health-focussed, which may have contributed to alcohol being seen as a harmful product.³
- » Young people could be drinking less as a reaction against the very visible alcohol-related problems in earlier years.³

Young Western Australians are delaying alcohol use and more are not drinking alcohol

- » The proportion of WA school students aged 12-17 not drinking alcohol has more than tripled over the past two decades.



In 2017, **38%** of school students reported never having drunk alcohol,



in 1999, only **1 in 10** reported never having drunk alcohol.⁵

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- » WA students who drank alcohol in 2017 were doing so less often than in previous years. Between 1999 and 2017, the proportion of school students who reported drinking alcohol in the past year had reduced from **74%** to **41%**, in past month had reduced from **51%** to **23%**, and in the past week from **36%** to **15%**.⁵

Cause for concern remains about WA young people's alcohol use



- » **3 in 10** (29%) school students who drank alcohol in the past week (15%) drank at levels considered risky for single occasion harm for adults in 2017. There has been little change in the proportion of students drinking at risky levels over the past two decades.⁵
- » The average number of drinks that school students aged 12-17 years drank over the past week has increased from **4.8** in 1984 to **6.1** in 2017.⁵
- » The heaviest drinking 14-19 year olds started drinking around **two years earlier** (14 years) than the national average (16 years).⁶

Of WA school students who drank at levels considered risky for adults during the past week:



boys drank an average of 19 standard drinks in a single occasion,



girls drank an average of 9 standard drinks in a single occasion.⁵

- » In a 15-year Australian prospective cohort study, the overwhelming majority of adolescent binge drinkers, those who drank 5+ standard drinks on a day, continued to binge drink in young adulthood (**90%** of males and **70%** of females).⁷

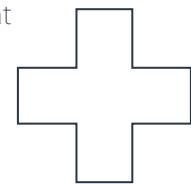
WA young people's attitudes towards alcohol are still of concern

In 2019, among the 150 12-17 year old West Australians surveyed:

- 40%** reported that 'it's okay to get drunk occasionally'.
- 39%** reported that 'drinking alcohol makes things more fun'.
- 24%** reported that 'getting drunk is mostly harmless fun for people my age'.
- 22%** reported that 'it's okay to occasionally lose control when drunk'.
- 19%** reported that 'their friends sometimes pressure them to drink alcohol'.
- 32%** reported 'feeling left out if they don't drink alcohol'.

Young people experience a range of harms from their own drinking

- » Alcohol remains the largest risk factor for death and injury in adolescents.⁹
- » **9** ambulances were called to treat intoxicated Western Australians aged 18 years and younger every week in 2017 (**493** ambulance call-outs). This figure does not include call-outs for other alcohol-related harms such as falls, assaults, and road crashes.¹⁰
- » Between 2012 and 2016, it is estimated that there were **3,100** alcohol-related hospitalisations for 12-17 year olds in WA, representing **10,259** bed days.¹¹



Of WA school students aged 12-17 years who drank recently:

- » **23%** reported arguing
- » **34%** reported vomiting
- » **13%** reported hitting someone or having a fight.¹²

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- » **16%** of WA's heaviest drinkers aged 14-19 years have been injured due to their drinking.²⁷
- » On average, 4 young people aged 15-24 years lose their life to drowning and a further 10 are hospitalised following a non-fatal drowning each year in WA.¹³ Alcohol contributes to **30%** of drownings among young people in WA.¹³ **93%** of young people who drown under the influence of alcohol are males.
- » **7.4%** of 16-17 year old P-plater drivers reported driving when probably affected by alcohol in their previous 10 trips in 2018.¹⁴
- » Young people aged 25 years and younger accounted for **30%** of all deaths on WA roads where alcohol was suspected to be involved between 2010 and 2016.¹⁵
- » The brain continues to develop into the early 20s. Risky drinking can irreparably damage the developing brain, leading to problems with memory, planning and organisation, impulse control and mood regulation.¹⁶
- » **20%** of WA's heaviest drinkers aged 14-19 years reported not being able to remember large stretches of time while drinking heavily.²⁷
- » Alcohol use can affect young people's sleep. **39%** of the heaviest drinking 14-19 year olds reported clinically significant insomnia symptoms.¹⁷

School leavers' celebrations have been associated with high-risk drinking behaviours among young people. Of those WA young people who attended Leavers celebrations in 2009:^{18,19}

- » **More than half drank at least 11 standard drinks a day;**
- » **87% drank more than 4 standard drinks a day which is considered risky for adults;**
- » **58% had a blackout;**
- » **41% had an accident or injury;**
- » **21% had sex they later regretted; and**
- » **14% had unprotected sex.**

Young people experience a range of harms from others' drinking

- » Younger people are more likely to be victims of alcohol-related incidents including verbal abuse, physical abuse, or being put in fear by someone under the influence of alcohol. In 2019 these percentages of young people had been a victim of an alcohol-related incident²:
- 
- 1 in 8** (12%) 12-17 year olds.
- 
- 1 in 3** (34%) 18-24 year olds.
- » Young people aged 14-19 years who are risky drinkers are three times more likely to experience harms due to another person's drinking than young people of the same age in the general population.²⁰
 - » More than **70%** of teenage girls who are risky drinkers report unwanted sexual attention from other drinkers.²⁰

42% of Australia's heaviest drinkers aged 14-19 years have been harassed in a public place.

31% have been left alone in an unsafe situation.

33% have been placed in a state of fear because of someone else's drinking.²⁰



- » **1 in 10** Australian teenagers aged 16-17 years had been the passenger of a driver who was under the influence of alcohol or drugs in the past year in 2018.¹⁴

- » **526** WA males aged 15-29 years were hospitalised due to alcohol-related assault in 2012-13; this age group is at the highest risk of alcohol-related assaults. WA males aged 20-29 years are hospitalised at a rate that is more than double the state average and triple the national average.²¹

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- » Alcohol use during pregnancy is a leading cause of preventable birth defects, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).²²
- » The prevalence of FASD in Australia or WA is not known. Australia's first ever prevalence study of FASD was conducted in Fitzroy Crossing in WA



1 in 5 children born in the region has FASD, one of the highest prevalence rates in the world.²³

- » **36%** of young people in a detention centre in WA were diagnosed with FASD. Given the challenges with a FASD diagnosis, this is likely to be an underestimate.²⁴
- » **3.5%** of Australians reported that a child under their care was physically hurt or exposed to family violence related to someone else's drinking. This figure does not include less severe harms like neglect and verbal abuse.²⁵

Over a million Australian children (22%) are estimated to be affected in some way by the drinking of others, and over 10,000 children are in the child protection system because of a carer's drinking.²⁵

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