



# **WA'S HIDDEN CRISIS: HARM FROM ALCOHOL**

**Alcohol-related harm is unacceptably high in WA. The time to act is now.**

**MAY 2022**

# RELEASED ON BEHALF OF THE FOLLOWING ORGANISATIONS



## OTHER SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS

Aboriginal Health Council  
of Western Australia

Advocare

Child and Family Alliance

Community Employers WA

Community Skills WA

Connect Groups

Consumers of Mental Health WA

Council on the Ageing WA Inc

Health Consumers' Council WA Inc

Linkwest

Men's Health and Wellbeing WA

Men's Sheds of WA

National Disability Services WA

Noongar Family Safety and  
Wellbeing Council

Peel Community Development Group

People With Disabilities WA Inc

Playgroup WA

Shelter WA

Social Reinvestment WA

Stopping Family Violence

Volunteering WA

WA Association for Mental Health

Western Australian Council  
of Social Service

Centre for Women's Safety and  
Wellbeing

Youth Affairs Council of WA

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We sincerely thank the above organisations for their input into the report and commitment to action on alcohol-related harm in Western Australia.

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# THE PROBLEM

As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated so clearly over the past two years, the health and wellbeing of our communities should always be our top priority. WA's approach to the pandemic has been based on the best available evidence and health advice and has been a success.

But a hidden crisis has been escalating in our state. Not enough is being done to prevent the growing harms fuelled by alcohol in our community. Harm from alcohol is unacceptably high in WA. It may not make the headlines but harm from alcohol is well known to the doctors and nurses in our emergency departments and first responders on our roads and in our homes.

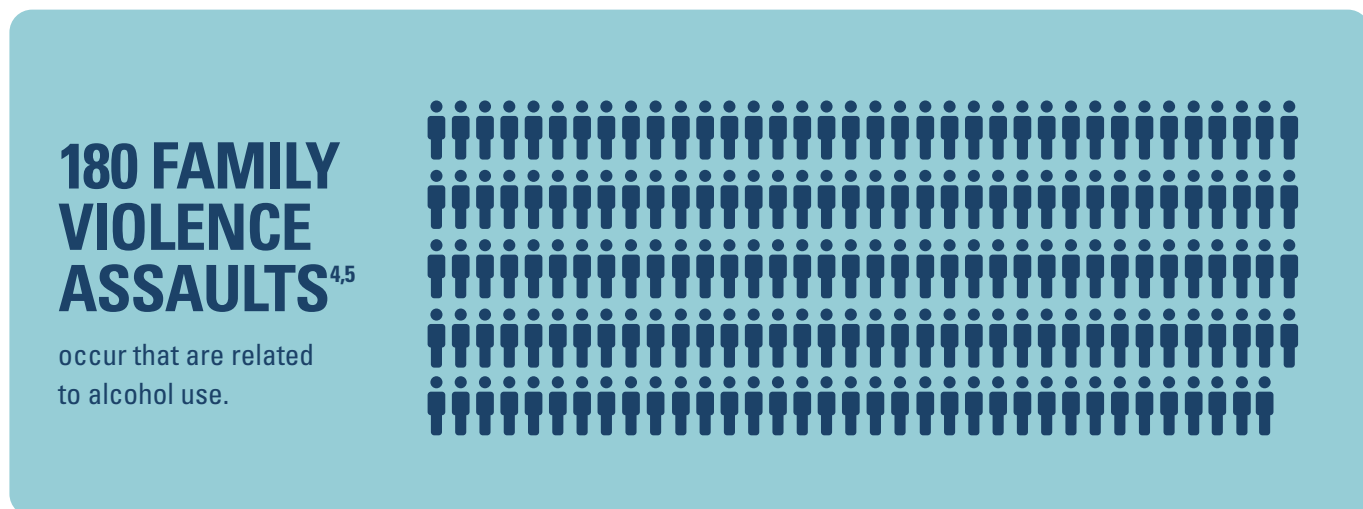
From emergency department presentations to increasing severity and frequency of family violence, alcohol-related harm is an ongoing threat to our community's health and wellbeing and has been increasing over time in WA. While harms from alcohol have been occurring for some time, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on alcohol-related harms that our communities experience. And there are reports that alcohol use during the pandemic has only continued to grow.

## HARM FROM ALCOHOL IN OUR STATE IS AT A CRISIS POINT

Harms from alcohol in our state are wide-ranging and extensive.

Almost every part of our lives can be affected by alcohol, including our ability to access urgent medical treatment, the amenity of our communities, safety on our roads, and the health and wellbeing of our children.

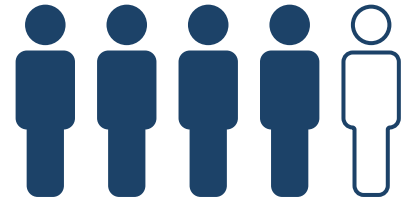
### EACH WEEK IN WA:



# OUR HEALTH SYSTEM IS STRETCHED TO ITS LIMITS

Our hospitals and emergency departments are often stretched to their limits.

WA has one of the highest rates of emergency department presentations due to alcohol in the country, with **1 in 5 (22%)** emergency department patients on a Saturday night there because of alcohol.<sup>6</sup>

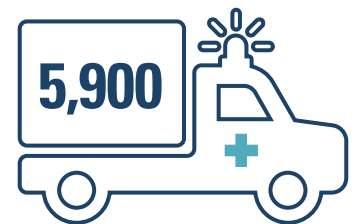


**9,455**  
↑  
**6,118**

The number of alcohol-related emergency department presentations has increased from **6,118 per year in 2014 to 9,455 per year in 2019.**<sup>3</sup>

This figure is a severe under-representation of alcohol-related presentations to emergency departments. Research shows there could be twice as many alcohol-related presentations when linked hospital data is used to assess presentations.<sup>7</sup>

Our ambulance service is often put under pressure. An average of **16 ambulances per day** are called out to attend to West Australians for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication (**over 5900 ambulance callouts per year**). There was an 8% increase in ambulance callouts due to alcohol between 2020 and 2021.<sup>8</sup>



Our health workers are exposed to violence each day.

There are rising rates of aggression against frontline health staff, leaving them feeling unsafe at work.<sup>9</sup>

Nationally, **98% of ED clinical staff have experienced verbal aggression** from an alcohol-affected patient and 92% have experienced physical aggression.<sup>10</sup>

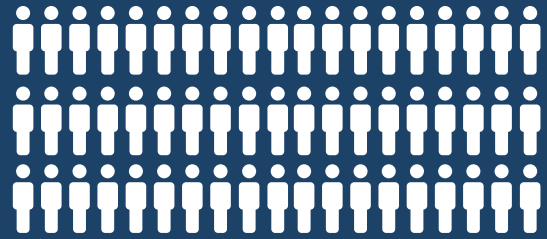
Alcohol-related presentations to the Royal Perth Hospital Emergency Department cost the WA community **\$7.5 million per year.**<sup>11</sup>



**\$7.5 MILLION**

# ONE WEST AUSTRALIAN IS HOSPITALISED FOR ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM EVERY 25 MINUTES

Each day in WA, **57 people** are hospitalised due to alcohol-attributable conditions.<sup>3</sup>



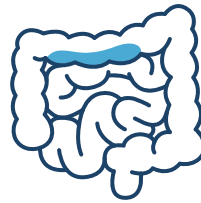
## EACH MONTH, WEST AUSTRALIANS ARE HOSPITALISED:

**41**



times due to alcohol-caused liver disease.<sup>12</sup>

**84**



times due to alcohol-caused cancers.<sup>12</sup>

**109**



times due to alcohol-caused digestive conditions.<sup>12</sup>

**1,017**

times due to alcohol-caused injuries.<sup>13</sup>



**338**

times due to alcohol-caused mental and neurological disorders.<sup>12</sup>



## WE HAVE LOST MANY WEST AUSTRALIANS DUE TO ALCOHOL

**360**

West Australians are lost to long-term alcohol-caused disease in a year.<sup>12</sup>

**154**

West Australians died from alcohol-caused cancers in 2017.<sup>12</sup>

**75**

West Australians died from alcohol-caused liver disease in 2017.<sup>12</sup>

More than **1 person dies each week by suicide** related to alcohol in WA. In 2019, an estimated **58 people died by suicide related to alcohol**.<sup>14,15</sup>

**284** West Australians **lost their lives** due to alcohol-caused injuries in 2017.<sup>13</sup>

**74** 

people died in WA waterways due to alcohol between July 2010 and June 2020, representing **21% of total drowning deaths** and an 8% increase over the past decade.<sup>16</sup>

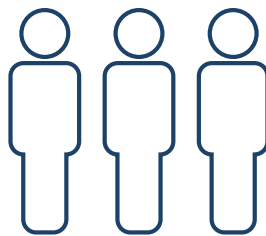
**8.3%**

**Death rates due to alcohol in Australia** increased by 8.3% in 2020, with 108 additional deaths since 2019.

## ALCOHOL CAUSES CANCER



**Alcohol causes cancer** in the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, breast, liver and bowel.<sup>18</sup>



On average, **3 West Australians die** from alcohol-caused cancers each week in WA.<sup>12</sup>



Over **1,000 people are hospitalised** due to alcohol-caused cancers each year in WA.<sup>12</sup>


**573** 

Alcohol was estimated to cause **4% of all new cancers** in 2020.<sup>19</sup> In WA, this equated to 573 new alcohol-caused cancer cases in 2019.<sup>20</sup>

**249,700** 

Alcohol will contribute to an estimated **249,700 cases of cancer over the lifetime** of Australians who were adults in 2016.<sup>21</sup>

# ALCOHOL IS THE HIGHEST RISK FACTOR FOR INJURY




Alcohol contributed to **15% of the overall burden of injury** in Australia in 2018.<sup>22</sup>



Alcohol increases risk of **violence**, intentional self-harm, road crashes, falls and drownings.<sup>23</sup>

## RATES OF FAMILY ASSAULT REMAIN ALARMINGLY HIGH


Gender is an organising structure in society and gender inequality is the central factor behind family and domestic violence. Alcohol use can intersect with family and domestic violence in gendered ways.<sup>24</sup> While alcohol does not cause family and domestic violence, it is involved in a substantial number of family assault incidents in WA, and alcohol may exacerbate existing violence.<sup>23</sup>



In 2021, WA Police attended more than **25 alcohol-related family assault incidents** each day (total 9,382 incidents).<sup>4,5</sup>



The number of family assaults has remained alarmingly high in WA, and in 2020-21 was **19% higher** than the preceding five-year average.<sup>25</sup>



Over the ten-year period to 2019, **Royal Perth Hospital Trauma Unit admitted 583 people** for injuries due to family and domestic violence where alcohol use was involved.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 1 shows the number of alcohol-related incidents reported to WA Police for each year between 2012 and 2021. The number of alcohol-related family assault incidents reported to WA Police has remained alarmingly high, and consistently greater than the number of alcohol-related non-family violence assault incidents.<sup>4,5</sup>

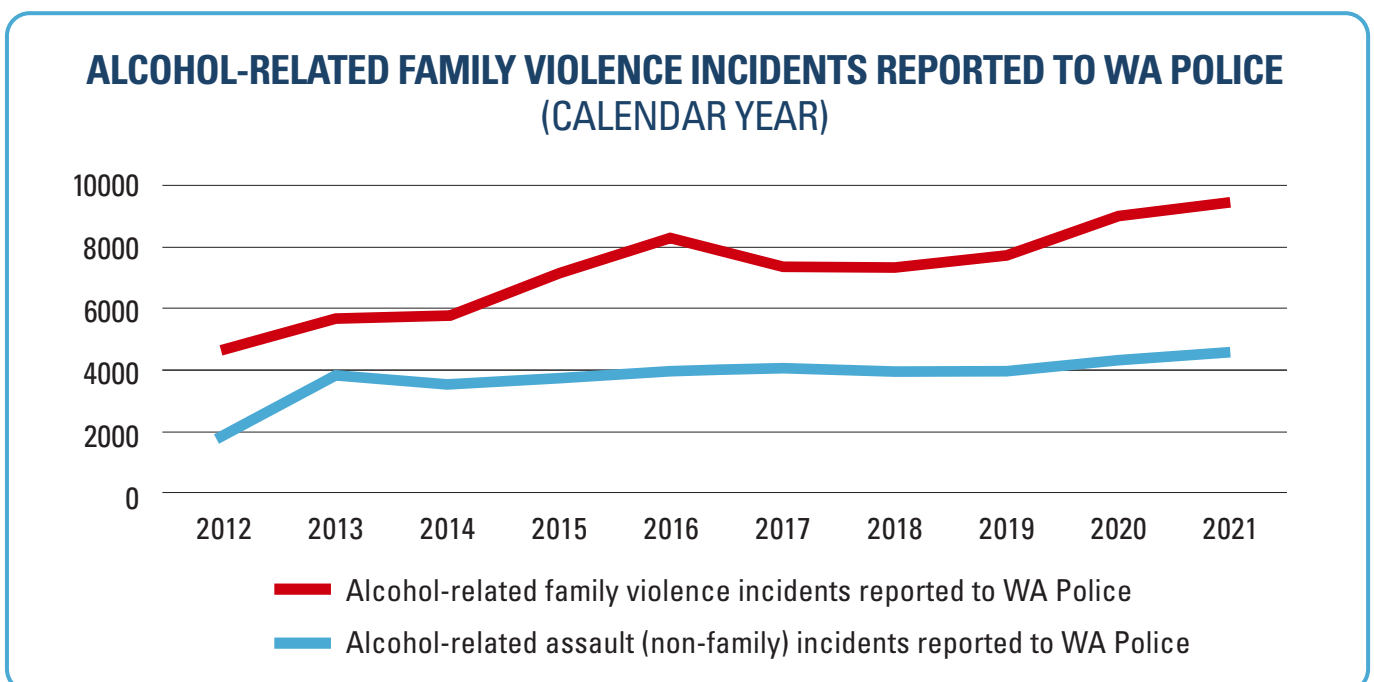


Figure 1 Alcohol-related incidents reported to WA Police, by calendar year, 2012 to 2021.

## ALCOHOL CONTRIBUTES TO OUR ROAD TOLL



**42 people died on WA roads** in 2020 where the driver was suspected to be under the influence of alcohol, or the primary cause of the crash included alcohol.

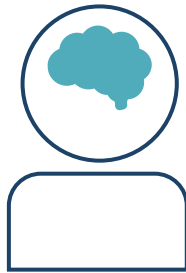
These 42 people represented more than a quarter (27%) of all road traffic fatalities in WA.<sup>27</sup>



**76% of alcohol-related road traffic fatalities** in 2019 occurred in regional WA.<sup>28</sup>

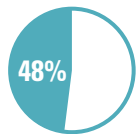
## OUR MENTAL HEALTH IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT NOW

In 2020, **78% of WA adults** reported being concerned about the impact of alcohol on mental health.<sup>30</sup>



**48%**

of the **estimated burden of suicide and self-inflicted injuries** is due to four modifiable risk factors, including alcohol, child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, and illicit drug use.<sup>32</sup>



**Alcohol is a depressant drug that, over time, can contribute to increased stress, anxiety and depression.** Alcohol can negatively affect thoughts, feelings and actions, and contribute to the development of, or worsen, existing mental health challenges over time.<sup>29</sup>

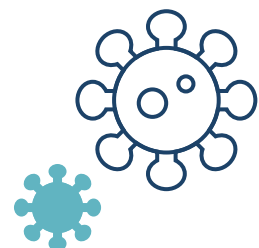


**3.8%**

of **West Australians reported cutting out alcohol** as a strategy to manage their mental health due to COVID-19.<sup>31</sup>



**7.7% of West Australians** reported using alcohol or other drugs as a strategy to manage their mental health due to COVID-19.<sup>31</sup>





# OUR YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE A RANGE OF HARMS FROM ALCOHOL

**6 ambulances** are called to treat intoxicated West Australians aged 18 years and younger every week.<sup>37</sup>



There were almost **41,000 alcohol-related** presentations to WA emergency departments for young people aged 12-24 years between 2006 and 2017.<sup>7</sup>

**EMERGENCY**

**12% of 12–17-year-olds** had been a victim of an alcohol-related incident in 2019, including verbal abuse, physical abuse, or being put in fear by someone under the influence of alcohol.<sup>33</sup>



## ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY CONTINUES TO BE OF CONCERN

Alcohol use during pregnancy **increases the risk of miscarriage, still birth and low birth weight**, and can cause Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).



**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.<sup>35</sup>



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.<sup>34</sup>

In Australia, **35% of pregnant women drank alcohol while pregnant in 2019.**

Around 55% of these women drank alcohol before they knew they were pregnant, and this declined to 15% who continued to drink alcohol once they knew they were pregnant.<sup>31</sup>



## CASE FOR ACTION

Our health system is at a breaking point, violence in the home is alarmingly high, and we are losing West Australians to alcohol each day. It is clear that we can no longer accept the escalating harm that alcohol products cause to West Australian individuals, families and communities.

Nationally, alcohol continues to cause a significant toll to the community through personal suffering, reduced quality of life and real financial costs; alcohol is estimated to cost the Australian community nearly \$67 billion a year in health, workplace and other costs.<sup>36</sup> We must act now to dramatically reduce harm caused by alcohol products.

Harm from alcohol is preventable and robust evidence is available about what works to prevent harm. Here in WA, we now have a choice. We know that alcohol products are hurting people across our state.

The only question is whether we'll sit by and let the harms happen or act to prevent them. Leading health authorities and government-led strategies recommend several evidence-based policies to reduce the harm.

For example, WA Government's Sustainable Health Review aims to reduce harmful alcohol use by 10 per cent by July 2024 and provides recommendations on how to achieve this. Policy changes will need to be complemented by appropriate services and supports like alcohol and other drug treatment, social and emotional wellbeing services, family and domestic violence services, youth programs, and adequate employment supports and opportunities.

The time to act is now. We call on the WA Government to prioritise the health and wellbeing of our community and to act on alcohol. In acting on the harms caused by alcohol, we commit to working with the WA Government to take the communities along on the journey.

It's time to protect West Australians from alcohol-related harms.

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