



Ready to Drink?

Alcopops and youth binge drinking



**A report from the Australian Divisions of
General Practice**

About ADGP

Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) is the peak national body representing 121 Divisions of General Practice across Australia. About 94 per cent of GPs are members of a local Division of General Practice.

Divisions are funded by the Commonwealth to support general practice to deliver high quality care to the Australian community. General practice is the core of Australia's health system. Around 90 per cent of Australians visit their GP each year, and these visits are the gateway to the country's hospital, specialist and diagnostic services.

General practice plays a major role in childhood immunisation, management of chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes, identifying and treating mental illness, and working with indigenous communities in remote parts of Australia.

Through linking GPs in local areas, Divisions are the voice of general practice in the community, with the concerns and views of GPs in day-to-day practice being passed through local divisions to the State Based Organisations and ADGP, which in turn presents those views to Federal and State Governments.

ADGP is one of Australia's largest representative voices for general practitioners. As part of ADGP's representation program, grass roots GPs sit on about 60 key decision-making bodies in the health sector, having direct input into general practice financing, GP workforce and training, clinical practice and practice management and other key areas influencing the future of general practice.

ADGP also coordinates a number of National Programs through Divisions of General Practice to improve the health of all Australians. ADGP's programs cover a broad range of primary care issues, including immunisation, mental health and practice nursing. These programs aim to strengthen primary health care to better meet the needs of the Australian community.

ADGP also auspices the National Divisions Youth Alliance (NDYA) a national youth health program that aims to improve the health of young people in Australia through the active participation of GPs and Divisions of General Practice. NDYA is working to strengthen the ability of GPs and Divisions to respond to the health needs of young people through national collaboration.

ADGP is governed by a Board of Directors comprising two GPs from each State and one GP from each Territory. Half the Directors are GPs working in rural areas of Australia. There is also a consumer representative who sits on the Board as an observer, nominated by the Consumers' Health Forum.

Through supporting GPs and advocating on behalf of general practice, the Australian Divisions of General Practice is a vital part of Australia's primary health care system.

Within the community, Divisions are central to the integration of general practice with other health sectors – pharmacy, hospitals, and community and area health services.

Cover photo taken from one alcopop producer's website promoting a schoolies week party to young people

Alcopops Report

Abstract

ADGP investigated current alcohol consumption patterns among young people aged 12 – 21 in Australia. The research sought to investigate among young people and to determine whether there is a relationship between the type of alcoholic drinks young people are consuming and their level of risk drinking

The study found that “alcopops” or “alcoholic sodas” are the most popular alcoholic drink among young people aged 12-21. In particular, these products are most popular among underage drinkers (aged 12-17) and among females. It found that there is a relationship between alcopop consumption and risk drinking, with young people whose last drink was an alcopop reporting a higher incidence of drunkenness than young people in any other drink category. The survey also found that there was a high level of concern among young people about the consumption of alcopops in their peer group.

Based on these findings, ADGP recommends further research and community consultation to be undertaken to determine the relationship between alcopop consumption and risk drinking among young people and to develop appropriate policy responses.



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE!

Half the drinks above are Alcopops and half are popular brands of non-alcoholic soft drinks

Introduction

A number of recent research studies have demonstrated that young Australians have high levels of alcohol consumption. These studies have shown that the level of alcohol consumption and the level of binge drinking among young people have increased dramatically in the past decade.

However, there has been little research conducted into the specific alcoholic products young people are drinking and their impact upon youth alcohol consumption. This is despite the fact that the alcohol market has changed markedly in the past decade, with the introduction of a new breed of “ready to drink” alcoholic products called “alcoholic sodas” or “alcopops”. Since their introduction into Australia in 1995, these products have become the fastest growing sector ever experienced by the alcohol market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that alcopops are particularly popular among young people, in

particular young women. The fact that the dramatic increase in youth drinking rates has occurred during the period in which alcopops have been introduced into the Australian market raises questions about the relationship between these products and the concurrent rise in risk drinking among young people. This study investigates the relationship between the consumption of alcopops and the level of risk drinking among young people and to gauge whether young people themselves are concerned about the consumption of alcopops among their peer group

The need for a comprehensive policy response to the high level of risk drinking among young people in Australia has been acknowledged by both Federal and State/Territory Governments and supported by stakeholder groups and the general community. For this policy response to be successful in reducing the harms associated with alcohol use among young people, it must be based on comprehensive research that accurately identifies current youth alcohol consumption patterns and the factors that influence risk drinking behaviours. This report is a contribution to this debate.

What are Alcopops?

Alcopops are pre-mixed, spirit-based drinks, also called alcoholic sodas or alcoholic soft drinks. They are a distinct category of the 'ready-to-drink' or RTD segment of the alcohol market. Alcopops were first sold in Australia in 1995 and the market for these products has expanded rapidly since that time. There are currently about 400 alcopop products available in Australia, an increase of 30 per cent in three years

Alcopops are typically based on "white" spirits such as vodka and white rum which have a blander flavour than dark spirits such as bourbon. They typically contain high levels of sweeteners, colouring and flavouring and in appearance and taste they resemble soft drinks more than traditional alcoholic drinks. Alcopops are available in a wide range of flavours including lemon, passionfruit, raspberry and blueberry. Alcopops have an average alcohol content of around 5 per cent, which is stronger than normal strength beers.

Method

A total of 400 young people in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne between the ages of 12 and 21 were interviewed using the street intercept survey method. This is a common methodology for researching drug and alcohol use patterns among young people. The young people were asked five questions about their own alcohol consumption patterns and one question about their friends' consumption of alcopops. The interviews took approximately three minutes to complete and were anonymous.

No surveys were conducted with young people who were drinking alcohol at the time and no surveys were conducted outside of a venue selling alcohol. Young people accompanied by adults were not interviewed. Only four young people approached declined to undertake the survey.

The following table provides a breakdown of the respondents by age and gender:

	12-14 years	15-17 years	18-21 years	TOTAL
Males	63	80	56	199
Females	71	81	49	201
TOTAL	134	161	105	400

Quote from survey respondent "They taste so good Once you drink one you just can't stop" Tegan, 14

Summary of Findings

This study found a high level of use of alcohol among young people in all age groups surveyed. 89% of young people surveyed had previously drunk alcohol. The proportion of young people who had never had an alcoholic drink decreased with age.

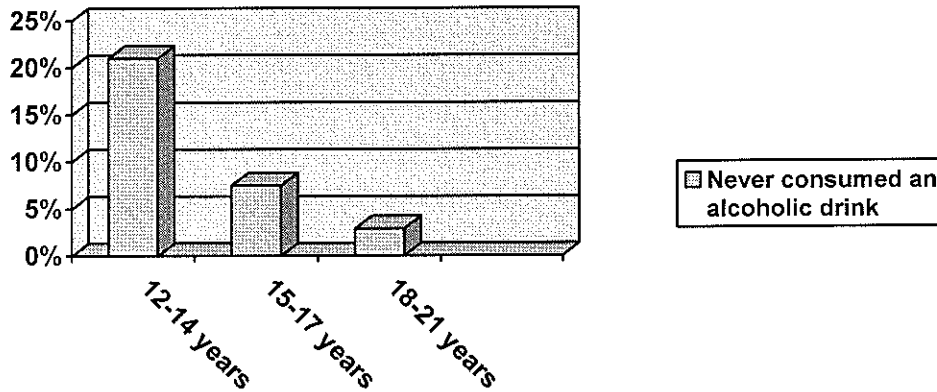


Fig 1: Percentage of young people who had never consumed an alcoholic drink by age group

Alcopops were the most common drink consumed by young people with 38.8% stating that an alcopop was the last drink they consumed. This was followed by other spirits (21.3%), beer (18.5%) and wine (10.5%).

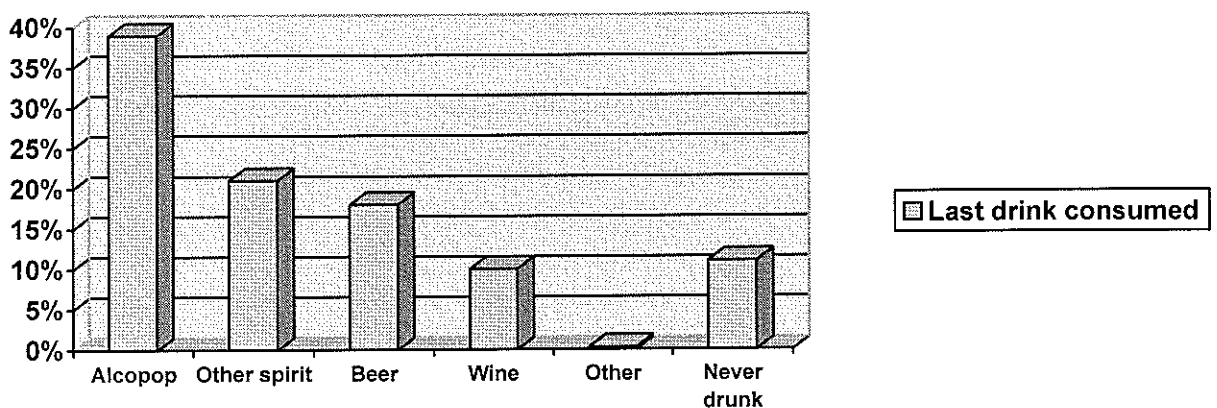


Fig 2 Last drink consumed by 12-21 year olds

Alcopops were most popular among young women and underage drinkers. 45% of female respondents stated that an alcopop was the last drink they consumed compared with 33% of males.

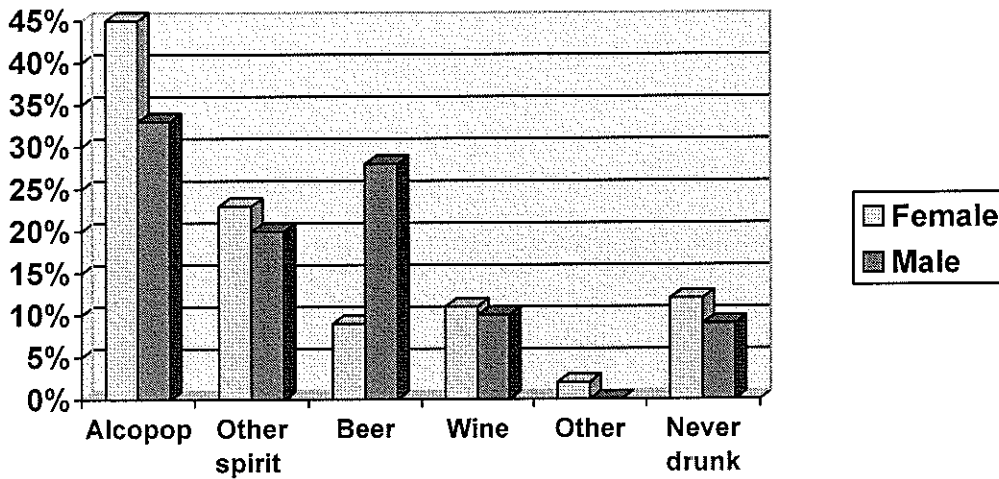


Fig 3 Last drink consumed by gender

Alcopops were by far the most popular alcoholic drink among 12-14 year olds. More young people in this age group reported an alcopop as their last drink than any other drink category in any of the age groups surveyed. The popularity of alcopops decreased markedly with increased age, the only drink category where this occurred. Young people aged under 18 were more than twice as likely to drink alcopops than people aged 18-21 (46% compared with 20%).

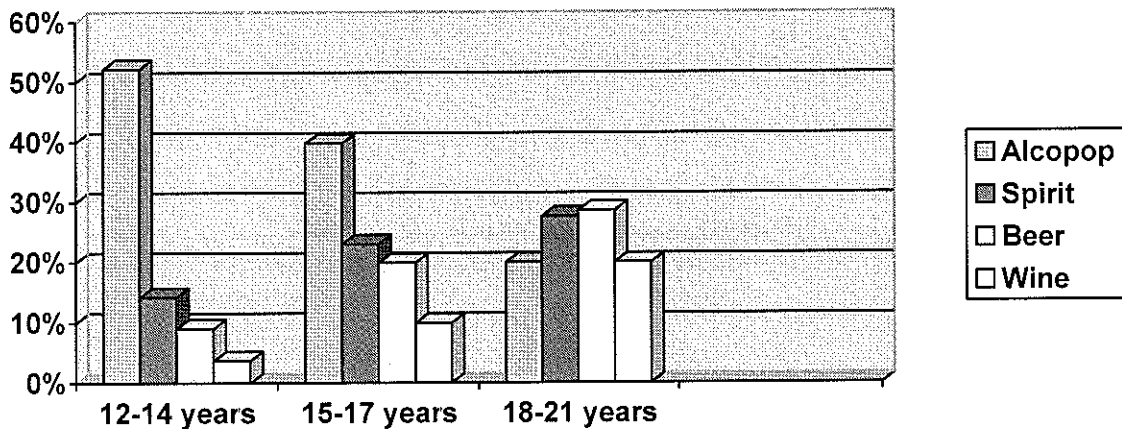


Fig 4 Last drink consumed by age

While alcopops were most popular among 12-14 year olds, alcopops were consumed regularly by a majority of young people in every age group. 75% of young people surveyed reported drinking alcopops at least once a week. 22% of respondents reported drinking an alcopop on three or more days a week and 1% stated that they drunk an alcopop every day in a typical week.

Quote from interview. "My brother buys them for us and we drink a case and a half every weekend" Kelli 13

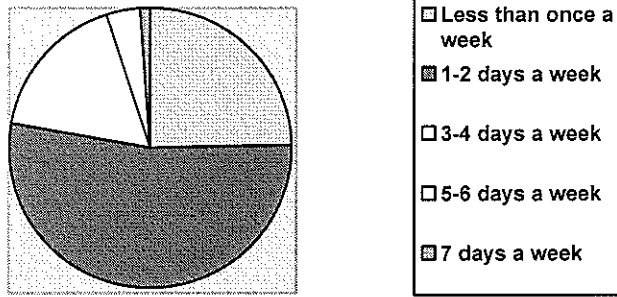


Fig 5 Number of days per week alcopops are consumed

Young people who drink alcopops frequently reported doing so at levels above what would be considered safe for adults. 54% of alcopop drinkers reported drinking three or more alcopops per session (equivalent to 3.5 standard drinks or more). 17% of alcopop drinkers stated that they consumed five or more alcopops per session (approximately six or more standard drinks). More than six standard drinks a day is considered a harmful level of drinking in adult males.

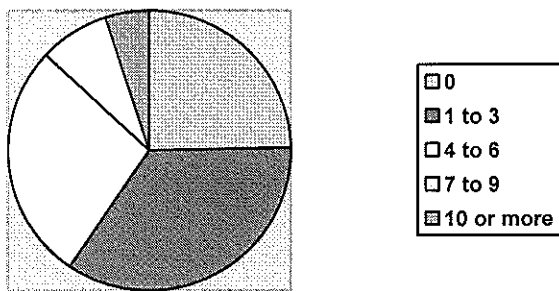


Fig 6 Number of alcopops drunk per night/drinking session

Young people surveyed also reported a high incidence of perceived drunkenness. 58.5% of young people stated that they had got drunk at least once in the past month and 21.7% stated that they got drunk 4 times or more in the past month. People whose last drink was an alcopop reported a higher incidence of drunkenness than people in any other drink category. 32% of people whose last drink was an alcopop reported getting drunk at least once a week in the past month (compared with 20% of beer drinkers and 12% of wine drinkers).

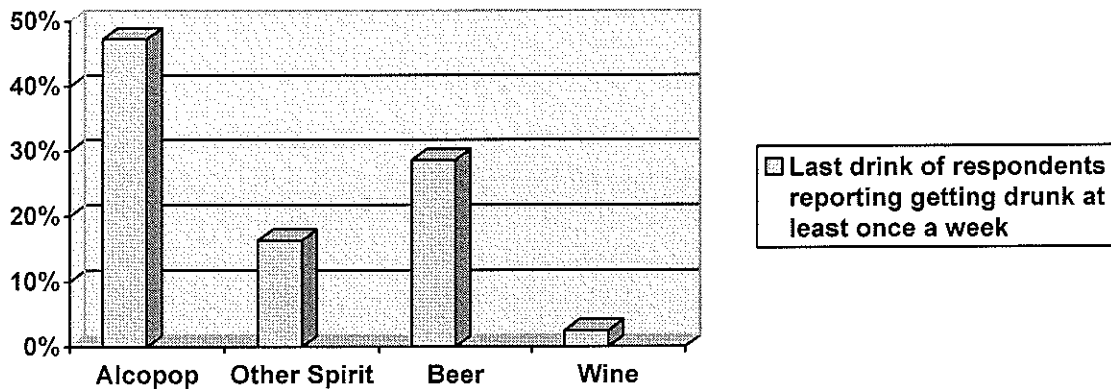
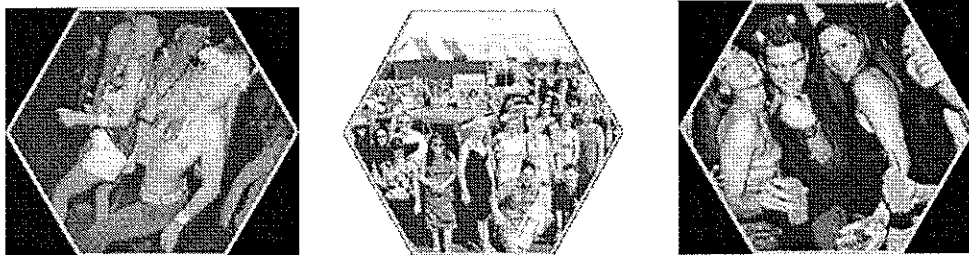


Fig 7 Incidence of drunkenness four times or more in the past month by last drink

The young people surveyed reported a high level of concern about alcopop consumption among their friends. 59% of respondents stated that they were concerned about a friend's consumption of alcopops. People whose last drink was an alcopop were more likely to state that they are concerned about a friend's alcopops consumption with 75.5% of this group stating that they have concerns about a friend.



Images taken a website promoting one alcopop product.

Quote from interview "They're girls drinks but sometimes at the end of a big night when you can't drink anymore beer they go down really well" Michael 15

Discussion

ADGP's study indicates that young people in Australia are consuming alcohol at levels that cause significant health and social harms. The findings of this study are supported by recent Australian research into this area that has demonstrated that the rate of risk drinking among young people has increased significantly in the past decade.

The high level of alcohol use among young people in Australia raises serious health and social concerns. Alcohol use in young people has been shown to be associated with a range of serious problems, including: sexually transmitted diseases, motor vehicle accidents, assault, unplanned pregnancies, violence, truancy, crime and the use of illegal drugs. Longer term health effects of high levels of alcohol use include heart disease, liver damage, high blood pressure and depression.

While moderate alcohol use in adults has been shown to provide some health benefits, these protective health effects do not occur in young people. Mortality associated with alcohol use in young people rises in line with consumption and there is no recommended safe level of alcohol consumption for people under the age of 18. Research has shown

that young people are more vulnerable than adults to alcohol-related harms and are less able to assess the risks associated with the inappropriate consumption of alcohol. As there is a strong association between the level of alcohol use and the level of violence experienced by young people, young people who drink alcohol are at particular risk of alcohol-related violence

"Growth has been phenomenal, especially since the introduction of the GST which brought down the retail price of RTDs (alcopops) The growth has kept on going and at this stage [there's] no sign of stopping.

Alcoholic sodas are definitely the drinks that young people are into at the moment, young women in particular. I think these are drinks that are very dangerous. They initiate young people into drinking alcohol at a very young age. They don't even realise how alcoholic they are".

Bottle Shop Operator, Adelaide.
(The Adelaide Advertiser 15/3/2003)

This study shows that alcopops are widely consumed by young Australians with 75% of young people surveyed reporting drinking these products at least once a week. In particular, alcopops are associated with drinking in younger age groups and are the drink of choice for over half of 12-14 year olds. Alcopops are the only alcoholic drink whose popularity declines with age, in fact 12-14 year olds are more than twice as likely to drink alcopops as 18-21 year olds. This finding indicates that alcopops may be playing an "initiation" role in introducing young people to alcohol at a young age, before they move onto other types of alcoholic drinks, such as wine and beer. While alcopops are the most popular alcoholic drink for both genders, they are significantly more popular among young women than young men. The high rate of alcopop consumption among young women is particularly concerning given that the safe level of alcohol use for women is lower than that for men.

The work suggests there is a relationship between the type of alcoholic product consumed and the incidence of reported drunkenness. Young people whose last drink was an alcopop report getting drunk more often than people drinking any other alcoholic beverage. This indicates that alcopops may be a specific risk factor for binge drinking among young people. Young people also report widespread concern for their friends about the unsafe level of consumption of these products

This study did not address why young people are choosing to drink alcopops in preference to other alcoholic drinks. Previous research undertaken on alcohol preferences among young people has found that the two main factors influencing young people's choice of alcoholic beverage are taste and price

Anecdotal evidence collected as part of this research suggests that young people like the taste and appearance of alcopops. In their packaging, branding and marketing, alcopops appear to be designed to appeal to a younger age group than are traditional alcoholic drinks, such as beer and bottled wine. Popular brands of alcopops sponsor youth events such as dance parties at schoolies week where large numbers of underage people are present. Other marketing techniques used by alcopop manufacturers include dedicated websites promoting their products, an environment in which there is no way to restrict these messages to people over 18. However, despite these practices, there are no specific policies or guidelines for the marketing of these products to young people.

Another possible factor influencing young people's choice of beverage is availability. Alcopops are typically sold in smaller units and priced at a level that may be more affordable for young people than bottled wine, beer or spirits (often single bottles costing

\$3-\$4 each). Whether there is a link between the dramatic rise in consumption of these products and the lowering of their cost as a result of the implementation of the GST, needs to be established.

The alcopop market has developed over the past eight years largely without scrutiny by governments or public health authorities. The impact that these products may be having on youth risk drinking has not been the subject of any major research studies. Other alcoholic products, such as alcoholic flavoured milks, alcoholic icy poles and alcoholic jellies, have been banned from sale in Australia on the basis that they are likely to appeal to children and young people and could be confused with similar non-alcoholic products. However, alcopops, which resemble soft drinks in their appearance, packaging and taste, have been allowed to be freely promoted and sold to young people

ADGP's survey suggests a high level of consumption of alcopops by young people in Australia and that these products are associated with high levels of youth risk drinking. Additional research is needed to determine the specific factors that influence young people's consumption of alcopops and to inform the appropriate policy responses to reduce the harms associated with youth alcohol use. This research should include a comprehensive review of current policies on the sale, marketing and taxation of alcopops.



Quote from survey respondent. "My favourites are blueberry and raspberry, they taste just like normal soft drinks so you can drink them really fast" Carly 17

Further research recommended

Due to the serious harms associated with the misuse of alcohol, ADGP recommends that further research is needed to determine whether alcopops are contributing to higher levels of alcohol misuse among young people.

Funding for this research and consultation could come from the alcohol industry, through a dedicated independent research fund, administered jointly by Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments and overseen by an expert committee

The following issues are suggested as priority areas for research:

Priority Areas for research

- **Link between Alcopop consumption and alcohol-related harms among young people**
Are alcopops contributing to the high levels of alcohol use among young people?
What is the relationship between consumption of alcopops and alcohol-related harms, such as violence, sexual assault, unwanted pregnancies, motor vehicle accidents and others?

- **Marketing of Alcopops and other alcoholic drinks to young people**
How does the current marketing of alcopops, including sponsorship of youth-targeted events, such as dance parties at schoolies week, web sites and other forms of entertainment targeted at young people, influence young people's drinking choices?
- **Availability of Alcopops**
Do alcopops play a role in encouraging a transition from non-alcoholic to alcoholic beverages in young people because they closely resemble soft drinks in appearance and taste?
- **Alcopop pricing**
How does the price of alcopops affect their use by young people? Has the reduction in the price of alcopops (due to the introduction of the GST) resulted in higher levels of consumption by young people? Would an increase in price reduce consumption?

The results of this research should then be made available to the community through a consultation process to develop policies on the regulation of alcopops that reflect community concerns about youth alcohol use and that support other initiatives to encourage the responsible use of alcohol among young people.

Questions for policy makers

- **Taxation policy**
Should the tax on alcopops be increased to reduce consumption among young people?
- **Marketing of alcopops**
Should alcopops be marketed to young people?
- **Sale of Alcopops and other alcoholic drinks to people under 18**
How can sales of alcohol to underage drinkers be restricted? Should there be greater enforcement of restrictions on selling alcohol to people under 18 at the point-of-sale? Should the unit of sale of alcopops be restricted to larger units (for example, packs of eight or more, larger bottles etc) to discourage younger people from purchasing them?

Conclusion

Reducing the harms associated with alcohol use should be a high priority for governments in Australia. Public policy responses that aim to reduce the significant harms that alcohol use can cause in young people need to be sensitive to the context in which young people begin consuming alcohol. In our society, drinking alcohol is part of the 'rite of passage' to adulthood and is an important part of the social life of many young people and adults. Most people start to drink alcohol when they are teenagers and in their early twenties. This period of youth and early adulthood is a critical time for health policy intervention as the patterns of alcohol use established at this age strongly influence adult alcohol behaviour. This study suggests that alcopops are a significant factor in alcohol consumption among young people. Additional research is required to further investigate the relationship between alcopops and unsafe levels of drinking among young people and to inform the development of the appropriate policy responses.

Survey questions

The following questions were asked to obtain the data used in this research study (provided with some explanatory notes).

What is your age range? Age ranges given as 12-14, 15-17 and 18-21.

What was the last alcoholic drink you had? Responses were classified into the following categories: alcopops, spirits, beer, wine, other and "never drunk alcohol". The category of "spirits" included spirits consumed either straight or with a non-alcoholic mixer. The category of "other" included drinks that included both spirits and other alcoholic substances and home brewed alcoholic drinks (not beer) that the respondents could not classify into another category. Respondents whose last drink was an alcopop tended to identify them by their brand name rather than a generic name.

In a typical week, on how many days would you drink an alcoholic soda or alcopop? Brand names (such as Woodstock, Breezer, Cruiser etc) were given as prompts if respondents were not familiar with the terms "alcoholic soda" or "alcopop". Once these terms were introduced, however, the young people surveyed generally understood them as a generic name for this category of drinks.

How many alcoholic sodas or alcopops would you estimate you drink during a typical night out or drinking session? The number of drinks was used to refer to the number of bottles consumed rather than standard drinks consumed. Different alcopop products contain different quantities of alcohol, ranging from about 1.1 to 1.9 standard drinks per bottle.

How many times would you estimate you had been drunk in the past month, if at all? Responses were based on young people's self-assessment of their drinking behaviour. No further description of the term "drunk" was provided.

Thinking specifically about alcoholic sodas or alcopops, are you concerned about any of your friends who in your opinion might be putting themselves at risk of harm from drinking too many of these products? Responses were based on young people's reported level of concern. No prompts were provided on what might be a risky level of drinking and what sorts of harms might be associated with risk drinking.

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