

PREMIER'S DRUG PREVENTION COUNCIL

VICTORIAN YOUTH ALCOHOL AND DRUG SURVEY 2003

ALCOHOL FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Surveys (VYADS) were conducted in 2002 and again in 2003. The 2002 surveys were conducted in three separate quarterly waves in March, June and September amongst a total of 4,500 young Victorians aged 16-24. The results of those surveys were presented in a publicly available report published by the Premier's Drug Prevention Council (PDPC).

The 2003 surveys, which are the subject of this report, were conducted by Wallis Consulting Group for the PDPC. The surveys were conducted in two waves, each of approximately 3,000 respondents. The first of these was conducted between 14th February and 30th March 2003 (n=3032) and the second between 11th November and 23rd December 2003 (n=3020).

This report covers the alcohol findings, and is comparable to the 2002 report. Reference to 'lifetime use' refers to a person reporting ever having tried alcohol. 'Recent use' as recorded in this document means the person reports having used alcohol in the 12 months prior to interview. The data presented in this report are combined data from both 2003 surveys and, where practical and relevant, comparisons are made with the 2002 data.

A further report on the findings relating to illicit drug use is also being released by the PDPC.

Survey Methodology

As in 2002, the survey sample was of young people aged 16-24 years resident in private dwellings in Metropolitan and non-Metropolitan Victoria. The survey methodology was Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) using randomly selected telephone numbers from Electronic White Page listings. As a consequence, no homeless or institutionalised persons are included in the survey. Stringent privacy measures were in place for the survey and no identifying information was ever collected about respondents or their friends. Telephone numbers were stripped from the data set immediately after fieldwork was finished and were not provided to the PDPC.

Pilot testing was undertaken prior to each wave of interviewing. Staff from the Department of Human Services attended some of the interviewer briefings and monitored some interviews.

The achieved samples for the surveys have been compared with one another and with relevant ABS estimates of the Victorian population for 2002 and 2003. It has been found that both survey data sets over-represent females and under-represent people aged 22-24 (within this age range). However, the two data sets are sufficiently similar to allow comparisons and no weighting has been undertaken.

KEY FINDINGS

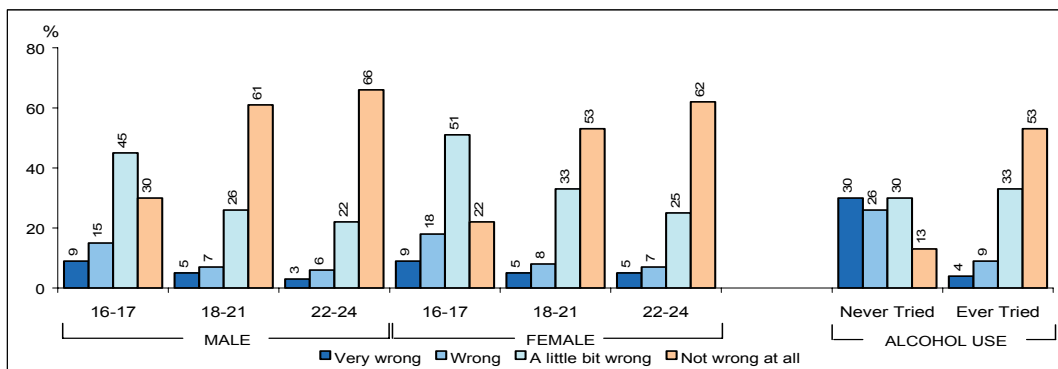
- There have been increases in the levels of reported alcohol use between the 2002 (n=4509) and 2003 (n=6052) surveys.
- The percentage of young people who have ever tried alcohol has grown from 94% to 96%. Within this overall picture, the most significant change is an increase in levels of lifetime use among 16-17 year old girls from 90% to 94%.
- Ninety one percent of all young people surveyed had had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months (up from 89% in 2002). Although half of these describe themselves as social drinkers, 3% see themselves as “heavy” drinkers and 3% as “binge” drinkers.
- There have also been increases in the amounts of alcohol drunk by young people resulting in increases in the percentages who are potentially “at risk” of harm. Thus, significantly more young people are putting themselves at risk of short term harm on a weekly basis (15% increased to 18%), and monthly basis (42% to 50%) compared with 2002.
- In the past 12 months, 20% of young people surveyed reported that they intend to get drunk most times or every time they drink. A further 27% intend to get drunk some times.
- Of those under 18 who had drunk alcohol in the past 12 months, half had parents buy it for them (51%) or got it from friends or acquaintances (50%).
- There has been at least one occasion in the past year where 42% of young people have not been able to remember what happened.
- Whilst under the influence of alcohol 26% of young people report verbally abusing someone; 13% have driven a car; 12% have created a public disturbance and 8% have caused property damage. Males are more likely to engage in these behaviours in the 18-21 year age bracket.
- 41% of young people report being verbally abused and 20% have been put in fear by somebody under the influence of alcohol.
- Females are more likely to drink bottled spirits and liqueurs, pre-mixed bottles (eg. ruskis, Bacardi breezer) and pre-mixed spirits (eg. UDL, Jim Beam and cola). Males most commonly drink regular beer followed by bottled spirits and liqueurs and pre-mixed spirits.
- The later people start to drink the more likely they are to see themselves as light or occasional drinkers, and the less likely to be heavy or binge drinkers. Similar results are found in relation to drinking at levels causing short and long term harm, and being unable to remember what happened after drinking.

ATTITUDES TO ALCOHOL USE BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Half (51%) of all young people believe it is 'not wrong at all' for them to drink alcohol regularly. Males were more likely to accept regular drinking (54%) than females (48%). As might be expected, this varied according to age, with 64% of 22-24 year olds holding this view, but only 26% of 16-17 year olds. The 16-17 year olds most often (48%) described it as 'a little bit wrong'.

As one might expect, those who have never tried alcohol were more likely to think it 'very wrong' or 'wrong' for people their age to drink (56%) than those who have tried it (13%).

Figure 1: Attitudes towards alcohol consumption by age, gender & drug use



EXTENT OF ALCOHOL USE

The 2003 survey indicates a higher proportion of young people as ever having tried alcohol at 95.7% compared to 93.8% in 2002.

Table 1 below shows variations between the sexes and age groups in 2003. Although small increases are apparent among other groups, the most significant change since 2002 is the increased level of trial among girls in the 16-17 age range such that 94.3% now claimed to have tried alcohol compared to 89.9% in 2002. The median age for having a first full serve of alcohol remains at 15.

Table 1: Proportions of Respondents Who Have Tried Alcohol

Age group	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
16- 17 years	90.8	94.3	92.6
18-21 years	97.2	95.8	96.4
22-24 years	97.5	97.4	97.4
All	95.5	95.9	95.7

(n=6,052)

Granted an inevitable level of experimentation, the fact of having tried alcohol may not be as important as whether a young person currently drinks. In fact 95% of those who had ever tried alcohol had had an alcoholic drink in the last twelve months, equivalent to 90.9% of all people in this age range having had at least one drink in the past 12 months.

This figure did not differ between males and females. However, it was lower among people in the 16-17 age range at 87%. It was also slightly lower among metro (90.3%) as opposed to non-metro respondents (92.9%); and very much lower among overseas born young people at 77.6% compared to 93.3% among those born in Australia. Indeed it is this latter factor – the lower proportion of overseas born people living in non-metro areas – that accounts for the differences between metro and non-metro areas rather than any other demographic or cultural differences.

PATTERNS OF ALCOHOL USE

Table 2 below summarises the types of alcohol that young people in the survey said they “usually” drank. Multiple responses were allowed to this question, and in fact respondents named over three types of drink each on average.

There have been no changes in the overall order since 2002, but there has been an apparent general trend away from spirits and towards beer drinking, especially among young women. Hence 65% of females said they drank bottled spirits this year, and 60% said pre-mixed spirits compared to 68% and 61% respectively in 2002. In contrast, 32% reported that they drank regular strength beer compared to 29% last year. There are no other changes of note.

Table 2: Types of Alcoholic Drink Usually Drunk

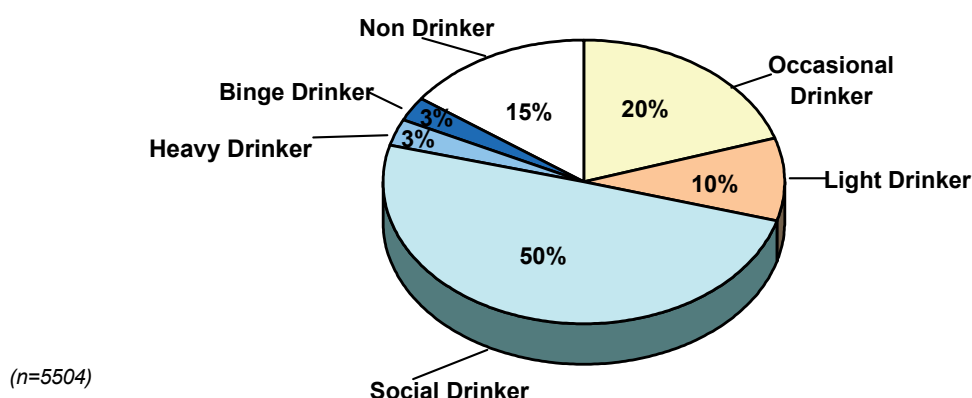
	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Bottled spirits and liqueurs	60.9	64.8	63%
Pre-mixed spirits (e.g. UDL, Jim Beam and cola)	56.5	59.6	58.2
Pre-mixed bottles (e.g. Bacardi Breezer, Ruskis)	33.5	64.0	50.2
Regular strength beer	70.3	32.2	49.5
Bottled wine	26.0	41.9	34.7
Mid strength beer	21.3	10.7	15.5
Low alcohol beer	16.8	9.8	13.0
Cask wine	7.3	13.9	10.9
Cider	9.9	7.9	8.8
Fortified wine (sherry, port, vermouth)	9.8	7.4	8.5
Home brewed beer	12.2	3.1	7.2
<i>Base: Drunk alcohol in last 12 months</i>	<i>n=2495</i>	<i>n=3009</i>	<i>n=5504</i>

Of those under 18 who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months, 51% had parents buy it for them, 50% got it from friends or acquaintances, 14% had bought it for themselves, and 9% had a brother or sister obtain it for them.

LEVELS OF DRINKING

Respondents who had had a drink in the past twelve months were asked to classify their own status in relation to drinking. At this stage a further 5.8% of respondents said they were either a “non-drinker” or an “ex-drinker”. The figure below therefore classifies **all respondents** according to their self-classified drinking status.

Figure 2: Self Classified Drinking Status of Respondents.



Patterns are little changed since last year. Underlying analysis tends to confirm that a culture of heavy drinking exists among a sub-group of older males within the age range: around 10% of males aged 18-21 and 14% of those aged 22-24 classified themselves as either a “heavy” or “binge” drinker. In contrast the corresponding figures for females in these age groups were 5% and 4% for each age group.

In further questioning respondents were asked how often they drank with the intention of getting drunk. The next table summarises results. The contrasts between males and females are apparent here with over a quarter of males (25.9%) saying they drank to get drunk most times or every time, compared to just over 15% (15.6%) of females.

Table 3: How Often Drink Intending to get Drunk (in past 12 months)

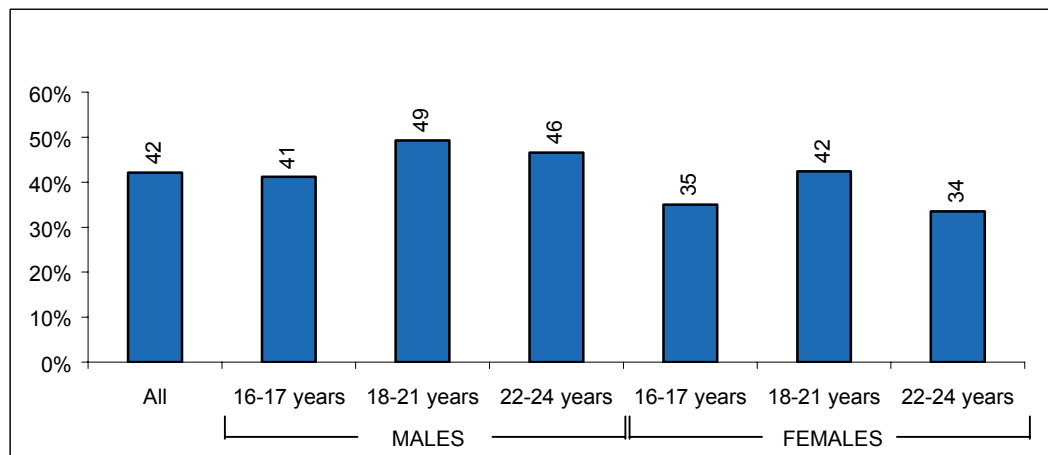
	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Every time	7.3	4.1	5.6
Most times	18.6	11.5	14.7
Some times	27.4	25.9	26.6
A few times	21.6	25.2	23.6
Never	24.8	33.0	29.3
Can't say	0.2	0.2	0.2
<i>Base: Drunk alcohol in last 12 months</i>	<i>n=2495</i>	<i>n=3009</i>	<i>n=5504</i>

That young people start to learn some moderation as they get older is indicated by the fact that the peak age range for “drinking to get drunk” is 18-21, where it is 22.7% (27.3% among males in this age range), whereas it falls to 15.3% among people in the 22-24 age range.

A related question asked respondents how often they had drunk so much in the past 12 months that they could not remember what had happened. Very few respondents (3%) gave answers suggesting this happened more than once a month. However, around 6% said it had happened about once a month, and a third reported that it had happened in the past twelve months, with 58% saying it had never happened.

Figure 3 below summarises the proportions saying this had occurred (i.e. that they were so drunk they could not remember what happened) confirming that although this pattern of “binge” drinking is more common among males among both groups it increases in the 18-21 age range then falls off again.

Figure 3: Proportions that could not remember what had happened after drinking (on occasion)



(n=5504)

LEVELS OF RISK

Based on a series of questions in the survey, respondents were categorised according to their level of risk of long and short term harm as a result of drinking alcohol¹. The definitions are taken from the National Health and Medical Research Council’s Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits (2001)².

¹ The assistance of the Mark Cooper-Stanbury of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is acknowledged in making this analysis.

² Basically males are said to be at high risk in the short term if they have 11 or more drinks in a day, and females if they have 7 or more; males at medium risk if they have 7- 10, females 5 to 6. Long term risk is more complex, and is related to the level and pattern of consumption over a period. For males it is considered risky to have 5 or 6 drinks on an average day and high risk to have 7 or more over a period of time, and for females it is risky to have 3 or 4 on an average day or 5 or more over a period of time. These average day figures also have weekly equivalents which define these levels of risk. See the NHMRC Guidelines cited.

Table 4 below shows the levels of short term harm among the sample this year with comparison to last year, based on levels drunk during the year, and in an average month or average week.

The table below indicates significantly higher proportions of young people putting themselves at risk of harm from excessive alcohol consumption, even on a weekly basis. The increase is noticeable among both males and females, and among both sexes is driven by people in the 18+ age groups (i.e. legally entitled to drink).

Table 4: Levels of Potential Short Term Harm due to Alcohol

	Males		Females		Persons	
	2002 (%)	2003 (%)	2002 (%)	2003 (%)	2002 (%)	2003 (%)
<i>% at risk of short term harm...</i>						
Over past year	73.8	78.0	71.8	75.7	72.7	76.7
Monthly	44.3	52.1	40.1	47.9	42.1	49.8
Weekly	17.5	21.9	12.7	15.6	15.0	18.4
<i>Base:</i>	<i>n=2140</i>	<i>n=2743</i>	<i>n=2369</i>	<i>n=3309</i>	<i>n=4509</i>	<i>n=6052</i>

The next table repeats the analysis for risk levels relating to long term harm. It is notable that the proportions of both males and females categorised as being at risk and at high risk have increased strongly since the last survey. Again further examination of the data by age suggests that the increased risk is due to increased levels of drinking among young people in the 18 and over ages, both male and female.

In relation to the risk of long term harm, it should be kept in mind that people have to drink at the risk levels for a considerable period of time (possibly years) to cause themselves harm. It cannot be assumed that young people will continue to drink at these levels. A further feature of the table of note is that although females tend to drink less than males, their levels of long term risk are almost as high. This is because (in general) females have lower risk thresholds than males.

Table 5: Extent of Long Term Risk due to Alcohol

Level of risk..	Males		Females		Persons	
	2002 (%)	2003 (%)	2002 (%)	2003 (%)	2002 (%)	2003 (%)
No risk (abstainer)	10.7	9.0	10.6	9.0	10.6	9.0
Low risk	77.7	73.8	75.3	72.5	76.4	73.1
At risk	7.8	10.4	10.3	13.4	9.1	12.0
High risk	3.9	6.8	3.9	5.1	3.9	5.8
Base:	<i>n</i> =2140	<i>n</i> =2743	<i>n</i> =2369	<i>n</i> =3309	<i>n</i> =4509	<i>n</i> =6052

The changes in levels of risk measured are quite high, and raise concerns that there may be some methodological reason that has caused them. In fact the survey methodology has been unchanged throughout 2002 and 2003, and the few questionnaire changes over this period have been in questions outside of those relating to alcohol. It is the case that the survey contractor changed in the course of 2002 but, even so, comparison of the surveys conducted by Wallis Consulting Group confirms that there has been an underlying trend towards greater alcohol consumption.

EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL ON BEHAVIOUR

Table 6 below shows a number of behaviours that respondents who drank alcohol admitted to in the past twelve months. Despite the higher levels of consumption apparent in 2003, the data in this table are very similar to the equivalent data for 2002, (the figures are marginally higher, except for the proportion of males admitting to stealing, but changes are not generally statistically significant).

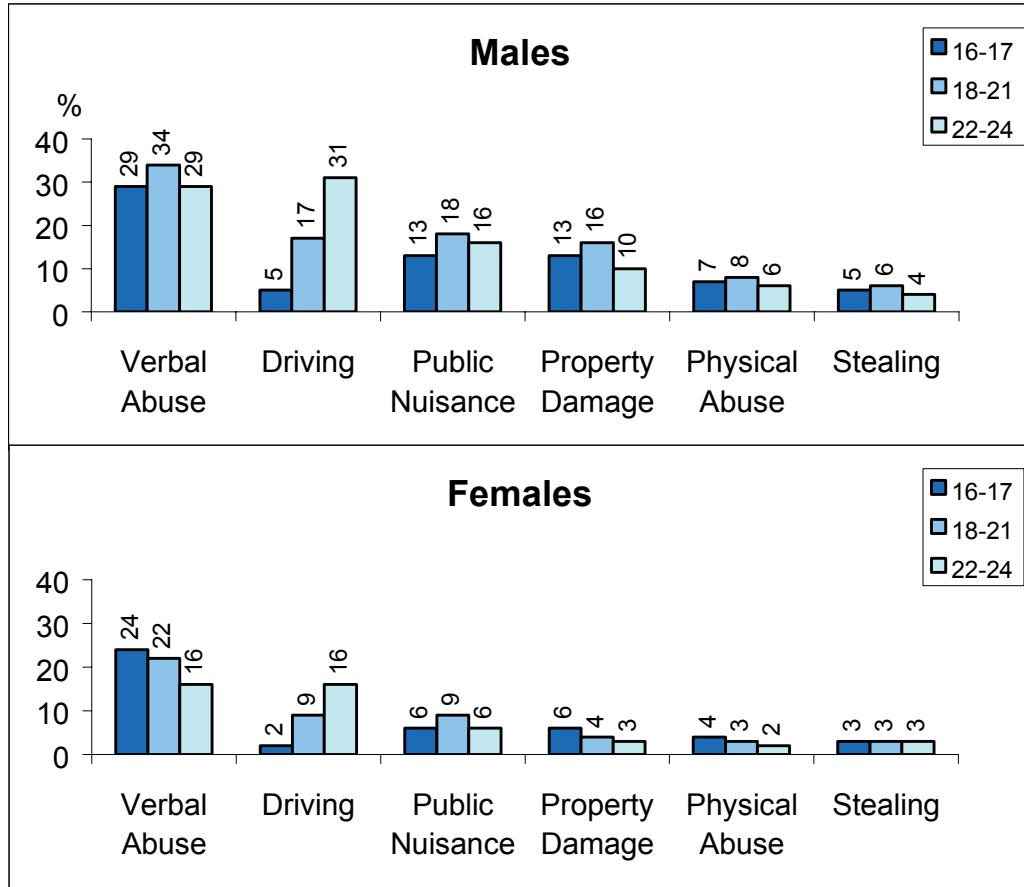
Table 6: Behaviours Under the Influence of Alcohol

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Verbally abusing someone	31.8	20.7	25.7
Driving a motor vehicle	17.4	9.0	12.8
Creating a public disturbance	16.2	7.4	11.4
Causing damage to property	13.6	4.0	8.3
Physically abusing someone	7.2	2.8	4.8
Stealing something	5.6	2.9	4.1
<i>Base: Drunk alcohol in last 12 months</i>	<i>n=2495</i>	<i>n=3009</i>	<i>n=5504</i>

Table 6 indicates clear differences in the behaviour of males and females while under the influence of alcohol. Males and females generally differ further in their behaviours in that males tend to exhibit more of the above behaviours in the 18-21 age group. In contrast these behaviours tend to decline among girls as they get older. The one exception in both cases is that the proportion who drive under the influence of alcohol increases with age among both sexes. (Note: the figures do not indicate the proportions who have driven with a blood alcohol level over the legal limit.)

Charts below exhibit the differences between males and females.

Figure 4: Patterns of Behaviour Under the Influence of Alcohol among Young People in Different Age Ranges



(n=3009)

Young people may not only exhibit anti-social behaviours; they may also encounter them. The next table indicates three kinds of behaviour encountered from other people who had themselves been drinking. The table shows that although males encounter more verbal and physical abuse, females are more often made to be afraid by people who have been drinking. It is notable that this last figure is very little affected by how old the young person is.

Table 7: Behaviours Encountered from People Under the Influence of Alcohol

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Verbal abuse	48.0	35.5	41.2
Physical abuse (respondents age 18+ only)	14.3	6.5	9.9
Being put in fear	16.2	21.5	19.1
<i>Base: all respondents</i>	<i>n=2743</i>	<i>n=3309</i>	<i>n=6052</i>

AGE OF INITIATION TO ALCOHOL USE

For some time there has been interest in the question of whether the age of first trying alcohol leads to greater use later on. The survey data suggests that, within the limits of the age range, the earlier the “age of initiation” the greater the later usage.

The table below shows age of first having a serve of alcohol related to the respondent’s classification of themselves as a drinker now. It is clear from this that the later people start to drink alcohol the more likely they are to view themselves as light or occasional drinkers, and the less likely to be heavy or binge drinkers.

Table 8: Age of Initiation related to Self-classified Drinking Status

Self-classification	Age of first drinking alcohol			
	Below 14 (%)	14-15 (%)	16-17 (%)	18 + (%)
Non or ex-drinker	5.1	4.5	6.6	18.0
Occasional drinker	17.7	19.9	24.9	30.8
Light drinker	9.4	9.3	11.0	16.0
Social drinker	58.1	58.4	53.3	33.3
Heavy drinker	5.4	3.7	1.8	0.8
Binge drinker	4.1	4.1	2.2	1.0
Can’t say	0.1	0.2	0.1	0

Base: Ever tried alcohol (n=5792)

Similar results are found if we look at other measures such the extent to which people indulge in drinking sessions that leave them unable to remember what happened, or the extent of long term or short term harm.