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for parents and teachers

The prevalence of alcohol use among secondary school students

Introduction

Alcohol is widely used by Australians and the use of alcohol among adolescents is common. A recent study found that 90 per cent of students over the age of 14 have had some experience with alcohol, and approximately 50 per cent of those aged 16 and 17 years regularly consume alcohol.

This fact sheet is a summary of the monograph *Australian Secondary School Students' Use of Alcohol in 2002*, produced by the National Drug Strategy. It is a report of the seventh national survey on the use of alcohol by Australian secondary school students.

Who was surveyed?

The target population for this survey was students in Years 7 to 12 across Australia. The schools that took part in the survey were chosen because they represented students from the three main education sectors: government, Catholic and independent. A total of 363 schools participated in the study and 23 417 students aged between 12 and 17 years of age answered the questionnaire.

The results

How many students drink alcohol?

Experience with alcohol was high among secondary school students, with use becoming more common as age increased:

- In the week before the survey, 19 per cent of 12-year-olds had drunk alcohol and this increased to 50 per cent of 17-year-olds.
- In the month before the survey, 29 per cent of 12-year-olds and around 70 per cent of 17-year-old students had consumed alcohol.
- In the year before the survey, approximately 20 per

cent of students aged 12 years had drunk alcohol and this increased to approximately 90 per cent of 17-year-olds.

- Around half of the 12–13-year-olds who had consumed alcohol in the year before the survey had drunk in the month before the survey.
- Of the 17-year-olds who had drunk in the year before the survey, around 70 per cent had consumed alcohol in the previous month.
- Among students 14 years and under, males were significantly more likely than females to have had an alcoholic drink. This difference was not seen with older students.

How much are students drinking?

Students who had drunk alcohol in the week before the survey were called "current drinkers". Of current drinkers, 31 per cent of 15-year-olds and 44 per cent of 17-year-olds had consumed alcohol at levels above those recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in the previous week. The guidelines recommend that adults drink less than six drinks in one day for males and less than four drinks in one day for females.

Although the number of drinks consumed per week increased between the ages of 14 and 17 for both males and females, this increase was more dramatic among males.

It was found that both younger and older students drank less alcohol per week if they obtained it from their parents than if someone else bought alcohol for them.

What are students drinking?

The survey results show that students are drinking the following types of alcoholic drinks:

- Spirits (e.g. vodka, scotch, rum), in either the premixed (or "ready to drink") or straight form, were the most common types of drinks among current drinkers of all ages.
- Straight spirits were consumed by 33 per cent of 12–15-year-olds and 36 per cent of 16–17-year-olds.
- Premixed spirits were consumed by 30 per cent of 12–15-year-olds and 31 per cent of 16–17-year-olds.
- More females than males drank premixed spirits
- More males than females drank straight spirits.
- After spirits, the next most commonly consumed alcoholic drink was beer (18 per cent ordinary beer), followed by wine (6 per cent).
- Beer was more likely to be consumed by males than females.

The popularity of premixed drinks has increased among both males and females at the expense of beer for males and straight spirits for females.

How are students obtaining alcohol?

Parents were the most common source of alcohol. Thirty-eight per cent of male and female students indicated that their parents gave them their last drink.

Across all age groups, 11 per cent of males and 8 per cent of females bought their last alcoholic drink themselves. Buying alcohol was related to age and increased from 5 per cent of 12–15-year-old males to 22 per cent of 16–17-year-olds.

Where are students drinking?

The three main places for students to drink are:

- The family home
- A friend's home
- A party.

There was a relationship between where alcohol was consumed and the source of alcohol. Among current drinkers who drank at home, 85 per cent obtained their alcohol from their parents.

Types of drinker

Students were asked to classify themselves according to how often they drank alcohol.

- 46 per cent of all students saw themselves as non-drinkers
- 25 per cent thought they were an occasional drinker
- 22 per cent said they were party drinkers.

Older students were more likely to say they were party drinkers than were younger students.

Are students being educated about alcohol?

Over all age groups, 17 per cent of students had not received any lessons about alcohol use in the previous school year, while 44 per cent had received more than one lesson about this topic. Seventeen-year-old students were the least likely to have received a lesson about alcohol use in the previous school year.

Changes in the use of alcohol between 1999 and 2002

Previous studies have shown that, after some success in reducing alcohol use among young adolescents between 1984 and 1990, the prevalence of alcohol consumption increased during the 1990s.

While the prevalence of drinking among younger students had not changed between 1999 and 2002, the proportion of current drinkers among older students in 2002 was lower than that found in 1999. However, the proportion of older students drinking at levels higher than those recommended by the NHMRC guidelines for daily consumption had not changed between 1999 and 2002. The data suggest that just as many students were placing themselves at risk of experiencing some immediate harm from their consumption of alcohol in 2002 as in 1999.

Conclusion

Teenage alcohol use is predictive of harmful usage levels at older ages. The findings of this report suggest that there is a need to reduce students' access to alcohol and increase educational programs.

Reference

Australian secondary students' use of alcohol in 2002
2004 National Drug Strategy monograph no. 55,
Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia