



Australian Government



Binge Drinking

A summary of website discussions and
the Australian Government's initiatives

July 2009

Executive Summary

The online discussion on Binge Drinking was live from 5 May 2009 to 5 July 2009. This topic was suggested by a number of AYF website users and participants at the inaugural **youTHINK** event in February 2009.

During this time over 90 ideas were posted on the topic board, with a number of suggestions being made about ways to address the issue of binge drinking in Australia.

Below is a summary of the posts, as well as some of the initiatives the Australian Government is undertaking to address this issue.

Summary of Ideas

Advertising of Alcohol Products

- There should be harsher restrictions on advertising alcohol, not only in radio and television advertisements, but also in movies and television shows that young people are likely to watch.
- A number of young people felt that the advertising of alcohol products should be banned altogether.
- Others suggested advertising less alcohol products and more of the negative effects of alcohol may be more off putting to young people.
- A young person suggested that some countries, such as Sweden, have banned the advertising of drinks containing 3.5% alcohol or more and that this should be enforced in Australia.
- Alcopop advertisements should not target the youth market. Such products are currently made to look very appealing to the youth market.
- There should be a ban on alcohol advertising at sporting and other events where there are likely to be young people. There could also be a complete ban on the sale of alcohol at these events.

Education

- More education should be provided, not only to young people but to adults, about the correct and safe consumption of alcohol, risk factors and complications of underage and binge drinking.
- Many young people felt that they could not relate to the drinking nightmare ads (in that they hadn't been in those sort of situations themselves) and therefore the ads did not have a lasting affect, as they felt 'that won't happen to me'.
- Some people did, however, express that they found the drinking nightmare ads to be an effective way to make them think twice about their drinking habits.
- Some young people suggested that education should begin at a very early age and be ongoing throughout school to push the message that binge drinking is not something exciting, but that it is dangerous.
- More education as to the consequences of binge drinking and underage drinking – for example, the damage that excessive alcohol can cause to the developing body, as well as things like liver failure, brain damage and unwanted pregnancies.
- Focus alcohol campaigns to tell true stories of how alcohol and more specifically, binge drinking, has ruined lives – a campaign containing this sort of message would hit much closer to home and would be a lot harder to ignore.
- Parents should educate their teenagers about different types of alcohol and how alcoholic drinks can affect their bodies.

- The Government should produce creative advertising campaigns to screen on popular youth TV channels such as Channel V. These campaigns should also take advantage of YouTube and billboards. Campaigns such as the 'no one things big of you' were very effective in sending a clear message about actions and reactions from a youth perspective.
- The Government's campaign is misguided. It should not focus on safety, but target the underlying culture of peer pressure and acceptance that produces, encourages and rewards reckless behaviour.
- In the Northern Territory football players, who are strong role models, have promoted the message that violence against women and children is unacceptable. These campaigns have sent a strong message to the community from respected people – the Government should use local role models in their education campaigns.
- Instead of focussing on violence that comes out of binge drinking, associate binge drinking with something young adults really care about: sex. Binge drinking can lead to impotency, pregnancy, STI's and infertility. If there is one thing to stop youth binge drinking, it's to make it sexually unattractive.
- Life Education Alcohol Education programs should be introduced widely into secondary schools to provide skills to assist young people to make responsible choices about alcohol use.
- All secondary school students could be required to undertake a Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) course.

The Legal Drinking Age

- Many young people suggested that the legal drinking age in Australia should be lowered because lots of young people drink because they are rebelling. Many people felt, however, that this would mean that problems with binge drinking would then start at a younger age.
- Lowering the legal drinking age could ruin young peoples chances of doing well in exams and school.
- A few young people suggested that all people over 18 years old could be given an alcohol licence card which would record all alcohol purchases and potentially only allow a certain amount of alcohol to be purchased. It could also keep a record of barcodes and if an underage person was found drinking the bottle could be traced back to the purchaser who may incur a fine.
- Raising the drinking age may be a solution to this problem. Many people suggested to 21 years of age.
- Drinking should be allowed under parental consent, in a safe environment.

Taxes on Alcohol Products

- Many young people feel that the alcopops tax is not working as it is putting teenagers off pre-mixed drinks and encouraging them to mix their own, which often means they are making the drinks stronger, and really have no idea how many standard drinks they have consumed.
- Money made from alcohol taxes should be put towards subsidising youth or family events and activities to give young people something else to do that is affordable.

Cost of Alcohol

- Many people felt that the cost of all alcohol should be increased to make it less affordable to drink to excess, and out of reach for minors.
- A number of people suggested that the cost of alcohol should increase with its alcohol content, so the more potent alcohols are the most expensive and those with the smallest alcohol content are cheaper.

- If other activities were more affordable than young people would consider those instead of drinking. Some young people expressed that if a surfing lesson, or a spin around a go kart track cost less than a bottle of spirits then they would choose to do this on their weekend rather than drink.

Culture/Peer Pressure

- Many young people felt that binge drinking could be considered part of Australian culture, in that at every social gathering there is encouragement to drink. Peer pressure was also considered a major factor in binge drinking with people wanting to 'fit in' with their friends.
- Australia needs to have a shift in culture, for too long the Australian culture has been sitting down with mates and beers and not thinking twice about how much you are drinking. It's all well and good to be sociable, but that doesn't have to mean drinking to excess.
- The Government should focus more on the peer pressure aspect of binge drinking. Many young people are pressured into drinking believing that it will make them 'cool' but they end up ruining their teenage years.
- Campaigns need to target the culture of acceptance amongst young people, as acceptance by their peers is of far more concern than their safety.
- The media and our peers have a large influence on binge drinking. TV shows like 'Home and Away' show popular characters drinking and receiving encouragement from their peers – if advertisements showed young popular celebrities saying no to drinking then maybe binge drinking wouldn't be such a big issue.
- It has to be made clear that getting drunk is anti-social, not social.

Boredom/Rebellion

- Many young people drink due to boredom, particularly in small/regional communities where there are not a lot of things to do. Providing more alcohol and drug free events for youth could help combat this boredom.
- More underage events such as concerts, parties and underage alcohol-free nightclubs with proper supervision would help curb the boredom that leads people to drinking.
- Many people felt that if the legal drinking age were lowered it would stop underage binge drinking as young people often just do it to rebel, because they get a thrill out of doing something illegal.
- Open more free youth clubs and centres to keep kids off the streets, organise fun activities on the weekends to prevent young people from drinking.

Alcohol Packaging/Labelling and Content

- Young people are often not aware of how much they are drinking due to some of the weird and wonderful packaging. Standardising drink packaging would help to ensure people are aware of how much they are consuming.
- A small quantity of flavourless carrot juice could be added to all alcohol in Australia, then when people drink too much alcohol they will turn orange. Being orange seems uncool and it would help police identify binge drinkers.
- Alcohol packaging should be required to contain graphic images of the consequences of binge drinking, similar to the graphic images used on cigarette packaging.
- The alcohol content of some drinks, particularly alcopops should be lowered. For example, many of these drinks currently have a five percent alcohol content. Why not make them go back to three or four percent, then one of these drinks relates to approximately one standard drink rather than 1.5 standard drinks.

Violence

- Use the alcohol tax to set up activities for drunk people to do in a fun environment so they don't get angry and want to fight.

Harsher Penalties

- Many young people feel that there should be harsher penalties for parents or older siblings who purchase alcohol for minors.
- The government and adults should be stricter on young people to make sure they stay away from alcohol.
- There should be more spot checks and harsher penalties for licensed venues serving intoxicated or underage people.
- Harsher penalties need to be applied with more concentrated efforts in the 'scare' factor and making the binge drinkers feel ashamed.

What is being done?

National Binge Drinking Strategy

The Australian Government is keen to address the issue of binge drinking. In March 2008, the Prime Minister announced a National Binge Drinking Strategy, which provides \$53.5 million over four years to address the problem of binge drinking. The Strategy includes:

- \$14.4 million for community level initiatives to confront the culture of binge drinking, particularly in sporting organisations;
- \$19.1 million to intervene earlier to assist young people and ensure that they assume personal responsibility for their binge drinking; and
- \$20 million for advertising that confronts young people with the costs and consequences of binge drinking.

The development of the National Binge Drinking Campaign was based on current evidence and best practice in relation to reaching young Australians with a behaviour-change message. The Department of Health and Ageing tested a variety of campaign directions, and depiction of regrettable consequences resonated the most with young people.

The Department of Health and Ageing has a long history of using powerful imagery and hard-hitting messages to reach the community on the harms associated with excessive alcohol consumption, tobacco and illicit drug use. The current campaign drew upon research from past campaigns as well as significant testing with the primary and secondary audiences for the binge drinking campaign. This supported the approach taken and the consequences depicted by the binge drinking campaign. The available statistics show that these scenarios are likely to happen and the realistic depiction ensured their relevance to the target audiences.

Research

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has commissioned the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) to conduct a scoping study to address the challenging issue of youth binge drinking.

This scoping study, through comprehensive analysis of research and consultations with experts and key stakeholders, aims to develop a solid evidence base to support future policy development in educating students on the physical, social and emotional harms and the risks to personal safety and the safety of others that arise from excessive alcohol consumption.

NCETA has consulted with a wide range of key stakeholders including state and territory government and non-government education authorities, school students, teachers and parents across all Australian school jurisdictions to collect information that investigates:

- the range and implementation of programs currently being used in Australian schools that address alcohol use and young people;
- effective strategies and interventions;
- influence and impact of families, peers and products on young people's attitudes and practices in relation to alcohol use;
- the most effective and appropriate school-based alcohol education and prevention strategies; and
- how to best educate young people to understand the impact of alcohol and the social and cultural pressures that can lead to its misuse.

The scoping study was completed in August 2009 and recommendations are being considered by the department. Please keep an eye on the AYF website for any further developments in relation to this study.

Legal drinking age

In Australia there is no minimum legal drinking age. However, states and territories regulate a minimum legal age for purchasing alcohol and for drinking on licensed premises. In setting such age limits, the state and territory governments take into account available research on the dangers of alcohol consumption by young people. For example, there is evidence to suggest that alcohol use during childhood and adolescence might have a detrimental impact on the developing brain.

Alcohol advertising

The advertising of alcohol in Australia is subject to a number of different codes of practice. The Australian Association of National Advertisers Code of Ethics covers general advertising issues. Other applicable laws and codes include the Trade Practices Act and the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice.

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice states that alcohol advertisements can only be shown during M, MA, or AV classification periods. However, on weekends and public holidays alcohol advertisements can be shown as an accompaniment to the live broadcast of a sporting event.

The Government has not yet made any decisions about imposing further restrictions on alcohol advertising. In March 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) asked the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) to prepare a report on options for reducing binge drinking. One of the areas under consideration by MCDS concerns the standards and controls for alcohol advertising targeting young people. The development of the report is now well underway and it is expected that it will be provided to COAG later in 2009.

Alcohol taxes

In relation to alcohol taxes, industry acknowledged that there was significant growth in alcohol consumption, of more than 250 per cent, following the reduction in taxation on alcohol by the previous government in 2000. Evidence shows that alcohol consumption is responsive to price - especially for younger people. In line with this evidence, the level of alcohol consumed has fallen significantly since the rate on such products was increased in 2008.

The Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act ('the Constitution') provides that the Commonwealth can exclusively impose duties of excise. For alcohol, 'excisable goods' refers to beer, brandy and 'other excisable beverages'. Other excisable beverages are beverages containing more than 1.15% alcohol other than beer, brandy and wine; this category includes spirits such as vodka, gin and whiskey. Other excisable beverages not exceeding 10 per cent by volume of alcohol are commonly referred to as alcopops or ready to drink (RTD) beverages.

Many of you suggested that taxes on alcohol should be in line with the alcohol content. Excise is currently levied on the basis of alcohol content, that is, dollars per litre of alcohol. Wine is excluded from the excise regime and is instead subject to the Wine Equalisation Tax (WET), which is a tax applied at the rate of 29 percent on the value of the last wholesale sale. More broadly, the review of Australia's Future Tax System is currently considering the taxation of alcohol and will be reporting to the Government in December 2009.