

**INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ALCOHOL
ABUSE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

Organisation: Name suppressed

Date received: 26/02/2013

Partially Confidential

Young people of the Standing Committee on Social Issues *inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people*

Introduction

On 26 February 2013, approximately sixteen young people from worked with to address five of the seven issue areas highlighted in the Terms of Reference of the New South Wales state government's Standing Committee on Social Issues *inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people*.

Discussions were recorded in dot-point by a year-12 student, and later written up by the Youth Health and Development Worker. The submission below directly reflects the thoughts and ideas of a cross-section of rural young people living and/or schooling in the Snowy River Shire. The language used in the submission is indicative of the young people's own informal, conversational approach to this issue.

It is worth noting that alcohol-related harm and alcohol abuse are important topics for rural young people. Alcohol impacts those that do not drink as well as those that do. It shapes attitudes, social norms, and local culture. The young people engaged on this topic spoke honestly, reflected thoughtfully, and thought critically about these issues throughout the discussion.

Discussion Areas

a) Impacts of advertising

Initially, participants stated that they didn't really notice alcohol advertising; however, as the conversation progressed, they moved away from the notion of overt advertisements to that of product placement, film, and even the way drinks are coloured and packaged.

The group noted that there is a lot of drinking on television and in movies, with images of parties, people having fun, and young people defying their parents, that does have a subconscious influence on their ideas about drinking.

Girls in the group stated that pretty colours, the design of labels, sweetness, alcohol content all impact their decisions about purchasing alcohol; whereas the boys in the group more likely to drink beer and spirits (rum and vodka) and felt their selection was less affected by marketing. Both male and female participants said cost was a factor; some indicated that they drink what their parents drink – excepting wine, which didn't appeal to anyone in the group.

The discussion made it clear that the normalisation in the media of heavy drinking, particularly at parties and as the 'only way' to have fun, plays a big role in their decision to

drink. They felt that this was a way for alcohol manufacturers to get around regulations designed to prevent direct advertising to young people. One young man stated that it's "easy for them to get around" the regulations.

b) Effectiveness of alcohol harm minimisation strategies targeting young people

Participants felt that many strategies currently employed simply don't work. They dislike programs run by adults that treat them like "children who are clueless." They indicated that effective programs are fun, interactive, and somewhat confronting. However, they also stated that most programs are boring, and many kids simply zone out. Some young people advocated for scare tactics; however, the majority of the group indicated that a presentation by someone they could relate to – someone young who *did* engage in drinking as a teenager – would be more effective. The personality and approach of the presenter during workshops related to alcohol is obviously important.

Young people also indicated that messages need to be clear and consistent, that sometimes laws and regulations are not clear, and that there is a lack of education about safety (i.e., not accepting a drink from a stranger at the pub) for some young people. Students cited an example wherein friends from Sydney, who regularly go "clubbing" were prepared to accept a pre-mixed drink from a stranger at the pub, whereas the Jindabyne girls knew to reject the drink because they did not know what it contained.

Participants advocated for more information about laws and "bar etiquette" (go to the bar when someone offers to buy you a drink, watch the barman pour it etc); and to be treated like intelligent beings capable of making responsible decisions when engaging in alcohol education.

The need to educate parents – about young people's drinking, laws related to underage drinking, and the impact of adult drinking on young people's ideas about alcohol – was also emphasised.

Young people in this particular group had firm positive memories of two programs completed by the area's rural youth health workers in 2011 and 2012. These involved beer goggles, interactive Q&As, honest discussion about drinking habits and culture, and helpful give-aways such as a wheel that indicated hours to sobriety based on gender and weight.

d) Effectiveness of measures to reduce drink-driving

There was a clear gender split during this discussion. Most of the young women in the room indicated that people should "just know better"; but also admitted that 1) you don't think clearly or make good decisions when you're drunk, and 2) in the countryside, where there's no public transportation and taxis are very expensive, people sometimes decide to chance driving. They did not see this as excusable; but did acknowledge that it is a factor in incidences of drink driving.

The young men in the room indicated that boys think they're "ten-foot tall and bullet-proof," and that it's almost impossible to get through to them.

The group definitely heard drink driving messages, and many felt it was "common sense" not to drive drunk or get in the car with a drunk driver. They indicated that these interventions and messages seem to only work for some people, and that others simply have to learn from their mistakes. Special campaigns directed at men and boys were recommended.

Participants recommended peer interventions / peer support, continued in-school education about the dangers of drink driving, and earlier intervention with a focus on personal responsibility and integrity. There was some concern that talking to younger children about alcohol may push the age of experimentation forward, and they were keen to prevent this.

e) Measures to reduce alcohol-related violence

Young people expressed the belief that a "alcohol is a truth serum," and that sometimes those truths can escalate until violence results. They also stated that "it doesn't hurt until the next morning, so therefore it doesn't matter" while you're drunk.

However, there was also a suggestion that alcohol-fuelled violence is a cultural construct: "we have decided that alcohol makes us violent therefore puts us in a violent mind set." They felt that expressions of violence while drinking were related to your childhood experiences, i.e., what drinking behaviours you witness growing up; and that local drinking culture plays a role. In Jindabyne, for instance, alcohol-related violence is not expected or accepted, and is therefore uncommon; however, in Sydney where "everyone knows" there's alcohol-fuelled violence and it's "out in the open" with "more places to drink" there's a higher likelihood of violence.

That said, the group agreed that the vast majority of people are not violent when drunk. They felt that isolated incidents, particularly in Sydney's Kings Cross, tended to be blown out of proportion and sensationalised by local media. This led to an interesting discussion about the impact of media – including the news – on drinking habits and culture in Australia (see below).

g) Other matters: Australian drinking culture

The final topic of discussion was Australian drinking culture. Young people indicated that drinking is part of the "Aussie identity," that Australians drink heavily ("to get pissed") and frequently. Many young people in the group cited that alcohol is the way people relax after work, party on the weekends, and celebrate special occasions.

Participants felt very strongly that there is a "cultural expectation to drink." For young men, it was highlighted that the "Aussie male is expected to be able to drink and drink in excessive amount – this is expected to be classified as 'a man'." This is very confronting a challenging for young men, who often struggle with stigma attached to being non-

drinkers. Male participants also highlighted the association between sport and alcohol as particularly potent.

There was an extensive discussion around the age of alcohol consumption, with the majority of the group opposed to increasing the age to 21 as was done in the United States. They felt it unfair that they should be able to go to war at 18, but not have a beer; participants also expressed concern that, once you move the right to drink to 21, other rights may follow, further delaying adulthood.

The group discussed brain development and recent studies that indicate our brains continue to develop into our mid-20s. This came as a surprise to many participants. They were concerned about suggestions, primarily on the internet, to move the drinking, driving, and other ages to a period after full brain development. It was agreed – by young people and adults present – that allowing young people to make decisions while their brains are still developing is important to that overall development.

Some young women suggested increasing the availability of mocktails / virgin cocktails in pubs. They were also more likely to express disgust and/or embarrassment about Australian drinking culture, and seemed to feel that drinking alcohol as a normal, everyday thing was not something to be proud of.

Most of the young men did not share this view. One young man in particular, who works in a pub, stated that there is nothing wrong with people "sitting around the pub having a quiet beer," or with someone having a drink after work to wind down. The problem, he indicated, is people that get very drunk and act out.

The group generally agreed with this, indicating that drinking alcohol does not have to be excessive or problematic. They strongly felt that "only a minority are completely smashed; most are having a civilised drink" but that the media focuses on "negative extreme events" that are "blown out of proportion and thrust into the spotlight." They expressed that this sort of emphasis – on the negative and sensational rather than the positive – across issue areas is a huge problem and reinforces negative behaviour. They want to see more good news on the news, and a shift in focus to positive things people do in the world.