# Understanding recent trends in Australian alcohol consumption

## Researcher

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## Summary

This report examines recent trends in alcohol consumption in Australia across three measures: rates of abstention, rates of episodic heavy drinking and the distribution of drinking across the population. The study relies on five waves of the National Drug Strategy Household Survey involving more than 120,000 respondents.

## Outcomes

It found that there have been small but significant increases in the proportion of the Australian population (aged 14 and over) reporting lifetime abstention from alcohol in the past decade, from 9.4 per cent in 2001 to 14.1 per cent in 2013. This shift has been concentrated in the younger subgroups of the population, with significant increases for all age groups up to 40-49 year olds. There have been no significant increases observed for respondents aged 50 or over. By far the largest shift has occurred among teenagers, with abstention among 14-17 year olds increasing from 28 per cent in 2001 to 57.3 per cent in 2013.

An analysis of abstention by cultural background suggested that the shifts in the population abstaining rates among adults were driven partly by changes in the cultural makeup of the population and survey sample. Among respondents aged 18 and over living in households where only English was spoken, rates of abstention increased only slightly (for instance from 4.5 to 7.3 per cent for 18-24 year olds) during the period examined. In contrast, there were large increases in abstention rates in households where a language other than English was spoken alongside a general increase in the proportion of these households included in the sample.

Trends in the rates of heavy episodic drinking in Australia from 2001 to 2013 produced contrasting pictures by age groups. For younger drinkers (aged less than 40) there were steady declines in the prevalence of consuming five or more drinks in an occasion, and relatively stable rates of consuming 20 or more drinks in an occasion. For older respondents (aged 40-49) the number of occasions on which 20 or more drinks had been consumed had generally increased (from 6.4 per cent to 9 per cent). There was some evidence of diverging consumption, with rates of heavy episodic drinking at lower levels (five or more drinks per occasion) more likely to decline than rates of very heavy episodic drinking (20 or more drinks per occasion). Across the entire sample, heavy episodic drinking declined from 42.9 to 38.5 per cent, while very heavy episodic drinking rates were relatively unchanged between 2001 and 2013 (9.4 and 9.5 per cent respectively).

## Recommendations

Taken together, the findings of this study provide a complex picture of changes in Australian drinking. In the last 13 years young people, particularly those aged under 25, have sharply reduced their drinking; with increases in abstention rates among young adults driven by both changes in the cultural makeup of the population and the ageing of abstaining teenage cohorts into adulthood. At the general population level consumption has been more stable, with some evidence of increasing rates of very heavy episodic drinking among older adults (significant increases in the number of occasions where 20 or more drinks are consumed for respondents aged between 30 and 59).

The implications of these findings are important. Firstly, they suggest that public health advocates need to ensure that policy and prevention focuses on older adults as well as young people, since Australians over the age of 40 have shown signs of increasingly problematic drinking between 2001 and 2013. The sharp declines in drinking among teenagers and, in more recent years, young adults during this period are promising signs, and further research into the factors driving these changes is needed to facilitate and reinforce them.

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