

Media Release

ESCALATING ALCOHOL HARMS HIGHLIGHTS VICTORIA'S TRUE EPIDEMIC

11 September 2014: Newly released Victorian data has revealed the State's alcohol harms remain extensive and are continuing to rise in the absence of effective Government intervention.

Alcohol harms are rising across the board, with alcohol responsible for three deaths, 18 assaults, 81 hospital admissions and 22 ambulance attendances every single day.

The study by FARE examined a total of seven harms indicators, accessing data from a range of sources including Victoria Police, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, for the most recently available ten year period where available.

Alcohol-related ambulance attendances increased by 146 per cent to 8,349 (2003 to 2011), while family incidents involving alcohol totalled 14,015 in 2012-13, an increase of 85 per cent since 2003-04.

Alcohol-related hospital admissions rose 53 per cent to 29,694 from 2001-02 to 2010-11, alcohol related assaults increased 30 per cent to 6,768 (2001-02 to 2010-11) and alcohol treatment episodes totalled 21,460 in 2012-13, a 28 per cent increase since 2003-04.

Dr Michael Livingston, a researcher with FARE's Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) has closely examined the relationship between the density of alcohol outlets and increased trading hours and alcohol-related harms, and says the number of alcohol outlets in the State, together with the increasing affordability of alcohol in Victoria in the last few years are two major factors driving the high level of alcohol harms in Victoria.

"At last count there were 19,978 active liquor licences in Victoria, up 21 per cent since 2003-04. Studies tell us that as alcohol's availability increases, so too do alcohol harms, and unfortunately, as the escalating harms data attests, Victoria is not an exception to that rule," Dr Livingston said.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says the newly released data is a sobering reminder of the extent of alcohol harms in Victoria, but more importantly, a clear indication that the measures implemented by past and present State Governments have failed to effectively address the problem.

"Alcohol harms continue to have devastating impact on the State of Victoria, and it is of great concern that the problem is only growing worse with each passing year. This new trend data is clear evidence of the failure of successive State governments to come close to effectively tackling a problem that sees 1,214 alcohol-related deaths in Victoria every year," Mr Thorn said.

The study found only one notable exception; alcohol related serious or fatal road injuries are in decline, down 36 percent from 3,031 in 2001-02 to 1,932 in 2010-11.

Mr Thorn says the success in this one area stands in stark contrast to the failure to address alcohol harms more generally but says it is easy to understand why road safety initiatives have been so successful.

“In Victoria, and in other jurisdictions we have seen governments embrace comprehensive measures to reduce accidents, introducing strong regulation, public education, together with strong enforcement measures. That effort and commitment to reduce the road toll has been rewarded and the same comprehensive approach and serious long-term commitment to preventing alcohol harm is needed in Victoria,” Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn questions the Victorian Government’s current focus on crystal methamphetamine and says data on the prevalence of drug use in Victoria, hospitalisations and ambulance attendances clearly demonstrate that the associated harms from alcohol use are of a far greater magnitude than ice.

“Notwithstanding the seriousness of the harm associated with crystal methamphetamine, Victoria is not being overwhelmed by ice, but by alcohol,” Mr Thorn said.

Calling for measures to address availability and alcohol-related violence including 3am last drinks, a 10pm close for packaged liquor outlets, and a continued freeze on the granting of new liquor licences, Mr Thorn says that with the Victorian election fast approaching, the Government and the Opposition must declare their willingness to get serious about reducing alcohol harms.

“There is only one reason why alcohol harms continue to increase in Victoria, and it’s not from the lack of a solution to the problem. Quite simply, it’s a lack of political will from both major parties. Current policies are weak and ineffectual when what is needed to reduce alcohol harms is strong targeted measures that would address availability and have an immediate impact. In the lead up to the State election and in the face of rising alcohol harms Victorians deserve to know whether the Government or the opposition are prepared to take real action to save lives,” Mr Thorn said.

Michael Thorn (@MichaelTThorn) is available for interview.

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation’s greatest preventative health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia.

For further information visit FARE’s website: www.fare.org.au.