

MEDIA RELEASE

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EXPERTS WARN AGAINST DANGERS OF PRELOADING ON BOOZE

New research reveals that three-quarters of Victorian young people are loading up on alcohol before going for a night out at a venue where alcohol is sold.

Findings from a Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre and VicHealth Australian Research Council Linkage Grant study using Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey data and interviews with 18 to 24-year-old Victorians will be presented at the 2012 APSAD conference* in Melbourne today.

The study has prompted health authorities to issue a message to young people heading off to Schoolies Week celebrations to be wary of the amount of alcohol they consume at home and think about the potential this has for the night to end badly – in hospital or in the back of a police van. The researchers also suggest that raising the price of cheap packaged alcohol is likely to limit high risk pre-loading.

Otherwise known as ‘pre-drinking’, ‘pre-partying’ and ‘home drinking’, pre-loading is when a person consumes alcoholic beverages before going out to a club, bar or pub. To date, very little research has been done on this behaviour in Australia, despite the high profile of the issue in the community.

The findings presented at the conference identify a strong relationship between pre-drinking and ‘extreme bingeing’, that is, consuming 11 or more standard drinks in a session at least once a month over the last year.

Interview participants explained that they pre-load because it is cheaper to buy alcohol from bottle shops than from clubs and pubs, particularly alcoholic-energy drinks, wine and alcopops.

The lead researcher, Turning Point’s Dr Sarah MacLean – who is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at Turning Point and the University of Melbourne – said the study indicated raising the price of cheap packaged alcohol was likely to limit high risk pre-loading.

“It is a concern that some young adults drink heavily before going out to reduce spending money on more expensive drinks at licensed venues, with our study showing a strong relationship between pre-drinking and high risk alcohol consumption,” Dr MacLean said.

“This means that if you load up on alcohol before going out you are more likely to be drinking at a level which puts you at high risk of short and long-term harm.

“With the price difference between the cost of drinking at home compared to buying alcohol at venues a major factor in pre-drinking, serious consideration must be given to setting a minimum price for alcohol as a deterrent.”

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Dr MacLean added that as well as the widely known health risks, excessive alcohol consumption put people at greater risk of being involved in fights, accidents or road trauma.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said the nature of alcohol consumption amongst young people has changed over the years, to the point where many are drunk before they even get to a licensed venue.

“We know that young people are pre-disposed to binge drinking and while there’s nothing wrong with having a responsible drink with your mates, drinking with the sole purpose of getting drunk is a bad idea.

“This research shows if young people drink at home they’re more likely to end the night having drunk at a level that can put them at much greater risk of harm. Alcohol is aggressively marketed at the young adult population, it’s readily available, and it is much cheaper when bought from a bottle-shop or the supermarket – suggesting a need for a rethink on pricing. When you can buy wine cheaper than bottled water, there’s a problem.

“With Schoolies celebrations around the corner, we want to remind school leavers that it’s important to monitor the amount you drink. Having fun is one thing, but no-one wants to end up spending their Schoolies Week in trouble with the police or in hospital.”

The research concludes that setting a minimum price for alcohol products, preferably through volumetric taxation, is the most effective way to reduce the price difference between on and off-premise alcohol and could effectively reduce pre-loading.

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* The Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) conference is taking place at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre until 21 November 2012

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