

# Brief insights

## Construction industry drinking culture

### Generation X

#### Introduction

In 2016, VicHealth commissioned La Trobe University's Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) to examine alcohol cultures in middle- and older-age groups in Victoria – Generation X, born 1965 to 1980, and Baby Boomers, born 1946 to 1964.

The research applies the Alcohol Cultures Framework (VicHealth 2016a) to guide the exploration of factors that socially shape the way people drink, providing the evidence to inform future VicHealth-funded alcohol culture change interventions operating at the subpopulation level.

In order to identify cultures of risky drinking for targeted interventions, researchers drew upon three methods: analysis of existing survey data, literature review and stakeholder consultation. Following multiple rounds of consultation and consideration of potential project impact, drinking culture among Generation X male construction workers was selected by VicHealth as one of the alcohol cultures of interest.

#### Why construction industry drinking culture?

The construction industry is one of the largest employing industries in Victoria. More than 268,000 employees – over 9 per cent of the workforce – were employed by the industry at the end of 2011 (Victoria State Government 2016). Those in the industry are classified as blue-collar workers, where drinking patterns associated with short- and long-term alcohol-related harm are more prevalent than among white-collar occupations (Berry et al 2007). Australian survey data indicates a higher prevalence of risky drinking among male construction workers compared to all employed men in general: over six in ten middle-aged male construction workers regularly (monthly or more) consume five or more drinks in a single session, compared to

four in ten employed middle-aged men in general (Livingston 2016). The number of male construction workers (Generation X) drinking at risky levels is estimated to be approximately 25,000 in Victoria (Census 2011 and NDHDS, 2010 & 2013).

Consultation with expert agencies, including peak construction bodies, supported the above analysis findings and identified alcohol as an issue of concern for construction industry employees regardless of income; including labourers, project managers and staff who work long hours and have high responsibility.

These insights may not represent the practices and perceptions of all male construction workers, but describe drinking patterns and culture as reported by the sample.

#### About the research

In late 2016, CAPR administered an online survey where respondents were recruited through targeted Facebook advertising and offered the chance to win a \$50 gift voucher in return for their participation. Eligible respondents were Victorian men who drink alcohol, aged 36–51 years old (Generation X), and work in the construction industry (employed as a tradesperson, labourer or professional in the physical construction of buildings and infrastructure – for example, carpenter, electrician, heavy equipment operator or similar).

Limited online survey response rates resulted in alternate recruitment methods to boost responses. This included direct workplace recruitment, advertising through a free online classifieds website (Gumtree) and other social media promotion via VicHealth and La Trobe University. Further, the incentive to participate was doubled, such that participants were offered a chance to win a \$100 gift voucher for the duration of the alternate recruitment methods. The alternate methods resulted in very few additional responses to the survey.

Survey respondents were asked about their attitudes to, and experiences of, alcohol culture among male construction workers, including alcohol consumption patterns, risky drinking, social norms relating to drinking, the consequences of drinking and concerns related to drinking in social settings.

Our final sample was 32 men (Generation X) who work in the construction industry in Victoria. Almost a third had attained a certificate or diploma and almost three out of ten had attained a university degree qualification. Over three-quarters were currently employed, one in five selected 'other' which includes unemployment. More than two-thirds of the sample lived in inner or outer Melbourne suburbs, with the remainder living in regional cities or rural areas.

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### Drinking patterns and the role of alcohol

Most commonly, respondents drank on one to two days per week, more often than not with other construction employees. One quarter of respondents drank five days a week or more. Overall, half the sample consumed four standard drinks or more on a usual drinking occasion. Three-quarters reported drinking five or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least monthly, and two-thirds of these reported drinking this way at least weekly. It is important to note that many studies (Boniface et al 2014; Livingston & Callinan 2015; Stockwell et al 2004) have found that survey questions about self-reported alcohol consumption produce underestimates of alcohol consumption. This study did not adjust survey data to weight estimates, therefore this study is likely to underestimate consumption.

One in five respondents reported drinking more when they were with their construction work colleagues (compared to drinking with other social groups). Some respondents reported that drinking with construction workers was more relaxing, enjoyable and socially comfortable than drinking with other groups.

*"...I drink because I enjoy it. A tradie works hard and a beer is a big unwind. Tradies have a lot in common and usually get on well in the work environment, and [they] understand their fellow workers."*

Respondents met to drink with other construction workers in a range of settings – most commonly at licensed venues (in particular, 'the pub'), but also in private homes and at work sites.

### Risky drinking

Survey respondents suspected that high levels of risky drinking does occur within the construction industry: one quarter of respondents suspected that most or all of the construction workers they knew drank at risky levels at least sometimes, and a further third suggested that this applied to more than half of their peers.

When presented with possible reasons for such drinking, respondents commonly selected that male construction workers might drink this heavily for enjoyment, because of

work-related stress, or because it is the social norm. Problems in relationships, drinking problems and financial concerns were selected less frequently as possible reasons for risky drinking.

Most respondents reported that drinking at risky levels was most likely to occur in someone's home or at a licensed venue, primarily at 'the pub'.

More than two-thirds of respondents did not feel they needed to drink when socialising with other construction workers in environments where alcohol was available. Among these men, drinking alcohol was viewed as a personal choice that was not subject to social pressures. However, among the other respondents, who indicated they did feel they needed to drink, drinking was a strong social norm and a key factor in maintaining good social relations within this setting. These men reported teasing and mocking of peers who did not conform to the drinking culture.

*"It's part of the culture and you get ribbed if you don't [drink]."*

Over three quarters (78 per cent) of respondents agreed that it was acceptable to get drunk with their male construction worker colleagues. Compared to Victorian survey data (VicHealth 2016b), acceptance of getting drunk is much higher for this sample. In Victoria, in any setting, almost a third (31 per cent) of men agreed that getting drunk occasionally is 'OK'. Within this study sample, the majority of respondents (94 per cent) thought it was acceptable to drink to the point of becoming tipsy.

### Choosing not to drink

Almost three-quarters agreed it was acceptable not to drink alcohol at all with their male construction worker colleagues.

Just under half of the respondents stated that there was no pressure to drink and no issues relating to choosing not to drink, although some men reported varied reactions to choosing not to drink.

*"Sometimes [you get] made fun of. Other times pat on the back for trying [not to drink]."*

One-third of respondents indicated that choosing not to drink would be met with disbelief, name-calling or bullying. Questioning a man's masculinity was a common way in which pressure to conform to drinking norms was applied.

*"If you want to be one of the boys and not get a hard time you join in [and drink]."*

When drinking with construction worker colleagues, a few men suggested that having to drive home limited their drinking. Some men were also cautious about what they said in these scenarios, however this had no impact on the quantity of alcohol consumed.

When meeting constructions workers who they did not know and where alcohol was available, two-thirds of respondents stated they would feel comfortable choosing not to drink. Fifteen per cent responded that feeling comfortable about choosing not to drink in this context would depend on the situation, for example, whether the person they did not know bought a round of drinks.

### Round-buying

When drinking with other construction workers at licensed venues, round-buying (or ‘shouts’) was reported to be the norm, with almost half of respondents indicating they were always expected to buy rounds and a similar number reporting this was sometimes the case. The practice is underpinned by an obligation to reciprocate once another person had shouted a round of drinks.

*“If someone buys you a drink you buy one in return.”*

Our finding is supported by a recent study that explored round-buying among young adults in Melbourne (Riazi & MacLean 2016). The study identified social rules, such as expectations of reciprocity, that the decision to buy rounds is not always discussed and can commence without agreement from others in the group, and implicit pressures that can encourage drinkers to conform to the pace of the fastest drinker in the group. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study believed that round-buying increased their overall alcohol intake through pressures to consume more.

### Alcohol-related concerns

Over two-thirds of respondents in our online survey never felt uneasy about the amount other construction worker colleagues or friends drink, as drinking was considered a personal choice.

*“Drinking is a choice. If you make that choice and drink too much, people will alert you, but others cannot make decisions for you.”*

Among the rest, however, common concerns included the risk of drink-driving, excessive intoxication, and negative effects on health or attitude. Over one in twenty stated they were not concerned about others as they themselves usually drank more.

Three-quarters of respondents *occasionally* or *sometimes* observed drunken behaviour, unpleasant or abusive talk, or fighting or aggression when they were with other construction workers in situations where alcohol was available. Almost none indicated that such behaviour occurred *most of the time* in this context, and over one in five reported *never* observing it.

Among respondents, this kind of behaviour was considered unacceptable and most commonly dealt with by the group to contain the situation and calm the individual. Humour was sometimes reported to be used as a means of diffusing an unpleasant situation. Removal of the person responsible (by colleagues or authorities) or choosing to leave violent or aggressive situations were also reported as a means of dealing with antisocial behaviour.

More than three-quarters of respondents had, at least occasionally, seen someone intending to drive after drinking too much. When this occurred, common interventions included confiscating the drinker’s keys, calling a taxi or driving him home. Others described advising the person not to drive or displaying their disapproval. One-quarter of respondents noted that no action was taken on the last occasion they observed someone intending to drive after drinking too much.

## Summary of brief insights – construction industry drinking culture, male Generation X

Factors that influence drinking	Insights
Role of alcohol	Important for social and recreational purposes. Central element of social inclusion among construction workers (‘being one of the boys’).
Social practices and norms	Drinking is a strong social norm among construction workers. Round-buying is nearly always expected and may increase the risk of heavy drinking. Drinking creates a sense of unity/coming together among construction workers.
Gendered norms	Social pressure – especially questioning masculinity – encourages drinking.
Role models	Construction managers are potential role models, could either encourage/discourage heavy drinking.
Approaches to alcohol and drinking behaviours	Unpleasant drunken behaviour in construction worker drinking situations is unacceptable. Managed mainly by members of construction worker group. Drink-driving is unacceptable, and a need to drive places limits on drinking.
Drinking settings	Alcohol readily available in licensed venues. Licensed venues (in particular, ‘the pub’), but also in private homes and at work sites.
Perception of others	Perception that over half of all construction workers drink at risky levels, this may have an impact on validating or disapproving heavy drinking.
Acceptability of intoxication	Getting drunk or tipsy was considered acceptable by the sample.

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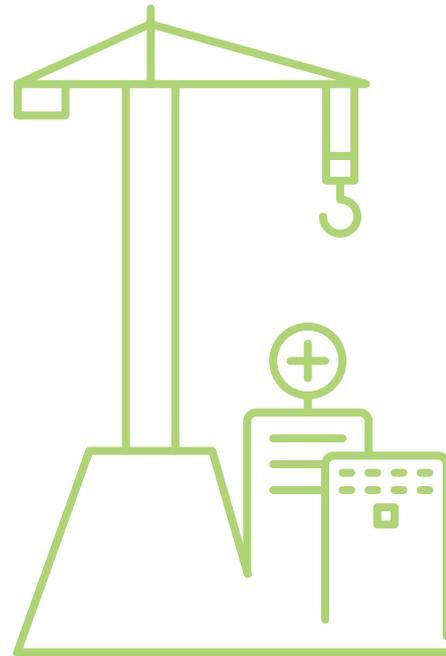
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February 2017 P-A-470

VicHealth acknowledges  
the support of the  
Victorian Government.

