

This paper contains collated evidence and observations on the role, impact and use of alcohol in Victoria during both COVID lockdowns.

Given Municipal Public Health Plans are currently in progress, this paper has been prepared to support the case for inclusion of alcohol harm and/or EMR Action on Alcohol Flagship initiatives in these Plans for the next 4 years.

Why we need to keep alcohol on the agenda

Key Points:

- Australian's relationship with alcohol has changed under COVID-19
- 20% of the national self-harm burden, 14% of the interpersonal violence burden and 7.5% of the unintentional injury burden (other than road transport) is due to alcohol use. ⁱ
- Over 1 in 4 Australian adults consumed alcohol at levels which put them at risk of short-term harm in 2013ⁱⁱ.
- 15% of Victorian 18 to 24-year-olds drink alcohol at risky or high-risk levels for short-term harm at least weekly.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Key challenges to reducing harm from alcohol include the availability of liquor license and planning provisions by which they are granted and the normative culture around drinking that has become entrenched in Australian society.^{iv}
- Our community wants action. Over the last decade, between two thirds and three quarters of those surveyed in FARE Polls reported that Australia has a problem with alcohol, and more than three quarters reported that more needs to be done to reduce alcohol harm. [Source: <http://fare.org.au/alcpoll2019/>]

Impacts of the pandemic

Increased access to alcohol in the home

Accessibility and home delivery are facilitating easy access to alcohol, with little regulation.

The Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation (VCGLR) very quickly relaxed rules in relation to the delivery of alcohol once a State of Emergency (COVID-19) was declared. Under this change, the VCGLR stated they would "fast track" temporary limited licence applications with an anticipated 72-hour turn-around.^v

Key points:

- Online sales spending on alcohol has increased^{vi}
- 'Contactless delivery' is being advertised/encouraged^{vii}
- As a result, alcohol is being left unattended making monitoring RSA difficult^{viii}
- In a recent EMR Council community survey, 24% of men who responded and 26% of women who responded reported drinking more alcohol during COVID-19. Overwhelmingly, more women than men completed the survey (28% of respondents were men, 71% were women - of 2,417 responses).
- Recent research on the delivery practices of the most popular online alcohol retailers in Australia found 69% advertised a willingness to leave alcohol unattended at an address^{ix}
- Alcohol regulation, licence and compliance systems should be aimed at helping to protect the community from related harms.

Increased consumption and purchase of alcohol

One in five (20%) households reported buying more alcohol than usual since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia

(FARE, 2020)

A study conducted by the Australian National University (2020) showed that Australian consumption of alcohol had increased for some Australians during the pandemic. 20.2 per cent of people reported that their alcohol consumption increased.^x Almost one-in-four women who drank at all (22.8 per cent) reported an increase in drinking during May 2020, whilst one-in-five men (17.9 per cent) reported an increase in the same period.

A recent examination of the delivery practices of the most popular online alcohol retailers in Australia found 69% advertised a willingness to leave alcohol unattended at an address without verifying the purchaser's age.^{xi}

"For males, a strong predictor for increased drinking was because of a loss of job or decline in working hours. For females, a strong predictor for increased drinking was having a child-caring role," Professor Biddle, Australian National University (2020).

In households where more alcohol was purchased than usual:^{xii}

- 70% report drinking more alcohol than usual since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia.
- 32% are concerned with the amount of alcohol either they or someone in their household is drinking.
- Over a third (34%) say they are now drinking alcohol daily.
- 28% report drinking alcohol to cope with anxiety and stress.
- 28% have been drinking alcohol on their own more often
- 24% have started drinking alcohol and ended up drinking more than they thought they would have
- 20% report having started drinking alcohol earlier in the day.
- Widespread panic buying occurred when lockdowns were first announced.^{xiii}

Impacts on mental health and wellbeing

The use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, to deal with stress and boredom during restrictions has increased

(FARE, 2020)

Key points:

- The mental health impacts of COVID-19, including anxiety and situational stress, have been well described and will be felt for years to come (Black Dog Institute, 2020).
- Priority groups that will be adversely impacted include people with pre-existing mental health conditions, people with insecure work, those who need to quarantine and healthcare workers.
- Within many social groups or social worlds in Victoria, drinking alcohol is an accepted and normalised practice (Vic Health, 2020)

FARE, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, found that 1 in 5 households had increased their consumption during the first stage of restrictions in April 2020. Some parents also reported an increase in their alcohol use to cope with the stress of remote schooling and working from home (Eastern region council, unpublished). Studies internationally have shown that many workers had increased their daily consumption of alcohol and had started drinking earlier in the day (The Conversation, 8 April, 2020).

Whilst it will be difficult to understand the full effects of the restrictions on alcohol consumption in the long term, there is significant concern from the health sector that we need to ensure alcohol harm reduction information and access to support is not forgotten. Not all segments of the community have increased their alcohol consumption. However enough community members have increased their intake for it to be a concern. The Australian Drug

Foundation has released a social media campaign “[Don’t let a little habit grow into a big problem](#)” to support Australians to keep an eye on their drinking (ADF, 2020).

Increase in family violence

During COVID, family violence has increased in both severity and first-time reports.

(Australian Institute of Criminology, July 2020)

Key points

- The burden of harm caused by alcohol and its role as a secondary driver to family violence is well known.
- Increased financial insecurity, unemployment, housing insecurity and families spending sustained periods of time together due to lockdown have increased the risk of family violence^{xiv}
- Family violence has increased in both severity and in first time reports.
- Victim survivors have a reduced ability to flee family violence during lockdown as well as reduced access to support
- A study of family violence practitioners referred to the ‘shadow pandemic’ i.e. greater risk of family violence, victims unable to report incidents, the emergence of new forms of social isolation/control and closer monitoring by perpetrators
- COVID-19 pandemic appears to have coincided with the onset of physical or sexual violence or coercive control for many women. For other women, it coincided with an increase in the frequency or severity of ongoing violence or abuse.^{xv}
- Maternal and Child Health in one EMR local government has reported an average of 4-5 family violence referrals received each week from DHHS, sometimes more.

Health services and peak bodies have shown great concern over the promotion of alcohol during this time.

A total of 53 frontline women’s specialist domestic and family violence workers from 27 family and domestic violence services in New South Wales (NSW) were surveyed between 4 and 8 May 2020. Around half (51 per cent) reported that there has been an increase in the involvement of alcohol in family violence situations since the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced.^{xvi}

Opportunities to prevent harm from alcohol now

- It is vital that councils and community health organisations promote and encourage help seeking for those who think that their drinking is becoming more problematic or if they are concerned about someone they care about.
- Councils and community health organisations can run their own campaigns to promote low risk drinking or normalise no drinking (even during lock down) or share and promote current campaigns produced by the Alcohol and Drug Foundation (e.g. [Don’t let a little habit become a big problem](#)).
- Now is the optimum time for councils and community health services to plan for the primary prevention of alcohol harm, in their health promotion plans and upcoming Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plans.
- Encourage and promote community conversations about alcohol, online, including forums and webinars where experts and people with lived experiences can share the impacts of alcohol on their lives.

About the Action on Alcohol Flagship Group

The EMR Action on Alcohol Flagship Group (AAFG) was formed in 2011. It is a stakeholder partnership committed to reducing alcohol-related harm through advocacy and primary prevention projects to reduce the harmful impacts of alcohol in the EMR/community.

With a focus on primary prevention the core pillars for action include:

1. Advocacy | influencing systemic change to reduce alcohol related harm in the EMR
2. Community Awareness | promoting responsible drinking cultures in a range of settings
3. Systemic Change | aligning efforts to apply best practice statutory planning and decision making that considers the social and health impacts of alcohol supply within the community
4. Organisational Capacity Building | improving access to data and evidence-based practice to support organisational readiness to minimise alcohol related harms
5. Leadership | being a platform for collective action on primary prevention across sectors

Key achievements

- ‘Understanding the risks associated with underage drinking for young people’ (2013)
- Sports Clubs Pilot - ‘Understanding the risks associated with underage drinking’ (2014)
- Your Shout: Action on Alcohol Conference (2015)
- “Reducing alcohol harm in the Chin community through sport - Local Drug Action Team (2019)
- Local Drug Action Team - “Our Club - a place for everyone” (2020)

Further details can be found at <https://oepcp.org.au/portals/aafg/>

Current membership:

Boroondara City Council	Access Health & Community
Knox City Council	Carrington Health
Manningham City Council	EACH Social & Community Health
Maroondah City Council	Eastern Health
Monash City Council	Dalgarno Institute
Whitehorse City Council	Inner East Primary Care Partnership
Yarra Ranges Council	Outer East Primary Care Partnership



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Australian National University, 2020. *Alcohol consumption increases during COVID-19 crisis*.

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Black Dog Institute, 2020. *Mental Health Ramifications of COVID-19: The Australian context*.

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Colbert et al, 2020. *COVID-19 and alcohol in Australia: Industry changes and public health impacts*.

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FARE (The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education) conducted a poll in April 2020 of 1045 households in Australia. During the COVID-19 pandemic they found that: 20% of households (1 in 5) were purchasing more alcohol than usual. Of this 20%, 70% reported drinking more than usual and a further 32% reported being concerned about the level of drinking of someone in their household (<https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf>).

FARE, June 2020. <https://fare.org.au/role-of-alcohol-in-family-violence-revealed-by-specialists-in-covid-19-assessment/>

Goeji et al, 2015. *How economic crises affect alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health problems: A realist systematic review*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953615001082?via%3Dihub>

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Vic Health, 2020. *Alcohol Cultures Framework*. <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/alcohol-cultures-framework>

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ Eastern Health - Health Promotion. Integrated Health Promotion Plan 2017 – 2021
- ⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016). Australia's Health 2016. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/9844cefb-7745-4dd8-9ee2-f4d1c3d6a727/19787-AH16.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Health (2014), Victorian Population Health Survey 2011–12, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne (referenced in Eastern Health Integrated Health Promotion Plan 2017 – 2021)
- ^{iv} Eastern Health - Health Promotion. Integrated Health Promotion Plan 2017 – 2021
- ^v <https://www.vcglr.vic.gov.au/liquor/major-or-temporary-event/apply-new-licence/apply-temporary-limited-licence#:~:text=Existing%20licensees%20impacted%20by%20the,incomplete%2C%20this%20may%20take%20longer> (accessed 15/9/20)
- ^{vi} News.com.au: CBA report reveals what we're buying during pandemic Available at: <https://www.news.com.au/finance/business/retail/coronavirus-cba-report-reveals-what-were-buying-during-pandemic/news-story/5004b6810d69cdbcc73ac7789e24460d> (accessed 11/9/20).
- ^{vii} Winestar: Statement on COVID-19 <https://www.winestar.com.au/covid19> (accessed 11/9/20)
- ^{viii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Burden of Disease Study 2015: Impact and causes of illness and death in Australia. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/burden-disease-study-illness-death-2015/contents/table-of-contents> (accessed 7 April 2020).
- ^{ix} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7300689/> accessed 6/10/20
- ^x Australian National University, 2020. Alcohol consumption increases during COVID-19 crisis 10 June 2020. <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/alcohol-consumption-increases-during-covid-19-crisis>
- ^{xi} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7300689/> Colbert et al (2020) COVID-19 and alcohol in Australia: Industry changes and public health impacts (accessed 15/9/20)
- ^{xii} Alcohol sales and use during COVID-19. Poll by FARE Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education <https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf> (accessed 11/9/20)
- ^{xiii} Panic buying of alcohol during coronavirus pandemic prompts new sales restrictions <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-31/alcohol-limits-introduced-during-coronavirus-outbreak/12106182> accessed 11/9/20
- ^{xiv} <https://www.thelookout.org.au/family-violence-workers/covid-19-and-family-violence/covid-19-and-family-violence-faqs>
- ^{xv} https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28_prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf (accessed 15/9/20)
- ^{xvi} <http://fare.org.au/role-of-alcohol-in-family-violence-revealed-by-specialists-in-covid-19-assessment/> (accessed 11/9/20)