

BRAWLS, BATONS AND BEER GOGGLES

Young people talk about negative impacts of alcohol



**A report prepared by the Youth Action & Policy Association for NSW Health
in response to the draft NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan.**

October 2006

Introduction

The Youth Action & Policy Association is the peak organisation working in the interests of young people and youth services in NSW. YAPA is a member of the Youth Alcohol Action Plan Advisory Committee.

During September 2006 YAPA was engaged by NSW Health to conduct consultations with young people from across NSW to gain feedback and input into the draft NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan.

This report sets out the main findings of these consultations.

Methodology

In total 11 focus groups were held with 103 young people in the following locations

- Cabramatta
- Cessnock
- Dubbo x 2
- Gosford
- Moree x 2
- Nowra
- Sutherland
- Ulladulla
- Umina

Young people who were consulted ranged in age from 12 to 25 years of age and represented a broad range of young people. The consultations included Aboriginal young people and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Young people who were consulted had involvement with organisations such as youth councils, sporting programs, youth refuges, youth homelessness programs, youth centres and employment training programs.

Some young people in the focus groups had never consumed alcohol, others consumed alcohol at a moderate level while others identified themselves as heavy drinkers. The consultations focused on questions such as "How does alcohol impact on you, your friends, your family and your community?" & "What can be done to keep young people safe?"

The consultations used small and large groups and cultural action techniques (art and interactive activities) to generate discussion.

9 of the 11 consultations were facilitated or co-facilitated by youth consultants. The youth consultants involved in the project were Rey Reodica, Brandon-Leith Bear and Peta Waller-Bryant (pictured below).

Harm minimisation

The consultations used a **HARM MINIMISATION framework**.

Young people identified issues and strategies in each of the three key strands of harm minimisation.

- 1. Supply reduction**, eg policing, preventing supply
- 2. Demand reduction**, eg health promotion and education to increase awareness of health risks
- 3. Harm reduction**, eg identifying and reducing alcohol related harm to self and others

Why do young people drink?

Young people identified a number of reasons for drinking alcohol including:

- to have fun
- to celebrate
- to feel grown up
- to relax and unwind
- to forget about troubles with family or work
- to feel part of the group
- to socialise easier or pick up easier
- to self medicate for effects of depression or other mental health issues
- to relieve boredom and have something to do
- to experiment or thrill seek

Looking after yourself and your friends

Young people identified a number of steps that they could take to keep themselves safe.

For example, a group of 12 year old boys in Dubbo suggested the following "keeping safe" strategies for young people who drink.

- Ask your mum to give you a curfew of when you have to be home
- Leave before the pub or party finishes
- Get an older friend to go with you so that they will look after you
- Take only a limited amount of money. Give your parents half of your money to look after
- Pick sensible people to go drinking with
- Only go drinking with friends
- Only go drinking with women
- Go to clubs that are safer
- Bring a designated driver
- Have the party at home
- Don't just drink alcohol, have orange juice as well
- Ask your mum for money for a taxi
- Pay for your taxi before you start drinking
- If your parents will get angry with you then stay with an auntie or uncle
- If people drink at your house then make them buy their own alcohol
- Make sure your friends get home safe and put them to bed

The good things about alcohol...

The things that young people liked or enjoyed about alcohol were:

- Its relaxing
- Looks cool
- Talk with friends
- Do silly things
- More chance to pick up
- Not remember the stuff I've done
- Have lots of fun
- Fall over and not hurt so much
- Loosens vocal chords, warms up singing voice
- Bonding experience
- Can do fun things and not remember them
- Serotonin levels raised
- Can be silly and happy
- Relaxes you
- You don't care what you do
- Other people become more attractive
- Dance all night
- Fresh & relaxed
- Pretty colours
- Helps you go to sleep
- Makes you feel tough
- Fun
- Preparation for a party
- Makes you hungry
- You feel invincible
- Gives you energy
- Have an excuse to sleep in
- Run around and play fun games
- See pink elephants
- Makes you feel stronger and better than you are
- Mixing into cocktails tastes good
- Act like an idiot
- No expectations
- Opens your mind
- Relaxed
- Flavours
- Good times
- Nice flavour
- To feel grown up
- Fun at parties
- Looks pretty
- Feels good
- Forget stress, feel invincible
- Relax and sleep
- Feel on top of the world
- Can mix it with lots of things
- Get to show off
- Excuse to be crazy and inhibited
- Tastes good
- Goes well with drugs
- Lots of cute boys, as people are more attractive when you're drunk
- People are funny

- Opens up new doors and possibilities
- You can relax
- More emotional
- Having fun – state of mind
- Kick back and relax
- Mixing milk with alcohol – tastes good
- You can get anyone you want
- It's fun to be out of it
- Staying healthy (1 glass of red wine a day)
- Vitamins in drinks
- Everything is pretty
- Gives you head spins
- Lets you relax
- Time stops
- Feel like an elephant, waddling
- Social outlets
- Good if you're thirsty
- Stylish
- Trippy
- Relaxes you
- You forget things
- Dancing
- Freedom
- Cross dressing – loss of inhibitions
- Makes talking easier
- You can act like a monkey
- Be social
- Good taste, have fruit juice
- You feel fresh and just picked
- You can do stuff
- Milo – keeps you healthy
- Party
- Hang out with mates

The not so good things about alcohol...

The things that young people felt were not so good about alcohol were:

- Stealing cars
- Drink driving
- Do stupid stuff you could regret
- Feel dirty and have to wash
- You can lose things like your shoes
- Take chances
- Alters perceptions
- You get bloated sometimes
- May fall over
- Lose your teeth
- Sexual regrets
- Hangovers
- Tiredness from sock wrestling
- Inflated ego
- Bad taste
- Teeth falling out
- Send you to your grave
- Risks
- Drink driving
- Driving under the influence
- Lose inhibitions
- Lose balance
- Spend money and never see it again
- Become an alcoholic
- Watching parents drunk – not a good feeling
- Might get run over by a car
- Could be beaten up/beat someone else up
- Buy things you wouldn't usually buy
- Town unsafe at night – people drunk/on drugs
- Peer pressure
- Don't know all the risks
- Might wake up not knowing where you are/how you got there – can't remember
- More risks such as accidents or death
- Hangovers
- Serotonin levels low afterwards
- Hallucinations
- Triggers mental illness
- May have contact with the police
- Affects body weight
- Kills brain cells
- Could end up getting pregnant/STI
- Vertigo
- Could cause violence
- People become sad and depressed
- Alcohol poisoning
- More clumsy, could fall over or hurt others with implements
- Binge drinking age is getting younger
- Losing things
- Losing normal perceptions
- Trusting people you wouldn't usually trust
- Crashing or irresponsibly driving vehicles
- Gamble while drinking

- Make silly decisions
- More chances of getting into dangerous situations
- Suicide, depression
- Fighting and violence
- Breakdown of relationships - girlfriends/boyfriends, friends
- Health issues – poison, loss of brain cells, scolioses of the liver, falling over – injuries, drowning, train tracks
- Bad habits and addiction
- Free love – more promiscuity
- Breakdown of family relationships
- Embarrassing singing
- Do things you may regret
- Car accidents
- You don't think clearly
- Start fights and go crazy
- Eating odd things like a cactus
- Can't ride bikes – loss of mobility
- Stumble and get stuck
- Bad fashion sense
- Drownings
- Stumbling at door
- Hurts children
- Time away from kids
- Miss the runway
- Going to work
- Waking up with someone
- Car crashes
- Consequences/violence
- Blackouts
- Heels – price vs pay
- Underage
- Loose track of time
- Boring conversations/not thinking before you speak
- Dehydrated
- Gambling
- Run around like crazy
- Run off the road
- Car accidents
- Crazy like birds
- Lose your thinking
- Kissing unattractive people
- Makes you do silly things
- No money
- Drowning
- Going along with the crowd
- Spilling and breakages
- Lower your chances for driving safely
- You may end up naked – wearing only leaves
- Makes you tired
- Stunts growth
- "What have I done?"
- Empty/no wallet
- No memory
- Mental problems
- Liver & kidney problems

- Finding out
- Not remembering
- Brain cells
- Unsafe sex
- Pregnancy
- Clumsiness
- Mental health
- May get in trouble
- May hallucinate
- Can't concentrate
- Accidents
- Car crash
- Teeth
- Go too far
- Shame
- Scars
- Cost too much
- Waste money you could spend on kids
- Bad taste (beer)
- Smells
- Kill yourself
- Hit your girlfriend
- Go to jail
- Sexual assault
- Spill things
- Fall over
- Lose license
- Be embarrassed afterwards
- Get dizzy
- Be an idiot
- Bad influence on kids
- Fight with friends

Issues and recommendations

Getting home safely

Young people said that safe, affordable and accessible transport was important in helping them to stay safe after they had been drinking.

Young people were concerned about motor vehicle accidents and many knew of a young person who had been seriously injured or killed in a motor vehicle accident.

However some young people said that they would drive home under the influence if there was no other way of getting home.

"If I am with my friends and there is no other way of getting home then me and my friends would get the least drunk person to drive. It's better than sleeping in town overnight – that's too dangerous, you don't know what could happen".

There was overwhelming support for designated driver programs and young people felt that there was not enough promotion and support of such programs.

"There used to be a program at the local and you could get free soft drink all night if you were the designated driver. Now they just don't run it any more and I have to pay for my soft drinks so I just think "What's the point?" and I end up having a few.

Young people said they would be more willing to be a designated driver if there was some recognition and encouragement for them.

Young people were critical of changes in recent years to driver licensing laws which they saw as making it much harder for them to get their licences. Young people felt it was important for young people to have access to a licence so that more young people could be designated drivers for their friends. In some cases young people said they were driving without a licence because the new rules made it "too hard and it is easier to just drive unlicensed".

Bus services were very limited or non existent late at night.

In some towns there was a free or low cost youth bus program operating and young people in these towns thought these programs were a good idea. Some of these allowed intoxicated young people to travel on the buses and some did not. Young people felt it was safer for intoxicated young people to be allowed on the bus than being left in town or being allowing to drive home intoxicated.

Generally there was a good availability of taxis in the towns that young people lived in. However affordability and running times were issues that impacted on young people being able to use taxis.

Some young people lived out of town and taxis were too expensive to use. Some of these stayed at a friends house who lived in town to try and address this problem.

A number of young people talked about the importance of pre-paid taxi schemes so that they would not spend all their money on alcohol or gambling and then be stuck in town.

Gambling was identified as a major concern by a number of young people who said that they or their friends would put all their money in the pokies which meant they would have no money left for a taxi.

Many taxi services finished before hotel and club closing times or before parties finished which meant that young people could be stuck in town with no other transport options.

“Sometimes I just stay in town, maybe go down to the beach with my friends and keep drinking because there is no other way to get home except the first bus in the morning. If there was a way to get home earlier we probably wouldn’t drink so much”

Some young people felt reasonably safe walking home particularly if they were walking home in a group however they said it was probably safer for young men to walk home than young women, even though many could name someone they knew who had been “bashed or hassled” walking home.

Recommendation 1	That the NSW Government and the Liquor Industry Consultative Committee encourage pubs and clubs to actively promote and support designated driver programs.
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Recommendation 2	That the NSW Government, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, develop programs promoting safe transport options for intoxicated persons such as pre-paid taxi services.
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Recommendation 3	That the NSW Government provide further funding and promotion of funding for community transport schemes for young people.
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Recommendation 4	That the Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW work to improve the affordability and accessibility of licenses for young drivers.
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Security & police

There were mixed views about the response of police to public drinking and parties. Generally young people felt that the police responded in a positive way *“the cops are pretty good they just talk to you and tell you to go home”*.

Young people in these towns tended to take a more positive view of police and were more respectful of the job that the police had to do.

In one particular region however a number of young people raised concerns about how they had been treated by police and identified a number of occasions where they had been publicly humiliated or hurt by police. A number of young people reported that they or their friends had been hit by police batons while drinking in a public place. One young person reported that a friend had been hospitalised after one such occasion. Another reported being hit repeatedly for refusing to tip out his drink. In this region young people did not take a positive view of local police.

In relation to random breath testing, it was suggested by a number of focus groups that police should vary their sites as *“locals know where they are, they are in the same place every time so people just avoid those spots”*

Young people were also concerned about older people being drunk in public.

Generally young people felt that security officers in public places, car park staff and bar security did not take an active enough role in maintaining public safety. For example, they felt that car park attendants should take a more active role in making sure intoxicated people did not drive.

Recommendation 5	That NSW Police provide training to all police officers on appropriate conflict resolution and crowd control techniques.
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Recommendation 6	That NSW Police provide more variety in the location of random breath tests.
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Responsible service of alcohol

Young people felt that there needed to be a stronger enforcement of the responsible service of alcohol laws with young people almost universally reporting that RSA was not enforced at their local pub, club or bottle shop, particularly at busy times such as Friday and Saturday nights.

Many young people were concerned about children and very young teenagers gaining access to alcohol and said that they would not buy alcohol for them. Young people felt there should be more awareness of laws relating to supply of alcohol to minors, including information to parents about supply to their children.

There was concern from many groups that pub opening times were too long, opening too early in the day and staying open too late at night. Young people felt that this contributed to people drinking excessive amounts of alcohol.

Recommendation 7	That NSW Police ensure adequate enforcement of the responsible service of alcohol.
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Recommendation 8	That NSW Police, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, promote a greater awareness of laws relating to supply of alcohol to minors.
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Labelling of alcohol

Many young people were unsure about how many standard drinks were in particular serving of alcohol. They said this made it hard for them to accurately count their drinks and tell when they might be over the limit.

Young people suggested that alcohol labels should more clearly spell out how many standard drinks were in each bottle, perhaps with a simple graphic with a number.

It was suggested that many young people (incorrectly) assume that pre mixed drinks have a lower alcohol content. They thought it would be better to have light versions of these or not display these as prominently in bottle shops.

Recommendation 9	That the NSW Government and the Liquor Industry Consultative Committee consider the introduction of clearer labeling standards on alcohol to indicate how many standard drinks are in each bottle.
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Supply of non alcohol drinks

Young people in larger towns talked about the difficulties of getting water in some pubs and at raves. Young people felt it was important for water to be free and accessible at all entertainment venues.

Young people also wanted non-alcohol drinks such as soft drinks to be cheaper.

First aid

Young people said that there needed to be more education and training about First Aid. Many young people were unsure whether ambulance officers would call police and were therefore hesitant about calling for an ambulance.

A number of young people had completed a Save a Mate course and felt this had been really beneficial. These young people suggested that this be a compulsory course, eg at school.

Recommendation 10	That NSW Police, the Ambulance Service of NSW and relevant stakeholders promote information to young people about first aid and first aid protocols.
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Mental health issues

A number of young people spoke about their own experiences of mental illness and how this impacted on their use of alcohol. Some said that they self medicated with alcohol to reduce the side effects of their mental illness, others knew that they should not be mixing alcohol with their medication and spoke about the difficulties of not drinking when all their friends were.

Young people wanted more places to go for help so that they would not turn to alcohol to deal with these problems.

Safe sex and safe relationships

Some young people said the worst thing about drinking alcohol was forgetting what they did the night before while others said the worst thing was remembering what they did the night before.

Many young people reported the negative impact of alcohol as "beer goggles". Young people reported that they were less likely to exercise caution about who they slept with when they were intoxicated.

Name calling and rumours at school were seen as probable consequences of sexual behaviour while intoxicated.

Access to contraception was identified as a concern to young people, particularly to young people in smaller or rural towns.

Some towns had access to youth health centres or youth centres which distributed free condoms however not all young people knew they could access condoms at these services, the number of condoms was sometimes limited and some young people felt shame in asking someone for these. Young people said it was good when condoms were available without having to ask someone. Youth health centres and youth centres were seen as good and helpful services.

Confidentiality was also identified as an issue in accessing contraception from a doctor, the supermarket or chemist.

"There is always a worry that someone will see you and tell your mum, if you go to the supermarket your friend or neighbour might see you and if you go to the doctor's surgery then you might see someone else you know".

Young people also said that shop closing times were important as chemists and supermarkets were not open late when they might need to access contraception.

Some young people knew of petrol stations or pubs that have condom vending machines however lots of young people didn't know these existed. Young people felt that it should be easier to access condoms in a confidential way.

Some young people suggested that condoms be available at places where alcohol was sold.

Unplanned pregnancy was discussed by a number of groups. Some young people saw this as a negative outcome while others said that being pregnant or having a girlfriend who was pregnant helped them "settle down in life" or "turn their life around."

Drink spiking was an issue in many communities including rural communities. Young people were very concerned about their safety and the safety of their friends. Young people identified a number of strategies for keeping safe from drink spiking such as looking out for their friends and staying together as a group.

Young women said that "being taken advantage of" was a concern for them when they were drinking.

Recommendation 11	That NSW Health ensure the provision of free condoms to services which young people access such as youth health centres and youth services.
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Recommendation 12	That NSW Health further promote information and support services relating to sexual assault and strategies for preventing sexual assault.
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Violence

Almost all of the focus groups said that violence was a common and negative impact of excessive alcohol consumption.

Strategies that were suggested included the responsible service of alcohol and more active involvement of security staff.

Family influences

Young people talked about the impact of their family's drinking on their own decision to drink or not.

"If you grow up seeing your mum or dad drink and they have a good time drinking then you straightaway think oh that's how I have a good time". 12 year old

Generally young people felt that they would be more likely to drink if their parents or other family members drank regularly however they also acknowledged *"in the end its up to me – its my decision about whether I'll drink or not"*

There were mixed views about whether parents should drink with under age young people.

Young people identified a number of ways to stay safe when a parent's drinking got out of control such as staying with a neighbour or auntie or going out for a while until things calmed down.

It was suggested that there should be more education for parents about how to support young people around alcohol issues.

Recommendation 13	That NSW Health promote information to parents about ways of keeping young people safe from alcohol related harms.
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Education programs

Young people felt that there was adequate information provided in school about alcohol and the health impacts of alcohol. Many young people suggested that there should be a greater focus on harm reduction strategies so that young people knew how to keep safe if they were going to drink.

Young people felt that peer education would be useful at events.

Many young people said it was common for them to mix alcohol with other drugs and that there needed to be more harm reduction information about this as most of the information they had came from their friends.

Young people also said that they had little information about the dangers of mixing medications with alcohol. Some young people said that they would tell their doctor what drugs or alcohol they used but many said that they would not.

Recommendation 14	That the NSW Department of Education & Training and the NSW Board of Studies consider ways to provide harm reduction information to young people.
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Recommendation 15	That the Division of GPs, and the Pharmacology Guild of Australia consider ways of promoting information to young people about the dangers of mixing medications with alcohol or other drugs. This should include harm reduction information and should not rely on young people disclosing their personal use.
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Getting help and support

A number of young people talked about the value of having a youth worker that they could turn to when they were experiencing problems or when they needed confidential advice.

These young people felt it was important that these workers had training about alcohol and other drugs so that they could provide useful advice to young people.

Recommendation 16	That NSW Health and the NSW Department of Community Services provide alcohol related training and workforce development to frontline workers such as youth workers. This should focus on practical and theoretical approaches to working with young people and include information on harm reduction principles, stages of change, assessment, motivational interviewing, brief interventions, information and referral.
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Safe alternatives to drinking

Young people identified “boredom and nothing to do” as a major factor contributing to their decision to drink alcohol. Young people in rural towns identified very few night time activities that they could participate as the major entertainment activities such as pubs, clubs and restaurants revolved around drinking or having a lot of money.

“There is absolutely nothing to do in this town. There is a movie theatre but we get sick of going to that and plus we can’t afford it. We have tried to get other positive things and venues happening but the council or the community always puts a stop to it. And then they turn around and complain about young people drinking, but they won’t do anything about it.”

Young people identified events such as CrocFest, Youth week and all age gigs as the type of programs that they would like to see more of in their towns.

Recommendation 17	That the NSW Government commit further funding to youth events and activities in rural areas through programs such as Indent music grants, small grants programs for young people, sporting programs and youth service funding for areas with low levels of youth service provision.
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Thank you

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** Some young people did not wish to be named in this report as they were participating in a program for young offenders.*

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