



The Longitudinal Study
of Australian Children

Alcohol use among teens allowed to drink at home

Growing Up in Australia
Snapshot Series – Issue 2

August 2021



WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Although more young Australians are delaying their first alcoholic drink, many still begin drinking before 18. In addition to experiencing negative drinking-related outcomes such as injuries and mental ill-health, early alcohol use can lead to harmful drinking practices and alcohol use disorders later in life. Adolescent alcohol consumption can also adversely affect brain development. Identifying modifiable factors associated with adolescent alcohol use, such as parenting practices, is important for preventing alcohol-related harms among young people.

Prior to 2009, in Australia, official advice suggested that alcohol use was a 'normal' part of adolescent development, and that supervised alcohol consumption could reduce potential harm. Therefore, parents may choose to allow their underage teens to drink at home to help young people learn responsible drinking practices. However, with mounting evidence about the numerous risks of underage alcohol use, current National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines¹ suggest delaying alcohol use until at least the age of 18.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

This snapshot uses data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) to answer three main research questions: (1) How many Australian teens are allowed to drink at home? (2) Does permission to drink at home result in teens drinking more and a greater risk of experiencing alcohol-related harm? (3) Which teens are more likely to be allowed to drink at home?

¹ The National Health and Medical Research Council's *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*: www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol#download

KEY FINDINGS



1

In 2016, **around 28%** of teens aged 16–17 were **allowed to drink alcohol at home**. Approximately **18% of teens** of this age were permitted to **take alcohol to parties** or social events.

Overall, **alcohol use** was **significantly more common** among 16–17 year olds **who were permitted to drink at home**, compared to those not allowed to drink at home. Around **three-quarters (77%)** of teens with **permission to drink at home** had **drunk alcohol** in the past month, compared to **63% of teens without permission**.

2

3

Teens **allowed to drink at home** were more likely to have **experienced alcohol-related harm** compared to those without permission (23% vs 17%, respectively).

More **frequent parental alcohol consumption** was associated with a **greater likelihood of** teens being **allowed to drink at home**.

4

ABOUT GROWING UP IN AUSTRALIA

Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is an ongoing, nationally representative study that follows the lives of children and their families from all over Australia. In 2004, around 5,000 0–1 year olds (B cohort) and 5,000 4–5 year olds (K cohort) and their families were recruited and have been surveyed every two years since. With extensive information on children's physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and behavioural development and linked biomarkers, education, health and welfare data, the study has been a unique resource providing evidence for policy makers to identify opportunities for early intervention and prevention strategies.



IN FOCUS

Australian teens aged 16–17 years are the focus of this snapshot. For the first time in 2016 (Wave 7), parents were asked questions about whether they allowed their children to drink alcohol at home, and whether their children were allowed to take alcohol to parties or other social events. Since 2012 (Wave 5), study children have been asked whether they have ever drunk alcohol. If they have, they are asked further questions about their recent and current patterns of drinking and their experience of certain alcohol-related harms. For this snapshot, ‘underage drinking’ is defined as alcohol use before the age of 18, the legal purchasing age in Australia.

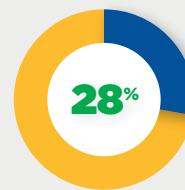
HOW MANY TEENS ARE ALLOWED TO DRINK AT HOME?

In 2016, just over one-quarter (28%) of Australian teens aged 16–17 had permission from their parents to drink at home. This was similar for females (29%) and males (27%). Parental reports indicate that, of the teens permitted to drink at home, most (70%) did so less frequently than monthly, and around 2% drank alcohol at home on at least a weekly basis. One-fifth (20%) had never drunk alcohol at home or had not done so in the past year, despite being allowed to.

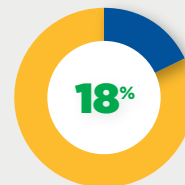
These teens were first allowed to drink a full serve of alcohol at home at an average age of 16.0 years (SD = 1.5). This was similar for males (16.0) and females (15.9).

Close to one-fifth (18%) of teens aged 16–17 years had parents who allowed them to take alcohol to parties or social events. This group was mostly (75%) comprised of teens who were also allowed to drink at home. Again, there was little difference between female (19%) and male (17%) teens with regard to being allowed to take alcohol to parties/ social events.

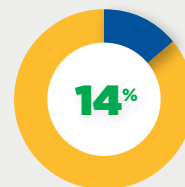
Parental permission to consume alcohol



of 16–17 year olds had permission to drink alcohol **at home**



of 16–17 year olds had permission to take alcohol **to parties**



of 16–17 year olds had permission to both drink **at home and** take alcohol **to parties**



DOES PERMISSION TO DRINK AT HOME RESULT IN TEENS DRINKING MORE?

In 2016, teens aged 16–17 years who were allowed to drink at home were more likely to have reported having ever drunk alcohol (88%) compared to those not permitted to drink at home (49%).

Recent and current alcohol use

Among teens who had ever drunk alcohol, nearly all (98%) had done so at least once in the past year. Most (69%) had drunk alcohol in the past month, and 40% in the last week.

Compared to teens without parental permission to drink at home, those with permission were significantly more likely to have drunk alcohol in the past month (approximately 20% more likely) and in the past week (almost 45% more likely).



Drinking quantity

The amount of alcohol recently drunk (at home or elsewhere) by teens permitted to drink at home was comparable to the amount drunk by those not permitted to drink at home. Among teens who had drunk any alcohol in the past week, those whose parents allowed them to drink at home had consumed an average of 6.5 standard alcoholic drinks in the past week (95% CI [5.7, 7.3]), compared to an average of 6.3 drinks consumed by teens not allowed to drink at home (95% CI [5.3, 7.3]).²

ARE TEENS ALLOWED TO DRINK AT HOME MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE ALCOHOL-RELATED HARMS?

Alcohol use can lead to numerous types of harms, including negative physical, mental, financial and social outcomes such as:

- *trouble at school or work* the day after drinking
- *arguments* with family members
- alcohol-related *injuries* or *accidents*
- *violence* or involvement in a fight due to alcohol
- having sex with someone due to alcohol and regretting it later.

Teens whose parents permitted them to drink at home were significantly more likely to have ever experienced any alcohol-related harm (i.e. one or more of the above harms) compared to those not allowed to drink at home (23% vs 17%, respectively).

² Data on volume of alcohol consumed were only collected for the past week (see the [supplementary materials](#)).



WHICH TEENS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ALLOWED TO DRINK AT HOME?

When taking a number of socio-demographic and psychosocial characteristics into account in a multivariable analysis, the following parental (primary parent/carer), familial and individual factors were found to be associated with an increased likelihood of teens aged 16–17 years being permitted to drink at home:³

- living in more socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods:
 - Around 30% of teens living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (the lowest quartile of advantage) were allowed to drink at home, compared to 24% of those in the most advantaged neighbourhoods (the highest quartile).⁴
- residing in inner or outer regional areas compared to major cities in Australia:⁵
 - Around 35% of teens in outer regional or remote areas were allowed to drink at home, compared to 30% of those in inner regional areas and 25% of those in major cities.
- being an only child:
 - One-third (33%) of teens who were only children were allowed to drink at home, compared to 28% of those who were youngest children, and 26% of those who were the oldest child.
- having a younger primary parent/carer:
 - Every one-year increase in primary parent/carer age was associated with a 2% decrease in the likelihood of parents allowing their teens to drink at home.
- having a less educated primary parent:
 - Thirty-six per cent of teens with parents with a Year 12 education (maximum) were permitted to drink at home, compared to 24% of those with parents with a university education.
- residing with one biological parent and one step-parent (compared to two biological parents):
 - Thirty-seven per cent of teens living with one biological parent and one step-parent were allowed to drink at home, compared to 27% of those with two biological parents and 26% of those living with a single parent.

Factors **not significantly** associated with permitting teens to drink at home included: sex of adolescent and primary parent, Indigenous status of adolescent, language background, and level of parental monitoring.

³ For the full results see Table S1 of the [supplementary materials](#).

⁴ This measure uses the SEIFA index of relative socio-economic disadvantage.

⁵ Areas are rated by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).



Associations with parental drinking patterns

When taking socio-demographic and psychosocial factors into account,⁶ having a primary parent/carer with a history of alcohol problems (as a child and/or as an adult) was not associated with allowing an adolescent to drink at home underage. However, having a primary parent who drank at all when their child was aged 14–15 years was significantly associated with allowing teens to drink at home when they were aged 16–17 years.

More frequent alcohol consumption by parents was associated with a greater likelihood of allowing teens to drink at home. When taking key characteristics into account (e.g. socio-economic status, family structure, parent age), each incremental increase in parental drinking frequency was associated with a 23% increase in the odds of parents allowing their 16–17 year old teen to drink at home, compared to parents who did not drink at all.



“ More frequent parental alcohol consumption was associated with a greater likelihood of allowing teens to drink at home. ”

⁶ For the full results see Table S1 of the [supplementary materials](#).

RELEVANCE FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These findings reveal that, in 2016, a significant proportion of parents allowed their teens aged 16–17 to drink alcohol at home. Given previous harm reduction recommendations, some Australian parents might think that if they allow their child to drink alcohol in moderation at home (such as having a beer or glass of wine at home with dinner), this will lead to a more responsible relationship with alcohol. However, greater rates of recent alcohol use and an increased likelihood of experiencing alcohol-related harms among those with permission to drink at home provide further evidence to support the NHMRC's guideline that children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol, even in environments or circumstances that might be considered 'low risk'.

To this end, parents can reduce their child's risk of harm by encouraging them to delay drinking alcohol for as long as possible. Educating parents and their children about current national alcohol use guidelines and alcohol-related consequences among young people, such as via the media and schools, might help to address alcohol harms in Australia.

POTENTIAL OF THE GROWING UP IN AUSTRALIA STUDY

Understanding when and how teens start drinking, and changes to drinking patterns over time, is important for identifying opportunities for interventions to address alcohol-related harms in Australia. Changes to alcohol legislation warrant ongoing investigations of any resultant impacts on the drinking practices and experiences of young people. The ongoing nature of LSAC will allow us to monitor this. Specific research questions to answer using LSAC data include:

- How do changes to alcohol legislation (e.g. 'secondary supply' laws) affect the extent that children are provided with alcohol and their developmental trajectories?
- What types of family factors, such as family conflict, family discipline and family management, influence parental provision of alcohol to teens?
- What individual, family and lifestyle factors are associated with a delayed uptake of alcohol use among young Australians and a reduced likelihood of engaging in riskier alcohol consumption patterns?

FURTHER DETAILS

Technical details of this research, including description of measures, detailed results and bibliography are available to [download as a PDF](#).

About the *Growing Up in Australia* snapshot series

Growing Up in Australia snapshots are brief and accessible summaries of policy-relevant research findings from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC). For other *Growing Up in Australia* snapshots in this series see growingupinaustralia.gov.au/research-findings/snapshots

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