# Alcohol Cultures Framework

## A framework to guide public health action on risky drinking cultures

**REVISED EDITION 2019**

**The framework is a tool for those with an interest in changing risky drinking cultures to reduce harm from alcohol products.**

## What do we mean by risky drinking?

Consuming alcohol products in a way that carries substantial risk of physical, social or mental harm to the people drinking or to others, either from a single occasion or cumulatively.

## What is an alcohol culture?

It is the **way a group of people drink**, including their **shared understanding of formal rules, social norms, practices, values and beliefs** around what is and what is not socially acceptable when they get together.

## Why focus on alcohol cultures?

Alcohol culture change is one of many strategies for reducing alcohol-related harm. This work complements other efforts, targeting individuals and the population as a whole, aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol-related harm.

Although alcohol consumption data can tell us how much and how often individuals consume alcohol products, it doesn't tell us where, what, why and with whom people drink.

The Alcohol Cultures Framework shifts the focus from the behaviours of individuals to the shared activities and practices of a group, which we call a **social world**. It invites practitioners to focus on social worlds where risky drinking is commonplace, and alter elements of their practices so that, if drinking is continued, it becomes less risky.

## What does a culture that prevents harm from alcohol look like?

In such a culture, people support one another to engage in low-risk drinking practices rather than high-risk drinking, resulting in reduced harm for the individual, their family, bystanders and the broader community. A culture like this provides a supportive policy, physical and social environment where:

- people do not feel the pressure to drink
- not drinking isn't viewed as exceptional or unusual
- occurrences of drinking are reduced
- alcohol is consumed in a low-risk way
- intoxication is discouraged.

**Alcohol Culture Change** | *an initiative of* **VicHealth**®

# Influencing risky drinking cultures through social worlds

A social world is a group of people who get together around a common interest or activity. Members of social worlds may or may not necessarily know one another but they share social norms and practices, including expectations about how people behave when they meet.

People participate in multiple social worlds; for example, a person might belong to a parents' group that gets together once a month, and also belong to a sporting team where they play a weekly soccer game. Each of these social worlds is likely to have a different culture.

Where there is a drinking culture, drinking norms, practices and expectations are shared within the social world. In some social worlds these constitute what we refer to as a 'risky drinking culture', where drinking is likely to lead to harm to either the people who drink or to others.

## Social worlds: examples of groups that might share a drinking culture

- Self-expression groups e.g. hipsters, goths, bikers
- Occupational groups e.g. media, police, army, hospitality workers
- Music fan groups or musicians e.g. country, punk, ravers, hip hop, garage bands
- Sports groups and fans with strong commitment e.g. football players, die hard football fans, skaters, golfers, cyclists
- Groups with shared situations or interests e.g. parents' groups, students in a university department, youth hobby groups
- Technology-based groups e.g. gamers, followers of a blog or social media group
- Groups with an appreciation of particular commodities e.g. food (fine dining or food trucks), alcohol (beer, wine, spirits)

## Where do we focus our intervention activity?

Alcohol culture change is not seeking to draw members away from a social world, but rather to influence and help transform drinking norms, expectations and practices within the group. To do this, intervention activity can focus on understanding three separate but overlapping elements: the **settings** in which the group drinks, the social know-how or **skills** the group shares in drinking together and the **shared meanings** of drinking among the group.
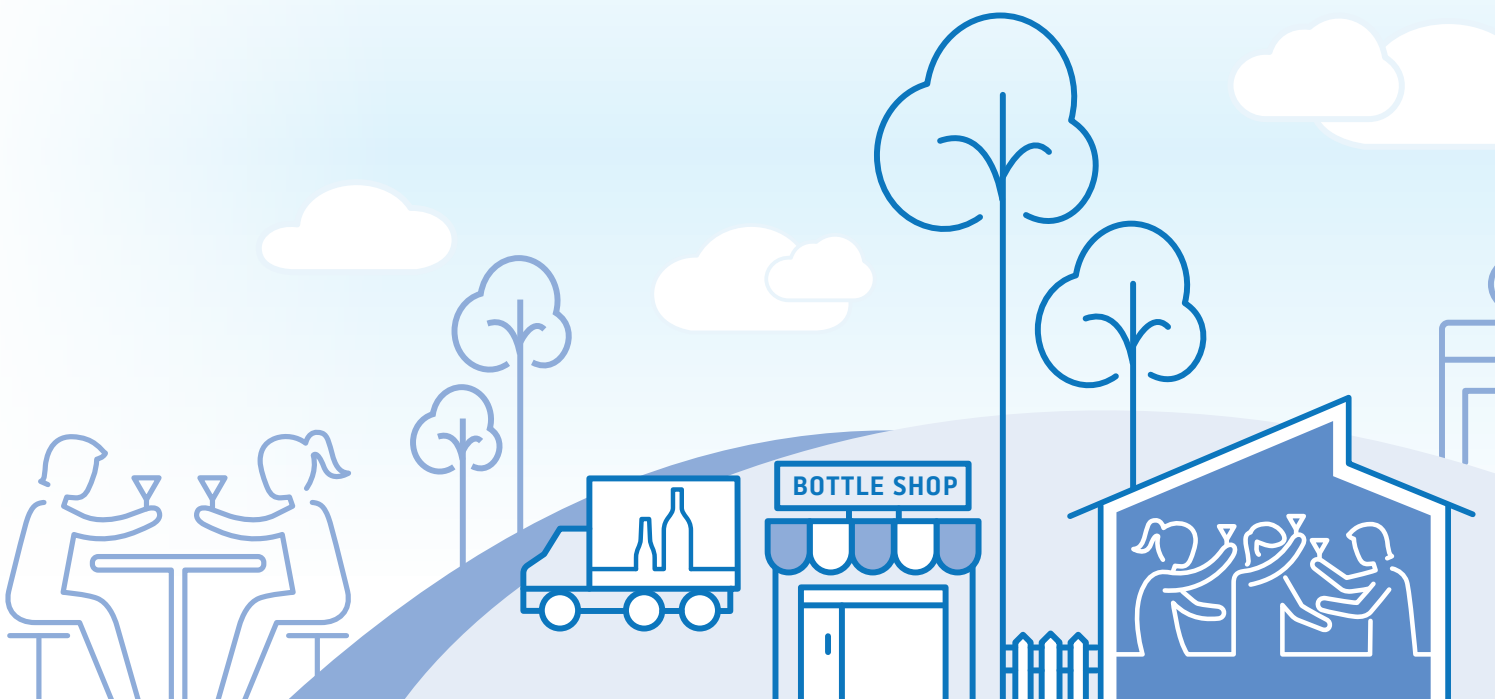
# Critical questions to develop an understanding of risky drinking social worlds

The chart below includes examples of critical questions to ask to understand the alcohol culture within a risky drinking social world.

| Elements | Critical questions |
| --- | --- |
| **SETTINGS** | How available and accessible is alcohol in the given setting? Are free water, other non-alcoholic beverages or food easily available? |
| | How does the drinking space feel, how is it organised in relation to the drinker and how do drinkers relate to other drinkers? |
| | What forms of entertainment are available e.g. televisions, dance floor? |
| | How central is alcohol to the function of the setting? |
| | What alcohol harm-reduction rules or policies exist? How are they enforced? |
| | What types of drinks are available? Are there 'happy hours' or other arrangements to discount drink prices as an incentive to drink? |
| | How are drinks served e.g. in glass or plastic, shot glasses, jugs, pint glasses? |
| | Are there alcohol advertisements or promotions in the setting that encourage risky drinking? |
| | What other practices are linked with drinking alcohol in the setting e.g. eating, dancing, socialising? |
| **SKILLS** | What strategies do members of the social world use to manage drunkenness e.g. comments like 'don't you think you've had enough?' or looks/raised eyebrow? |
| | What strategies do members of the social world use to encourage risky drinking e.g. expectations of the type, frequency and quantity of alcohol to be consumed, pre-loading, drinking games? |
| | Under what circumstances is it difficult to say 'no' to a drink within the social world? |
| | What actions or behaviours do members of the social world expect of their peers when drinking e.g. buying rounds or shouting drinks? |
| | Are there role models that encourage/discourage drinking within the social world? |
| **SHARED MEANINGS** | What does alcohol mean and what purpose does it serve in the social world e.g. therapeutic, recreational, social, psychoactive? |
| | How do members of the social world define 'drunk' or 'intoxicated'? How drunk is 'drunk'? What purpose does being drunk serve? How does alcohol facilitate or impede group activities? |
| | How do members of a social world understand the term 'risky drinking'? |
| | How is alcohol or risky drinking part of the group's shared identity? What is at stake if the drinking culture in a social world changes e.g. relationships, jobs? How are people 'held' in the group? |
| | Do shared experiences of discrimination or exclusion influence the way men and women drink in a particular social world? |
| | How do masculinities and femininities influence the way men and women drink within particular social worlds? |
| | How does social media influence drinking practices e.g. expectations to share an Instagram picture of drinking? |

# Alcohol Cultures Framework

## SOCIETAL
Population drivers at a state, national or global level e.g. the way alcohol is priced, promoted and its availability.

### SETTINGS

**Where drinking takes place**

The factors that shape the environment and atmosphere of alcohol cultures i.e. the venue, the type and availability of alcohol products, advertising and promotions.

**EXAMPLES:**

- Physical settings e.g. licensed venues, private residences, public spaces, social events, festivals, workplaces, sports events
- Virtual settings e.g. social media, internet, online gaming
- Televisions, entertainment, pinball machines, dance floors
- Type of drinks, glassware used in the setting
- Availability of alcohol, enforcement of legislation and policy, advertising and promotion, role models e.g. positive or negative
- Safe and accessible transport to/from the setting
- Timing of events and occasions where drinking occurs

### SKILLS

**What people know about drinking that they bring to the social world**

The competencies, abilities and knowledge that are held by members of their social world.

**EXAMPLES:**

- Practical know-how e.g. which glasses are used for different types of alcohol, how to give a toast, use lemon, do a shot
- Knowing how to handle large volumes of alcohol or the alcohol content of drinks
- Knowing techniques to handle occasions of risky drinking e.g. drinking water or managing a hangover
- Knowing how to respond to someone who wants to drink too much/has drunk too much/is drinking too much
- Knowing when risky drinking might be inappropriate for the group e.g. when supervising children

### SHARED MEANINGS

**Why people drink**

The shared cultural expectations, norms and understandings of drinking.

**EXAMPLES:**

- Drinking is used to connect with others or alter mood in the group
- Risky drinking is seen as normal and low-risk drinking is discouraged
- Drinking together is fun, pleasurable, exciting, relaxing, sophisticated, transgressive
- Shared rituals, myths or traditions around drinking
- Shared gendered meanings of drinking
- Shared histories of drinking as a group
- Drinking together creates belonging and inclusion and/or it could be a mode of excluding 'outsiders'

## INDIVIDUAL
Someone's unique combination of genetic and personal characteristiscs e.g. age, gender, resilience, ethnicity, family influence and beliefs.

OPEN 24 HOURS

BAR

#%*!

...!

## CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF A CULTURE CHANGE PROJECT

There are a range of actions to take when planning to influence alcohol cultures within risky drinking social worlds:

- **Target social worlds** that engage in risky drinking practices.

- Gain insights about the social world by:
  - understanding how the **settings, skills and shared meanings** of the target group influence the way people drink
  - focusing on **everyday and routine drinking practices** in the social world and understanding how these are sustained by connections to other practices such as eating, cooking, smoking or playing sport
  - considering **intersecting factors** that affect alcohol consumption such as age, gender, occupation, education, social class, ethnicity, disability, Aboriginality and sexuality.

- Use the above insights to inform intervention design and implementation.

- Co-design and test interventions with people who are part of the social world, and continually seek their input and communicate findings.

- Seek allies for change or champions to drive and model culture shifts within the target group.

- Ensure organisational policies and processes support alcohol culture change activities.

- Form partnerships with other agencies on coordinated programs where regulation and intervention efforts are aligned.

- Think about how the project could be replicated and sustained when designing and delivering interventions, acknowledging that alcohol culture change is a slow process.

- Evaluate and monitor activity and share learnings.

## Examples of action

**Targeting risky drinking cultures in university colleges**

- A university explores the drinking settings, skills and shared meanings of some risky drinking social worlds in a residential college. Using these insights, the social worlds are targeted through the provision of alternative non-drinking activities, tailored messaging, co-design policy review and peer-leadership programs.

**Changing alcohol norms with rural teenagers and their parents**

- A rural council wants to change the risky drinking culture of a group of local teenagers. They develop insights which identify who the young people are drinking with, where they drink and why they drink. In response to the findings, the council works with the young people, their parents and the community to co-design an intervention. This includes a youth-driven parent-education program, consolidated alcohol and other drugs curriculum in local schools, local social marketing campaigns, an online parent forum and alternative non-drinking social activities for young people.

## Bibliography

The Alcohol Cultures Framework is grounded in the following research:

VicHealth (2019) *Alcohol Cultures Framework background paper: A framework to guide public health action on drinking cultures. Revised edition*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia. www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/alcoholculturesframework

Savic, M., Room, R., Mugavin, J., Pennay, A. & Livingston, M. (2016) Defining 'drinking culture': a critical review of its meaning and connotation in social research on alcohol problems, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, Vol 23, Issue 4, pp. 270-282. https://doi.org/10.3109/09687637.2016.1153602

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