

A snapshot of Victoria's alcohol culture

SELECTED FINDINGS

Introduction

In Victoria, those in their late teens and twenties are more likely to drink in a manner that puts them at risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking, compared to older age groups (AIHW 2011). There are also indications of a broad social acceptance of alcohol and in some instances intoxication among the Victorian community. VicHealth's research has shown us that drinking is seen as normal in most social situations, from funerals to children's birthday parties, to sports events and everything in between. In fact, the only places where Australians think it's not right to drink are at church, a baby shower and a study group (VicHealth 2013). This highlights the need to examine and address the values, beliefs and norms that inform drinking cultures, particularly among those most likely to drink harmfully (Roche et al. 2008; AIHW 2011).

To encourage a better drinking culture among young people aged 16–29, VicHealth, in partnership with the State Government, has initiated an alcohol cultural change program. The program is part of the Victorian Government's *Reducing the Alcohol and Drug Toll: Victoria's plan 2013–2017*. The initial focus of this activity is to encourage the development of a less harmful drinking culture in Victoria, by targeting normative values and by taking a positively framed approach.

The first component of this program sought to engage the Victorian community in an online community conversation about alcohol. The NameThatPoint campaign asked Victorians to come up with a name for that point in the night when 'clear thinking becomes more drinking'. Running from December to April 2014, NameThatPoint had over 45,000 website visits, more than 143,000 YouTube views and received over 1800 submissions. The second component of the program is the 'No Excuse Needed' campaign which aims to empower young Victorians to say no to a drink if they do not want to keep drinking, without having to justify the decision by using an excuse. The campaign also takes a social norms approach by communicating that the majority of young people and young adults aged 16–29 do not actually intend to get drunk when drinking.

To inform and support this culture change program, VicHealth, with funding from the Victorian Law Enforcement Drug Research Fund, and working with the Social Research Group – Market Solutions, conducted an Australian-first population-wide survey to measure Victoria's alcohol culture. This survey examined social norms, attitudes and beliefs toward alcohol and intoxication among Victorians aged 16 years and older.

This research provides a snapshot of alcohol culture in Victoria for 2013. It can be repeated over time to assess the impact of efforts to improve alcohol culture in Victoria, in particular to reduce the acceptance of intoxication in the community and other social norms.

Summary of findings

The majority of Victorians view alcohol positively, and see it as an important part of many social occasions and events. In particular, drinking in Victoria appears to be much more entrenched among those aged 16–29 years. For instance:

- Two-thirds (67%) of young Victorians report drinking at levels that put them at risk of injury from a single drinking occasion.
- Over half (53%) believe getting drunk every now and then is not a problem.
- One-third (33%) think it is okay to drink to get drunk.

When compared to Victorians aged 30 or older, 16–29 year olds are more likely to believe it is acceptable to be drunk some or most times at:

- pubs, bars and clubs (73% v 37%)
- parties at a friend's house (51% v 21%)
- barbecue at home (35% v 17%)
- sporting events (32% v 14%).

The influence of peers on drinking behaviour is also more pronounced among young Victorians, with 42% of those who had attended a pub, bar or club feeling obliged to drink when others around them are doing the same, compared to 23% of those aged 30 years or older.

VicHealth has asked Victorian drinkers if they ever drink to get drunk. Those aged 16–29 are more likely to do so, compared to those aged 30 years or older (37% v 9%). Despite this, the majority (61%) of young people reported that they do not drink to get drunk.

This research indicates that young Victorians aged 16–29 are more accepting of drunkenness in a variety of social contexts than those aged 30 years or older. In addition, this group appear to be more susceptible to peer pressure when drinking. Further work communicating the finding that 61% of young drinkers do not drink to get drunk may help to reduce the influence of peer pressure on drinking behaviour and over time reduce the acceptability of drunkenness among young Victorians.

Method

Data was collected by The Social Research Group from 1392 Victorians via random digit dialling of landline and mobile phones. Results were adjusted to account for chance of selection by either landline or mobile phone. The data presented in this paper has been weighted to the Victorian population, and is presented with confidence intervals.

The development of the quantitative survey was informed by a literature review to identify validated indicators of alcohol culture and qualitative interviews with young people aged 16–29. This project was approved by the Charles Sturt Human Research Ethics Committee [2013/164].

The survey was conducted with 1392 Victorians aged 16 years or older in October/November 2013. Quotas were set at 50% 16 to 29 year olds and 50% ages 30 and older, with young people oversampled in order to permit more extensive analyses with this sub-group. Verbal consent was provided by a parent or carer of any respondent aged 16 or 17 years.

Data were weighted based on chance of selection and percentage in the Victorian population using ABS 2011 census statistics. When the term 'intoxication' or 'drunk' is used, unless otherwise stated it refers to the term each respondent chose for the stage of intoxication that represents 'losing your balance', or 8/10 on a scale of intoxication where 0 = sober and 10 = passed out.

Statistical differences within data were determined when statistical results produced p-values of 0.01 or less. Confidence levels are presented at a 95% confidence interval for a 50% estimate throughout. Except where otherwise noted, the data presented in this report was cross-tabulated and checked for significance.

Key findings

VICTORIANS' DRINKING PATTERNS

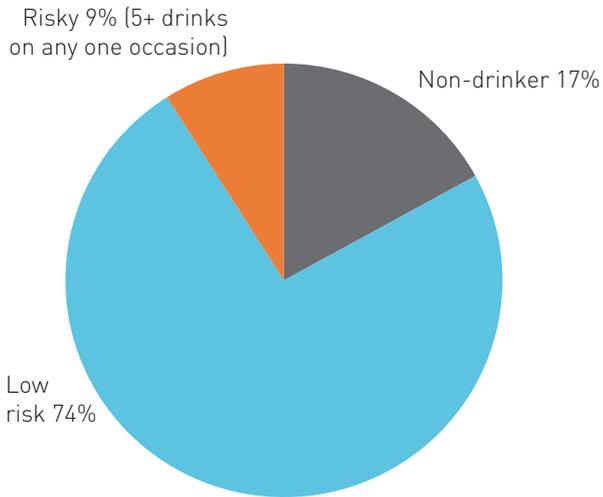
Survey respondents were asked how often they drink alcohol and the amount consumed on each occasion. Results were analysed and assessed against the current National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines (2009):

- For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.
- For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

Results show that more Victorians drink in a manner that put them at risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking than do in a way that puts them at risk of harm from an alcohol-related disease. For instance, Figure 1 shows that 9% of Victorians drink at levels that put them at risk of harm in the long term, while 17% were classified as non-drinkers and 74% as low risk drinkers.

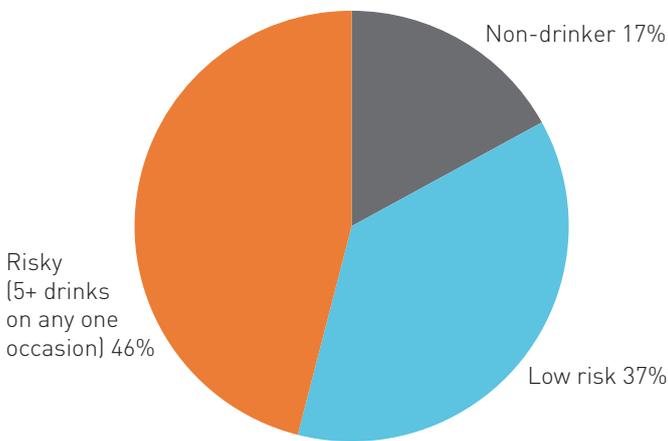
A much larger proportion of Victorians drink at levels that put them at risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking. Figure 2 shows that **46% of Victorians had consumed five or more drinks in a single occasion of drinking at least once in the previous year.**

Figure 1: Percentage of all Victorians drinking more than 2 standard drinks on any given day



NHMRC Guidelines: No more than 2 standard drinks on any given day [CI = ±2.4%]

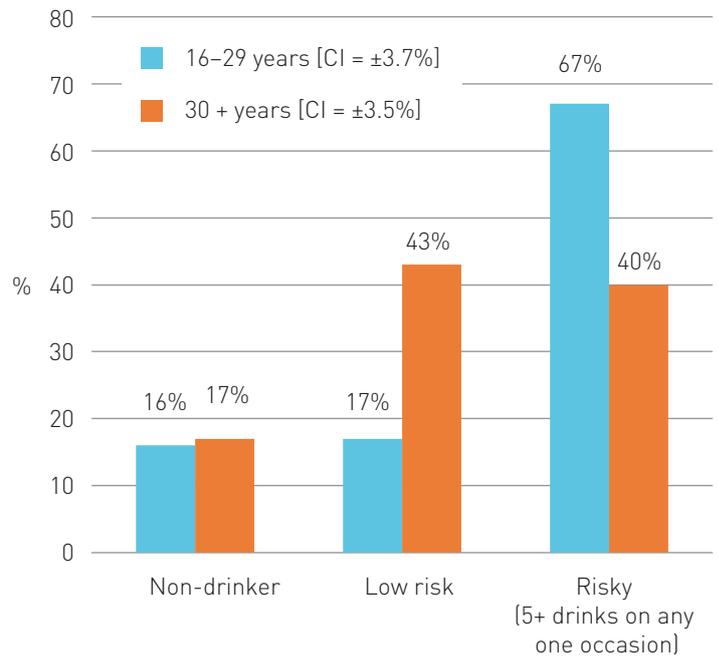
Figure 2: Percentage of all Victorians at risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking



NHMRC Guidelines: No more than 4 standard drinks on any given day [CI = ±2.4%]

When analysed by age, (Figure 3), some key differences in self-reported drinking behaviour emerged. Victorians aged 30 years or older were less likely to drink in excess of four standard drinks on a single drinking occasion, compared to those aged 16–29 (43% v 17%). Similarly, **those aged 16–29 were significantly more likely to consume alcohol in excess of NHMRC Guidelines, at least once in the previous year (67% v 40%).**

Figure 3: Risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking by age



NHMRC Guidelines: No more than 4 standard drinks on any given day

BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ALCOHOL AND NON-DRINKING

Alcohol and socialising

Victorians generally hold positive views of alcohol as a social lubricant, with 56% agreeing that having a few drinks is a great way of meeting new people. Over two-thirds (69%) of young people and young adults believe the same, compared to 53% of those aged 30 or older.

However, Victorians felt less positive about propositions where alcohol was the main focus or activity. Only 13% of Victorians agreed that people who drink alcohol are more fun to be around than those that do not, while less (11%) agreed that going out drinking on the weekend is more fun than most other weekend activities. Those aged 16–29 were more likely to agree that going out drinking on the weekend was more fun than most other activities, compared to those aged 30 years or older (23% v 8%), but were not more likely to agree that people who drink are more fun to be around.

An overwhelming majority (94%) of Victorians agree that you can have a good time at a party without alcohol, with no significant differences noted between young Victorians aged 16–29 and those aged 30 or older.

Peer pressure to drink

Over a quarter of Victorians (27%) feel obliged to drink when others around them are drinking at a pub, bar or club. When broken down further by age, 42% of young Victorians feel this obligation, compared to 23% of those aged 30 years or older, suggesting that younger Victorians feel the social pressure to drink alcohol much more acutely.

Developing a definition of intoxication

Data collected during qualitative interviews showed that Victorians do not think or talk about intoxication in terms of the number of drinks they have consumed, but by the types of behaviours displayed when drinking. With this in mind, survey respondents were asked to rate each of seven behaviours typical of someone at various stages of intoxication on a scale of 0 = sober to 10 = passed out. These included:

- starting to feel relaxed
- losing inhibitions
- getting excited and noisy
- starting to slur
- head is spinning
- losing your balance
- vomiting.

As Table 1 details, Victorians perceive 'starting to feel relaxed' as being at the lower end of the intoxication scale, with an average rating of 3.3 out of 10. All other behaviours were rated as above 5, from 'losing their inhibitions' at 6.1 to 'vomiting' at 9.0. Average standard deviations for each scale ranged from 1.5 for 'losing their balance' to 1.9 for 'losing their inhibitions', suggesting that Victorians generally view behaviours associated with stages of intoxication consistently, irrespective of age.

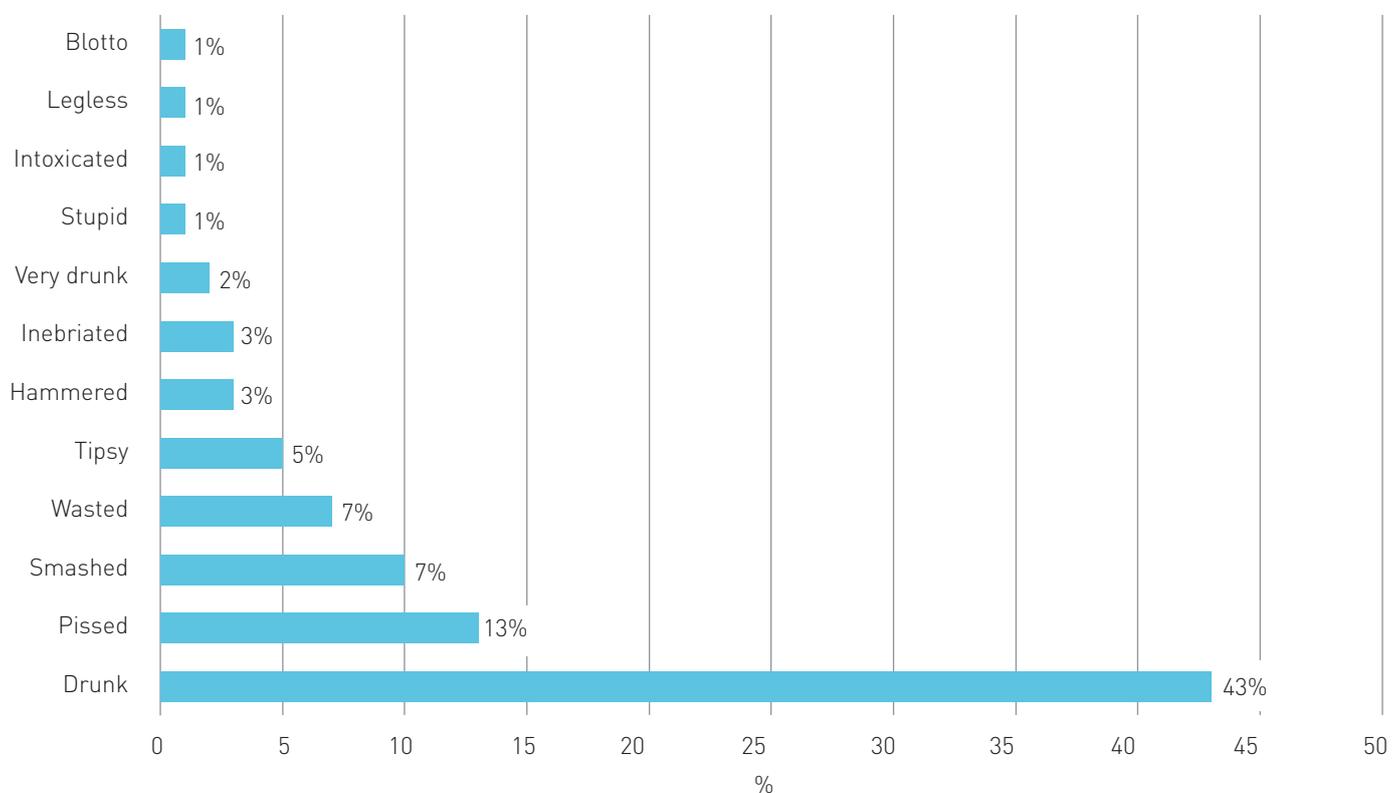
Table 1: Victorians' ranking of drinking behaviour, where 0=sober and 10=passed out

Drinking behaviour	Mean ranking on intoxication scale
Starting to feel relaxed	3.3
Losing inhibitions	6.1
Getting excited and noisy	6.5
Starting to slur	7.4
Head is spinning	8.0
Losing your balance	8.1
Vomiting	9.0

Q. On that same scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is SOBER and 10 is PASSED OUT, what level of intoxication do people typically get to when you go to a...? [CI = ±2.4%]

Survey participants were also asked to choose their own term for the behaviour, 'losing your balance'. Figure 4 presents the most common terms chosen for the behaviour, 'losing their balance' which averaged 8 out of 10 on the intoxication scale. 'Drunk' was the most popular by a considerable margin. 'Drunk' was also the most popular term among young people and young adults aged 16–29. The chosen term was used throughout the remaining survey questions when asking about intoxication.

Figure 4: Preferred label for 'losing their balance': 8/10 on the intoxication scale



Q. You gave "losing balance" a rating of [ANSWER TO Q. 14] on that scale where 0 was SOBER and 10 was PASSED OUT. What word would you use to describe this level of intoxication? [CI = ±2.4%]

ATTITUDES TOWARD INTOXICATION

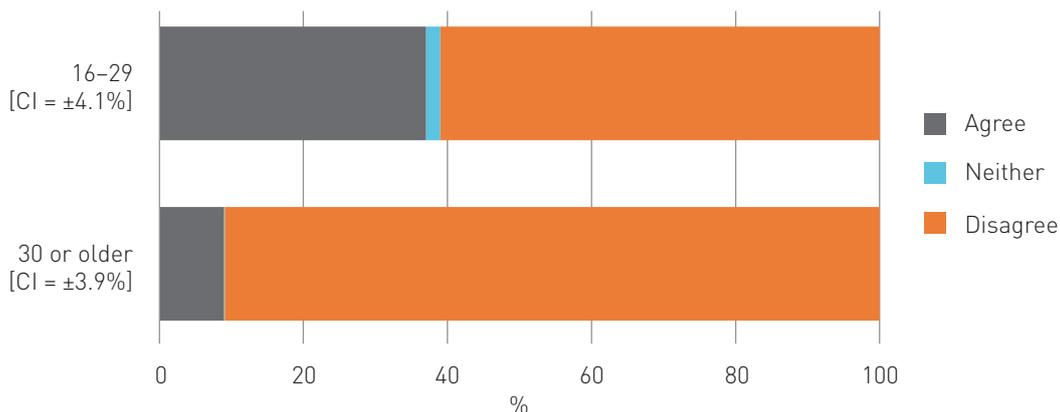
Drinking to get drunk

The next questions asked Victorians about their drinking intentions and attitudes toward drunkenness, specifically using the term respondents had identified to describe 8/10 on the scale of intoxication, most commonly referred to as 'drunk'. The first of these, asked only of drinkers, asked respondents whether they agree or disagree that on occasions that they're drinking, they know they will probably get drunk. Overall, 16% of Victorian drinkers agreed with the statement, and almost three-quarters disagreed (84%). As shown in Figure 5, a higher proportion of those aged 16–29 (37%) agreed with the statement, compared to 9% of those aged 30 or over. This also means that **61% of young drinkers do not intend to get drunk when drinking**.

Further questions asked of all survey respondents sought to examine Victorians' perceptions of drunkenness and drinking to get drunk. A significant proportion of Victorians agreed that getting drunk every now and then is not a problem (31%), while less than a sixth (14%) agreed that it is okay to drink with the intention of getting drunk. Young people and young adults aged 16–29 generally held more positive attitudes toward alcohol, as shown in Table 2.

This indicates that many Victorians are accepting of drunkenness providing it is not the main intention behind the drinking occasion.

Figure 5: Drinking intentions of Victorians



Q. Thinking about your own drinking occasions, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement... 'I know I will probably get drunk'

Table 2: General attitudes towards intoxication among Victorians

	16–29 [CI = ±3.7%]	30+ [CI = ±3.5%]
	% Agree	
Getting drunk every now and then is not a problem	53%	25%
A drunk person is a disgusting sight	64%	76%
It's okay to drink with the intention of getting drunk	33%	8%

Q. Now I'm going to read some statements about getting drunk. Do you agree or disagree that...?

ALCOHOL AND INTOXICATION AT SOCIAL EVENTS

Importance of alcohol at events

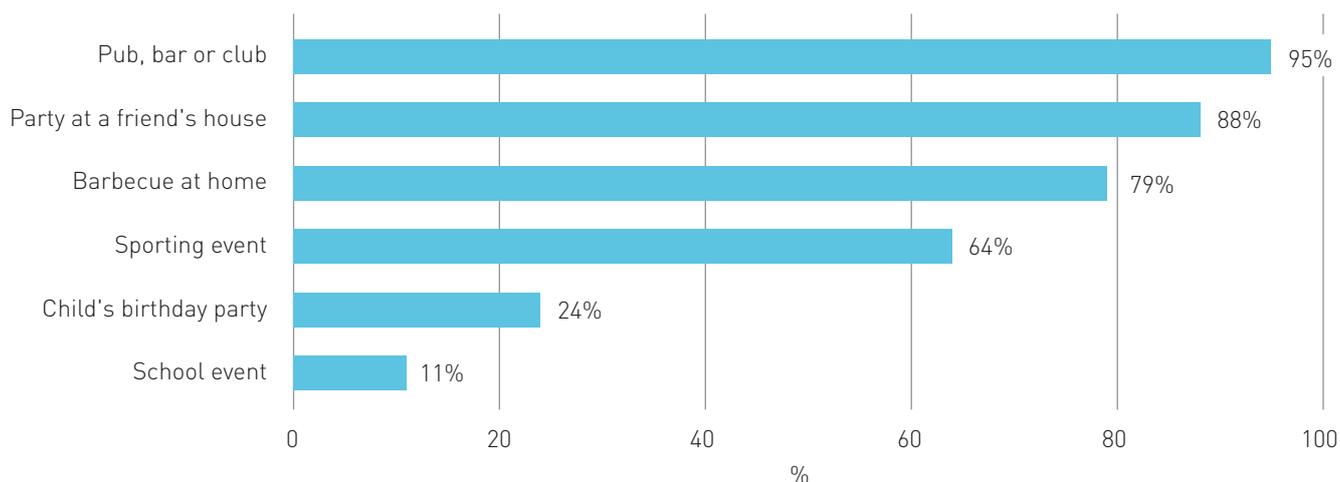
Survey participants were asked a range of questions about the role of alcohol at various social events, including at a:

- pub, bar or club
- party at a friend's house
- barbecue at home
- sporting event
- child's birthday party
- school event.

When asked about the importance of alcohol at each social setting, a majority of Victorians believed alcohol would be important at a pub, bar or club, party at a friend's house, barbecue at home or at a sporting event. Almost a quarter (24%), believed alcohol would be important at a child's birthday party, and one in 10 (11%), felt the same about school events, displayed in more detail in Figure 6.

There were no statistically significant differences found between those aged 16–29 and 30 years or older for the likelihood that alcohol would be important at each social occasion, suggesting that there is a general consensus among the community about where alcohol is expected to be an important part of the occasion. However, those aged 16–29 were significantly more likely to be disappointed if no alcohol was served at a pub, bar or club, party at a friend's house, sporting event or a school event.

Figure 6: Likelihood of alcohol being important at events (% somewhat or very likely)



Q. How likely is it that alcohol will be important at a... ? [CI = ±2.4%]

Acceptability of drunkenness at social events

Using the scale of intoxication where 0 = sober and 10 = passed out, survey participants were asked what level of intoxication people typically get to at each of these events. The results indicate that most Victorians expect some level of intoxication at each of these, ranging from 'starting to feel relaxed' at a child's birthday party, to 'losing inhibitions' at a pub bar or club. However, as Table 3 shows, those aged 16–29 generally expected that people would reach a higher level of intoxication at a pub, bar or club, party at a friend's house, barbecue at home or a school event, compared to those aged 30 years or older.

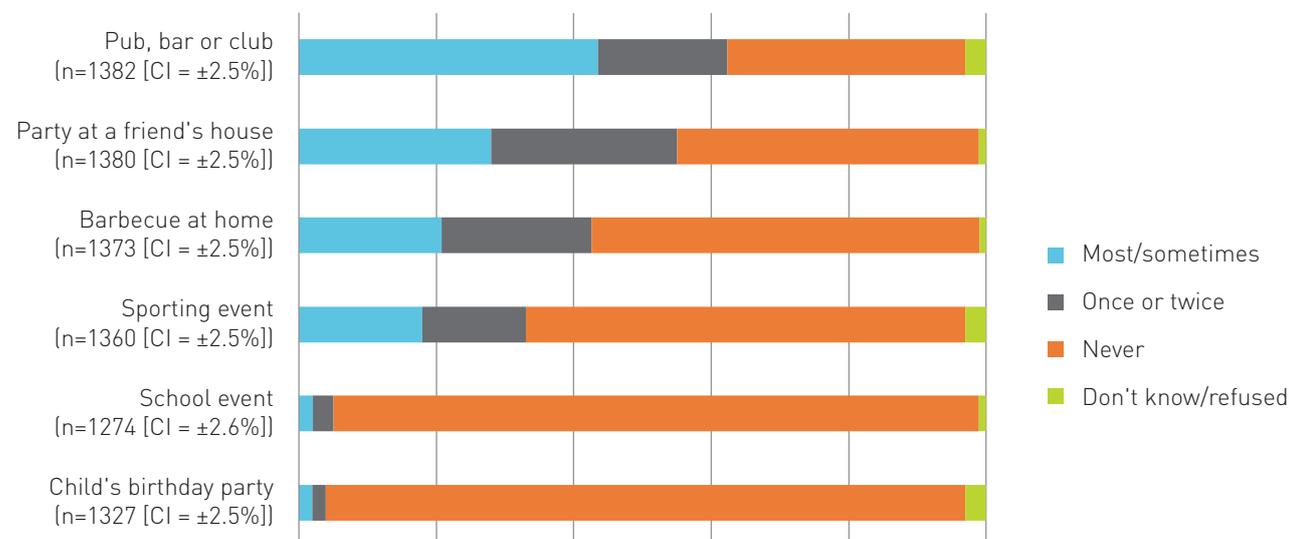
Figure 7 shows that the acceptability of intoxication at the various events generally follows the order of perceived levels of intoxication seen in the previous table, with being drunk most acceptable at a pub, bar or club and least acceptable at a child's birthday party or school event. For instance, 45% of Victorians believed it was acceptable to be drunk either most times or sometimes at a pub, bar or club, while only 2% believed the same for a child's birthday party.

Table 3: Perceived levels of intoxication at events by age group (0 = sober to 10 = passed out)

	16–29 [CI = ±3.7%]	30 or older [CI = ±3.5%]
Pub, bar or club	7.4	5.8
Party at a friend's house	6.2	4.5
Barbecue at your place	4.5	3.7
Sporting event	5.2	4.7
School event	4.6	2.7
Child's birthday party	3.1	2.8

Q. On that same scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is SOBER and 10 is PASSED OUT, what level of intoxication do people typically get to when you go to a...?

Figure 7: Perceived acceptability of intoxication at events



Q. About how often would it be acceptable to be drunk at a...

Higher proportions of young Victorians aged 16–29 felt that it was acceptable to get drunk most of the time or sometimes at various settings. Compared to those aged 30 or older, young Victorians were more likely to believe it is acceptable to get drunk most or sometimes at a pub, bar or club, party at a friend’s place, barbecue at home or sporting events, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Acceptability of intoxication at events by age group

	16–29 [CI = ±3.7%]	30 or older [CI = ±3.5%]
	% Agree	
Pub, bar or club	73%	37%
Party at a friend’s house	51%	21%
Barbecue at home	35%	17%
Sporting event	32%	14%
School event	6%	1%
Child’s birthday party	4%	1%

Q. About how often would it be acceptable to be drunk at a...

Conclusions

Victoria’s alcohol culture is one in which large percentages of the population drink at risky levels, feel pressure by others to drink, expect that alcohol will be served at a wide array of events, and accept intoxication both in general and at some events.

Arguably, Victorians aged 16–29 are advocates of this drinking culture. This age group are generally more likely to be disappointed when alcohol is not available at social events and occasions, including going to a pub, bar or club, party at a friend’s house or a sporting event. They are also significantly more likely to agree that it is acceptable to get drunk at these events regularly.

But there are some positive signs. While approximately a third of young Victorians know that when they drink, they will probably get drunk, and believe it is okay to drink with the intention of getting drunk, a majority do not believe that this kind of drinking is right.

Given that a significant proportion of this age group (42%) report feeling obliged to drink when others around them are doing so at a bar, pub or club, further work highlighting that the majority of young people and young adults aged 16–29 do not drink to get drunk will be crucial in establishing a more moderate drinking culture in Victoria.

Acknowledgements

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