

Drinking cultures and social occasions – public holidays

Research summary

Reducing harm from alcohol

This study, funded by VicHealth and conducted by **Turning Point Drug and Alcohol Centre** and **Eastern Health**, provides evidence that acute intoxication, injuries due to assaults and traffic accidents increase on public holidays and other major celebratory events and generally rise the day before.

Intent

Ambulance, police and hospital workers are noticing an increase in alcohol-related incidents around public holidays. However, there is relatively little evidence in Australia to support this observation. There has also been increasing community concern about alcohol intoxication during major social occasions.

The results from this study are designed to inform appropriate intervention and prevention strategies to minimise the impact on the health sector and the community's safety. The findings will be shared with Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, Emergency Department personnel and public health agencies.

Study

For all public holidays of the year, the study examines:

- ambulance data
- hospital admissions data
- emergency department presentations
- motor vehicle accidents
- police data for all assaults and family violence incidents (this data includes all recorded incidents, not just those related to alcohol).

Methodology

The data were collected from 2000 to 2009 for metropolitan Melbourne.

Ambulance attendance data regarding acute alcohol intoxication were derived

from the *Ambo Project: Alcohol and Drug Related Ambulance Attendances*, which is a collaboration between Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre and Ambulance Victoria and is funded by the Victorian Department of Health.

Hospital emergency department presentations for acute alcohol intoxication, assaults and motor vehicle accidents were taken from the *Victorian Emergency Minimum Dataset*, which includes detailed clinical, demographic and administrative data on all emergency department presentations in Victoria.

Hospital admissions for acute alcohol intoxication, assaults and motor vehicle accidents were taken from the *Victorian Admitted Episode Dataset*, which includes detailed clinical, demographic and administrative data on all admitted patient hospital separations in Victoria.

Police data on assaults and family violence incidents were sourced from the Victoria Police Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) database.

Serious road incident data were derived from the VicRoads Road Network Database (RNDB), which is compiled from Victoria Police information.

The research includes all cases recorded from 6 am to 6 am the following day. This is to reflect the fact that many cases occur after midnight. The day before and after the public holiday were also analysed.

Key findings

- Events that are associated with drinking alcohol in public in warmer weather are generally more likely to be associated with violence, drunkenness and traffic accidents than winter and/or indoor celebrations.
- Fridays and Saturdays are big drinking days and the warmer months are peak times for alcohol-related harms in Melbourne. For example, on Saturdays, there are an average 25 ambulance attendances, 13 emergency department presentations and seven hospital admissions for alcohol intoxication, compared to 10, five and four respectively on Mondays. [Note: The numbers refer to records between 6 am and 6 am the next day to account for overnight admissions.]
- The busiest months of the year for emergency services responding to alcohol intoxication are December, November, February and March, in that order. For assaults, they are December, March, February and January. The quietest month is July.
- There are significant increases in alcohol-related incidents in the lead up to most public holidays, particularly the days before New Year's Day, Australia Day, Good Friday, ANZAC Day and the last working day before Christmas.

Alcohol intoxication

- Women are more likely to be hospitalised or attended to by ambulance in November and December and men are more likely to be severely alcohol-affected in December, February and November, in that order.
- New Year's Eve represents a peak time, with a seven-fold increase in ambulance attendances, a six-fold increase in emergency presentations and a five-fold increase in hospital admissions

for acute intoxication, while emergency department presentations and hospital admissions for assault more than tripled.

- On New Year's Day, alcohol intoxication-related ambulance attendances increased by 75 per cent, emergency presentations increased by 50 per cent, compared to the average.
- There was a three-fold increase in ambulance attendances for intoxication on New Year's Eve, with similar increases in hospital presentations and admissions.
- Among women, the day preceding Australia Day was second only to New Year's Eve in terms of increased cases of acute intoxication.
- The last working day before Christmas marks the start of a significant and sustained upturn in alcohol-related harms each year until the end of summer, with a 50 per cent increase in ambulance attendances for alcohol intoxication on that day.
- The numbers of intoxicated individuals seen by emergency services drops markedly on Boxing Day and Good Friday.

Assaults

- Police-recorded assaults and family incidents, assault-related emergency department presentations and hospital admissions peak in the warmer months of the year, between November and March. Friday and Saturdays are the busiest days of the week.
- Significant increases in emergency department assault presentations occur on New Year's Day, Australia Day and ANZAC Day. The figures show that after New Year's Day, Australia Day is the biggest public holiday of the year for assaults.
- The number of assaults recorded by emergency departments always increases the day before a public holiday, with the exception of Christmas Eve.

- In terms of social occasions, assaults rise on the last working day before Christmas, St Patrick's Day and during the St Kilda Festival – particularly among men and young people.

Young people

- People aged 25 and under are most likely to experience acute intoxication and assault related to alcohol on New Year's Eve, Australia Day and ANZAC Day and Queen's Birthday, in that order.
- On Australia Day, ambulance attendances for intoxicated young people more than double, compared to the average.
- Australia Day also heralds a 50 per cent increase of intoxicated young people presenting to Melbourne's emergency departments, while there is a 200 per cent rise in young people treated for injuries due to assaults.
- On ANZAC Day, ambulance attendances due to alcohol intoxication and emergency department presentations for assault increase by around 50 per cent.

Motor vehicle accidents (all recorded incidents)

- Serious motor vehicle incidents peak the day before Australia Day and on Good Friday.
- Serious motor vehicle related hospital admissions peak between October and December and again in March. Friday and Saturday were the days of the week with the greatest concentration of serious road incidents and hospital admissions. There is a spike in admissions for men on Thursdays.
- A surge in people hospitalised for motor vehicle accidents happens the day before Good Friday, the day before Australia Day, New Year's Day and on Easter Sunday. The day before ANZAC Day and the Queen's Birthday is also associated with a higher risk of traffic accidents among young people.

Recommendations

This research provides valuable evidence about alcohol-related harms for different populations in the context of major social events in Victoria. This evidence highlights the impact of alcohol and the harmful drinking culture upon resource allocation, staffing and funding across a wide range of areas, from emergency and health services, to hospitality, transport and entertainment.

The data also gives valuable guidance for targeting alcohol intervention and prevention initiatives and health education campaigns to minimise harms associated with drinking. In addition, the data gives us further insight into patterns of family violence.

The data also shows the level of harm in the community associated with typically celebratory events. It points to a need for more stringent checks on alcohol marketing, which is often highly prevalent around these occasions, as well as a need for reform in areas of alcohol pricing, licensing regulations and opening hours of bottle shops, pubs and clubs.

A similar analysis of alcohol-related harms associated with big sporting events is currently underway by VicHealth and Turning Point.

This publication is a summary of the full report *Drinking cultures and social occasions: Alcohol harms in the context of major public holidays and cultural events* by Dr Belinda Lloyd, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre.

For more information about this study and to view the full report, please visit the website www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Alcohol-misuse