Brief insights
Drinking cultures in rural and regional settings
Generation X and Baby Boomers

Introduction

In 2016, VicHealth commissioned La Trobe University's Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) to examine alcohol cultures in middle- and older-age groups in Victoria – Generation X, born 1965 to 1980, and Baby Boomers, born 1946 to 1964.

The research applies the Alcohol Cultures Framework (VicHealth 2016a) to guide the exploration of factors that socially shape the way people drink, providing the evidence to inform future VicHealth-funded alcohol culture change interventions operating at the subpopulation level.

In order to identify cultures of risky drinking for targeted interventions, researchers drew upon three methods: analysis of existing survey data, literature review and stakeholder consultation. Following multiple rounds of consultation and consideration of potential project impact, alcohol cultures in regional and rural Victorian settings (Baby Boomers and Generation X) was selected by VicHealth as an area of interest.

Why drinking cultures in regional and rural settings?

Middle- and older-aged people living in rural and regional areas of Victoria are more likely to drink at levels that place them at higher risk of short- and long-term harm from alcohol than similarly aged people living in metropolitan Melbourne. Recent Australian survey data (Livingston 2016) indicates that in regional and rural areas of Victoria, men aged 36–70 years old are almost twice as likely as 36–70 year old men living in metropolitan areas to regularly consume five or more drinks on a single drinking occasion. Middle-aged women (Generation X) who live in regional and remote areas are one-and-a-half times more likely to regularly drink five or more drinks in a single session than their metropolitan counterparts. Among older women (Baby Boomers) there appears to be no differences in drinking patterns depending on residential location.

The information interviewees provided is not representative of the practices and perspectives of all people who drink alcohol in rural and regional Victoria. However, it provides some insights into the ways in which regional and rural settings may shape drinking patterns and alcohol cultures.

About the research

In late 2016, CAPR conducted twenty in-depth telephone interviews of approximately 20 minutes. Eligible participants were Victorians aged 36–70 years old (Generation X and Baby Boomers) living in regional or rural Victoria, who drank alcohol at least occasionally in local licensed venues. Participants were recruited through online advertisements, media (newspapers and radio), posters and emailing among the researchers' networks. Participants were reimbursed for their time with a $20 gift voucher. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using qualitative analysis software.

Interview respondents were asked about their attitudes to, and experiences of, alcohol culture in the Victorian regional or rural setting, particularly in relation to drinking in licensed venues. Respondents were also asked about alcohol consumption patterns, risky drinking, social norms relating to drinking, the consequences of drinking and concerns relating to drinking in social settings.

Of the 20 interviewees, there was greater representation from the Generation X age cohort than Baby Boomers (65 per cent and 35 per cent respectively) and greater female representation than male (60 per cent and 40 per cent). Six in ten (60 per cent) had obtained a university degree and a quarter had obtained a certificate or diploma. Three-quarters were employed in work of some form; almost two-thirds in full time employment and one in five were employed in part-time work. Almost a quarter were unemployed, retired or studying. Half of the interviewees lived in a regional city (such as, Geelong, Ballarat or Bendigo), and the remainder in rural areas.

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The rural and regional setting

While interviewees in this sample drank alcohol infrequently and at levels of low risk, when alcohol was consumed, the sample mostly identified key social drinking settings as private homes (either a friend's or their own), the local pub or sports clubs. Other less frequent drinking locations were venues with drinking on the premises such as restaurants, cafes, wine bars or breweries, and the occasional public event at a school or workplace.

When at a licensed venue, many identified drinking alcohol as an 'add on' to a social occasion where there was more focus on eating a meal than drinking alcohol. For this sample, a lack of public transport often limited drinking at licensed venues, due to the need to drive home.

While those living in regional cities noted the increasing number and variety of licensed venues available (i.e. small wine bars), rural residents identified fewer venues, a lack of variety in the types of venues and shorter trading hours as limiting their access to alcohol in these areas.

Several interviewees noted a lack of cultural activities on offer locally, meaning drinking at the pub was identified as one of very few options for socialising in rural and regional locations.

> "…it's partly to do with the fact that we don't have the same kind of cultural life and, you know, outside influences that keep us occupied and entertain us. And so the form of entertainment comes with maybe a couple of drinks and loosening up."

> "In my opinion, from what I've seen, there's probably some heavier drinking in rural areas and I would attribute that to there being perhaps fewer distractions, fewer activities for rural people to do."

When describing other people's drinking, it was often described as influenced by individual level factors such as personality, personal predispositions or existing drinking problems.

Although this study sought to interview people who frequent licensed venues, the sample reported drinking more frequently in non-social situations, either alone or with one other person in a private residence.

Drinking patterns and the role of alcohol

Overall, among this sample, alcohol was not identified as of central social importance and those interviewed were not heavy drinkers. Despite this, alcohol was reported to be the norm in social situations. Drinking had an important role in relaxation, providing pleasure and enhancing socialisation – with family, friends and work colleagues.

> "…when you get to the pub you […] just don't feel comfortable and like you can't laugh out loud until you've had a couple of drinks and then you tend to be a bit freer and happier and chilled."

Alcohol was also used as a reward, gift or to celebrate, such as marking the end of a challenging week at work. Some interviewees reported alcohol was simply consumed for enjoyment, or 'for the taste'.

Round-buying was identified by some interviewees, but was not a common norm.

Among this sample, it was acceptable to drink to the point of getting drunk or tipsy. However, drunkenness was rarely observed by participants. Generally, at the Victorian population level, almost a third of all people (28 per cent) agree that getting drunk occasionally is 'OK' (VicHealth 2016b).

Factors that influence drinking

When describing the drinking behaviour of other regional and rural people generally, some participants considered there were some who drank at risky levels. Factors considered to influence the way regional and rural people drank, beyond the contribution of the 'Australian' drinking culture (especially among males), were access to, and affordability of, alcohol.

Although affordability issues were felt to curb drinking levels within licensed venues, they were conversely seen to promote a culture of take-away drinking. This was perceived as more risky than drinking at venues where responsible service of alcohol applies and some level of supervision exists.

> "…it's cheaper to buy take-away alcohol and have it home, better than paying $4.50 for a pot."

Interviewees reported that occupation, unemployment and financial resources influenced the way drinking culture is shaped in regional and rural Victoria. In particular, the accountability felt by those with jobs or who had to wake up early to attend to farming duties was felt to limit drinking.

> "…people like dairy farmers and orchardists […] the only thing that might stop them is that they have to get up early in the morning to either milk the cows or work on the farm."

The lack of transport in rural and regional areas and necessity of driving home after drinking alcohol at a venue was identified as a protective factor in limiting drinking. A quarter of interviewees mentioned that this would be a key reason for them to choose not to drink.

> "…in the country we'd be all from different towns and we would all meet up in the one town that had an event going on and then all drive home to our own towns […] So when you can't do very much share-riding of cars, then you need a lot of sober drivers… In the country, your license is your job."

Choosing not to drink

Interviewees were comfortable choosing not to drink in social settings. When asked about the reasons to drink alcohol, a number of interviewees suggested it was more common to need a reason **NOT** to drink, as drinking was the social norm.

> "…Like, what could be a possible reason why you wouldn't have a drink? You can still drive, you can still, you know, whatever, so people would generally expect you to have a drink."

Despite this, many interviewees reported there was no pressure relating to choosing not to drink, either on a specific occasion or in general (e.g. for those who were temporarily or permanently giving up or cutting back). This was commonly related to the nature of their social drinking group, who would either be supportive or not notice the choice being made.

> "…most people probably got other things to think or care about than whether someone else is drinking."

A few, however, spoke of pressure or negative reactions from peers, and one reported using the specific strategy of drinking water out of a 'stubbie' bottle holder to avoid such reactions.

One participant expressed the difficulty of choosing not to drink alcohol if drinking was ingrained in the social circle.

> "…if that group bases itself on getting together for a drink then that's what you do. And it makes it hard for people who don't drink much."

Gendered norms

While participants were not directly asked about the gender composition of their social drinking groups, or gendered nature of drinking, a number of participants suggested that there was a masculine drinking culture – referring to expectations of 'the boys', 'mates', 'blokes' and 'lads' as being particularly strong in rural areas.

> "…a country drink is a drink for the sake of having one with the boys."

> "You meet a lot more women who don't drink than you do men, I do anyway, in the country."

Alcohol-related concerns

Some interviewees had concerns about the drinking of friends or family, particularly in relation to short-term harm from intoxication rather than long-term potential health impacts. Some noted age as a factor that prevented alcohol-related harm.

> "I guess we're a much older group, we don't tend to get out there and get on the grog and, you know, party and carry on."

For most interviewees, witnessing unpleasant drunken behaviour or drink-driving was uncommon. In social settings when such behaviour occurred, it was most commonly reported that someone would approach and talk to the person about it. Others reported looking away or leaving a venue when antisocial behaviour was witnessed and in other cases, venue staff or police had intervened.

Very few interviewees raised concerns about their own drinking. One interviewee explained the powerful impact that a private conversation initiated by a friend who had noticed his heavy drinking had had on his own drinking:

> "…one of me mates come up and said that he'd noticed that I was drinking more and more […] over the course of six months it was getting worse and he just said, 'It used to be you'd have two, then half way through the season it was four, then it was 10 and then you're sort of getting in the car and driving 20 minutes home, you know.' That was, you know, and I said, right, well, if someone has noticed it then it's time to stop."

Summary of brief insights – drinking culture in regional and rural settings, Generation X and Baby Boomers

Factors that influence drinking	Insights
Role of alcohol	Overall, in public social settings alcohol was not identified as of central importance for this sample – sharing a meal together was more important than drinking alcohol when coming together.
	Drinking appears to be the norm in social situations and plays a role in relaxation, enhancing socialising, providing pleasure and enjoyment and in celebrating life events (including the end of a working week).
Acceptability of intoxication	Among this sample, it was generally considered acceptable to be affected by alcohol (tipsy or drunk) and the contribution of a broad 'Australian' drinking culture was seen to reinforce this.
Affordability	Interviewees identified that price restricted drinking alcohol in licensed venues, however, take-away alcohol was quite affordable.
Accessibility	While alcohol generally was easily accessible, lack of public transport in rural and regional locations was seen to limit drinking, especially when drinking alcohol at licensed venues.
Employment type, unemployment and financial resources	Work obligations limited drinking, for example the requirement to get up early the next day to work on the farm.
	Underemployment and limited financial resources limited drinking.
Social practices and norms	Participants were comfortable choosing not to drink in social settings, with some stating their social groups comprised both drinkers and non-drinkers. Only a couple of participants described experiencing social pressure to drink in some social situations. Drinking in private residences was reported by the sample as more common.
Gendered norms	Several interviewees described a masculine drinking culture (fitting in with 'the boys') in rural settings as contributing to heavy drinking.
Peer-support	In response to unpleasant drunken behaviour, the sample identified that someone approaching the individual to talk about their behaviour was a common action that would be taken. One interviewee explained the powerful impact that a private conversation initiated by a friend who had noticed his heavy drinking had had on his drinking. Knowing that someone had noticed his heavy drinking had encouraged him to cut down.
	Drink-driving and drunken unpleasant behaviour were considered unacceptable. Peers supported one another in their decision not to drink-drive.
Drinking settings	The most common drinking setting was at home, either alone or with one other person.
	Lack of public transport in regional/rural settings limits drinking in licensed venues due to the need to drive home.
	In rural settings, reduced access to licensed venues and restricted opening hours limit drinking.
	Dining, rather than drinking, is often the focus of attending pubs and other licensed venues.

References

Livingston, M 2016, unpublished analyses of Victorian data from the 2010 and 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Surveys (NDSHS).

VicHealth (2016a), *VicHealth Alcohol Cultures Framework: a framework to guide public health action on drinking cultures*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/alcoholculturesframework

VicHealth (2016b), VicHealth Indicators Survey 2015. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/vichealth-indicators-report-2015