

Alcohol use and harms during the COVID-19 pandemic

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fare.

Foundation for Alcohol
Research & Education



About FARE

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is the leading not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms.

We approach this through developing evidence-informed policy, enabling people-powered advocacy and delivering health promotion programs.

Working with local communities, values-aligned organisations, health professionals and researchers across the country, we strive to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone in Australia.

To learn more about us and our work, visit www.fare.org.au.

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FARE is a registered charity, and every dollar you give helps fund projects keeping our communities healthy and safe. You can make a tax-deductible donation at: www.fare.org.au/donate.

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Executive Summary

This report follows FARE's 2020 report - *Alcohol Use and Harm During COVID-19*. The analysis continues to monitor alcohol use and harms in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report examines evidence from academic studies, national and international surveys, health and emergency services data, retail trade data, and news media.

COVID-19 pandemic and alcohol use trends

- Several point-in-time surveys indicated the pandemic significantly disrupted many Australians' alcohol use, prompting some to increase alcohol use and some to decrease use.
- An Australian National University (ANU) 2020 study found that since the pandemic, 20 per cent of respondents increased alcohol use, 27 per cent decreased use, and alcohol use stayed the same for 53 per cent.¹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Health Survey, 2020-21, found that 9.8 per cent of Australians increased alcohol use, 23.9 per cent decreased, and alcohol use stayed the same for 66.4 per cent.² The same ABS survey found that risky drinking remained common during the pandemic – with 26 per cent of people exceeding national alcohol guidelines, consistent with 2019 data from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW).³
- As for whether these changed trends resulted in a net increase in people drinking since the start of the pandemic, Roy Morgan's Alcohol Consumption report series indicated that the number of Australians drinking alcohol in 2021 reached its highest point in five years.^{4,5}

Increased alcohol use in the home

- Even before the pandemic, the home was the most common place for alcohol use. FARE's 2020 Annual Alcohol Poll found that in the 12 months prior to January 2020, most Australians reported alcohol use in their own home or someone else's home (77 per cent).⁶
- This alcohol use in the home has become even more concentrated during the pandemic.
- Australian packaged liquor retail data indicates that takeaway and delivered alcohol sales increased significantly. There was a \$3.6 billion (29 per cent) increase in alcohol retail turnover in Australia between 2019 and 2021.⁷ This represents a significant increase in alcohol flowing into people's homes.
- Australia's two largest alcohol retailers have had significant increases in online alcohol sales and delivery during the pandemic. Endeavour Group, which owns alcohol delivery companies Dan Murphy's, BWS and Jimmy Brings, recorded an increase of more than a third (35 per cent) in their online sales in the 2020-21 financial year compared with the previous year.⁸ Coles Group, which owns Liquorland, First Choice and Vintage Cellars, similarly recorded a 60 per cent increase in eCommerce in the first half of the 2021-22 financial year.⁹
- There is concern that increased alcohol use in the home is a long-term trend, not simply a temporary change due to the pandemic. Qualitative studies have highlighted how more time isolated at home has meant regular drinking in the home and drinking alone has become normalised for some people.¹⁰ Alcohol company advertising that frames alcohol use as a way to cope with isolation and boredom during the pandemic has been identified as a contributing factor to this issue.¹¹

Differing impacts across demographic groups

- Emerging evidence shows that there has been a greater increase in alcohol use by women during the pandemic in Australia compared with men.¹²
- Multiple studies have highlighted that people aged 25 years and older were more likely to increase their alcohol use during the pandemic.¹³ It has been suggested that this may be because people aged 25 years and older faced more disruption due to work and child-caring responsibilities than people under 25.
- Other recent studies have highlighted concerning trends in the frequency of alcohol use. Although women between 69 and 74 years were least likely to change drinking patterns during the pandemic, they were more likely to drink daily (11 per cent) as compared to women between 25 and 31 years (two percent).¹⁴

Increased stress and alcohol use

- There is consistent evidence emerging that the pandemic has increased levels of stress. Increased alcohol use has been linked to higher stress levels.
- A Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) study on alcohol use in 2020 found that people who reported high stress levels were more likely to increase their alcohol use.¹⁵
- An ANU study found that changes in work hours between February and April 2020 led to increased stress and alcohol use for both men and women.¹⁶ Having a child-caring role was a strong predictor of increased alcohol consumption for women. For men, on the other hand, it was a loss of job or a decline in hours worked that was the strongest predictor of a (self-reported) increase in alcohol consumption.
- Qualitative research with parents and carers found that the frequency of alcohol use increased, but not the quantity, during the March and April lockdown periods.¹⁷
- Similar results were found in the Alcohol and Drug Foundation's May 2020 survey, which found that one in six Australian parents were drinking daily (14 per cent).¹⁸

Emerging evidence of alcohol-fuelled harms

- A Victorian study found an increase (nine per cent) in alcohol-related ambulance attendances to the home in 2020 compared with 2019.¹⁹
- ABS data on alcohol-induced deaths showed increases of 8.3 per cent between 2019 and 2020.²⁰
- The Coroners Court of Victoria found an increase in alcohol-related overdose deaths from 2019 (145) to 2020 (154). In 2020, alcohol accounted for more than a quarter (30 per cent) of overdose deaths in Victoria.²¹
- With many people confined to their homes for long periods, there has been growing concern that family violence incidents may be on the rise and often under-reported to police.²² Recent research highlights how economic insecurity during the pandemic was a significant driver of increased intimate partner violence.²³
- ABS data from 2019 to 2020 indicated that 10 per cent of individuals who used alcohol and/or drugs experienced family and domestic violence.²⁴
- Women's Safety NSW reports collected survey results from frontline workers and service providers throughout 2020.²⁵ Findings revealed that nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of respondents had noticed an escalation in violence and abuse triggered by drug and alcohol use.

Support services under pressure

- Since the pandemic, there have been indications of increased demand for accessing support services for alcohol problems and dependence.
- Call data from the National Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Hotline showed calls almost doubling in 2020 compared with 2019.²⁶ Call numbers have continued to climb, with 2021 call numbers totalling 26,487, triple the amount compared with 2019 (7,804 calls).
- Hello Sunday Morning, an alcohol support service and online community, conducted a survey in September 2020 and found that seven out of 10 people who drank at risky levels reported feelings of depression, had troubled sleeping patterns, and found it problematic to bring up concerns with their GPs.²⁷
- Western Australia's Mental Health Commission noted that nearly half (45 per cent) of calls they received from 2020 to 2021 identified alcohol as the primary drug of concern. This was an increase in 12 per cent from the previous year.²⁸
- The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) noted that 70 per cent of individuals needed more alcohol assistance since the pandemic.²⁹
- The significant strain on alcohol support services and social distancing restrictions have created several disruptions, affecting how care is provided. The Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) study found that while some individuals could access alcohol assistance, others could not access services during the pandemic.³⁰
- This highlights that many people are not getting the help they need, indicating that the data on service usage may be an underestimate. It is estimated that up to 500,000 Australians could not access AOD treatment services before the pandemic.³¹



Introduction

“During COVID lockdown, I struggled to cope. Being unable to leave home except for essentials – however, I was surprised that bottle shops were open – hence the start of my decline. Not normally a big drinker, I began to have a drink – every day. I started earlier each day, and I was alone. By November, I would say I was addicted. I sought help and finally achieved it. By Christmas, I was sober and enjoyed Christmas with 30 members of my family. But, on New Year’s Eve – another lockdown and once again, I escaped into the bottle. COVID and subsequent lockdowns basically were the beginning of my descent into alcoholism.”

– FARE community member

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a catalyst for turbulence in Australia. Uncertainty has confronted the Australian population through waves of social isolation as a result of Government restrictions which raised concerns for health, mental wellbeing, and financial stability. As a result, risky alcohol use has increased for some Australians. Many people have been impacted by alcohol harms, such as adverse mental health and family violence. Aggressive marketing and profit-making by alcohol companies during the pandemic has also proven to be an obstacle in protecting the health and wellbeing of Australians during this time.

FARE’s 2020 report on *Alcohol use and harm during COVID-19* provided a snapshot of alcohol use and harm in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. It captured the emerging evidence so the Australian community could grasp how the pandemic impacts were unfolding. This current report follows the 2020 report, drawing upon the evidence that has emerged in the past two years since COVID-19 reached Australia.

What pre-pandemic evidence tells us

Research before the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that levels of alcohol use and harm increase during chaotic events, such as the Global Financial Crisis (‘GFC’, 2007-2008), Black Saturday Bushfires (2009) and the Queensland Floods (2011 and 2019):

- Although the GFC did not impact the Australian economy as severely as other nations, evidence showed that alcohol use increased from 2008 to 2009.³²
- The 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria took a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of those affected. According to a longitudinal cohort study that assessed a range of individuals from most to least affected by the bushfires, there was a 24.7 per cent increase in alcohol use among those most affected.³³
- The Queensland floods in 2011 led to 23 deaths.³⁴ A 2011 study that used a sample of 3000 residents who lived in areas affected by floods found an increase in alcohol use, with people affected being 5.2 times more likely to use alcohol at risky levels compared with those not affected.³⁵ Similar findings regarding risky alcohol use were also observed during the Queensland 2019 floods.^{36,37}

In all instances, chaotic events often resulted in increased levels of alcohol use in combination with psychological trauma and economic uncertainty. COVID-19 has proven to pose the same threat level to the Australian community. The main differences between COVID-19 and the chaotic events listed above are the immediate impacts of the events on individuals and the ability of communities to develop strategies for recovery. COVID-19 does not provide the same opportunities for communities to recover. There is a lack of predictability of when the community can safely return to a ‘pre-COVID’ life of normality. The recent increase in cases in December 2021³⁸ and January 2022³⁹ and concerns over new strains of the virus are a reminder that a return to normalcy is far into the future.

This report will first look at how patterns of alcohol use have changed across Australia, drawing on survey and retail data. Second, shifts in alcohol harms will be examined including the impact of mental health, family and domestic violence, deaths, emergency services and hospitals and treatment and support services. The report will conclude by discussing the future of alcohol use and harm in the Australian community.



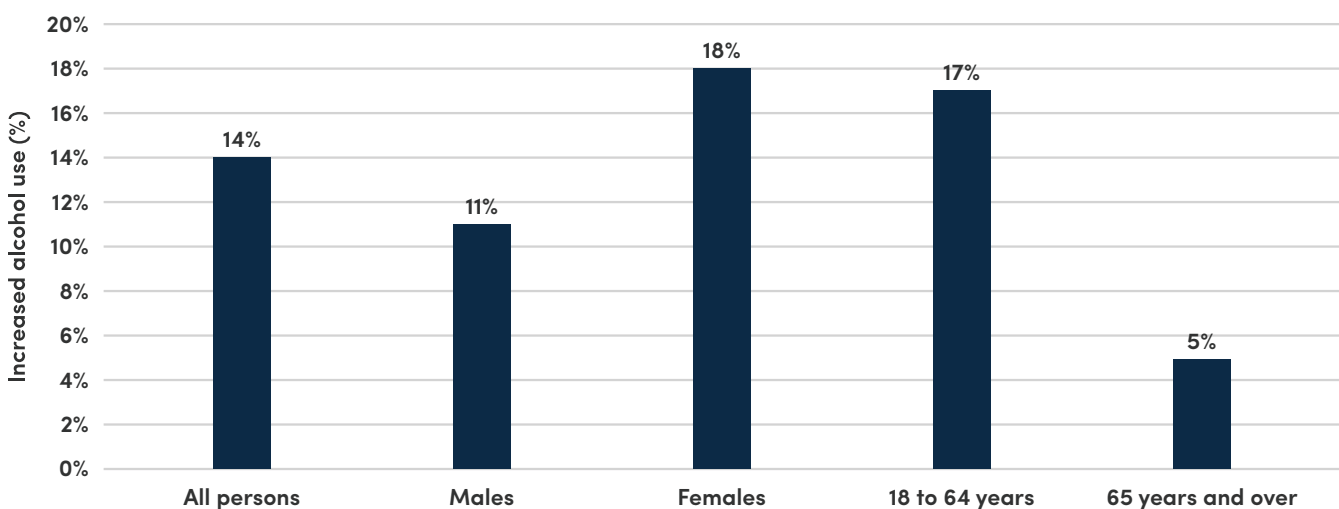
Findings

Changes in national alcohol use trends

As prior literature highlighted, we can expect to see a change in alcohol use during a chaotic event like a pandemic. Evidence confirms this expectation when looking at data on overall alcohol use in Australia. Roy Morgan's Alcohol Consumption reports collected survey data and interviewed more than 50,000 Australians. Roy Morgan found a four per cent increase in alcohol use from June 2020 (65.7 per cent) to June 2021 (69.7 per cent).⁴⁰ The ANU's alcohol consumption report in May 2020 indicated that women were more likely to report an increase in alcohol use (22.8 per cent) than men (17.9 per cent).⁴¹ Alcohol use was similar for both men (27.5 per cent) and women (26.7 per cent).

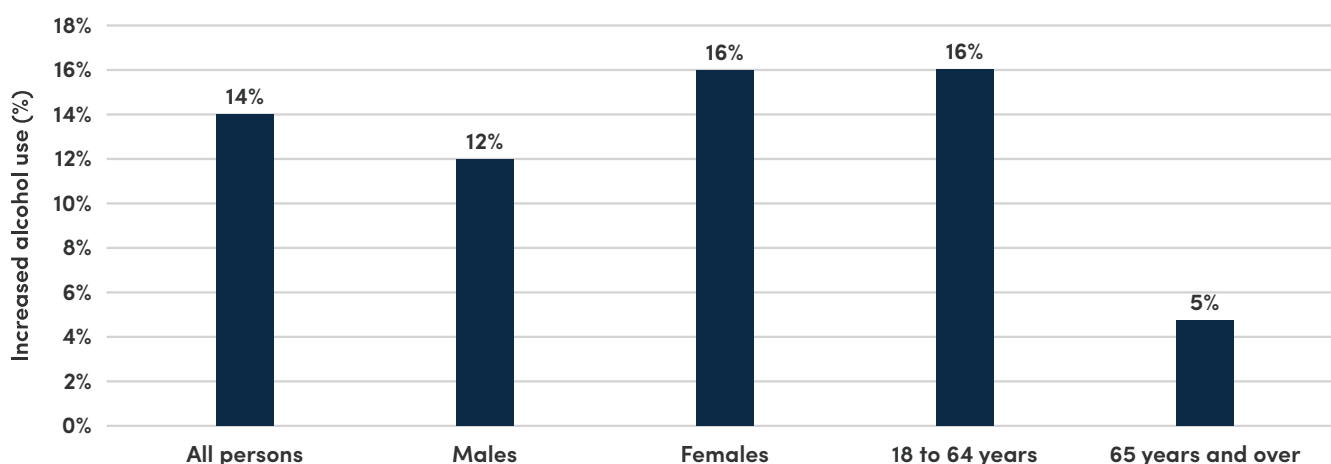
The ABS conducted a series of surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on households from April 2020 to June 2021. These surveys indicated there was an initial increase in alcohol use for both women (18 per cent) and men (10.8 per cent) (see Figure 1).⁴² When comparing age categories, those between 18 to 64 (17.1 per cent) increased alcohol use compared with those 65 years and older (4.8 per cent).

Figure 1: Proportion of people who increased alcohol use in the last four weeks (April to May 2020), by sex and age (%), ABS survey



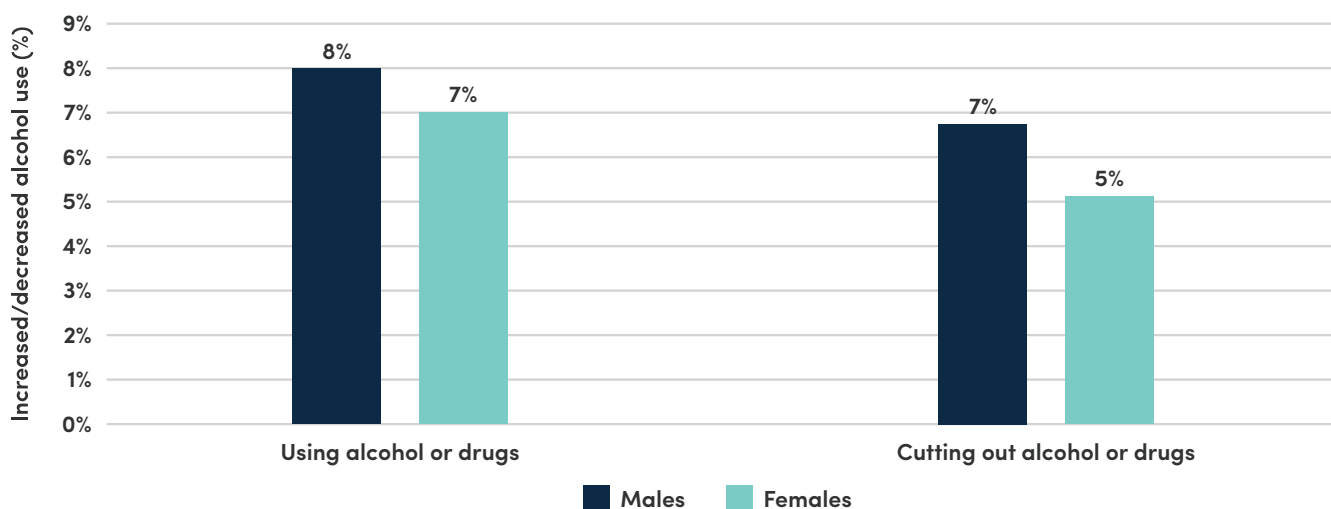
The ABS also noted the difference in alcohol use levels before government restrictions in March 2020 compared with alcohol use levels in June 2020.⁴³ It was found that nearly three-quarters of respondents (72 per cent) indicated that alcohol use levels remained unchanged, whereas 14 per cent increased and 15 per cent decreased (see Figure 2). It was also reported that women reported a higher increase (15.9 per cent) than men (12.1 per cent). When comparing age categories, those between 18 to 64 (16 per cent) increased alcohol use compared with those 65 years and older (4.7 per cent).

Figure 2: Proportion of people who usually drink alcohol who increased alcohol use in the past four weeks (March to June 2020), by sex and age (%), ABS survey



When looking at alcohol use rates from March 2020 to January 2021, males reported a similar increase (8.1 per cent increase) in alcohol or drug use as women (seven per cent increase) (Figure 3).⁴⁴ A relatively smaller proportion of men (6.8 per cent) and women (5.2 per cent) cut out alcohol or drugs in the same timeframe.

Figure 3: Proportion of people who increased or decreased alcohol or drug use from March 2020 to January 2021, by sex (%), ABS survey



We can also observe people who did or did not exceed the National Health and Medical Research Council Alcohol Guidelines (2020). The Guidelines state that alcohol health risks can be reduced by drinking no more than 10 standard drinks in a week or no more than four standard drinks in any one day. The ABS National Health Survey found that 26 per cent of Australian adults exceeded these guidelines in 2020–21 financial year (Figures 4 and 5).⁴⁵

The National Health Survey also found that nearly a third of men between the ages of 25 and 65 drank more than 10 drinks in the past week (Figure 4), and almost a third of men between the ages of 18 and 55 drank five or more drinks on any day (Figure 5). Nearly a fifth of women between the ages of 44 and 75 drank more than 10 drinks in the past week (Figure 4). More than a fifth of women aged between 18 and 24 (21.6 per cent) and just under a fifth of women aged between 44 and 54 (13.6 per cent) drank five or more drinks on any day (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Proportion of people who drank more than 10 drinks in the past week from 2020–2021, by sex and age, ABS survey

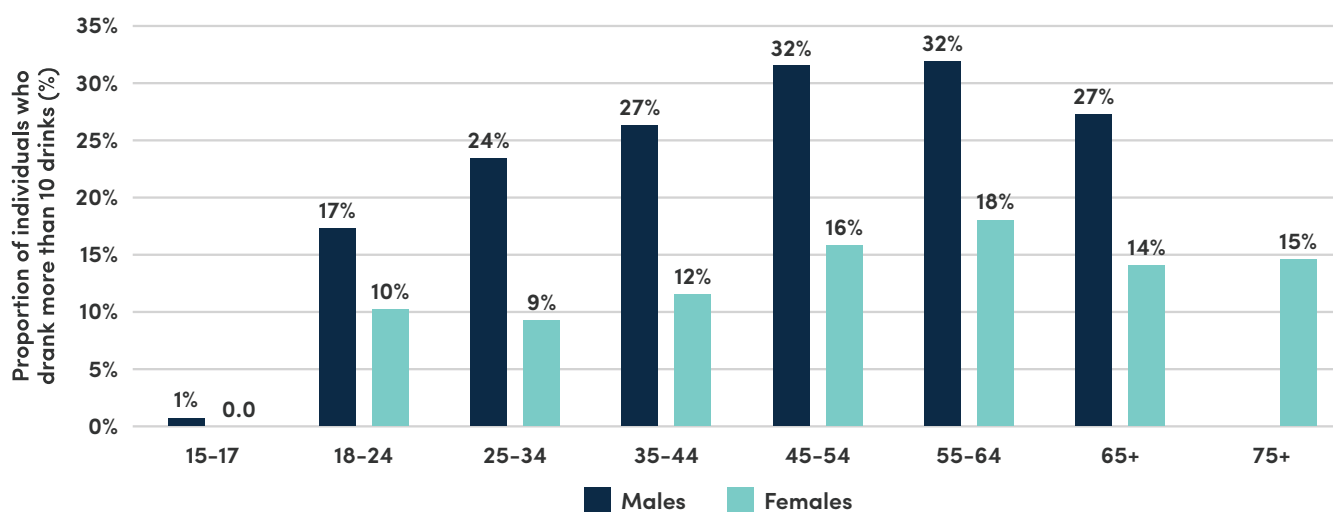
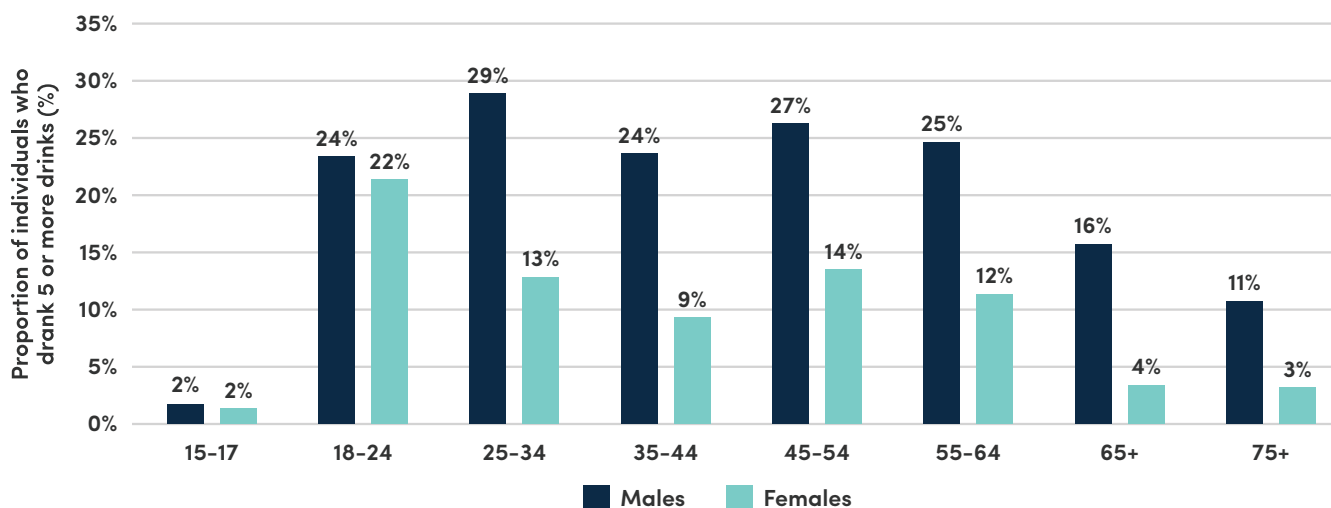


Figure 5: Proportion of people who drank 5 or more drinks on any day from 2020–2021, by sex and age, ABS survey



Regional differences

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts communities differently based on their geographic location, and the same is true for changes to alcohol use and related harms. Data from the National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program highlights these regional differences through a program that regularly measures alcohol use levels based on wastewater treatment plants.⁴⁶

When comparing levels of alcohol use at a population-weighted average between December 2020 and August 2021, the wastewater analysis found that alcohol use decreased in capital cities and increased in regional areas. Both alcohol and nicotine were the highest consumed substances in all States and Territories across Australia. Nationally, on average, 1,000 to 1,400 drinks per day per 1,000 people were consumed between early 2017 to the latest analysis in late 2021.

Changing motivations for alcohol use

"I lived through the Melbourne lockdowns, and this greatly impacted on mine and my partners' alcohol consumption. Being at home, all day, every day, in what was an uncertain and stressful time made each day feel like it was going for a week. There was no way to delineate between the work part of the day and the rest part of the day - although we were doing nothing, there was no rest. My partner would frequently get to 5 pm and ask me to have a drink with him when we usually don't drink during the week. Even when I didn't want to drink and knew it wouldn't make me feel better, it was a way of being there for him and with him in solidarity...As for myself, I really battled with it all because my health and wellbeing overall declined during the pandemic - less movement, less fun, less social support, and I knew drinking wasn't going to help that. But I also felt like my partner needed me to drink with him, and it was a way to mark the end of the day or mark a weekend."

- FARE community member

During the pandemic, research indicates that several reasons led to changing patterns in alcohol use. The 'COLLATE project' drew information in April 2020 based on distal and proximal attributes that affected Australians during the pandemic.⁴⁷ Distal factors, such as age and former drinking behaviours, combined with proximal factors, such as financial stability, lifestyle patterns and mood, increased alcohol use.

In terms of distal factors, the study found that people who drank more than 10 standard drinks a week before the pandemic continued to do so after the pandemic. People within the 25-49 age category and people with a high income were reported to have high levels of alcohol use during the pandemic. Other distal factors were not as statistically significant until proximal factors were added to the study. Women who indicated a history of mental illness and have children reported to have increased drinking patterns compared with men. Additionally, people who reported having inconsistent sleeping patterns, both short and long sleeping periods, reported increases in alcohol use.

The 'Beyond drinking occasions' survey conducted in the second half of 2020 investigated factors that influenced changes in drinking behaviour.⁴⁸ The findings were sorted into thematic areas, such as 'shifting of structures shaping drinking, the permeability of drinking boundaries, the extension of drinking and new contexts of drinking':

- Shifting of structures shaping drinking: Findings suggest that there was less 'accountability' in terms of when drinking took place due to a lack of daily structure during lockdowns:

"I managed my drinking around my job. Then, I think as soon as my job came to be inside my home, that's when I didn't have any of that accountability."

- Man, 29 years, working from home

- The permeability of drinking boundaries: Mandated lockdowns created periods of boredom for several people. This was seen as an impetus for many to drink alcohol without much reason:

"So yeah, like I said, it would normally be attached to a social occasion and an event, whereas now it's a bit more prosaic; it's just, well, while watching a movie at home, let's open a bottle of wine, which is something we never would have done in the past."

- Man, 38 years, working in the usual workplace

- The extension of drinking: With a lack of routine and prolonged periods of lockdown, many people reported experiencing longer drinking periods as compared with before the pandemic:

"I would crack a beer at 10.30 in the morning or 11 o'clock, around that time, and I'd sip on two bottles of beer that would get me through until around about 3-ish, I guess. Then I would have a

glass of wine and continue sipping on the wine through the evening, through till 10 or 11 o'clock when I would normally go to bed."

- Man, 58 years, working from home

- New contexts for drinking: In combination with a lack of structure and uncertainty around the pandemic, new situations for drinking became available for drinking alcohol:

"I normally have a wine with a meal, or if I've got friends in the house, I will drink in the house. But I would not normally ever drink if I'm the only physical person in the space. But on a Zoom call, that became very different."

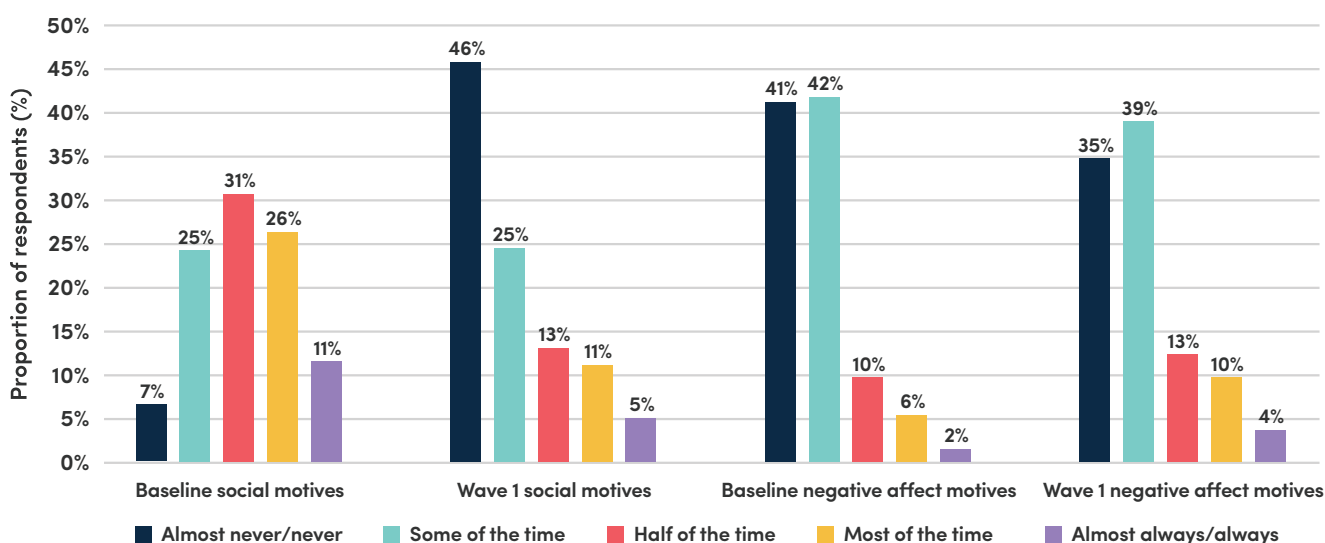
- Woman, 39 years, lost job

Economic factors such as financial situation and employment also led to changes in alcohol use during the pandemic. The ABS National Health Survey 2020–21 found that people employed full time were more likely to drink at risky levels than people who were unemployed. Those living in less disadvantaged areas were also more likely to drink at risky levels than those in very disadvantaged areas. This aligns with earlier research in 2020 that found people on above average incomes were more likely to be drinking at risky levels.⁴⁹ It has been suggested that a reason for this disparity is those facing financial pressure in a pandemic may have less money to spend on alcohol compared with those with a higher disposable income.⁵⁰

When looking at specific Australian jurisdictions that experienced prolonged periods of mandated lockdowns and constant shifts in COVID-19 policies, it was evident that both New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria were highly impacted. As a result, some studies have examined the motivations behind alcohol use in both states.

The Drug Policy Modelling Program's study observed changes in alcohol use in NSW through longitudinal surveys.⁵¹ The study examined NSW policy changes and fluctuations in alcohol use through multiple surveys. Questions in the survey focused on two broad categories, 'social motives' and 'motives associated with negative feelings', to analyse motives for drinking during the pandemic. It is evident in comparing baseline (February 2020, NSW pre-lockdown) and wave one (23 March – 14 May, NSW lockdown) surveys motives behind drinking drastically changed due to lockdown measures being implemented (Figure 6). Social motives decreased because there were fewer opportunities to meet in-person due to social distancing. In contrast, the proportion of people drinking due to negative feelings remained relatively stable.

Figure 6: Changes in drinking motives between Baseline and Wave 1: Lockdown (%), NSW Drug Policy Modelling Program



VicHealth’s two studies examined the wellbeing of Victorians during the first and second waves of lockdowns.^{52,53} Both surveys also asked for motivations behind drinking more and drinking less (Figures 7 and 8). It was evident that income did not play a huge factor in changing drinking patterns. Boredom, feelings of anxiety and not needing to meet drinking requirements while driving led to higher levels of drinking due to lockdowns. Nearly a third (30 per cent) of individuals from the first survey and second survey (31 per cent) indicated that they drank less for health reasons.

Figure 7: Respondents main reasons for drinking more alcohol (Surveys 1 and 2) (%), VicHealth survey

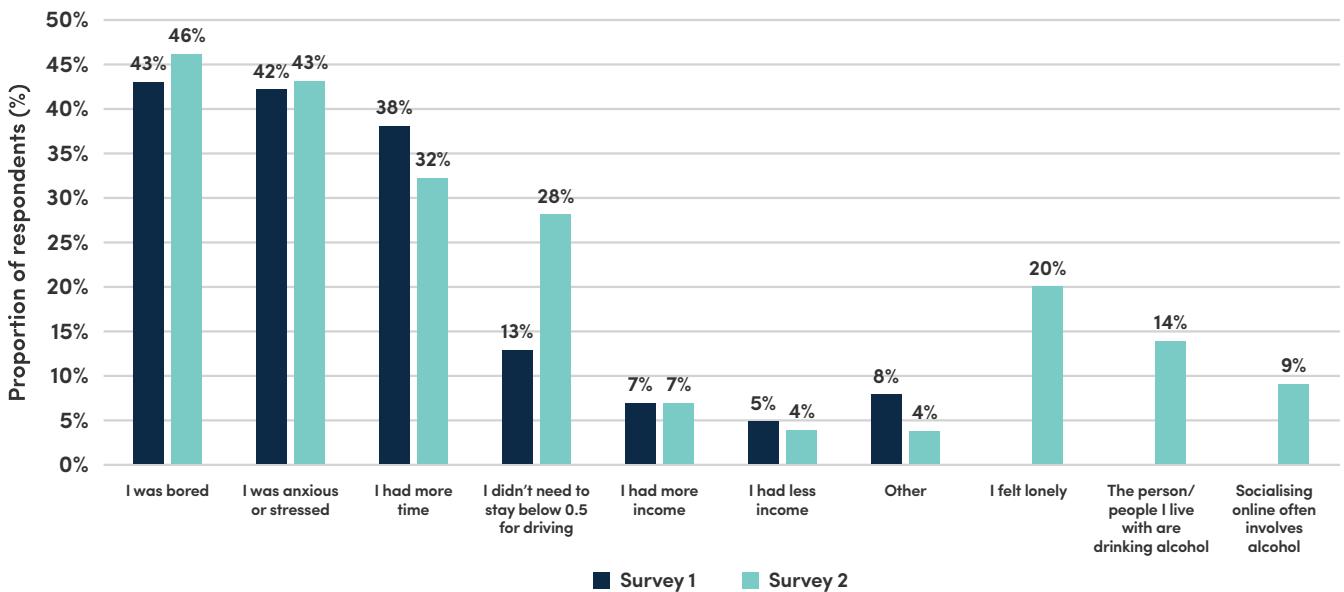
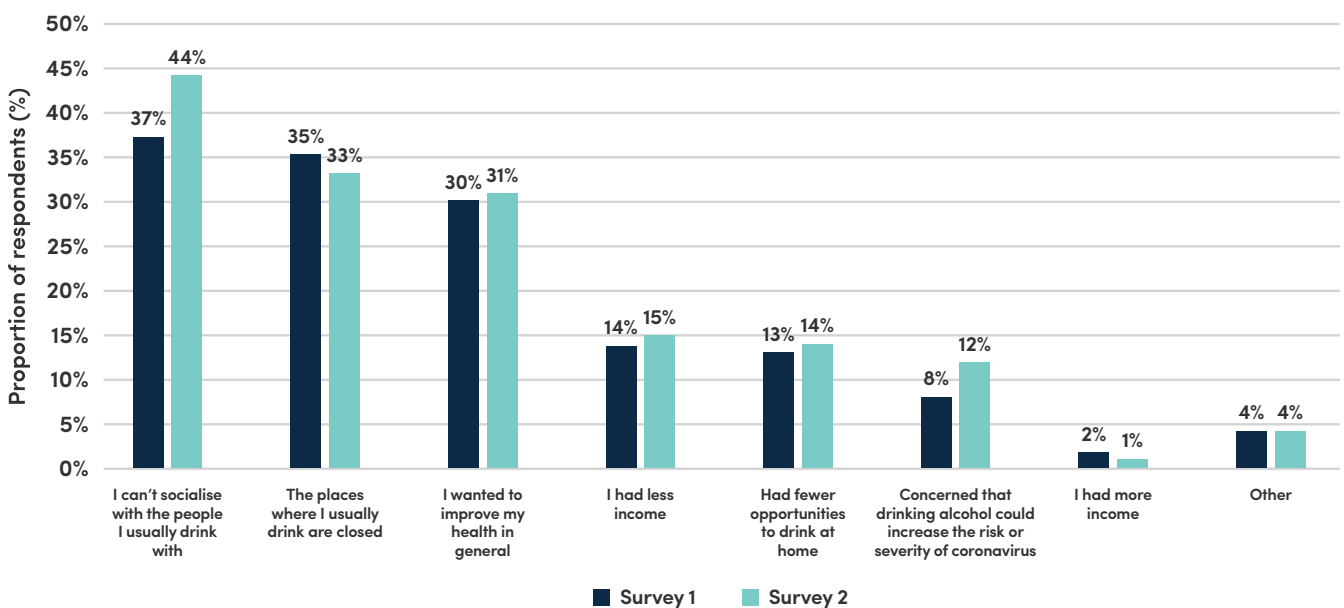


Figure 8: Respondent mains reason for drinking less alcohol (Surveys 1 and 2) (%), VicHealth survey



Increased alcohol use in the home

Even before the pandemic, the home was the most common place for alcohol use. FARE’s 2020 Annual Alcohol Poll found that in the 12 months prior to January 2020, most Australians reported alcohol use in their own home or someone else’s home (77 per cent).⁵⁴ Drinking at licensed venues, such as pubs, bars or clubs (15 per cent) and restaurants (eight per cent) was far lower compared with the number of people who reported alcohol use in the home. Alcohol use in the home has become even more concentrated during the pandemic.

Retail data indicates that there have been significant increases in the amount of ‘packaged’ alcohol being sold during COVID-19, i.e., alcohol that is bought at a bottle shop to takeaway or bought online for home delivery. This highlights the increasing use of alcohol in the home.

The ABS regularly releases its Retail Trade Australia collection, made up of estimates of liquor retail business turnover for every quarter in selected states and territories in Australia.⁵⁵ We can observe a \$3.6 billion (29 per cent) increase from 2019 to 2021 in alcohol retail turnover (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Australian alcohol retailer turnover (\$ million), ABS

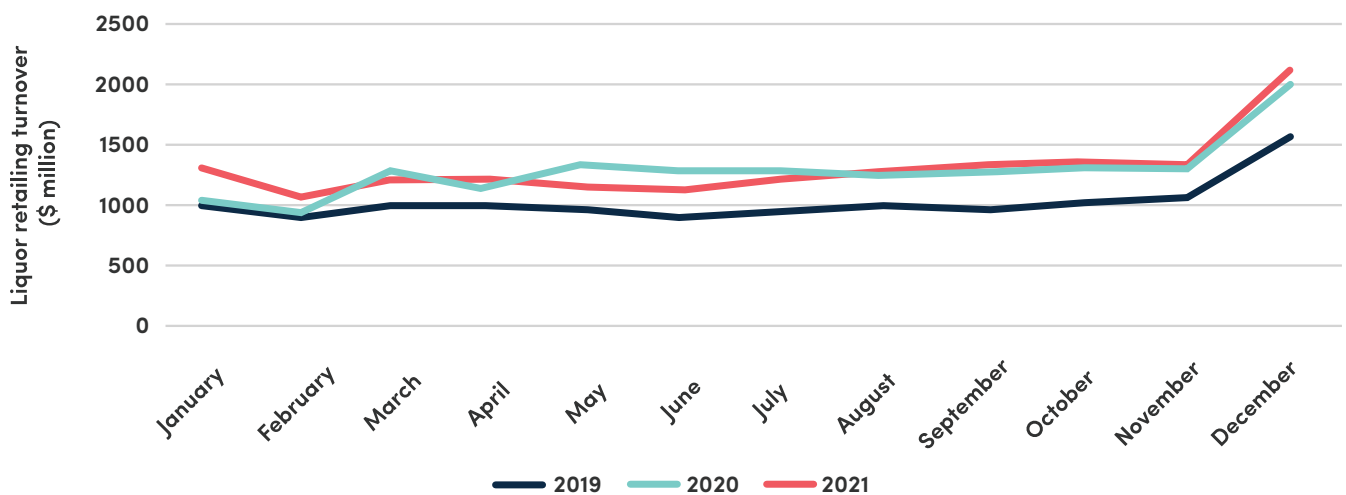
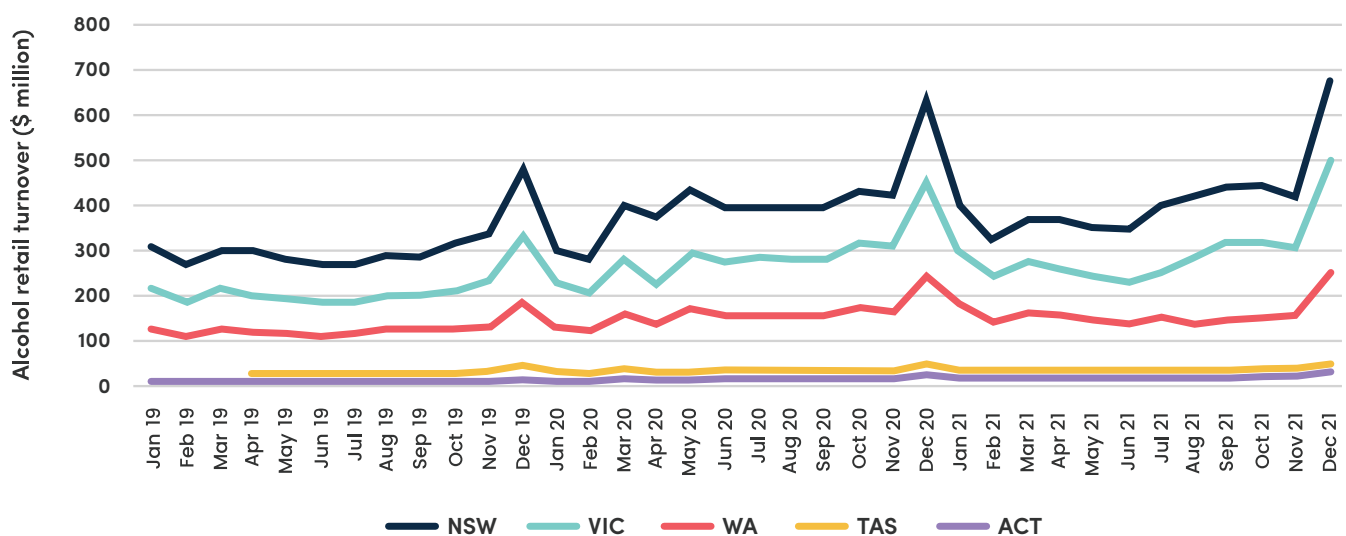


Figure 10: Australian alcohol retail turnover (\$ million), by state, ABS



The findings highlight that there has been a clear increase across jurisdictions since March 2020 (Figure 10). All states reported an increase in alcohol retail turnover rates in June 2020 and July 2021. From January 2020 to December 2021, alcohol retail turnover either doubled or almost doubled in all states and increased by \$1077.90 million nationally. Specifically, a \$369.4 million increase (54.9 per cent) in NSW, \$271.1 million increase (54.5 per cent) in Victoria, \$121.8 million (48.2 per cent) in Western Australia, \$20.1 million (38 per cent) in Tasmania, and \$21.2 million (65.4 per cent) in the Australian Capital Territory.

Online alcohol sale and delivery

Online alcohol sales and delivery have enabled greater alcohol use in the home. Endeavour Group, which owns alcohol delivery companies Dan Murphy's, BWS and Jimmy Brings, recorded an increase of more than a third (34.7 per cent) for online sales in the 2020-21 financial year compared to the previous year.⁵⁶ Additionally, on-demand BWS and Dan Murphy's delivery apps increased in people who used the service monthly. In the first half of the 2021-22, Coles Group, which owns Liquorland, First Choice and Vintage Cellars, recorded more than \$2 billion (15.2 per cent) increase in overall liquor sales and 60 per cent increase in eCommerce alcohol sales.⁵⁷

IBISWorld's report similarly looked at the impact of the pandemic on the online beer, wine and liquor industry.⁵⁸ Over the past five years, the online beer, wine and liquor industry has increased its revenue by 19.1 per cent and is forecasted to increase to 27.2 per cent growth in 2020-21. In terms of demand, nearly half of individuals aged between 26 to 40 (42.2 per cent) comprised the market, followed by those aged 41 to 60 (27 per cent), people aged under 25 (21 per cent), people aged 61 and older (6.9 per cent) and businesses (2.9 per cent).

Referring to the Drug Policy Modelling Program's study on drinking levels in NSW, data on buying alcohol on-premises and online were compared. The main difference between baseline and the first wave survey results was the purchasing behaviour of respondents. Nearly all (92.8 per cent) respondents indicated that they had not purchased from licensed venues. Takeaway alcohol increased and alcohol purchased online increased by 10 per cent. Additionally, female respondents reported having purchased more alcohol online when comparing baseline (17 per cent) to wave one (29 per cent), as compared with male respondents that increased purchases by five per cent.

Alcohol Change Vic surveyed 1011 respondents who used on-demand alcohol delivery in May 2021.⁵⁹ The findings found that more than half (61 per cent) of individuals in Victoria who used on-demand alcohol delivery drank 11 or more standard drinks in one sitting on at least a single occasion in a year. Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of respondents utilised on-demand alcohol delivery at least once a week, and more than half (51 per cent) of those who received alcohol weekly drank at risky levels beyond the national drinking guidelines. There are several alcohol harms associated with alcohol delivery that the survey found, including:

- **Memory loss:** Nearly half (46 per cent) claimed to have not remembered what happened when drinking in the past 12 months. Three-quarters (74 per cent) of people who use weekly delivery experienced memory loss from alcohol use. Almost half (45 per cent) of people who drink alcohol from a delivery experienced regular memory loss.
- **Harm to others:** A third (34 per cent) were fearful and/or experienced verbal or physical abuse by someone who used alcohol. More than half (53 per cent) of people who drank alcohol, compared with 28 per cent of people who drank alcohol less frequently, experienced such harm. Nearly a third (30 per cent) indicated that they experienced harm from someone they believed used alcohol delivery.
- **Went to work alcohol affected:** Some (15 per cent) indicated that they were under the influence or affected by alcohol when attending work in the past 12 months. This represented more than a third (37 per cent) of people who drank alcohol weekly and more than a half (61 per cent) of people who either attended work or were affected by alcohol use.
- **Injury:** A small proportion (nine per cent) had either injured themselves or others in the past 12 months due to alcohol use.

Shifts in women's alcohol use

Evidence is emerging of the unique impact the pandemic has had on women and their alcohol use. The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health conducted several surveys on the impact of the pandemic on women in Australia. Surveys conducted in June⁶⁰ and July 2020⁶¹ provide insight into the alcohol use patterns of women during COVID-19. One of the respondents indicated that the pandemic affected their ability to cope with stress and dependency on alcohol and other drugs:

"I have never experienced such a sustained period of stress, hyper-vigilance, fearfulness, and anxiousness in my life. I sought to self-medicate with marijuana (which I haven't done in 20 years) - and had to really fight to avoid alcohol on account of a history of alcoholism. TOUGH TIME. Having kids made it worse."

Findings from the July 2020 survey indicated that slightly more women increased their drinking (15 per cent) during the pandemic compared with women who drank less (10 per cent). Half (50 per cent) of the women indicated no change in alcohol use since the onset of the pandemic. When comparing women aged 69-74 and 25-31, older women were more likely to drink alcohol daily (11 per cent) compared with younger women (two per cent). In terms of "heavy episodic drinking" (consuming five standard drinks or more on a single occasion), under half (44 per cent) of women between 25 and 31 and a third (33 per cent) of women between 42 and 47 reported heavy episodic drinking. In terms of frequency of heavy drinking, a small proportion (seven per cent) of women between 25 and 31 had a higher frequency compared with an even smaller number (one per cent) of women between 69 and 74.

Impacts for parents

The pandemic has proven challenging for parents, guardians, and carers to adjust to home-schooling arrangements while working from home and fulfilling other domestic duties. CAPR conducted an interview study with parents and carers, investigating changes in alcohol use during the pandemic. Stress was a common factor that led to an increase in use. Some associated drinking with feelings of pleasure or a reward incentive in coping with the stress. However, some parents and carers felt guilty for drinking and, in some cases, felt it would have created an obstacle in caring for children. A woman in NSW indicated that such responsibilities would have been more difficult to handle if she had used alcohol:

"I know if I drink too much, everything else becomes harder, like getting up, getting dressed, getting organised, putting up with everyone, and making sure their needs are met just becomes harder."

The ANU consumption report suggested that stress was a common factor that increased use for both men (67.3 per cent) and women (63.7 per cent) from February to April 2020. More than a fifth of women (20.8 per cent) and more than a quarter of men (27.6 per cent) who did not work during that period increased their alcohol use. Women who had reduced work hours (30 per cent) reported a similar increase in alcohol use as women who reported no change in work hours (31.1 per cent). Additionally, women who had child-caring and other domestic responsibilities reported increased alcohol use from February to April 2020 (18.6 per cent to 20.9 per cent).

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation's research in May 2020 on drinking patterns of parents during the pandemic highlight that one in four (29 per cent) parents increased their alcohol use since the pandemic.⁶² One in ten parents of children between the ages of nine and 12 claimed that they have been drinking 'a lot more', some of whom (23 per cent) indicated that they have been drinking in front of their children. Confining in a shared space during the pandemic creates difficulty in establishing boundaries, especially during lockdowns.

The link between mental health and alcohol

Maintaining mental wellbeing has proven to be difficult for many throughout COVID-19. Unfortunately, some people turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress, even though alcohol can often worsen mental health problems.⁶³ Several studies during the pandemic have highlighted this link between adverse mental health and increased alcohol use:

- A Monash University 2020 survey study in NSW and Victoria found that one-fifth of the respondents drank more when the pandemic began and more than a fifth (22 per cent) felt that their mental health was “worse or much worse” since the start of the pandemic.⁶⁴ The increase in alcohol use resulted from managing stress and anxiety. Respondents with pre-existing depression and anxiety diagnoses accounted for the majority of those who reported increases.
- CAPR’s survey study on alcohol use in 2020 found that respondents who reported high stress levels were more likely to increase their alcohol use. A NSW-based survey found that between February and May 2020, there was an increase in respondents drinking due to negative feelings and a decrease in drinking for social reasons.⁶⁵
- VicHealth’s studies recorded reasons for individuals drinking more or less during the pandemic.⁶⁶ The first and second surveys indicated that boredom (43 per cent, 46 per cent), anxiousness and stress (42 per cent, 43 per cent) and having more spare time (38 per cent, 21 per cent) were the main reasons for drinking more. The main reasons for drinking less in first and second surveys was not being able to socialise with other people (37 per cent, 44 per cent), venues for drinking being closed (35 per cent, 33 per cent), and improving general health (30 per cent, 31 per cent).

Family and domestic violence

Lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions have increased the risk and likelihood of family and domestic violence. From 2019 to 2020, there was a 13 per cent increase in family and domestic violence in relation to sexual assault.⁶⁷ An Australian Institute of Criminology study found that more than half (53.1 per cent) of the 15,000 Australian women surveyed during the pandemic indicated that their partner’s violent behaviour worsened.⁶⁸ More than half (59 per cent) of women reported an increase in the frequency of violence, and half (50 per cent) reported an increase in severity.⁶⁹

Alcohol can worsen family violence situations, and has been a growing concern during the pandemic. Data on specialist homelessness services (SHS) from 2020 to 2021 indicated that some (10 per cent) individuals who used alcohol and/or drugs had experienced family and domestic violence.⁷⁰ During 2020, Women’s Safety NSW surveyed frontline workers and service providers who supported people experiencing domestic violence during the pandemic.⁷¹ The June 2020 report found that some providers indicated that the combination of alcohol and drugs had played a factor in the increase of clients. A third (29.3 per cent) of respondents reported that there was a lack of available services. The September 2020 report highlighted that nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of respondents indicated that abuse and violence were caused by alcohol and drugs. Nearly all (90 per cent) of providers agreed that there needs to be more regulation around alcohol in homes:

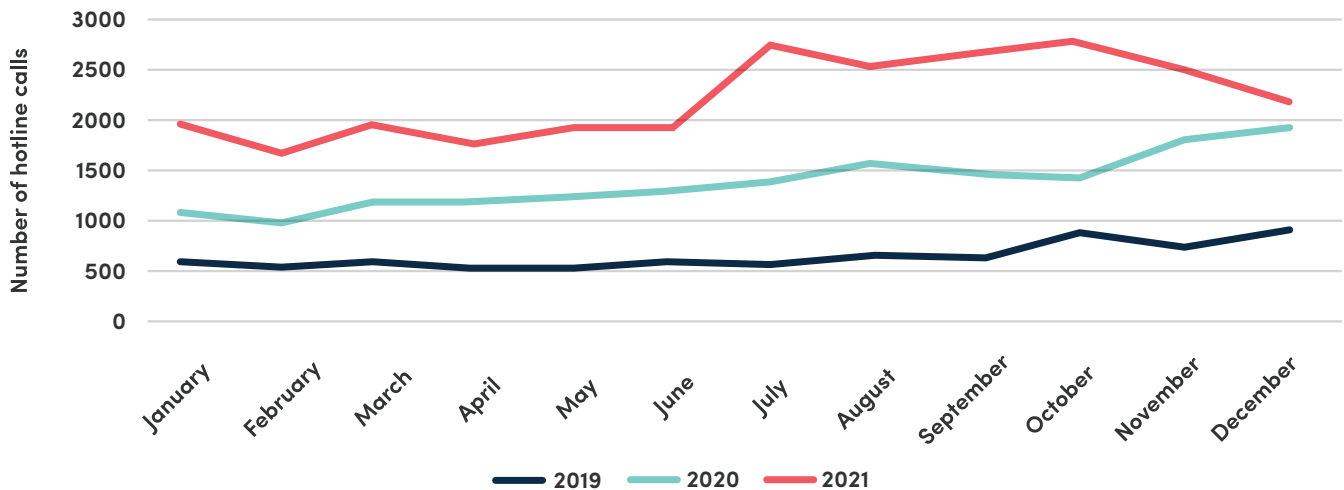
“Alcohol helps fuel many DV incidents. Police told me during the lockdown, there wasn’t much DV because the pub/clubs were shut. It’s pretty much common sense that home delivery of alcohol is going to add to the violence too.”

- Penelope*, Inner Metropolitan Domestic and Family Violence Specialist, WDVCS

Impact on treatment and support services

Treatment and support services for people dealing with alcohol and other drug problems have increased in demand during the pandemic. The AOD Hotline reported an increase in the number of hotline calls since the start of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020.⁷² Call data shows calls almost doubling in 2020 compared with 2019. For 2021, call numbers tripled totalling 26,487, compared with 2019 (7,804 calls) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Number of hotline calls per month, National AOD Hotline



Western Australia's Mental Health Commission Annual report (2020-2021) noted that support was provided to 12,955 Western Australians through the Alcohol and Drug Support Line, the Parent and Family Drug Support Line, and the Meth Helpline.⁷³ Alcohol was the most common drug used in almost half (45 per cent) of cases, reflecting a 12 per cent increase from the previous year.

VAADA's 'snapshot' waitlist survey was undertaken to investigate the number of individuals waiting for treatment during the pandemic.⁷⁴ Since the onset of the pandemic, almost three-quarters (70 per cent) of individuals reported needing more alcohol assistance. Data on alcohol assistance was retrieved for three different periods:

- 24 August to 28 September 2020: 47 agencies participated, and 2385 individuals had been waiting for treatment.
- 30 November 2020 to 11 January 2021: 38 agencies participated, and 2427 individuals had been waiting for treatment.
- 1 July to 30 July 2021: 47 agencies participated, and 3599 individuals had been waiting for treatment.

The ADAPT NSW-based survey study analysed trends of drug use during the first wave of COVID-19 restrictions from April to June 2020.⁷⁵ The majority (92 per cent) of respondents used alcohol since March 2020, some (four per cent) accessed drug treatment within four weeks and others (three per cent) were not able to access treatment. More than a third (37 per cent) sought mental health help in the same timeframe, and others (eight per cent) could not do so. A follow up survey conducted in June-September 2020 found there was a slight (seven per cent) decrease in participants reporting alcohol use. Some (five per cent) had accessed drug treatment and just under half (47 per cent) accessed mental health services.⁷⁶

Alcohol-fuelled hospitalisation, injury and deaths

There is emerging data on how alcohol harms are placing pressure on emergency services and our health system. A study conducted on Victorian alcohol intoxication-related ambulance attendances during COVID-19 shows an increase in the need for emergency services related to alcohol use.⁷⁷ Findings indicate that between January 2019 and September 2020, 43,003 alcohol-related ambulance attendances were reported in Victoria. At-home attendances slightly increased (nine per cent) in 2020.

According to the ABS, there was almost a tenth increase in alcohol-induced deaths (8.3 per cent) from 2019 to 2020.⁷⁸ This accounts for a total of 1056 men and 396 women. This increase can also be linked to long-term health harms. The combination of alcohol and drugs was the second most common factor contributing to suicides from 2017 to 2020.

Nearly all (90 per cent) deaths by suicide were found to have associations with mental health issues, alcohol and/or drug use and family issues. When looking at men under the age of 44 specifically, alcohol and drugs were common factors that resulted in suicide. COVID-19 was noted as a factor contributing to 3.2 per cent (99) of suicides in 2020. In looking at other factors that affected these individuals in combination with COVID-19, 60 per cent reported having mood disorders, 50 per cent had employment issues, and around 25 per cent had problems related to their social environment, including isolation.

The Coroners Court of Victoria observed overdose trends from 2011 to 2020 and found alcohol contributed to 30 per cent (154) of overdose deaths in 2020, increasing from 2019 (145).⁷⁹ Data suggests that COVID-19 did not lead to statistical differences in alcohol and other drug-related overdoses from 2019 to 2020. However, when looking at month-to-month data in 2020, there was a slight increase in such deaths when mandated lockdowns were introduced in March (58 deaths) and July 2020 (55 deaths) and a slight decrease when restrictions were partially eased in June (45 deaths), and November 2020 (36 deaths).



Areas for further investigation

This report has looked at how alcohol use and harm in Australia has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the end of the COVID-19 pandemic is not clearly in sight, meaning an ongoing experience of disruption and uncertainty for Australians. Monitoring how alcohol use and harm is changing in this climate is a priority.

Based on the evidence examined in this report, there are several areas recommended for further investigation so we can better understand shifts in alcohol use and harms and how harms can be reduced and ultimately prevented:

- **Support for women impacted by alcohol harms:** A Monash University study reported that 59 per cent of women indicated that the frequency of violence from partners increased during the pandemic. Qualitative insights from practitioners suggest that during the pandemic women have reached out to a range of mental health, AOD and family violence services. This needs to be continually monitored, and services need to be readily available for women once COVID-19 becomes less of a concern in society. Studies involving non-heterosexual couples in the post-COVID-19 environment would also provide a clearer indication of partner violence involving alcohol on a broader scale.
- **Online alcohol sale and delivery:** As evidenced by FARE's Annual Alcohol Poll, most Australians (77 per cent) were already drinking alcohol in the home before the pandemic. With alcohol delivery becoming more prevalent and a contributing factor to increasing drinking at home, it should be continually monitored to understand potential emerging harms.
- **Research with socio-economically disadvantaged groups:** Many studies on alcohol during the pandemic have predominantly relied on online surveys or through phone calls. Survey methods like this typically exclude people without access to the internet or a working phone, which often means more socio-economically and geographically disadvantaged people are excluded. It would be worth exploring research methods that could include these potentially excluded people to understand their challenges with alcohol use and harms during the pandemic and investigate the type of support they require moving forward.

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