

## **YOUNG PEOPLE AND ALCOHOL: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES**

NCETA launched the 'Young people and alcohol: the role of cultural influences' report at the DrinkWise 'Alcohol and the Australian culture' forum on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 2008. The report forms the first stage in a larger, two stage project examining cultural factors that influence the drinking behaviours of young Australians.

### **REPORT: PART 1**

The first part of the report focuses upon secondary analysis of available data sets.

- For each successive 10-year generation over the past 50 years, initiation into drinking has occurred at earlier and earlier ages.
- The age at which at least 50 per cent of survey respondents reported consuming a full serve of alcohol has reduced from 19 years to 15.5 years [over the past 40 years].
- By 18 years of age, approximately 50 per cent of males and females are risky drinkers. Despite this, most young people who drink at risky levels for short term harm at least monthly classify themselves as 'light' or 'social' drinkers, with only 3 per cent viewing themselves as 'heavy' or 'binge' drinkers.
- The proportion of 12-15 year olds consuming alcohol at risky levels for short term harms has approximately doubled from 1990 (approximately 2.5 per cent) to 2005 (approximately 5 per cent).
- The majority of young people aged 12-17 years do not report difficulty obtaining alcohol, with 73 per cent responding that it was easy or very easy to get alcohol if they wanted some.

### **REPORT: PART 2**

The second part of the report reviews the existing literature to formulate a cultural approach to understanding alcohol consumption by young people.

#### **Defining youth**

- The definition of 'youth' as a transition period from childhood to adulthood needs to be extended. Young people are staying at home longer, staying in education longer, and marrying later. This provides greater opportunity to engage in leisure activities that involve alcohol consumption.
- In this delayed and unpredictable transition into adulthood, new rites-of-passage that mark the ongoing process of youth have taken greater importance. The commercial market continually attempts to co-opt definitions of youth and has exploited the connection between drinking and youth for economic gain.

#### **Marketing and advertising**

- Evidence is growing that alcohol advertising and marketing significantly influence young people's decisions about drinking and their expectations related to alcohol use. Recent marketing, advertising and promotional trends

that are more difficult to measure, monitor and regulate, such as sponsorships, Internet advertising, point-of-sale promotions, product placement and branding, are likely to substantially increase young people's exposure to alcohol products and, thus influence their drinking behaviour adversely.

- The unparalleled growth in electronic media has provided a new, largely unregulated, means to promote alcohol products to a global audience. The websites established by alcohol companies are designed with a strong focus on youth-oriented images, including a wide range of cartoons, animation, music videos and interactive games that provide an attractive virtual playground for children and young people.

### **Drinking, young people and culture**

- The existing literature points to a need to look at drinking in terms of its symbolic meanings and consumption in a cultural context. To better understand *why* young people drink, we must get a better understanding of the cultural context that influences the amount young people drink, the types of drinks they consume, the patterns and prevalence of their drinking, and who they drink with.
- Drinking is part of consumer culture. Drinking is a resource for young people that they use to construct their identity. Drinking therefore has a symbolic function for young people – it communicates to others how they wish to be seen.
- Like other goods in consumer culture, an ever-increasing range of alcoholic beverages are produced for their novelty value and to make past products obsolete. Consumer choice is therefore based on a continual sense of dissatisfaction where older products are made stylistically and emotionally obsolete.
- Contrary to commonsense ideas around drinking and young people, not all drinking is part of a hedonistic culture where 'anything goes'. The literature shows that drinking by young people can entail a fair amount of planning and organisation. This is referred to as a 'controlled loss of control' (Fiona Measham).
- Australian culture supports a heavy drinking culture. In particular, heavy consumption of alcohol is evident at large-scale nationwide events such as public holidays.
- Lack of appropriate leisure options can result in drinking as relief from 'leisure boredom' - a phenomenon that crosses geographical boundaries.

### **RESEARCH STAGE (STAGE 2)**

The 'Young people and alcohol' report is being used to inform the next stage of the project. Early findings from this research stage indicate:

- It is apparent from our early investigations that the rise in popularity of new ready-to-drink (RTDs) and pre-mixed alcoholic beverages lends support to the idea of a 'new drinking culture' that directly affects young people.
- Drinking is a social activity. The cultural significance of drinking and its symbolic meaning is not just learnt from young people's peers, but also from family members and older siblings.