Alcohol Change Australia

Working together to prevent harm from alcohol in Australia: Opportunities for action

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Introduction

Everyone should be able to live, work, play, and raise children in communities that are safe and free from harm. However, this opportunity is not afforded to many Australians who experience harms caused by alcohol.

Every day, alcohol products are responsible for 15 deaths and over 390 hospitalisations in Australia.[1]

Alcohol takes a significant toll on our communities, fuelling violence, injuries, and deaths.

The more alcohol that is sold, the more the alcohol industry profits, and the more people in our communities experience harm. In recognition of the harm caused by alcohol, the Australian Government has committed to a 10% reduction in the harmful use of alcohol by 2028.[2]

We must act to put people ahead of alcohol industry profits. To keep people healthy and well, the Australian Government should take more responsibility for regulating alcohol products and introduce proven measures that reduce harms from alcohol products. While states and territories have an important role to play in reducing harm caused by alcohol companies, national leadership on alcohol policy is crucial. We know what works to reduce harm – now all that is needed is action.

About Alcohol Change Australia

Alcohol Change Australia is a group of health and community organisations working together to prevent and reduce alcohol harm among Australian individuals, families, and communities.

Aboriginal Drug & Alcohol Council (SA) Aboriginal Corporation

ADF Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Australasian College for Emergency Medicine

Cancer Council

fare Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education

Drug Awareness & Relief Foundation (Australia)

FASD Research Australia NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

nofasd australia National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Public Health Association Australia

SOBER IN THE COUNTRY Helping mates say no to booze

Opportunities for action

1 **Protect the community from alcohol marketing**	Every Australian should be able to grow up and live in an environment that supports their health and wellbeing. Yet our community is constantly bombarded with promotions for alcohol. Alcohol companies advertise relentlessly through a wide range of media, using sophisticated technology to target people with marketing for their products.	**Recommendations:** › Introduce a regulatory framework with legislative basis that effectively protects the community from exposure to alcohol marketing. › Prohibit the collection, use, and disclosure of data for commercial purposes (including the profiling, monitoring, tracking, and targeting).
2 **Address cheap alcohol that fuels harm**	To help keep our communities safe and well, people should be supported to buy products that promote their health, rather than harm it. Instead, people are encouraged to buy more alcohol by retailers who flood the community with very cheap alcohol.	**Recommendations:** › Remove the Wine Equalisation Tax and introduce a volumetric tax for wine and other fruit-based alcohol products. › Maintain Consumer Price Index increases on excisable alcohol products.
3 **Empower the community by raising awareness of the harms caused by alcohol**	Australians have a right to know if the products they are using can cause them harm. However, many people in the community are not aware of the range and magnitude of the harms caused by alcoholic products, particularly when it comes to alcohol and cancer.	**Recommendations:** › Substantially invest in evidence-based, targeted, and ongoing campaigns and preventative programs that increase awareness of alcohol harms and the NHMRC Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. › Introduce a health warning label on all alcohol products that is mandated, standardised, and presents rotating health messages.
4 **Support alcohol-free pregnancies**	Supporting people to have alcohol-free pregnancies is important for the health of both mum and baby. Alcohol consumed at any stage of pregnancy can damage a developing baby's brain, body, and organs.	**Recommendations:** › Provide adequate investment to implement the National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028. › Implement the recommendations from the Senate Inquiry into effective approaches to prevention, diagnosis, and support for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
5 **Create healthy public policy free of industry influence**	When developing health policies, the objective should always be to improve the health and wellbeing of the community. But in Australia, many commercial groups motivated to put profits before health are able to influence the development of alcohol policy.	**Recommendations:** › Reform political donation laws to exclude donations from the alcohol industry. › Exclude alcohol companies, retailers, and their lobbyists from being involved in the development of public policy in Australia and at the global level. › Increase transparency of interactions between the Australian Government and alcohol industry representatives.

Alcohol-fuelled harm in Australia

The alcohol industry and its products fuel significant harm in our communities. The more alcohol that is sold, the more the alcohol industry profits, and the more people in our communities experience harm.

Every day, **15 people die** from alcohol-related harm in Australia.[1]

Alcohol causes at least **seven types of cancer**,[6] and was estimated to cause **4% of all new cancers** in Australia in 2020.[7]

Alcohol-induced **deaths** are at their **highest rate in 10 years.**[3]

In 2018, alcohol contributed to **4.5%** of the total **burden of disease** and **15%** of the overall burden of **injury**.[4]

The **highest number** of alcohol and other drug-related **ambulance attendances** are related to alcohol **intoxication**.[9]

Each year, alcohol products are responsible for almost **6,000 deaths** and more than **144,000 hospitalisations**.[1]

Alcohol use is estimated to cost Australia $66.8 billion a year.[11] This includes costs such as healthcare, crime, road traffic crashes, and child protection, as well as the cost of alcohol to others such the impacts on victims of alcohol-caused crime.

One in eight (13%) presentations to Australian **emergency departments** on one Saturday night in 2019 were **alcohol-related**.[8]

Alcohol use is causally linked to over **200** disease and injury conditions.[5]

Prenatal exposure to alcohol increases the risk of **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder** (FASD), the leading cause of preventable developmental disabilities in Australia.[10]

Alcohol products significantly contribute to family violence in Australia

- Alcohol products are involved in up to 65% of family violence incidents reported to police each year.[12]
- More than half of all homicide perpetrators who killed an intimate partner were under the influence of alcohol products.[13]
- Alcohol products are involved in up to 47% of child abuse cases each year.[12]
- Over 10,000 children are in the child protection system at least partly due to a carer's alcohol use. In addition, over 142,000 children who are not within the child protection system are substantially affected by someone's alcohol use.[14]

Some groups experience higher levels of alcohol-fuelled harm

- Thirteen per cent of deaths in 14–17 year old children are caused by alcohol.[15]
- The industry relies on people who drink at high-risk levels for the vast majority of its profit; over half (54%) of all alcohol sold in Australia is drunk by just 10% of drinkers.[16]
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are less likely to use alcohol. Despite this, they bear the burden of higher levels of alcohol-fuelled harm.[17] Alcohol-related mortality rates are 4.2 times higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than among non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[18]
- Australians living in remote and rural areas are 1.6 times as likely as those in major cities to use alcohol at high-risk levels.[19]
- While people from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to use alcohol than those from higher socio-economic groups, they are disproportionately harmed by alcohol.[20]

The alcohol industry fuelled harm during the COVID-19 pandemic

- In 2020, the alcohol industry heavily promoted alcohol products as a way of coping with the challenges of lockdowns and isolation.[21]
- Levels of alcohol-fuelled harm increased during the pandemic, including alcohol-induced deaths.[22] There was also increased demand for support services for alcohol problems and dependence – in 2021, there were over 25,000 calls to the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline, triple the number seen in 2019.[22]

1. Protect the community from alcohol marketing

Every Australian should be able to grow up and live in an environment that supports their health and wellbeing. Yet people in our community, including children and those most vulnerable, are constantly bombarded with promotions for alcohol. Alcohol companies advertise relentlessly through a wide range of media, using sophisticated technology to target people with marketing for their products.

Alcohol marketing remains highly visible in traditional forms of media, and children regularly see alcohol marketing on television and outdoors.[23] However, the expansion of digital platforms has given the alcohol industry the opportunity to market products in new ways that are highly targeted, time-relevant, and interactive. Online tracking, profiling, and data collection is enabling harmful marketing of alcohol. Algorithms developed by digital platforms allow the alcohol industry to specifically target high-risk drinkers, as well as new consumers in a range of markets and demographics.[24] Digital platforms collect the data of children and young people for marketing purposes, with technology companies collecting over 72 million data points on a child by the time they are 13 years old.[25] Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, has been found to have flagged children as being 'interested' in alcohol and approved alcohol ads targeted to children.[26] Alcohol companies are bombarding the Australian community with 40,000 alcohol ads a year on Facebook and Instagram alone.[27]

This relentless marketing benefits the alcohol industry, but comes at a cost to the community. The more children and young people are exposed to alcohol advertising, the more likely they are to start using alcohol products at a younger age, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol.[28] The constant flow of pro-alcohol messages can be confronting for people with lived experience of alcohol harm and people with alcohol dependence or managing an Alcohol Use Disorder.

Regulatory approaches have not kept pace with the increased sophistication and diversity of modern alcohol marketing. Australia continues to rely on voluntary, industry-managed codes and practices for managing alcohol marketing. Research has consistently shown the self-regulatory system is inadequate, ineffective, and lacks transparency and accountability.[29] Existing codes do not adequately restrict alcohol companies from marketing on digital platforms that are used by children, and there are few rules limiting how companies can use data for marketing purposes, including the collection and use of children's data. The system does little to reduce community exposure to alcohol marketing and is failing to protect people's health.

The Australian community wants governments to do more to protect young people from alcohol advertising. The overwhelming majority of Australians believe that alcohol advertising should not be shown to children online (85%). Around two-thirds don't support alcohol advertising being shown during children's television viewing hours (71%) or placed on public transport (69%).[30]

Opportunities for action

The Australian Government can introduce higher standards for how the alcohol industry markets and sells its products. We need regulatory systems that ensure safe and healthy environments for everyone, especially for children and other Australians most at risk from harm.

Recommendations:

- Introduce a regulatory framework with legislative basis that effectively protects the community from exposure to alcohol marketing.
- Prohibit the collection, use and disclosure of data for commercial purposes (including the profiling, monitoring, tracking, and targeting).

2. Address cheap alcohol that fuels harm

To help keep our communities safe and well, people should be supported to buy affordable, nutritious products that promote their health, rather than harm it. Instead, people are encouraged to buy alcohol by retailers who flood the community with very cheap products. In particular, wine and wine-based products are often available at bottle shops for as little as 30 cents per standard drink.[31] The cheaper alcohol products are, the more people drink, and the more they experience harm. This affects not just the person using alcohol but their partners, children, and communities.[32]

The alcohol industry relies on high-risk drinkers for much of its profit; over half (54%) of all alcohol sold in Australia is drunk by just 10% of drinkers.[16] Alcohol companies and retailers sell more cheap alcohol to people drinking at high-risk levels than people drinking at lower levels.[33]

The current alcohol tax system in Australia enables the alcohol industry to profit from a business model that causes significant harm. Beer and spirits are taxed based on their alcohol content (the higher the alcohol content, the higher the tax); however, wine and other alcohol products made from fruit (e.g. ciders) are taxed based on their price (the Wine Equalisation Tax). This means that cheaper wines are taxed at a lower rate than premium wines, even though the alcohol content may be the same. High-volume, high-alcohol wine (such as cask wine) is being sold at very low prices.

Pricing measures are among the most effective in reducing alcohol-fuelled harm.[32] Research has consistently shown that increases in the price of alcohol lead to reductions in alcohol use.[34, 35] Taxation and other price reform measures would reduce alcohol-fuelled harms among the groups most at risk of short and long-term health harm.

There is public support for action on cheap alcohol. Nearly six in 10 Australians (59%) believe that governments should ensure alcohol products are not sold below the price of bottled water or soft drinks.[36] In addition, at least 13 government and parliamentary reviews, including Federal Treasury's 2010 Australia's Future Tax System Review, have concluded that wine should be taxed on a volumetric basis.[37]

Opportunities for action

Changes can be made to the current tax system to address the very cheap products that fuel alcohol harm. Action on price would put an end to the current situation where the wine that causes the most harm is taxed the least.

Recommendations:

- Remove the Wine Equalisation Tax and introduce a volumetric tax for wine and other fruit-based alcohol products.
- Maintain Consumer Price Index increases on excisable alcohol products.

3. Empower the community by raising awareness of the harms caused by alcohol

Australians have a right to know if the products they are using can cause them harm. Yet many people in the community are not aware of the range and magnitude of the harms caused by alcoholic products, particularly when it comes to alcohol and cancer.[30,38,39] The alcohol industry spends millions of dollars every year telling people to drink, ignoring the fact that their products fuel violence, injuries, illness, and deaths.

Decades of tobacco control action in Australia has shown how combining effective public health-focused policies with strong public education campaigns can help change social norms. It was not too long ago that tobacco was seen as a normal part of Australian culture, and that smoking in restaurants, offices, and hospitals was accepted. Public education, combined with policy reforms, has helped change the community's perceptions of tobacco and reduce the harm caused.

Unfortunately, compared to smoking, Australian governments have invested far less in public education campaigns to help increase awareness of alcohol harms. Campaigns that highlight the harms caused by alcohol have been effective in changing knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about alcohol. For example, the Western Australian Mental Health Commission has run ongoing mass media campaigns to inform the public of alcohol harms and to promote the NHMRC alcohol guidelines to reduce risks from drinking.[40] These campaigns have increased understanding of the link between alcohol products and cancer, and have ranked among the most effective advertisements in the world for motivating drinkers to reduce their alcohol use.[41,42] However, with much smaller budgets than that of alcohol companies, it is difficult for campaigns alone to compete with the unrestricted volume of pro-alcohol messages.[43]

In addition to public education campaigns, there is also an opportunity to promote health messaging at arguably the most crucial time - when people are buying and using alcohol products. The implementation of mandatory, standardised health warning labels on alcoholic products that present rotating health messages would help raise awareness of the range of short- and long-term harms caused by alcohol at point of sale and point of use.

Health warning labels on alcoholic products have been found to be effective in increasing awareness of alcohol harms, slowing down people's drinking, decreasing drinking occasions, and decreasing purchase occasions.[44] Australian and New Zealand Governments have mandated the introduction of evidence-based pregnancy health warnings on alcohol products, an important measure to help raise awareness of the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy. Further health messages are needed to communicate the wide range of other harms caused by alcohol.

Two-thirds of Australians believe there should be public education campaigns about alcohol-related harms, and over half support health warning labels on alcohol products.[45] Community awareness of the harms caused by alcohol products is currently too low. Australians need to see more health messages that show the true impact of the harms and see fewer messages telling them to drink more.

Opportunities for action

Empowering Australians with the knowledge that alcohol causes harm is an important part of a comprehensive approach to reducing harm from alcohol. The time has come for the Australian Government to commit to raising awareness of the harms from alcohol, help de-normalise alcohol use, and encourage behaviour change.

Recommendations:

- Substantially invest in the development and implementation of evidence-based, targeted, and ongoing campaigns and preventative programs that increase awareness of alcohol harms and the NHMRC Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol.
- Introduce health warning labels on all alcohol products that are mandated, standardised, and presents rotating health messages.

4. Support alcohol-free pregnancies

Supporting people to have alcohol-free pregnancies is important for the health of both mum and baby. Unfortunately, many Australians are still unaware of the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy. Nearly one in four Australians are not aware alcohol should be avoided altogether during pregnancy for the health of mum and baby, while almost one in three are unaware drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).[46]

Alcohol consumed at any stage of pregnancy can damage a developing baby's brain, body, and organs. Prenatal exposure to alcohol increases the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, low birth weight, and FASD, the leading preventable developmental disability in Australia.[47] Children and adults who have FASD can experience challenges such as physical and emotional development delay, impaired speech and language development, difficulty controlling behaviour, and learning difficulties such as issues with memory and attention.[48]

Australia has one of the highest rates of alcohol use during pregnancy in the world.[49] In 2019, over a third of Australian women drank alcohol while pregnant and one in seven women continued to drink alcohol after becoming aware of their pregnancy.[19]

Conservative estimates are that FASD affects between one and two per cent of the Australian population.[50] However, taking in to account the higher rate of alcohol use during pregnancy in Australia compared to other countries, some studies estimate it could be as high is five per cent of the Australian population.[49] In addition, much higher rates of FASD are seen in some population groups. For example, a 2018 study indicates that over a third of children in youth detention in Western Australia have FASD.[51]

The Australian Government has a blueprint outlining what action is needed to reduce harms from alcohol use during pregnancy. The National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028 provides a framework for governments, communities, and service providers to reduce the incidence of FASD and its impact.[52] The Government has made some investment in the plan, including funding for a national awareness campaign on alcohol and pregnancy and the expansion of diagnostic services in some states. In addition, the 2021 final report from the Senate Inquiry into effective approaches to prevention, diagnosis, and support for FASD has 32 recommendations aimed at improving the prevention, diagnosis, and management of FASD.[53]

Opportunities for action

Continued implementation of both the National FASD Strategic Action Plan and the Inquiry recommendations, alongside the introduction of mandated, evidence-based pregnancy health warning labels, are important measures that will raise awareness of the adverse consequences of alcohol use in pregnancy and help to prevent FASD.

Recommendations:

- Provide adequate investment to implement the National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028.
- Implement the recommendations from the Senate Inquiry into effective approaches to prevention, diagnosis, and support for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

5. Create healthy public policy free of industry influence

Governments have a responsibility to prevent and reduce harms experienced by individuals, families, and communities. When developing health policies, the objective should always be to improve the health and wellbeing of the community. In Australia, many commercial groups are invested in the development of alcohol policy, including alcohol companies, sporting codes, the advertising sector, broadcasters, and digital platforms. As businesses, these groups are motivated to put profits before health.

Across production, retail, and wholesaling, alcohol industry revenue in Australia exceeds $42 billion annually, and profit exceeds $3 billion annually.[54] Reducing alcohol-fuelled harm comes at a financial cost to the alcohol and related industries.

Alcohol companies and their lobbyists use the same tactics as the tobacco industry to ward off government regulation and undermine effective alcohol policies,[55] such as:

- casting doubt on legitimate science,
- attacking and intimidating scientists,
- creating front organisations to conduct research,
- manufacturing false debate,
- framing issues in ways that misrepresent the problem,
- funding disinformation campaigns, and
- lobbying to influence the political agenda.[56]

In the 2021–22 financial year, alcohol companies and retailers paid at least $1.49 million in political donations to the major Australian political parties.[57] Key employees often move between government and the alcohol industry, creating an imbalance between the influence of industry and that of public health interests.[58]

The immediate past Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr Margaret Chan, stated: "when industry is involved in policy-making, rest assured that the most effective control measures will be downplayed or left out entirely."[59] If improving health and wellbeing of the community is the objective, then the development of health policies must be protected from distortion by commercial or vested interests. There are a range of measures the Australian Government can introduce to do this, from reforming political donation laws to increasing transparency of interactions between the Government and alcohol industry. This could include placing restrictions on members of parliament and their advisory staff who have had responsibilities related to health policy from taking paid roles in the alcohol industry. In addition, Australia has an opportunity to protect health policies from industry influence at the global level. As a member state of the WHO, the Australian Government can advocate for the WHO to cease engagement with the alcohol industry.

Opportunities for action

Reducing alcohol-fuelled harms should always be the main objective of alcohol policy. Governments can introduce measures that support the development of healthy public policy. The implementation of robust systems for policy development that are guided by the evidence and prioritise the involvement of health experts and people with lived experience would help put people before profits.

Recommendations:

- Reform political donation laws to exclude donations from the alcohol industry.
- Exclude alcohol companies, retailers, and their lobbyists from being involved in the development of public policy in Australia and at the global level.
- Increase transparency of interactions between the Australian Government and alcohol industry representatives.

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