

Underage drinking trends

By Gordon Broderick

The underage 'drinking epidemic' continues to worsen. Young Australians are drinking more and are drinking more frequently - or so you would believe if you accepted the line in the popular press. These common perceptions are generated in part by shonky research - usually a one-off yet-to-be-released study: "young Australians binge at three times the rate of their counterparts overseas"; "females as young as 13 consume up to 30 standard drinks at a sitting"; "RTDs have caused an explosion in underage drinking". Such survey results are usually followed up by a quick media grab showing the worst bacchanalian excesses of 'schoolies week'. We baby-boomers are left shaking our heads about the decline in the younger generation.

But before we condemn our youth, let's look at the evidence. First we need to examine to best available data. Of the surveys that measure underage drinking, one of the best is the *Australian Secondary School Students' Survey*. This survey has been carried out every 3 years since 1984 and its sample size is large, ranging in different years from around 19,000 to 30,000 students. In the most recent survey 21,805 students were interviewed.

Even the best studies, however, may contain several sources of bias. For example, by definition the secondary school survey excludes those who do not attend school. Further, there may be a selection bias given that those who attend school more regularly are more likely to be interviewed. In addition, the presence of teachers in the rooms when the questionnaires are being completed may influence results. In 1999 this figure was 29 per cent, but in the 2005 survey this occurred in 45 per cent of cases. Finally, in recent years the number of schools and number of students within those schools participating in the survey has been declining.

Notwithstanding these issues, the capacity of the *Secondary Students' Surveys* to trace patterns of alcohol use over an extended period of time using similar measures and sampling methodologies is particularly valuable.

The results of the *2005 Australian Secondary School Students' Survey* certainly explode many myths alluded to in my introduction. Overall the levels of drinking amongst adolescents has remained remarkably stable since 1984. The study summarises the key finding since 1999 as:

- "The proportion of students aged between 12 and 15 drinking in their lifetime and in the month before the survey decreased significantly between 1999 and 2005.
- In 2005, 82% of 12- to 15-year-olds had ever tried alcohol, which was significantly lower than that reported in 2002 (86%) and 1999 (87%).

- Significantly fewer 12- to 15-year-olds had drunk in the past month in 2005 (34%) compared to 2002 (43%) and 1999 (43%). The proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds that had ever tried alcohol had not changed significantly between 1999 and 2005.
- Among older students, 95% had tried alcohol in 2005 compared to 94% in both 2002 and 1999. A similar proportion of older students had drunk in the past month in 2005 (68%) compared to 2002 (68%) and 1999 (70%).
- The proportion of students aged between 12 and 15 drinking in the week before the survey decreased significantly between 1999 and 2005.
- In 2005, 22% of 12- to 15-year-olds were current drinkers, which was significantly lower than that reported in 2002 (29%) and 1999 (28%). The proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds drinking in the week before the survey had not changed significantly between 1999 and 2005. Among older students, 47% were current drinkers in 2005 compared to 48% in 2002 and 51% in 1999.”¹

In summary, the results suggest either stability in adolescent drinking patterns or, more frequently, decline. Given the rise in popularity of RTDs over this period, particularly among adolescent females, it suggests that while drinking of all types (including harmful drinking) has remained the same or experienced a slight decline, beverage preference has changed substantially. A central conclusion, then, is the increased popularity of RTDs has very clearly not been a cause of increased harmful drinking among adolescents.

¹ White, Victoria and Jane Hayman. 2006. *Australian Secondary School Students' Use of Alcohol in 2005*. Melbourne: Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer.