

Heavy drinkers likely to elude targeted alcohol policies

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Policies that aim to reduce binge drinking by targeting particular kinds of alcohol or drinking locations are likely to be less effective than policies with more widespread targets, new research from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales suggests.

Research associate Dr Matthew Sunderland from NDARC's Drug Policy and Modelling Program surveyed two thousand 18-30 year olds – all of whom had used alcohol and/or illicit drugs in the previous 12 months – about their drinking behaviour during their most recent Saturday night. He found this sample of drinkers could be classed into seven groups based on their drinking behaviour, from those who did not drink at all through to those engaging in heavy single occasion drinking. The research will be presented today at the 2012 Scientific Conference of the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs.

On average the heaviest drinkers consumed 21 standard drinks between 6pm – 6am, drank cheap alcohol, many kinds of alcohol, and at multiple locations. Dr Sunderland said these findings suggest heavy drinkers are able to circumvent policies that target a particular kind of alcohol (e.g. the 'alcohol tax') or drinking location (e.g. bars).

"These drinkers consumed a bit of everything on the Saturday night – beer, wine, spirits, and ready-to-drink alcohol. If the price of one type of alcohol goes up, it appears they could shift to drinking another type. To stop risky drinking, a policy that adjusts prices across all types of alcohol may be more effective than a policy that targets just beer, for example. It would minimise the capacity to substitute cheap drinks for pricey ones," Dr Sunderland said.

The study found of those that consumed alcohol on the Saturday night, approximately 42% preferred to drink in a private location or restaurant. This suggests bar or club specific policies will have no impact on almost half of those who consume alcohol above risky single occasion drinking levels (that is, more than four standard drinks).

As well, many of those identified as heavy or 'binge' drinkers in the study screened positive for a history of problematic alcohol consumption or for harmful drinking behaviour, possible indicators of alcohol dependence. Policies that target types of alcohol or locations are unlikely to address underlying conditions such as alcohol dependence, and need to be coupled with strategies that reduce the risk of developing dependence.

A paper on the 'Typologies of alcohol consumption on a Saturday night among young adults' is in preparation.



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