



Alcohol and Other Drugs: Young People's Perspectives

YOUNG AND WISE ROUNDTABLE REPORT
April 2025

“

Any help or programs for youth should be using people or wording young people can relate/connect to. Such as using young people in advertisements, made in a non-cringy way that is meaningful

”

About ARACY

ARACY champions the wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. Together, we drive systemic change, collaborate with communities, and amplify young voices to create a healthier future. Our work focuses on prevention, early intervention, and equity. Our purpose is for every child and young person to thrive.

We genuinely listen to and amplify the voices of young people, highlighting their issues and the solutions they envision. Our Young and Wise Roundtables is a continuation of ARACY's Young and Wise Report by Dr Kristy Noble. The report brings together insights from over 117 consultations with children and young people across Australia over the past five years.

Purpose

The purpose of this Young and Wise roundtable is to gain an understanding of the perspectives of young people about alcohol and other drugs, to support the Department of Health and Aged care in developing policies and communications that will be more meaningful and reflective of their audience.

Key discussion themes, identified in consultation between ARACY and The Department of Health and Aged Care, were:

- **Access and Choices** – How do young people navigate decisions around alcohol and drugs?
- **Shifting Trends in Drinking and Drugs** – What's changing, and how are young people leading the way?
- **The Influence of advertising** – How can we make sure alcohol marketing doesn't shape our choices?
- **Getting the Right Support** – What works best when young people need help?
- **Empowering Young People** – How can education and peer support create safer choices?

Scope

ARACY has undertaken all efforts to ensure young roundtable participants represent a diverse cross section of young people nationally. Key demographic details are outlined below. However, given the small cross section, this summary should not be taken to be a comprehensive assessment of the above issues. Rather, this is an exploratory or scoping exercise that can identify common or likely issues and supports that can be examined in greater depth. As always, any action in relation to young people should be done in partnership with them.

ARACY's Young and Wise Roundtables are supported by the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing under the Health Peak and Advisory Bodies Program.

Key Details

Roundtable date: 1 April 2025

Roundtable time: 5:30pm – 7:00pm AEDT

Online/in person: Online (Microsoft Teams)

Recording available: Yes

ARACY staff present: Adam Valvasori, Liz Depers, Josie Horne

Participant Demographics

Total number of participants:

Five participants; two identified as female and three identified as male

States:

Participants were aged between 17 and 19 years of age and were from New South Wales, Western Australia, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland.

Lived Experience/ Identity Characteristics:

Participants also had the option to self-identify from a number of diversity criteria. Participants in their application self-identified as one or more of the following:

- **I am culturally and linguistically diverse - 3**
- **I currently live or grew up in a rural, regional, or remote area - 1**
- **I identify as LGBTQIA+ - 2**
- **I live with a disability - 2**
- **I live with a mental health condition - 2**
- **I am neurodiverse - 2**
- **I am currently experiencing or grew up in poverty - 1**
- **I entered Australia as a refugee - 1**

Process

Participants were recruited and consented via circulation of an Expression of Interest online form to our young subscriber network of 800+ young Australians. Key demographic details were collected on registering their interest through a non-compulsory survey. Registration was open for two weeks. Of the approximately 56 applicants, 22 were invited to participate, selected based on their age, diversity of lived experience as well as location to ensure a broad community cross section.

Availability to participate was collected via a poll with the most popular timeslot allocated for the roundtable. Options included outside of school/business hours to ensure availability of young people.

During the roundtable, participants were given a short (10 minute) overview of ARACY, the roundtable context and purpose, key details of the upcoming social media age restrictions, and reminded about the remuneration process. An icebreaker activity was used for participants to briefly introduce themselves. The participants were then presented with slides and interactive Menti Polls as well as being able to give feedback via the chat and verbally.

Executive Summary

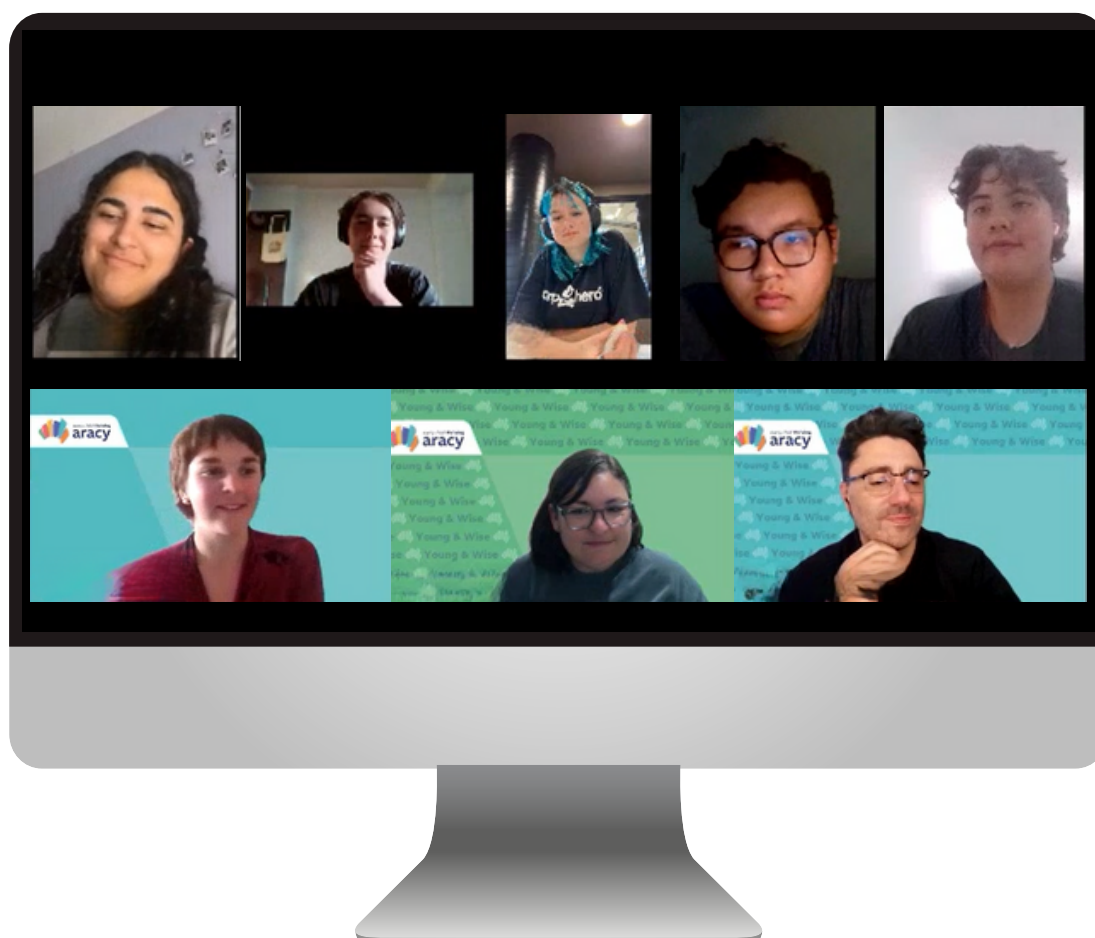
Young people are navigating a complex and shifting alcohol and drug landscape. While national data shows alcohol consumption is decreasing, young participants challenged this narrative—highlighting cost-of-living, mental health challenges, peer pressure, and social norms as key **drivers behind alcohol and other drug (AoD) use. They also shared sharp insights into what does and doesn't work when it comes to prevention, education, and support.**

Young people are calling for:

- **Better mental health support** to reduce harmful self-medication
- **Youth-friendly prevention and education messaging**—short, real, and peer-connected
- **Parent education campaigns** to challenge alcohol culture at home
- **Confidential and accessible services** that feel safe to reach out to

These insights reaffirm the importance of listening to young people as experts in their own experiences. Their perspectives challenge assumptions, highlight blind spots in existing supports, and offer practical, grounded ideas for change. If we want to meaningfully reduce harm and promote wellbeing, young people must be co-creators of the solutions—not just the subjects of policy.

We would like to thank the young people who generously shared their time, insights, and lived experience to help us better understand, contextualise, and strengthen the findings of this report.



Highlights

Not Just for Parties: Alcohol as a Coping Mechanism

- Many young people drink to cope with mental ill-health, especially where support is costly, inaccessible, or non-confidential
- Alcohol is often used to self-medicate anxiety, stress, and trauma
- Some fear formal help due to mandatory parental notification

"It's like you buy it and it just solves the problem for a little while."

"The first response from a lot of people is making self-deprecating jokes about the dangers."

Risk? What Risk?

- Alcohol use is normalised and minimised, especially by parents and on social media
- Many young people start drinking at younger ages, influenced by peer stories, humour-led minimisation of the dangers, or parental permission
- Self-deprecating humour was described as a way young people downplay the risks of drinking

Where Are They Getting It?

- Parents, older siblings, and friends are the most common sources
- Online purchases are rare—seen as too risky at home
- Some young people share Instagram accounts to access alcohol and other substances discreetly

"If your parents do approve, then you just get your parents to buy it."

Highlights

"I think the most impactful ad I've seen wasn't even about alcohol — it was about vaping. It showed someone tearing their room apart to find their vape and made me stop and think."

Advertising: Missing the Mark on Young People

- Young people report that alcohol ads are highly visible—on YouTube, TikTok and billboards—but fail to connect with them in meaningful ways.
- Government messaging about alcohol is often perceived as generic, overly focused on statistics, and ultimately ineffective.
- In contrast, anti-vaping campaigns that use relatable stories and emotional narratives have had a stronger, more memorable impact.

Zero-Alcohol Products:

A Quiet Shift

- Seen as helpful for fitting in socially without pressure to drink
- Viewed positively by some as a tool for sobriety or moderation
- Cost remains a barrier—but less so than for full-strength alcohol

"It means that I can be with my friends and I'm sort of not missing out... it helps me feel included."

"They think that because their frequency is low or their amount is low, it doesn't really affect their health or lead to an addiction."

Other Drug Use:

Curiosity, Coping, and Culture

- Young people link drug use to mental health, belonging, and curiosity
- Vapes, marijuana, and cigarettes are considered drugs, and perceptions are shifting
- Marijuana is seen as safer than cigarettes or vaping in many circles
- Tighter laws have made some more cautious—but not all

Highlights

Barriers to Support

- Two-thirds of participants would not seek professional help
- Preferred support: friends, teachers, online info
- Confidentiality and access issues remain major deterrents
- Only two had heard of national support services like Path2Help or the AOD Hotline

"Sometimes you've gotta go on a massive waitlist... it's just like a quick solution instead."

"With the Paul Dillon presentation, he told us this horrific story about a young girl who had died. I just keep on thinking about that."

What Works: Education, Storytelling, and Relatability

- Participants want real stories, peer voices, and non-judgmental guidance
- Effective programs don't just say "don't do it"—they teach how to be safe
- Programs like Paul Dillon's (DARTA) were cited as memorable and respectful of youth autonomy
- Cultural change needs to come from media, influencers, and youth role models

Youth-Backed Priorities for Action

When asked to assume the role of the Federal Health Minister and spend \$100 billion on a list of options to reduce AoD use among young people, they chose to invest in:

- Treatment programs (early intervention, rehab) - 16%
 - School-based education - 15%
 - Parent education on role-modelling - 9%
 - Traditional mass media campaigns - 6%
- Emphasis was on youth-led, relatable, and community-embedded solutions

"My initiative would focus on education, mental health support, and peer-led programs to help young people build resilience."

I also have some, a group of friends that take alcohol and drugs just because they want to numb the pain.

So it's like a mental, I guess, mental or health conditions, type situation... we as humans I guess don't necessarily know how to cope with some of the pain.

Alcohol use

Participants were asked 'Research is starting to show that fewer young people are now drinking alcohol. Is this accurate for your community? If so, why do you think this is?' Despite research showing fewer young people are drinking alcohol, participants largely did not agree with this statement. Participants ranked "not accurate" as the second most prominent reason for why there is less drinking in the community.

"I just personally haven't noticed less people drinking"

Those that agreed that fewer young people are drinking alcohol indicated that cost is a contributing factor for young people drinking less.

"everything's just so expensive and it's not really necessary... when you're deciding between food and alcohol, I think most people would choose food."



Further discussions into the use of alcohol in young people were had to illicit a greater understanding of why young people may choose to drink alcohol, participants noted a range of factors that contribute to the use of alcohol, including:

Treatment for mental ill-health

Participants emphasised the role of alcohol as a tool young people use to manage mental ill-health and wellbeing challenges. One participant noted that in the absence of accessible mental health services, treatment and/or education, young people use alcohol and other drugs to treat symptoms without apparent awareness of the further risks to ill health.

"I also have some group of friends that take alcohol and drugs just because they want to numb the pain"

"A lot of young people turn to alcohol to cope with stress or anxiety, but they don't always understand how it makes things worse."

"And it's like, I do understand that ... some people do take it in connection to mental health and as a response to that."

Barriers of time and cost involved in accessing mental health supports were also suggested to why young people may choose to use AoD to manage their mental health and wellbeing

"Sometimes to get like a psychologist, someone you've gotta go on a massive waitlist... it can be quite expensive... It's just like a quick solution"

One participant raised confidentiality concerns with regards to accessing mental health support, which they suggested could lead young people to self-medicating with AoD:

"It's the fact that it's very like no-questions-asked type situation wherein those mental health consultations or like health consultations with the guidance counsellor, all those things it has like strings attached to that ... if things get worse, ... they need to contact our parents... sometimes some of us aren't comfortable with it."

Normalisation and minimisation of risks

Participants noted that the perceptions of the risks of alcohol appear to have been minimised, contributing to people engaging with alcohol at younger ages.

"I've like noticed in general that it has become extremely normalised to a certain point where it's like the people who are starting alcohol and drugs.... I feel like the ages are just getting younger and younger and younger."

"I feel like the first response that a lot of from a lot of people that I've heard is kind of making self-deprecating jokes in regard to those dangers."

Parents are one cohort that normalise alcohol consumption, according to participants. They explained that they perceive parents do this by socialising with alcohol and allowing young people to drink with them. Parents justified this by stating that drinking is a part of Australian culture.

"If their parents are drinking, they'll allow the kids to drink with them... I think it's like promoting... Like when you see someone else doing something and you just have access to that same exact thing."

"Parents influencing/perpetrating drinking culture: I've had some friends who have... just cause your parents do doesn't mean you have to, but I think they feel like it's like an Australian culture thing to do."

How are young people, including underage teens, getting access to alcohol or illicit substances?

15 responses



Another way participants identified parental influence in the use of alcohol is by providing young people with alcohol. When surveyed about which groups of people provide young people with alcohol access, parents were the joint-second most popular response (n:2).

“

More stories, less statistics. Bring someone in who has been impacted by alcohol use who is willing to share how it changed their life.

”

Participants highlighted that the way alcohol and drinking are shown on social media also reinforces the idea that substance use is normal and linked to socialising. They noted that when peers share posts about drinking—like Instagram stories—it creates an association between alcohol, fun, and fitting in. Some participants also reflected that this kind of representation can contribute to feelings of peer pressure and the expectation to drink in order to appear “cool” or socially accepted.

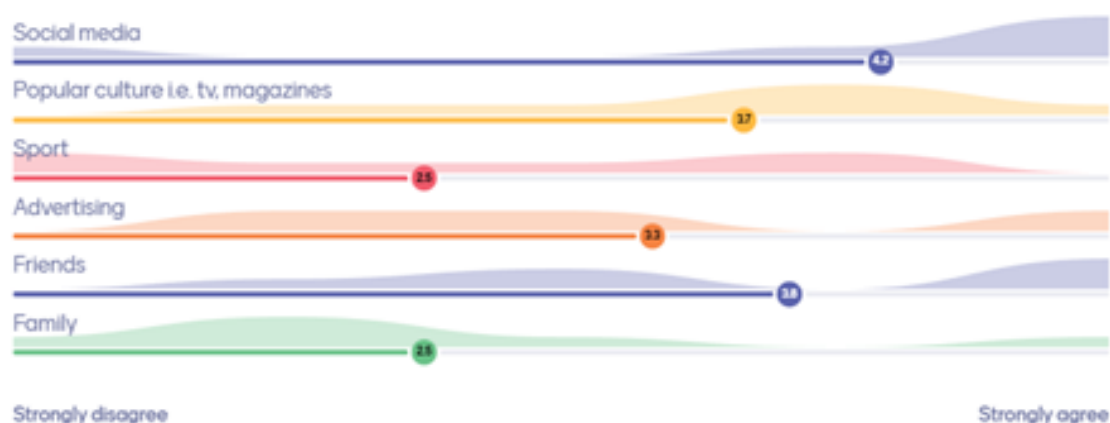
“I see a lot of people like on Instagram stories and posts posting themselves and their friends with like alcohol. They're like at a party and it's like alcohol around and I think that, like, sort of reinforces the idea that if you're having a party or if you're hanging out with friends ... just something you have to do to have fun and have a good time.”

“...think it will make them cool / want to connect with friends that do take drugs”

“Popularity, peer pressure and an escape”

“Social pressure, wanting to fit in. Relax after work and school”

To what extent do you think the following reinforces alcohol as a regular part of society?



When asked what influences the normalisation of alcohol use, most participants identified social media, friends, and popular culture— in that order— as the strongest factors.

One participant pointed out that while social media can amplify messages that normalise drinking, it is also a vital tool for young people to connect and communicate with friends and family. They cautioned against viewing social media only through a negative lens, noting its central role in supporting connection and wellbeing when used positively.

“Then I also think with social media, that is how we talk to friends and family... I think that's one of the reasons why probably most of us have put social media on the higher end (of the vote), because that's also how we interact with friends. I think social media, just like how we communicate and how we digest content.”

Activity-specific alcohol use

Participants suggested that young people consume alcohol because they perceived it as being integral to specific events, such as being at a party or going out to a club.

"I've been asking a lot of people about why they drink and the most popular response I get is because they are at a certain place and I think it really comes down to like them associating a certain activity or certain place with drinking."

"... the people I talk to would say like oh I don't, I don't really drink that often... I only drink when I go to parties or I only drink when I go to clubs or things like that."

Participants expanded on this by emphasising the sense of belonging that alcohol elicits, which may pressure them to engage in alcohol consumption.

"They're like at a party and it's like alcohol around and I think that, like, sort of reinforces the idea that if you're having a party or if you're hanging out with friends like our close, just something you have to have fun and have a good time."

Accessibility of alcohol

Participants reported that young people access alcohol through people that they know, including parents, older siblings, friends and family members. Participants discussed awareness of young people being given alcohol by their parents when their parents were drinking. They also identified a culture of sharing and bartering alcohol and other drugs whilst at parties with other young people.

"If you bring drinks, you can be like here. Like, have a drink, and I'll steal your weed, you know? So it's very like if you just at a party and there's someone with substances, usually the expectation is that you can, like, go up and ask to share it, especially if there's like, smoke circles or anything ... like you just puff and pass"

How are young people, including underage teens, getting access to alcohol or illicit substances?

15 responses



Accessing alcohol from social media was also mentioned, one participant noting that Instagram accounts were shared amongst young people with the intention of accessing alcohol or other substances. Young people were then able to contact these accounts via a direct message (DM), asking the account holder to buy them alcohol.

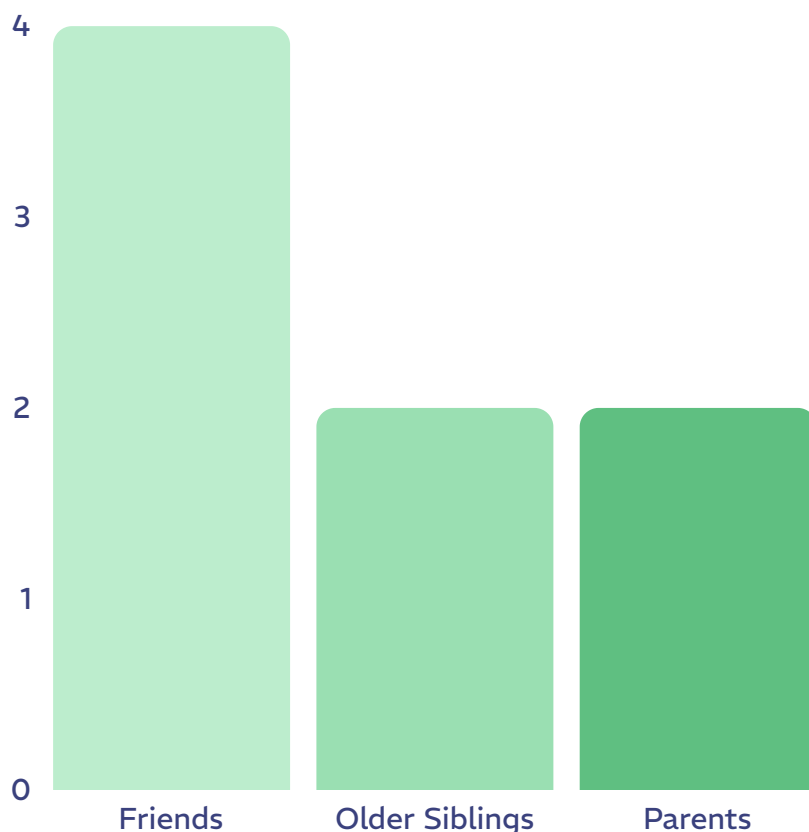
"Like people just know each other and then they like people will send profiles around like oh, talk to this person."

Online alcohol delivery and purchasing services were not reported to be used. Participants noted that for those under the legal drinking age and living at home, having alcohol delivered to their house creates a high risk of their family discovering the purchase. Online alcohol purchasing was perceived to be an extreme way of accessing alcohol.

In contrast, obtaining alcohol from family or friends was perceived to be less risky, thus was more common. Participants reported that parents who approved of alcohol consumption would directly purchase the alcohol for them.

"Like from my experience like none of my friends are willing to take it that far, like order it. Because if your parents don't approve, there's the risk of them finding out about the purchase if it's delivered to your door, they could like, open it up and be like what? What is this? I think it's like much more easier to just ask your like older sibling or a friend's older sibling or friend.... cause if your parents don't approve then like it's very risky to order. If your parents do approve, then you just gonna get your parents to buy it. So I feel like it is not much demand for young people to order it online."

How are young people, including underage teens, getting access to alcohol or illicit substances?



“

Stronger education on mental health is key to tackling risky drinking. A lot of young people turn to alcohol to cope with stress or anxiety, but they don't always understand how it makes things worse.

”

Alcohol campaigns

Participants observed that alcohol campaigns plays a strong role in shaping how normal alcohol use appears in everyday life. They reported seeing these ads mostly online—particularly on TikTok and YouTube—as well as in public spaces like billboards and public transport.

When asked about ads discouraging alcohol consumption, participants mainly recalled government drink-driving campaigns. However, they felt these were too broad and didn't meaningfully engage young people. While some messaging about the health and safety risks of alcohol was recognised, participants noted that ads promoting alcohol were far more common and visible.

" I guess when you think about it, you do tend to see more advertisements for alcohol, especially if you go out and stuff like that, which I think it's just like billboards and you know that sort of stuff. It's very common."

"In regards to against and like dangers and stuff like that. It's mostly just government kind of ads, and even within that, it's kind of ads where it's just kind of written like I've seen this personally where it's just kind of like written statistics on a screen"

One participant continued to explain, without being prompted, that they found government advertisements about vaping to be extremely effective.

"I think like in my opinion, the most impactful ads that I've seen from the government was like one that wasn't actually about alcoholism. It was actually about vaping and it's like they tried to show like the impactIt was like a person who couldn't find their vape and they were searching all over their room and it's like they eventually say like, why are we doing this?... But like when I think of it, I personally haven't seen many alcoholism ads that are similar in that nature."

For them, this vaping ad was effective because it was short and impactful and had an easy-to-understand message, noting that it highlighted the tangible impacts of vaping addiction in the lives and perspectives of young people.

"I think that sort of ad, which is short and impactful and kind of holds a message. It kind of really brings to light and kind of gives you some insight into how much it can truly impact your life and screw or like kind of skew your point of view. So like it kind of shows you how far someone's willing to go to, like, get a vape or get some alcohol."

Another participant observed a shift in young people's perception of vaping but was hesitant to attribute it solely to the impact of anti-vaping advertisements.

"Definitely have seen more ads talking about the dangers of vaping, and I do think it has been somewhat effective because from what I noticed I have seen a shift where people are starting to think that thing isn't as cool anymore"

"Like I think I've heard people like sort of not thinking of it as like a really cool thing to. It was like sort of shift which I don't know if it's directly from the advertising, but I have noticed that, which is interesting."

Another participant offered a differing view, explaining that from their perspective, advertising campaigns do not influence substance use.

"I guess with my peers, who actually do it, who just regardless wants to do it. Not because it's cool, but because potentially they just feel the need to vape and I guess it was alcohol as well."

Advertising campaigns that highlight the dangers of alcohol was discussed as an alternative mechanism to reduce alcohol use. In response to the suggestion of plain packaging on alcohol, one participant noted that images alone are insufficient. Communicating stories, such as the story of the young person trying to find their vape in the vaping advertisement, was perceived to have greater impact.

One participant emphasised that they were most struck by a story about an account of vape use from a school presentation from Paul Dillon, of DARTA (Drugs and Alcohol Research and Training Australia).

"With the Paul Dillon presentation at the end of it, he told us this horrific story about a young girl who had died. And I just keep on thinking about that."

Participants agreed that storytelling and lived experience should be incorporated into advertising campaigns and education about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs as well as being pitched at the right level – for young people but not talking down to them.

"So even if it's not like, you know, telling them all these, showing them all these horrific photos, just like a story like that, seeing how it did just impact someone's life so deeply, that makes you think a lot more."

Factors reducing alcohol consumption

Substitute: zero alcohol products

Participants held either positive or neutral attitudes towards zero-alcohol products. They reported the use of these products as beneficial to establishing a sense of belonging in social settings where alcohol is commonly consumed, such as parties. The ability for young people to feel included and not be perceived as being "lame" was a social benefit of zero-alcohol products.

"It means that I can be with my friends and I'm sort of not missing out... It was like we're having a good time ... I feel like it helps me feel included in the activity, ... like sort of saves me from being from, from being lame."

"Zero alcohol products are a good option for people who want to join in socially without the effects of alcohol"

"I know Tom Holland has a zero-alcohol beer and that's the first time I heard of it. I think it's very cool"

Zero alcohol products were perceived to be an effective tool for individuals struggling with substance abuse and/or addiction and were reported to be consumed by older teenagers

"Amazing for people trying to break habits and alcoholism"

"I can understand the appeal for people trying to be sober, but everyone my age who doesn't drink will just have soft drinks"

Cost:

Our participants believed an increase in the price of alcohol, compounded by the cost-of-living crisis was contributing to young people drinking less. Alcohol was not perceived as an essential product, and therefore could be sacrificed.

Other drug use and perceptions

What are some drugs that you, your friends or other young people in your community use/have used?

17 responses



“

I think there's been a lot of change in how people see particular drugs, like for example, I think a lot more of my friends see cigarettes as like something that's really dangerous.

And seeing weed and marijuana as something that's like quite safe and doesn't doesn't affect your body as much.

”

Participants were asked what drugs they were aware of that had been consumed by young people in their community. As indicated in the word cloud above, this includes alcohol, weed, vapes and cigarettes. Interestingly, participants classified alcohol, vapes and cigarettes as drugs.

Participants explained that some young people choose to take illicit drugs for similar reasons to that of alcohol, namely because of peer pressure, wanting to have a sense of belonging and as a way of addressing mental ill-health. Our participants also reported that young people who use alcohol and other substances are often aware of the risks but appear to have an 'It won't happen to me mindset'

"[they] think it will make them cool want to connect with friends that do take drugs"

"...they think that because their frequency is low or their amount is low it doesn't really affect their health or lead to an addiction"

"...for example smoking or vaping, if there are health risks, they think it will only affect them if they're having a lot like I only smoke at parties so won't affect me"

Other reasons reported by participants that may influence young people's decisions to use substances include curiosity sparked from media representations and a perceived sense of freedom.

"interested to experience what they've seen on media"

"because they know they can get away with it – a lot of people don't smoke because you can smell the nicotine, but will vape because you can't"

"Young people may choose to drink or use drugs to seek a sense of freedom or excitement. They might not fully understand the consequences, or they might feel like it's a way to change it up a bit"

"curiosity and access to it"

Participants reported that drug use has become more normalised, recalling that a greater number of young people were using drugs and using them at younger ages.

"Yes, I personally believe that it has become even more normalised and any dangers that have been discussed have sort of been disregarded"

"Yes... I've heard more people discussing partaking in hard drugs at a young age"

Participants shared that this normalisation may have reduced the stigma surrounding substance use.

"[it's] normalised to TALK about alcohol and drugs between friends where before there was a stigma of young people taking substances"

At the same time, participants reported more cautious attitudes towards drug use, especially vaping, following federal legislative restrictions. This was out of a fear of legal and financial consequences of vape use, as well as negative health consequences.

“Yes, attitudes have changed, but many are now using drugs or vaping in private due to a fear of legal issues and stricter enforcement of laws, especially around underage use and potential fines”

“Yes, attitudes have shifted, especially with stricter vaping laws. Fines for underage use and tighter sales regulations have raised awareness of the risks, making people more cautious about vaping”

Participants shared that among young people there appears to have been a shift in the perceived safety of certain drugs such as marijuana, with reported perception of marijuana being a safer drug in comparison to cigarettes and vaping. While this discussion was had in connection with the increased vaping laws, there was no explicit correlation between the two.

“vaping and smoking is dangerous and less “cool”. Weed [is] seen as more safe and acceptable”

“Yes there has been change from cigarette smoking to weed smoking in my group they have normalised weed smoking saying that only cigarettes have more consequences”

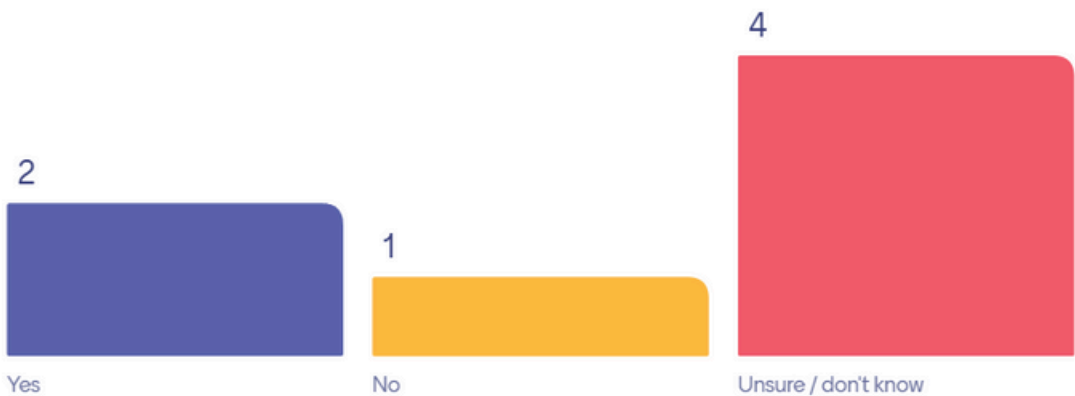
“I think I think this in a lot of change in how people see particular drugs, like for example, I think a lot more of my friends see cigarettes as like something that's really dangerous. But see like weed and marijuana as something that's like quite safe and doesn't affect your body as much.... ”

Participants also acknowledged that all substances illicit or licit carry risks.

“It's like you buy it and it just solves the problem for like a little while. And then I guess that's where the continuation of alcohol and drugs come in.”

When asked about drug checking services, such as pill testing at music festivals most participants were unsure what was meant by the term drug checking and were not familiar with these facilities. While not having been aware of or used the services, they were in favour of them as a risk mitigation strategy.

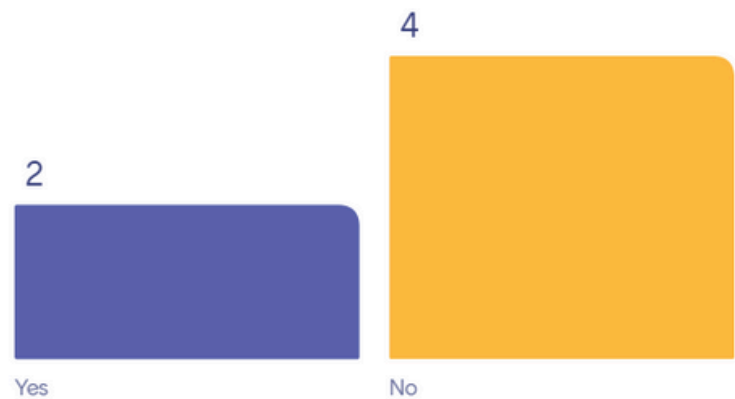
Do you think that drug checking services are valuable? Do you know anyone who has accessed one? (i.e. at a music festival)



Support Services for Alcohol and Other Drugs

When asked whether they would seek help for concerns about their own alcohol or drug use, four of the eight participants said they would not reach out for professional support. Instead, they preferred informal options like friends, teachers, and online resources.

If you were worried about your personal drug or alcohol use would you reach out for professional help?



Where would you go to for help?

9 responses



When asked about their awareness of different support services, two participants indicated they had heard of path2help and two were aware of the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline.

Have you heard of, or know about, any of the following services?



Mental health and Alcohol and Other Drugs supports

Young people with mental health conditions/challenges, accessing supports can be especially sensitive. Privacy and confidentiality were important for one participant, particularly noting in formal supports, practitioners may be obliged to contact parents or family members, which could be a deterrent for young people.

"I feel like just adding on to that it's the fact that it's very like 'no questions asked' type situation where in those mental health consultations or like health consultations with the guidance counsellor, all those things it has like strings attached ...They need to contact our parents and all those things and sometimes some of us aren't comfortable with it. It's like you buy it and it just solves the problem for like a little while. And then I guess that's where the continuation of alcohol and drugs come in."

Effective mechanisms of AoD deterrence

Participants identified that strong campaigns and government messaging ARE effective deterrents for AoD use. The young participants highlighted the importance of youth-friendly language in these representations. For them, the content must be relatable and engaging. The use of stories, rather than statistics, was emphasised as particularly valuable.

"More stories, less statistics. Bring someone in who has been impacted by alcohol use who is willing to share how it changed their life."

"any help or programs for youth should be using people or wording young people can relate/connect to. Such as using young people in advertisement, made in a non-cringy way that is meaningful"

The role of a narrative in the previously mentioned vaping advertisement was cited as an impactful deterrent to vaping, potentially contributing to a cultural and/or social shift in the perception of vaping.

One participant emphasised the effectiveness of presentations from the Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia (DARTA). They had attended a presentation from DARTA CEO and Founder Paul Dillon at their school. In the roundtable, they spoke about the anecdotes shared by Dillon several times, and that these had stuck with them. The presentation had centred young people's autonomy, and because of this they paid more attention.

"And then at my new school, we had this guy, I think his name's Paul Dillon came in and he was much better it he was like I know people are gonna be doing these things already. So here's how to do it safely. And here's how to talk about it. Not just "don't do it" because people are already doing these things."

"And when someone comes in with, like, a presentation about why you shouldn't do it, they (young people) just think it's stupid. They're not gonna listen, but I found that for me, it seemed like people took it on more. When he was just talking about like, you know how to be safe with it, not just don't do it at all."

Participants also suggested that the way AoD are represented online, in the media and in popular culture can have an impact on young people's perception of AoD use. To mitigate this, participants advocated for more healthy and moderate representation of drinking online and in TV shows and movies, along with more online resources that educate and provide advice.

"Platforms like YEP or young people on TikTok/Instagram giving advice on how to be safe, deal with struggles with substances and informing where to get help without stigma"

"Change media and cultural practices/representations of drinking to move away from binge drinking towards slower/safer practices (e.g. characters in tv not getting blackout drunk)"

"A shift from media perceiving it as cool as well as better education that addresses inherent issues associated with drinking and how to drink safely"

The need for these services to be physically accessible to young people was highlighted.

"Treatment programs would be good, especially if they are provided in places young people can easily access. Preventative measure like better educational programs would also help"

Multiple participants stated that education on the risks of alcohol and other drugs is an appropriate preventative measure. One participant noted that appropriate education on AoD must involve education on mental health and wellbeing.

"Stronger education of mental health is key to tackling risky drinking. A lot of young people turn to alcohol to cope with stress or anxiety, but they don't always understand how it makes things worse."

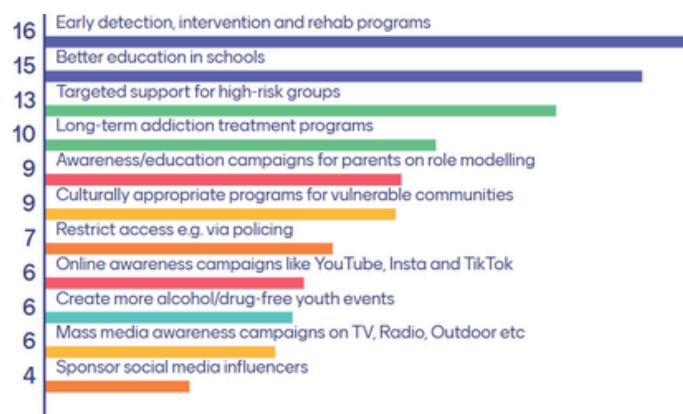


If I Were Health Minister for a Day...

When invited to step into the Health Minister's shoes and allocate \$100 billion to address alcohol and drug use among young people, participants prioritised early intervention, education, and cultural change. Their top investments reflect a desire to tackle root causes - mental health, lack of support, and harmful norms - rather than surface symptoms.

The strong support for parent-focused campaigns over traditional mass media or influencer sponsorship points to something deeper: young people want adults to take greater responsibility for role-modelling healthy behaviours. Their vision is clear - prevention begins at home, is reinforced at school, and supported through services that are accessible, human, and real.

Health Minister! You've got \$100 (billion) to spend to help ALL children & young people with alcohol and other drug use. *How will you spend it?*



Recommendations for change

At the conclusion of the session participants were provided with the opportunity to (as Health Minister) create a "signature initiative" to help children and young people thrive in the face of alcohol and other drugs. Most reflected the broad discussion themes from the session. One participant suggested the importance of youth role models, which aligns with the strong preference provided for messaging that is targeted and relatable to young people.

"Youth role models"

"Education on mental health issues"

"my initiative would focus on education, mental health support and peer-led programs to help young people build resilience, manage emotions, and access resources for healthier choices"

"improving education of mental health and coping issues to prevent issues from occurring in the first place"

"story telling. Accidents at parties, regrets, "drugs are awesome, but/and..."

"more safe and confidential information"

Conclusion

This roundtable provided valuable insights into how young people perceive and engage with alcohol and other drugs. Participants challenged common assumptions, highlighted the cultural and social drivers behind substance use, and offered practical ideas for prevention and support that resonate with their lived experience.

Key messages and proposed actions include:

Mental health drives use: Many young people use alcohol and other drugs to cope with mental ill-health. Expanding access to affordable, timely, and confidential mental health services is critical to reducing harm.

Messaging must connect: Prevention campaigns that use relatable language, short-form storytelling, and lived experience - like effective anti-vaping ads or DARTA presentations - are far more impactful than traditional, stat-heavy approaches.

Parents shape culture: Parents are key influencers in how alcohol is introduced and normalised. Targeted education for parents can support cultural change by challenging Australia's drinking norms at home.

Emphasise the need for improved education and awareness, ensuring young people understand that no drug is without risk and that comparing substances along a so-called 'healthier' spectrum can be misleading.

These findings reinforce the need for youth-informed strategies that address the real drivers of substance use and promote healthier, safer choices.

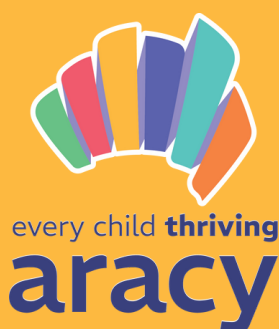


**Feedback from Young and Wise Roundtable Participants
on ARACY's reporting process:**

**I found the report really insightful
regarding all our comments, and I
definitely appreciate the heavy use of
direct quotes rather than paraphrasing**

**I love how you've collated the report.
And thank you again for giving me a
chance to speak.**

**Thank you again for the work you do and
representing our voices**



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Alcohol and Other Drugs - Young and Wise Roundtable Report

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