The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol’s Harm to Others

Beyond the drinker: Alcohol’s hidden costs
Harmful use of alcohol can ruin the lives of individuals, devastate families, and damage the fabric of communities. The World Health Organization’s global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol underlines that special attention needs to be given to reducing harm to people other than the drinker. The findings in this report give further evidence for this need and it is an important contribution to fulfilling the aims and objectives of the global strategy.

Dag Rekve, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, World Health Organization, Geneva
ABOUT THE AER FOUNDATION

The Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation (AER) Foundation is a not-for-profit company established in 2001 with a mandate to change the way Australians drink. It was initially established with funding from an Australian Government grant and is now a perpetual trust.

While the AER Foundation is committed to preventing the misuse of alcohol, it does not seek to outlaw drinking or impose a total ban on the sale of alcohol.

Its main objectives include:

- preventing the misuse of alcohol and other licit substances, including petrol sniffing, particularly among vulnerable population groups such as Indigenous Australians and youth
- supporting treatment, rehabilitation, research and prevention programs
- promoting community education encouraging low-risk consumption of alcohol and highlighting the dangers of licit substance abuse.

The AER Foundation has coordinated and managed more than 1,000 projects across Australia to improve the ability of the Australian community and government bodies to effectively respond to risky patterns of drinking and licit substance abuse.

ABOUT THE AER CENTRE FOR ALCOHOL POLICY RESEARCH

The AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research seeks to expand the evidence base for responding to the harmful consequences of alcohol in Australia. The Centre is a collaboration by Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre with the School of Population Health of the University of Melbourne, the Department of Health of Victoria, and the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

For further information

See the AER website www.aerf.com.au

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**FOREWORD**

While there is no doubt about the value and importance of evidence, statistics, costs and systems analysis, it is what happens to real people in real situations that I find most compelling.

This report seeks to reveal some of the interconnections between areas such as child protection, health, law enforcement and others. It provides insight into how individual acts of alcohol misuse ripple through families and communities.

The harm caused to others by alcohol misuse has been the missing dimension in discussions about alcohol-related harm in our community.

Our siloed system of counting and measuring health, social or legal costs has failed to account for the real costs of alcohol-related harm that are often incurred in shamed secrecy.

It is no surprise that there is a paucity of evidence in relation to these hidden dimensions of alcohol-related harm. Researchers measure costs within systems where data can be linked to individual experiences: health systems, social welfare systems, law enforcement and justice systems are responsive to those they see, the individuals seeking help or support.

Researchers can readily document and describe case experience in these areas, usually in terms of the services used. However, rarely is data from different systems connected, compared or used to create a new picture showing how individual experiences in each of these systems may be inter-related.

This report extends what can be learnt from raw statistics and discusses the broader experience of people harmed by the drinking of others. It includes factors such as well-being and social problems, and is not constrained by body count statistics. The report draws on the harms we can identify within systems to create a bigger picture, one that most readers will find disturbing.

The authors of this report have produced an important report that adds further weight to the need for reform of current alcohol policies and practices in Australia.

If ever our leaders needed the courage to tackle the vested interests that resist effective alcohol policy reform in Australia, this report provides ample evidence that the ongoing tragedy of alcohol-related harm in the Australian community cannot continue unabated.

This is a commendable piece of research that demands more attention be paid to the human costs of alcohol misuse in our community.

**Tim Costello**
Chief Executive Officer, WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA

**OVERVIEW**

This booklet is based on a major study commissioned by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AER) to assess the harm caused by the heavy drinking of others.


The study represents a sustained, comprehensive effort to quantify alcohol’s harms to others. It draws on and analyses a wide variety of existing and newly developed data, including a national survey of more than 2,600 Australians aged 18 or older conducted in 2008.

According to the study, almost three quarters of all adults in Australia were negatively affected over a one-year period by someone else’s drinking, in ways ranging from minor annoyance to physical violence or death.

The study, *The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol’s Harm to Others*, also reports for the first time on the previously largely hidden financial costs of alcohol abuse on others, including family members of drinkers, friends, workmates and strangers. Previous estimates have focused mainly on the drinkers themselves and the direct costs to society.

The study concludes that the overall tangible and intangible costs to Australia of alcohol abuse could be double the previous estimates if the additional impact that heavy drinkers have on others around them is taken into account, particularly in areas such as out-of-pocket expenses, lost time, forgone wages and productivity.

The study was published in conjunction with the Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre. The full study is available on the AER website, www.aerf.com.au.

**The issue**

Drinking often results in harm not only to the drinker, but to others in the community:

- a traffic crash caused by an intoxicated driver may kill the other driver or pedestrians
- an elderly couple walking home at night may be threatened by carousing teenagers
- a sober bystander attempting to separate two drunks fighting may himself be injured when they turn on him.
Drinking can affect people the drinker knows well:

- a child may be left stranded when an adult supposed to pick the child up from preschool instead over stays an after-work drinking session
- a traffic crash may result in death or injury to the drunk driver’s passengers
- an adult daughter may find herself at her wit’s end over the drinking of her live-in father
- a small firm may be driven into bankruptcy by mistakes or misdeeds of its employees when they have been drinking on the job
- a pregnant woman may drink heavily and harm her baby.

The study aims to describe and measure concretely such harms from drinking in Australian society.

The data

The Harm to Others project made use of data obtained from numerous sources, ranging from government departments to drug and alcohol treatment agencies. Secondary data sources include both national surveys that have been re-analysed to determine harms to others and routinely collected service agency data. The project also conducted a groundbreaking new survey dedicated to capturing harms from others’ drinking in 2008.

The data quoted in this report was taken from many sources, including:

- Pre-existing surveys
  - Gender, alcohol and culture: an international study (GENACIS)
  - National Drug Strategy household survey (NDSHS)
  - Personal safety survey (PSS)
  - Household income and labour dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA)

Agency data

- National mortality data file
- National morbidity data
- National hospital cost data collection
- Casualty crash database, Australia
- WA police service data
- Recorded crime, Australian Bureau of Statistics
- WA police assaults data
- NSW Bureau of Crime statistics and research data
- Client Related Information System (CRIS)
- Alcohol and Drug Information System (ADIS), Victoria
- Telephone helplines

Alcohol’s harm to others survey

- As well as re-analysing the existing data listed above, the Harm to Others project team also commissioned its own survey.

- All Australian Alcohol’s harm to others survey data were weighted using the most recent Australian population figures from the 2006 Census. The total estimated population of adults aged 18–98 years was 15,051,981 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Costing analysis

- Average weekly earnings, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008
- Australian Institute of Criminology’s report on crime costs, 2008
- National hospital cost data collection, Department of Health and Ageing
- Emergency department costs, Department of Health and Ageing
- State and Territory Government real recurrent expenditure on child protection, out-of-home care services and intensive family support services, Productivity Commission
- Valuing intangible harm, World Health Organisation value of a quality adjusted life year (corresponding to $50,000)
INTRODUCTION

The AER study, *The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol’s Harm to Others*, provides for the first time a detailed insight into the significant costs and problems that alcohol misuse causes for a large number of other Australians.

The impacts from the drinking of others vary dramatically. At one end of the spectrum Australians are affected by nuisance inconveniences, such as street noise or having to avoid public parks, or petty costs from damaged property. At the other end harms can be severe, such as child abuse or physical violence or death. The public health impacts of alcohol from others’ drinking are of major concern.

**Key points**

- Almost three quarters of adult Australians have been negatively affected by someone else’s drinking.
- Heavy drinkers have cost others around them more than $14 billion in out-of-pocket expenses, foregone wages and productivity, and more than $6 billion in intangible costs.
- More than 70,000 Australians are victims of alcohol-related assaults every year.

Previous research has focused largely on the problems of drinkers themselves and their direct costs to society in terms of absenteeism and lost productivity, and their demands on government services such as health care, law enforcement, the courts, social welfare and on community groups.

This study looks at the impact that drinkers have on those around them and the additional costs incurred by their friends, family, workmates and even strangers. It does not come up with a single definitive figure for the total cost burden caused by other people’s drinking, but it does provide cost estimates for major additional elements that would make up such a figure.

The study looked at the following critical questions:

- how many Australians are affected by the drinking of others?
- who is affected?
- what is the relationship between those affected and the drinker?
- how are Australians affected or harmed?
- what are the costs for others – in trouble, time and money?

The study provides a first set of answers to these questions and also looks at the strategies, policies, actions and further information needed to measure and limit the harm from others’ drinking.

**Key points**

- 367 people died and nearly 14,000 people were hospitalised because of the drinking of others in 2005.
- More than 70,000 Australians were victims of alcohol-related assault, among which 24,000 people were victims of alcohol-related domestic violence.
- Almost 20,000 children across Australia were victims of substantiated alcohol-related child abuse.

**Existing data**

In seeking answers to these questions, the study examined existing information collected by social and health agencies, police, child protection agencies, alcohol and drug services and helplines. The study also looked at road accident statistics, hospital records and population surveys.

These sources provided specific details of some of the more serious harms caused by drinkers to other people, but they did not provide a complete picture of the range and magnitude of the problem. The people who these statistics represent are often those that have been so seriously affected that they need to be picked up by government health and social safety nets.
Alcohol’s harm to others survey

A more detailed insight into the full range of impacts came from a national survey of 2,649 Australians aged 18 or older which was conducted specifically for this study in 2008. The survey provided a systematic and detailed insight into how many Australians believe they have been negatively affected by other people’s drinking, including people they know well and those they do not know well, or at all. The survey also looked at what ways they had been harmed across the full range of possible impacts, from the less severe to the serious.

Applying the survey results to the total population of Australia aged 18 or older (15 million at the last Census in 2006) indicates that far more Australians are negatively affected by other people’s drinking than previous reports might have suggested. The survey showed that harm from other people’s drinking is costly, widespread and broad ranging.

Identification of those affected

The drinker has many roles in society as shown in the following diagram. In each of these roles, alcohol abuse can affect many different individuals.

As can be seen, individuals affected by another person’s drinking can be classified as those well known to the drinker, and those who are not well known or who are complete strangers to the drinker.

ASSESSING THE HARM CAUSED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S DRINKING

The national survey findings

The survey sample was generally representative of the national population. The survey included detailed questions on heavy and episodic drinkers who were family members, household members, friends and work colleagues, as well as many questions on adverse effects from others’ drinking in public spaces. Respondents were also asked how much the drinking behaviour of others had negatively impacted upon them.

Almost three quarters of the survey respondents reported being negatively affected during the previous year by the drinking of others, at least in some minimal way. Applied to the Australian population aged 18 or older, this represents around 10 million Australians who had been adversely affected by others’ drinking. Of these, more than two million were affected “a lot”.

70 per cent of the survey respondents reported they were affected in some way by the drinking of strangers or people they did not know well. This included relatively minor annoyances such as being kept awake at night, or acts of urination or littering by drinkers. However, 43 per cent of them reported somewhat more serious effects, such as being threatened, physically assaulted, or having had their property or belongings damaged as a result of a stranger’s drinking.

Men and women were equally likely to have been troubled by strangers’ drinking, but younger people were three times more likely to have been affected. The survey indicates that younger women are more likely to report harms from the drinking behaviour of family members, while both younger men and younger women were more likely to report harms from the drinking of friends or strangers.

Key point

- The survey showed that almost 30 per cent of the adult population reported being negatively affected by someone who was in the circle of persons well known to them.
Families, friends and co-workers most affected by another’s drinking

The survey showed that of the 29 per cent of the population reporting negative affects, 16 per cent of these were negatively affected by the drinking of someone they lived with or were intimate with—a family member or romantic partner. More than one in ten Australians were affected by a friend’s drinking in the survey year, and 5 per cent were affected by a co-worker’s drinking.

5 per cent reported that someone else’s drinking had been responsible for potential abuse or neglect of children for whom the respondent had some parental responsibility.

Among those who reported that drinking by household members, relatives, friends and co-workers negatively affected them:

- close family members were the most common category of relationship nominated (37%)
- friends were the next most common category (28%)
- extended family members were also often nominated by a significant group (10%)
- co-workers were also fairly commonly nominated (10%).

Overall, the least frequent harms cited by the survey’s respondents were troubles which were more serious such as being physically hurt, being forced into something sexual, or being put at risk in a car because of someone else’s drinking. Yet even figures of less than 5 per cent translate into hundreds of thousands of Australians more seriously affected.

When respondents were asked which person, of those they knew, most negatively affected them because of their drinking, the most common answer was a partner or close family relative, often male. Women were more likely than men to report being negatively affected by the drinking of a household member or relative.

### People Affected—Survey-Based Figures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected categories of harm</th>
<th>Numbers of people affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affected a little:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively affected by a co-worker’s drinking</td>
<td>496 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had one or more children negatively affected by the drinking of a carer</td>
<td>888 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively affected by the drinking of a household member, relative or friend</td>
<td>2 905 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively affected by drinking of a stranger or someone not known well</td>
<td>5 463 900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From Table 13.1 of the Research Report. Projected to the adult population of the 2006 Census.

#### Key points

- Women nominated a spouse/partner more often than men (15% vs 8% of those with adverse effects from a heavy drinker in their life).
- Men nominated friends more frequently than women (37% vs 21%).
- Men nominated co-workers more frequently than women (16% vs 5%).

### People affected by a stranger’s drinking

Individuals can be negatively affected by the drinking of people they do not know in a number of ways. These include alcohol-related violence, being annoyed by litter or noise, property damage, and fear of alcohol-related violence from intoxicated individuals.

Information on how people are affected by drinkers they do not know comes from:

- the range of agencies which may be called upon to respond to the harm—for example councils, police and other law enforcement agencies, judicial systems and health services
- general population surveys asking about crime victimisation and other harm.
Key point

- Estimates from the data are that more than 10 million Australians report negative effects of a stranger’s drinking in one year, although many of these effects are minor.

Women are more likely than men to report being kept awake or disturbed at night (40% vs. 34%) and women reported slightly more commonly that they felt unsafe in a public place because of strangers’ drinking (26% vs. 23%).

Men were more likely to report being verbally abused (22% vs. 16%), physically abused (5% vs. 3%), being threatened (15% vs. 8%), being in a serious argument (14% vs. 9%), and experiencing trouble or noise related to licensed venue (24% vs. 20%).

Most of the adverse effects of strangers’ drinking were much more likely to be reported by younger than by older adults.

Police and health statistics provide data on the most severe effects

The study examined existing data held by police and government agencies to more fully assess the harm caused to others in cases where drinkers were linked to violence, assaults, traffic accidents and child abuse.

The people these statistics represent are often those who have been so seriously affected that they need to be picked up by government, health and social safety nets. The study noted that when taken together, the health system, parts of the welfare system and the criminal justice systems are all providing services not only for drinkers, but also for those who have been severely affected by the drinking of others.

Key point

- According to health system data, more than 360 people died and around 14,000 people were hospitalised because of the drinking of others in 2005.

A total of 285 people were killed due to another’s drinking and driving, with 32 of these being pedestrian deaths. More than 4,000 people were hospitalised.

Interpersonal violence resulted in 82 deaths which were caused by another person’s drinking. More than 9,600 people were hospitalised as a result of interpersonal violence.

According to police data, an estimated 70,000 Australians were victims of alcohol-related assaults in 2005 alone, among whom an estimated 25,000 were victims of alcohol-related domestic violence.

However, the study recommends that this figure substantially underestimates the actual number of alcohol-related assaults—the estimate is that only around 34 per cent of victims of alcohol-related assaults report the crime to police.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected categories of harm</th>
<th>Numbers of people affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deaths due to another’s drinking</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitalisations due to another’s drinking</td>
<td>13 669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantiated child protection cases involving a carer’s drinking</td>
<td>19 443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-related domestic assault in police records</td>
<td>24 581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-attributable assaults in police records</td>
<td>69 433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From Table 13.1 of the Research Report. Projected to the adult population of the 2006 Census.

Based on national child protection data and Victoria’s measurement of alcohol involvement, it is estimated that almost 20,000 children were victims of alcohol-related child abuse in 2006–07. Throughout Australia, alcohol was recorded as a factor in 33 per cent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment.

The study concluded that the drinking of others was associated with large numbers of hospitalisations and deaths and significant economic burdens. While the numbers of people affected by the drinking of others was large, the figures did not include many people who may have been unintentionally injured by the drinking of others, or affected where the drinker was in a situation of supervision and responsibility—for example, parents and carers or managers in work and recreational situations.
How much drinkers cost other Australians

One of the key aims of the study was to develop methods for costing alcohol’s harm to others, and applying these methods to establish a first set of figures on how much heavy drinkers have cost other Australians.

The study does not claim to provide a complete set of costs. However, based on estimates developed in conjunction with the survey responses, the study has identified three areas in which the drinking of others has potentially cost those around them a total of more than $14 billion. In terms of tangible costs reported by a representative sample of the Australian population, heavy drinkers have cost others around them about $13.4 billion in out-of-pocket costs and in forgone wages or productivity. Hospital and child protection costs sum to a further $765 million; totalling these gives a figure of $14.2 billion. In addition, there are large intangible costs, conservatively estimated at a minimum of $6.4 billion dollars. Intangible costs are the costs assigned to pain and suffering, and more generally a diminished quality of life.

Few of these costs have been included in earlier studies on alcohol abuse, which have focused largely on the costs of social welfare and government services such as police and the courts and costs such as lost productivity from early deaths.

The study estimates that out-of-pocket expenses amounted to an estimated $2.6 billion. This included costs such as property and personal damage, money that was ‘commandeered’ by drinkers which was needed for household expenses, the cost of having to leave home and stay elsewhere or the cost of professional counselling to cope with the drinker.

The out-of-pocket estimates were based on self-reporting from the Alcohol’s harm to others survey, from which data was extrapolated to reflect the whole of Australia’s adult population.

The time lost or spent by people looking after the needs and impositions of drinkers was also based on responses to the survey and was valued in accordance with the ABS average weekly earnings. Total time lost was valued at around $10.9 billion during the survey year. The biggest single component of this was $9 billion, representing the worth of people’s time absorbed by the demands of drinkers known to them. This includes time spent outside their workplace or normal routine caring for the drinkers, or for the children the drinkers were responsible for, cleaning up after the drinkers, or providing transport.

Respondents also reported spending substantial time—valued at $720 million—seeking or receiving help from the police or health services because of the drinking of others.

Intangible costs were measured on the basis of each quality-adjusted year of life valued at $50,000. Intangible costs for loss of well-being caused by the impact of drinking on other people was estimated at $6.4 billion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUMMARY OF COST ESTIMATES FROM OTHERS’ DRINKING FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF PROBLEMS AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR ONE YEAR*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Out of pocket costs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morbidity/mortality:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child road crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult road crash</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinker in household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinker elsewhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family, friends drinker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace drinker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger drinker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services use:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol treatment system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone helpline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey: help-seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From Table 13.2 of the Research Report

The figures in the chart cannot simply be added together to arrive at a total: there are areas of overlap both within the categories investigated, and also with categories covered in other studies.

**Key point**

- The research team however, conservatively estimates that at least $14 billion per annum can be attributed as alcohol’s harm to others and added to the more than $15 billion previously identified as costs associated with alcohol abuse in Australia.
CONCLUSION

The study has provided many first approximations of how many people are affected by the drinking of others, who is affected, and what the costs are in terms of trouble, time and money.

These numbers cannot be glossed over. Behind each of these statistics lie personal, family and community problems and stories that stem from the harms associated with the drinking of others—people close to the drinkers, as well as strangers. Although we do not know the qualitative details of the stories behind these statistics, the majority of Australians will know of times when they themselves, or those close to them, have been affected by others’ drinking.

Though without the qualitative details, the survey does provide insight into the broad ways in which individuals are affected. Over half of those identifying a drinker who had negatively affected them reported that the person’s drinking had affected social occasions, caused serious arguments, or meant the person failed to do what the respondent was counting on them to do. Further, over a third reported financial effects of the other’s drinking, and that they had to spend time caring for the drinker because of their drinking. More serious harms, including physical and sexual abuse, were less commonly reported, although over a third of respondents reported having to stop seeing the person because of their drinking.

The range and magnitude of alcohol’s harm to others is so significant, both in social and financial terms that it needs to be an important consideration in making public policy decisions about the availability and control of alcoholic beverages in Australia.

More thinking and research needs to be devoted to prevention and policy initiatives. Australians that care for and cope with drinkers and the harms they cause have their own service, health and emotional needs that are largely unknown. And preventing harm to others from drinking is as cogent and urgent a public health goal as preventing drinkers from harming themselves.

Only in the specific area of drink driving has the effects of drinking on others been seriously addressed with prevention and policy measures. Lessons from the policy experience of reducing casualties from drink driving should be studied and implications for reducing other kinds of harm from others’ drinking should be explored.

Key findings

- Almost three quarters of adult Australians have been negatively affected by someone else’s drinking.
- Almost 30 per cent of the adult population reported being negatively affected by someone who was in the circle of persons well known to them.
- Women nominated a spouse/partner more often than men (15% vs. 8%).
- Men nominated friends more frequently than women (37% vs. 21%).
- Men nominated co-workers more frequently (16% vs. 5%).
- The data indicates that more than 10 million Australians report negative effects of a stranger’s drinking in one year, although many of these effects were minor.
- According to health system data, more than 360 people died and around 14,000 people were hospitalised because of the drinking of others in 2005.
- More than 70,000 Australians are victims of alcohol-related assaults every year.
- Almost 20,000 children across Australia were victims of substantiated alcohol-related child abuse.
- Heavy drinkers have cost others around them more than $14 billion in out-of-pocket expenses, forgone wages and productivity, and more than $8 billion in intangible costs. At least $14 billion per annum can be attributed as tangible costs of alcohol’s harm to others. Much of this is additional to the more than $15 billion previously identified as costs associated with alcohol abuse in Australia.