

“Fourteen Dollars for One Beer!”

Pre-drinking is associated with high-risk drinking among Victorian young adults

Sarah MacLean

*Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Victoria;
Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne, Victoria*

Sarah Callinan

*Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Victoria;
Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Victoria*

Otherwise known as ‘pre-loading’, ‘pre-partying’, ‘pre-gaming’ and ‘home drinking’, pre-drinking entails consuming alcoholic beverages before going out to venues where alcohol is sold, such as clubs, bars and pubs. Pre-drinking is increasingly recognised as part of young adults’ contemporary drinking cultures in Europe¹⁻⁵ and North America.^{6,7} For example, 60% of Swiss students in a recent study participated in pre-drinking in the five weeks prior to completing a survey.¹ In other research, 64% of American college students reported pre-drinking in the prior two weeks.⁸ Two-thirds of venue patrons in a study conducted by Miller et al.⁹ in the Australian cities of Newcastle and Geelong reported pre-drinking. A further study by Miller et al. in an expanded range of Australian locations identified a similar level of pre-drinking.¹⁰ Using quantitative and qualitative methods, this article investigates whether pre-drinking contributes to high-risk drinking among young adults in Victoria, Australia, and – if so – whether measures to reduce pre-drinking though limiting the availability of cheap packaged alcohol would reduce high-risk drinking.

Research suggests that when people pre-drink they increase the amount of alcohol consumed over the night, rather than merely substituting cheaper off-premises alcohol for more expensive on-premises liquor.^{1,11} Heavy episodic alcohol consumption is associated with increased prevalence of intoxication and assault.¹² In the UK, significantly higher levels of alcohol consumption per night have been found among young people who reported pre-drinking when compared to those who did not.¹³ A US study found that women drank significantly more on days that they pre-drank than on days they drank but did not pre-drink. This relationship did not hold for men; however, both men and women experienced increased alcohol-related consequences on pre-drinking days.¹⁴ Paves et al.¹⁵ found that pre-drinkers consumed more drinks per week and experienced greater alcohol-related harm than non-pre-drinkers. Hummer and colleagues¹¹ found negative consequences associated with pre-drinking events in a US sample increased most sharply by blood alcohol level for those participants who did so infrequently, perhaps because they were inexperienced at heavy drinking. In

Abstract

Objective: Pre-drinking entails consuming alcohol before attending licensed venues. We examined the relationship between pre-drinking, intention to get drunk and high-risk drinking among Victorians aged 18–24 years, to consider whether reducing pre-drinking might ameliorate alcohol-related harm.

Methods: Variables within the 2009 Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drugs Survey (VYADS) dataset were analysed and compared with a thematic interpretation of research interviews involving 60 young adults living in Melbourne. High-risk drinking was defined as consuming 11 or more standard drinks in a session at least monthly.

Results: VYADS data show that pre-drinking was a significant predictor of high-risk drinking, even after intention to get drunk was controlled for. The most common explanation provided by interviewees for pre-drinking was because it is cheaper to purchase alcohol at bottle shops than at bars and clubs. This was particularly emphasised by those who drank at a high-risk level.

Conclusions: The study suggests that people pre-drink because they desire to be intoxicated, but also that pre-drinking patterns and product choices exacerbate the likelihood of high-risk drinking. Reducing availability of cheap packaged alcohol has potential to limit both pre-drinking and high-risk drinking among Victorian young adults.

Implications: The study adds weight to calls to implement minimum alcohol pricing in Australia.

Key words: alcohol, pre-drinking, pre-partying, pre-gaming, policy

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Correspondence to: Dr Sarah MacLean, Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010; e-mail: smaclean@unimelb.edu.au

Geelong and Newcastle, Miller et al.⁹ identified that pre-drinking study participants were significantly more likely to be involved in a fight than other participants.

Consistent reasons for pre-drinking are given across studies, with price differentials between purchasing alcohol at on and off premises a major factor in people's decisions to consume cheaper alcohol before they visit licensed venues.⁹ Other reasons include intoxication, socialising in a more relaxed setting and group bonding.^{2,5,9,16} A recent Australian study referred to above¹⁰ entailed approaching venue patrons to participate in brief interviews, finding that 61% of participants who pre-drank did so primarily for reasons related to price. Other reasons given by more than 2% of respondents included 'for fun' (14%), to 'socialise/catch up with friends' (9%), 'to be intoxicated before going out' (7.3%) and convenience (4%).

It is difficult to ascertain what role intention to get drunk plays in the relationship between high-risk drinking and pre-drinking. Reed and colleagues⁶ showed that intention to become drunk mediated the relationship between heavy episodic drinking history and pre-drinking behaviour as well as the relationship between heavy episodic drinking history and level of pre-drinking intoxication. If it is the case that this relationship is mediated by intention to get drunk, it is likely that reducing pre-drinking will not lower the overall volume of alcohol consumed by those who drink at high risk, as people will find other ways to consume to the same level. However, if pre-drinking makes high-risk drinking more likely even after intention to get drunk is taken into account, it may be that interventions targeting pre-drinking will reduce the level of high-risk drinking and associated harms.

Despite the prevalence of the pre-drinking and its apparent association with harmful alcohol consumption, little research to date – other than the two monographs referred to above^{9,10} – considers pre-drinking in Australia. This paper commences by identifying the relationship between pre-drinking, intention to get drunk and high-risk drinking within a population-based sample of Victorians aged 18 to 24 – the Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey (VYADS). We then provide detailed explication of people's reasons for pre-drinking and why pre-drinking might make high-risk alcohol consumption more likely through analysis of interviews with 60 young adults living in Melbourne. In concluding the paper, we consider implications for alcohol policy in Australia.

Method

In the current study, pre-drinking was defined as consuming at least one drink from a bottle or other container purchased at an off-licensed premises before going on to attend a licensed premises.¹ A more difficult challenge was to identify a level of alcohol consumption that could be considered 'high-risk'. Recent Australian guidelines for alcohol consumption¹⁷ identify consumption of four or fewer standard drinks within a single session as a level of drinking which will "reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury

arising from that occasion". Nonetheless, many people would not consider five drinks to be an excessive drinking session.¹⁸ Drinking 11 or more standard drinks in a session has been identified in other research as denoting high-risk drinking by women.¹⁹ Taylor et al.'s²⁰ meta-analysis of the dose-response relationship of alcohol to harm shows a smooth risk curve where acute harms increase with each standard drink consumed. They found that consuming 100 grams of alcohol (equivalent to 10 Australian standard drinks) is associated with around ten times the risk of acute injury not related to motor vehicles (e.g. assault, falls or intoxication-related medical events) three hours after drinking concludes. In view of these studies, we defined high-risk alcohol consumption as drinking 11 or more standard drinks within a single session on at least a monthly basis over the previous year.

Study 1 – the Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey

The VYADS was administered to a representative sample between September and November 2009 after being commissioned by the Victorian Drug and Alcohol Prevention Council, an advisory body to the Victorian Department of Health. It involved 5,001 interviewees aged between 16 and 24 years, with 72.8% residing in metropolitan Melbourne. The survey covered a range of topics related to the participants' alcohol, tobacco and drug consumption, as well as demographic questions. Household landlines were called using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing. Where there was more than one potential respondent in the household, the person with the most recent birthday was selected. The co-operation rate for the survey was 71%.²¹ Data collection for the VYADS was approved by the Victorian Department of Human Services Research Ethics Committee.

Survey weights have been applied to all analyses in this paper to match Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates on age, sex and rural status. In particular, weights reflected a small under-representation of respondents aged 22 to 24 and over-representation of females and rural respondents. To make the VYADS sample comparable with the sample used in Study 2, we considered only responses from participants aged 18 to 24 years who had consumed alcohol in the past 12 months (n=3,224). These participants had a mean age of 20.3 years (SD = 1.91) and 50.9% were female. Full details of the VYADS methodology can be found in the methodology report.²¹

In this secondary analysis of the VYADS, variables concerning the regularity of pre-drinking, prevalence of high-risk drinking and other variables relevant to a night out were the focus. It should be noted that these questions were asked with five response options, but in the current study these were reduced to three for ease of interpretation. The response 'never' remains as 'never'; 'a few times' or 'sometimes' is listed as 'sometimes'; and 'most' or 'every time' is listed as 'regularly'. In order to investigate high-risk drinking a logistic regression predicting those who drink eleven or more drinks in a session once a month or more often was conducted.

Study 2 – Interviews with Victorian drinkers

To understand pre-drinking trends shown in the VYADS data, we analysed qualitative interviews conducted in 2012 with 60 participants aged 18 to 24 years (mean age of 20.8 years; SD = 2.1; equal gender split) who reported having consumed at least one alcoholic drink within the prior six months. Participants were recruited via local tertiary institutions and agencies and through word of mouth. They lived in two greater Melbourne local government areas: Yarra which is close to the city centre (n=30); and Hume in the northwest (n=30). All except four of the 60 participants reported drinking before attending a licensed venue within the previous year.

Participants were offered the choice of completing interviews on their own (n=35), or with one (n=16) or two (n=9) friends. The purpose of interviews was to elicit detailed accounts of the place of alcohol within participants' lives. Interviews were conducted in a conversational style²² by three experienced researchers using a detailed theme sheet to ensure that major concerns for the research project were addressed in each. The interview component which we report on here involved asking participants to provide an account of a recent big night out that involved drinking alcohol before visiting an entertainment precinct.

At the conclusion of interviews, a brief survey of demographic characteristics and drinking patterns was administered. VYADS questions concerning levels of alcohol consumption were replicated in this survey to ensure consistency of measurement across the two studies. In addition to similarities in age and gender, drinking patterns of participants resembled those of VYADS respondents. For example, 47.4% of the VYADS sample reported that they drank 11 or more standard drinks in a session more than once a month compared to 48.3% (29 of 60) of the interview participant sample. In reporting on these interviews, we identify participants' age and gender, and whether or not they drank at this 'high-risk' level. All the names used are pseudonyms.

Interview transcripts were coded thematically²³ by one of the authors (SM) using the software package NVivo 10. This supported comparison of accounts of pre-drinking made by participants who drank at a high-risk level against those who did not. Quotations

were selected as typifying comments by others within these two sub-groups.

Results

Prevalence of pre-drinking

VYADS respondents were asked the frequency with which they engaged in a series of behaviours when they go out to licensed premises to drink. Table 1 shows how these compare for those who do and do not drink at a high-risk level. Three quarters of drinkers had pre-drunk at least a few times in the year prior to the survey and nearly three quarters had intended to get drunk at least a few times during this period. More than half of the respondents left their neighbourhood to go drinking regularly when they went out to drink in licensed premises and more than a third went to an entertainment district most or every time they drank in licensed premises. Taking other drugs most or every time was less common, with almost 80% of respondents stating they never did this when going out to drink. All of these behaviours were more prevalent in those who drank 11 or more drinks on one occasion at least monthly during the previous year, than in those who did not.

Predictors of pre-drinking

Logistic regression models were developed to investigate the predictors of high-risk drinking (11 or more standard drinks in a session at least once a month) and these are shown in Table 2. In the bivariate models, males were more likely than females to participate in high-risk drinking, as were those who pre-drink, leave their neighbourhood to drink, go to an entertainment district to drink, take drugs when drinking or intend to get drunk when drinking. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between 'intention to get drunk when drinking' with high-risk drinking was particularly strong, with those who regularly intended to get drunk more than 13 times more likely to participate in high-risk drinking than those who never did.

Model 1 included all variables except for intention to get drunk and – as can be seen – gender, pre-drinking and taking drugs when drinking were still significant predictors of risky drinking, as was regularly going to an entertainment district to drink. With

Table 1: Frequency of pre-drinking, leaving the neighbourhood to drink, going to entertainment districts, taking other drugs and intention to get drunk (%).

		Pre-drinking	Leave your neighbourhood	Go to entertainment district	Take other drugs	Intention to get drunk
Not drinking at 'high-risk' level (n=1,515)	Never	38.0	11.7	17.3	90.0	42.7
	Sometimes	41.7	37.5	52.3	9.3	48.5
	Regularly	20.3	50.8	30.3	0.8	8.8
Drinking at a 'high-risk' level (n=1,709)	Never	13.7	6.0	9.7	70.7	10.6
	Sometimes	41.7	35.7	49.1	25.4	60.0
	Regularly	44.6	58.3	41.3	3.9	29.4
Total (n=3,224)	Never	24.6	8.5	13.1	79.3	25.7
	Sometimes	41.7	36.5	50.5	18.2	54.6
	Regularly	33.8	55.0	36.4	2.5	19.7

the inclusion of intention to drink in Model 2, pre-drinking still remained a strong significant predictor of high-risk drinking, as did gender and taking drugs when drinking.

Reasons for pre-drinking

VYADS data analysis shows strong correlation between pre-drinking and high-risk drinking, but does not explain why young adults in Victoria pre-drink before going out or why pre-drinking is linked with high-risk alcohol consumption. These issues are explored here through analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with 60 young adults living in Melbourne, 29 of whom drank at the level we designate as high-risk.

Three main reasons for pre-drinking were evident in participants' accounts: to reduce expenditure on alcohol; to be intoxicated on arrival at a venue; and to enhance enjoyment of the company of friends in private settings. Many offered a combination of reasons, without prioritising one explanation for pre-drinking over others. For example, Yusef explained that his evening usually starts with a gathering of friends who enjoy becoming semi-intoxicated together

before they go out, thus reducing the amount of money they spend on alcohol once they are at a venue:

First we gather up [at] whoever's house it is. We buy something from the bottle shop so it's not expensive. Say for example there's five of us, we'd buy like a slab and a half [36 cans of beer]. Just to get us like tipsy, to get all of us ready for it [going out]. So instead of just going sober to the club and spending big money, we start off [at someone's house], so we're already halfway there. And when we get to the club, we finish it off [become very intoxicated]. (20, male, high-risk drinker)

Price differential between on- and off-premises alcohol

An Australian study of venue patrons, referred to above, identified that of 2,297 participants who had consumed alcohol before going out, almost two-thirds did so primarily for reasons related to price.¹⁰ Similarly, in our study, saving money was the most common explanation given for pre-drinking. Almost all participants in the interview sample who drank at a high-risk level identified the price differential between on- and off-premises alcohol as a reason for pre-drinking. Only one high-risk drinker, a full-time worker, said that saving money had nothing to do with his pre-drinking. In contrast, about half of those who did not fit our criterion for high-risk drinking mentioned they pre-drank to reduce their overall spending on alcohol.

In the quote used as the title to this paper Jamie (21, male, high-risk drinker) explained that alcohol purchased at a venue was six times more expensive than a similar drink purchased from a bottle shop. His comment was typical of many others made through the course of the interviews: "You go down the street, get yourself a six pack and that's fourteen dollars, whereas you go into the city [venues] and it's fourteen dollars for one beer!"

Consistent with survey data, some interviewees pre-drank without consuming alcohol at a high-risk level. For example, Alice (19, female) was a light drinker, generally consuming alcohol within the levels recommended in Australian guidelines referred to above.¹⁷ While, like most of our research participants, Alice pre-drank to save money, she only had one or two pre-drinks and rarely consumed alcohol at venues:

I don't really like to drink in clubs because I don't really trust people around me and it's a bit expensive. So I'd rather just have a few drinks before I go out.

Participants were much more likely to talk of pre-drinking before going to a licensed club than prior to attending a pub or private party. This was because they could bring alcohol purchased from bottle shops to parties, and because alcohol is often cheaper at pubs than at clubs. Ryan (23, male, high-risk drinker) explained that he didn't pre-drink heavily before going to a party at someone's house:

If it was a house party there probably wouldn't be as much emphasis on drinking a lot beforehand, because at a house party we can bring drinks, so the cost saving isn't any different. If you were drinking at home before going to a club we'd probably drink a little bit more because, you know, it's quite expensive to buy drinks in clubs.

Table 2: Logistic regression predicting high-risk drinking at least monthly in Victorians aged 18-24.

	Bivariate	Model 1	Model 2
Sex			
Female	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
Male	2.61***	2.93***	2.75***
Age			
18-19	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
20-21	1.18	1.04	1.12
22-24	0.96	0.92	0.97
Pre Drink			
Never	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
Sometimes	2.78***	2.41***	1.66***
Regularly	6.11***	5.08***	2.84***
Leave neighbourhood to drink			
Never	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
Sometimes	1.85***	1.15	1.13
Regularly	2.22***	1.07	1.02
Go to an entertainment district			
Never	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
Sometimes	1.68***	1.16	1.09
Regularly	2.44***	1.38*	1.21
Take drugs when drinking			
Never	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)	1 (Ref)
Sometimes	3.48***	2.24***	1.87***
Regularly	6.45***	3.50***	3.09***
Intention to get drunk when drinking			
Never	1 (Ref)		1 (Ref)
Sometimes	4.99***		2.85***
Regularly	13.44***		5.48***

Notes:

$N = 3,224$; * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$

To enhance enjoyment of gatherings in private places

The theme of enhancing enjoyment of gatherings in private places correlates to Miller et al.'s identification of "for fun" and to "socialise/catch up with friends"¹⁰ as primary reasons for pre-drinking given by 14% and 9% of pre-drinkers respectively in their study sample. Pre-drinking is thought of very much as a social activity. When asked about pre-drinking, only one of our research participants spoke about drinking on his own, although some mentioned elsewhere in the interviews that they would occasionally drink before they met up with friends. Around half of our research participants spoke of pre-drinking gatherings as pleasurable social events. Honey (24, female, high-risk drinker) explained that she usually started a big night out at a friend's house and that this involved both alcohol and socialising:

And on weekends we often start maybe at someone's house. So we might drink there and then go out to a club or a house party. And then how much would vary, I mean I might have just one whiskey on a weeknight. But I might also have a bottle and a half of wine ... depending on who's over and what we're doing, which would be sitting around talking.

Interestingly, however, participants who spoke of primarily valuing pre-drinking occasions as an opportunity for socialising with close friends tended not to drink at the high-risk level (of 11 or more standard drinks at least monthly). For example, Sienna (20, female) explained that she got ready to go out while sharing drinks with friends, but spoke of talking, photographing each other and putting makeup on as the main attractions of this event:

We sort of like did our makeup there and everything ... and had a few drinks while we were there. Yeah, taking photos, being silly.

Similarly, Rachael (19, female) described drinking as part of the experience of getting ready to go out, but her pleasure in being with her friends is also apparent:

Actually it's pretty fun drinking at home. Like we play drinking games, like you know, card games. You do have a laugh together before you go out, where you can hear each other speaking.

To enhance intoxication at venues

The third reason for pre-drinking, offered by a minority of participants, was to be intoxicated on arrival at a venue to ease their entry into this social space, although some also noted that they would be refused entry to venues if their intoxication was apparent to staff. This reason for pre-drinking was provided by 7% of pre-drinkers in Miller et al.'s sample.¹⁰ Interview participants spoke of consuming alcohol in cars and on public transport to make sure they were sufficiently drunk on arrival at a club. Zara (20, female, high-risk drinker) explained that she pre-drinks rapidly in order to become drunk enough to enjoy being at a venue:

Just, yeah to just get drunk quicker. 'Cause you wanna get [to the venue] and you find yourself more sociable as well when you've been drinking a few.

The association with high-risk drinking was apparent when Zara continued: "By the end of the night we're all vomiting. In very bad form by the end of the night, but we tend to do it every weekend."

In contrast Jade (19, female) who did not drink at a high-risk level, liked to feel "tipsy" when she arrived at a pub to boost her confidence but, like Alice (referred to above), would not drink much alcohol after this.

A couple of participants said that they drank before going to venues to enhance the effects of other substances which would be taken once they were there.

Explaining the association between pre-drinking and high-risk drinking

In our analysis of VYADS data, pre-drinking remained a significant predictor of high-risk drinking even after intention to get drunk was controlled for. Interviews conducted for the study suggest a number of explanations for this association. These relate to the intensive patterns of pre-drinking reported by high-risk drinkers, the alcoholic products they selected, and pre-drinking as extending the time over which alcohol is consumed during a big night, as well as a pre-disposition to continue drinking if you are already intoxicated when you arrive at a venue.

Pre-drinking provided participants with an opportunity to drink affordably before they entered a venue, and some did so intensively in the hope of attaining a level of intoxication which might be sustained long enough to reduce their need to buy alcohol at venues, as Zara explained in the quote above. Jade (20, female) complained that her friends would often overdo pre-drinks, with adverse consequences for the rest of the evening:

Especially on your pre-drink, people get out of control. Some of my friends [pre-drink] too much; I'm like: "You're not gonna last the whole night! Kind of slow down!" ... I hate that 'cause I know they're gonna be too sick later on.

High-risk drinkers tended to drink particularly heavily before going out. Elke (24, female high-risk drinker) estimated that she would drink half a dozen cans of full strength beers before attending a club. Arif (21, male, high-risk drinker) estimated that he drank eight standard drinks before his last visit to a club and Michelle (19, female, high-risk drinker) said that she and her friend had consumed almost a whole bottle of vodka.

Alcoholic products that participants selected for pre-drinking were also frequently those which had high alcohol content relative to price, enabling people to become intoxicated rapidly and without spending a lot of money. Many such as Yusef, referred to above, purchased 'slabs' of discounted alcohol for pre-drinking, with friends banding together to buy cheaper bulk products. Jade (19, female) selected "strong ones at pre-drinks". Ryan (23, male, high-risk drinker) drank "goon" (cask wine) as "a really cheap option". Carley (18, female, high-risk drinker) had drunk a bottle of a wine-based drink called Passion Pop (9.5% alcohol) and four cans of an energy drink called Elevate (8% alcohol) before going to a club the week before she was interviewed:

That's 18 to 20 dollars. So by the time I've drunk them I'm spastic [extremely intoxicated]. So it's a cheap night. Like it's 20 dollars plus whatever I buy at the club.

Pre-drinking also extends the period of time over a night during which alcohol could be consumed, itself leading to higher overall consumption, as many participants' accounts of long drinking nights attested. Drinking intensively at one point may also predispose people to continue to do so, to remain intoxicated. Amy (19, female) argued that if she pre-drank her self-control would be impaired and she would then be more likely to drink heavily at a venue.

These accounts suggest that people pre-drink because they desire to be intoxicated, but also that the drinking patterns and product choices associated with pre-drinking are such that the likelihood of high-risk drinking is exacerbated when pre-drinking is involved.

Discussion

Both qualitative and quantitative data analysed here suggest that pre-drinking is associated with high-risk drinking in Victoria, mirroring findings of UK and US studies.^{1,11,13-15} In this discussion, we consider the question of whether reducing pre-drinking would minimise high-risk drinking.

Reed and colleagues²⁴ found that intention to get drunk was a significant mediating variable between heavy episodic drinking and pre-drinking, while Room and Livingston²⁵ propose that young adults' desire to drink to intoxication means that they will drink a similar amount over an evening whether or not price differentials make it more attractive to do so in private settings or at venues. If this is the case, strategies to limit pre-drinking would simply encourage people to drink more at clubs and venues without reducing the overall volume of alcohol consumed. Our study shows that pre-drinking does not inevitably lead to high-risk drinking. However, we also found that there was still a significant relationship between high-risk drinking and pre-drinking in a population-based sample, even after intention to get drunk was controlled for. This indicates that the high-risk drinking that co-occurs with pre-drinking is not just a reflection of the intention to get drunk; rather, it appears that pre-drinking has predictive value of high-risk drinking outside of this intention. Conversely, leaving the neighbourhood and going to an entertainment district to drink – both strong bivariate predictors of high-risk drinking – were not significant in the multivariate model. This is presumably because, at least in part, they co-vary with pre-drinking or taking drugs when drinking.

The strength of pre-drinking as a positive predictor of high-risk drinking in the multivariate model provides support for the argument that reduction in pre-drinking could in turn reduce high-risk drinking levels. This finding is speculative, however, when based on the survey data alone, as it gives no information on the direction of causality, i.e. whether pre-drinking leads to high-risk drinking or, conversely, whether high-risk drinking itself predisposes people to pre-drink.

Interview data examined in this paper suggests that participants who drank 11 or more standard drinks on a single session at least monthly tended to drink particularly intensively before going out. As one would expect, lighter drinkers were less focused on drinking heavily before leaving a private setting. Lighter drinkers were more

likely to view gatherings in private settings as enhanced by drinking, rather than having heavy drinking as a primary object of these gatherings. The opportunity to drink cheap alcohol was a particularly strong motivator to consume intensively for high-risk drinkers, and high-risk drinkers often described intensive pre-drinking patterns. This indicates that the relationship between pre-drinking and risky drinking is probably complex and bi-directional. People pre-drink because they desire to be intoxicated but, at the same time, the drinking patterns and product choices associated with pre-drinking are such that the likelihood of high-risk drinking is exacerbated.

Our finding that the price differential between on-premises and off-premises alcohol is the dominant reason given for pre-drinking is in line with previous work in the area.¹⁰ Various studies suggest that raising the minimum price of alcohol leads to reductions in overall alcohol consumption and alcohol-associated harms, although effects differ by context.²⁶⁻²⁸ Price differentials may be particularly important for younger pre-drinkers. A study in the UK found that drinkers aged 18–24 were more likely than older drinkers to be influenced by price and drink promotions than older drinkers.¹³ If the availability of cheap packaged alcohol encourages people to drink more when they have the opportunity (i.e. as part of pre-drinking before they attend licensed venues), it makes sense that raising the price of packaged liquor will reduce both intensive pre-drinking and high-risk drinking. Raising the minimum price for units of alcohol will attract opposition on the basis that everyone who consumes low-cost alcohol will be affected, regardless of whether or not they drink excessively. Nonetheless, it has wide support as a mechanism to reduce problems associated with the price differential between on- and off-premises alcohol.²⁹ An alternative approach implemented in Scotland in recent years is to prohibit discounted bulk-buying and cheap drinks promotions at off-premises venues.

The study has various limitations. Survey data measure reported rather than observed drinking practices. Our two samples are not perfectly matched, as qualitative interviewees were drawn from a convenience sample. Further, it is possible that some interview participants who reported drinking at a high-risk level during screens administered at interview did not do so during events that involved pre-drinking.

Problems raised by pre-drinking do not relate only to its contribution to the total volume of alcohol consumed during any one drinking session. As the interview data considered here indicates, pre-drinking often involves people getting very drunk before travelling to a venue, sometimes taking alcohol with them in the car or on public transport. More careful monitoring of intoxication at entry to venues would serve multiple purposes. It would discourage heavy pre-drinking and problems associated with intoxication both in transit and in venues, and may also benefit venues by encouraging people to purchase drinks on site. Alongside better monitoring of intoxication on venue entry, efforts to reduce the price differential between off-premises and on-premises alcohol have potential to limit both pre-drinking and high-risk drinking among Victorian young adults.

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