

2. Key trends in alcohol consumption

2.1 Alcohol consumption in Australia and other countries

Information on levels and patterns of alcohol consumption is diverse, and it can be difficult to identify the key features for the purposes of monitoring trends in drinking and related harm, and the possible opportunities for intervention. Unfortunately, in Australia at the current time, some of the most significant and valuable data is not readily available to the public health field. (12) For example, alcohol sales data, while it is known to be collected and analysed by the alcohol beverage industry, is not available for the purposes of this paper, nor indeed is it easily accessed for public health research purposes in general. The Taskforce notes with some concern that the continuation of the most accessible data sets on alcohol consumption levels in Australia, collected and compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), is currently under review. Efforts are therefore urgently required to seek the continuation of these valuable data sets.

Per capita consumption of alcohol is an important measure from a public health perspective because it is 'to a considerable extent, related to the prevalence of heavy use, which in turn is associated with negative effects'. (13) Total per capita consumption of alcohol in Australia alcohol grew rapidly in the 1970s and has not returned to low levels since then; in 2007 it was estimated to be 9.88 litres of alcohol per capita (see Fig. 2). Among the different alcoholic beverage categories, there have been significant changes in per capita consumption over the past 70 years. Since peaking at over 6.4 litres of alcohol per capita in the mid-1970s, per capita consumption of beer has steadily declined and is now at a level similar to that of the late 1950s.

This reduction partly reflects changes in consumer tastes towards wine, and the increase in the availability of relatively low-priced wine. Consumption of wine has increased almost fourfold since the late 1940s, when intake was 0.77 litres of alcohol per capita. In 2005 wine consumption in Australia reached an all time record of 3.13 litres of alcohol per capita. When interpreting the trend in per capita consumption in Australia, it should be noted that the data does not take into account the ageing of the population; as people age, they generally consume less alcohol. Hence, as the Australian population continues to age over the coming decades, it is expected that per capita alcohol consumption will most likely decrease.

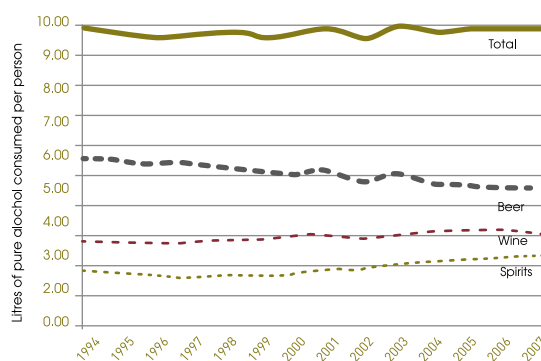


Figure 2: Apparent per capita consumption of alcohol (litres of alcohol), Australian persons aged 15+ years, 1994 to 2007 (years ending 30 June)

Source: ABS unpublished data and ABS 2008

Per capita consumption of alcohol in Australia is high by world standards. Australia is ranked within the top 30 highest alcohol-consuming nations, out of a total of 180 countries. Table 1 shows Australia's level of per capita alcohol consumption (9.02 litres of pure alcohol) and ranking (#30) compared to other selected countries in 2003. More recent estimates of per capita alcohol consumption for Australia (9.88 litres of pure alcohol in 2007) suggest that our international ranking is now likely to be even higher.



Table 1: Per capita consumption of alcohol by country and rank (out of 180 countries), selected countries*

RANK	COUNTRY	PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION†	RANK	COUNTRY	PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION†
1	Luxembourg	15.56	31	Greece	9.01
2	Ireland	13.69	33	USA	8.61
7	Germany	11.99	37	Italy	8.02
8	UK	11.75	42	Japan	7.59
10	Spain	11.68	52	South Africa	6.72
14	France	11.43	63	Sweden	5.96
20	Russian Federation	10.32	70	Thailand	5.59
23	Netherlands	9.68	74	China	5.20
24	New Zealand	9.68	120	Papua New Guinea	1.62
30	Australia	9.02	168	Indonesia	0.09

* Values are for various years before and including 2003

† Per capita alcohol consumption (litres of pure alcohol) among adults

Source: WHO 2008(14)

2.2 Drinking patterns among Australians

It is estimated that 83% of Australians are drinkers, and that 1.4 million Australians consume alcohol on a daily basis.(2) In 2007, males (10.8%) were almost twice as likely as females (5.5%) to drink daily.

Two in every five Australians drink on a weekly basis. However, there is a sizable proportion of the population (10.1% in 2007) who, for various reasons, have never drunk any alcohol (see Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of alcohol consumption, proportion of the population aged 14+ years, Australia, 1991 to 2007

FREQUENCY	1991	1993	1995	1998	2001	2004	2007
Daily	10.2	8.5	8.8	8.5	8.3	8.9	8.1
Weekly	41.0	39.9	35.2	40.1	39.5	41.2	41.3
Less	30.4	29.5	34.3	31.9	34.6	33.5	33.5
Ex-drinker	12.0	9.0	9.5	10.0	8.0	7.1	7.0
Never	6.5	13.0	12.2	9.4	9.6	9.3	10.1

Source: AIHW, National Drug Strategy Household Surveys,(2) various years

Almost three-quarters (72.6%) of Australians drink below levels that would incur long-term risk of harm. However, among young adults (aged 20–29 years), the prevalence of drinking at levels posing long-term risk of harm is significantly higher (16%) than among other age groups (see Fig. 3).

This pattern of drinking is the equivalent of consuming 29 or more standard drinks per week for males and 15 or more standard drinks per week for females. Among Australian teenagers in 2007, this drinking pattern was considerably higher among females (10.6%) than among males (7%).

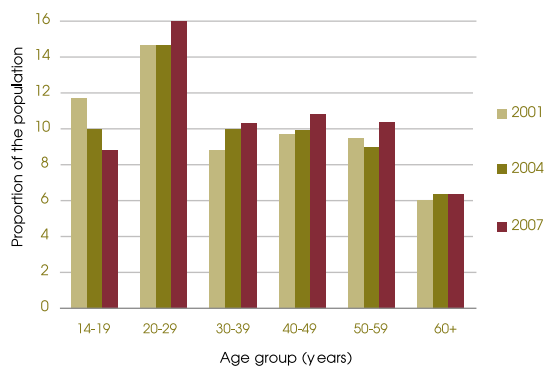


Figure 3: Drinking at risky/high risk of harm in the long term by age and year, proportion of the population aged 14+ years, Australia, 2007

Source: AIHW National Drug Strategy Household Survey(2)

While almost half (48.3%) of the Australian population drink at low risk levels, one in five Australians (20.4%) drink at short-term risky/high-risk levels at least once a month. This pattern of drinking is the equivalent of consuming seven or more standard drinks on any one day for males, and consuming five or more standard drinks on any one day for females. In short, this generally equates to drinking to the point of intoxication, or what is often termed as 'binge drinking'. This sort of drinking is most prevalent among adults aged 20-29 years, one-quarter (24.9%) of whom do so on at least a monthly basis. Overall, Australian males are more likely than females to drink at short-term risky/high-risk levels on regular (at least once a month) occasions (17.1% of females compared to 23.6% of males). However, among teenagers, females are more likely than males to regularly drink at levels of risky/high-risk of harm in the short term: 28.3% of female teenagers compared to 24.5% of male teenagers (see Figs. 4 and 5). Between 2001 and 2007 there were only slight changes in the prevalence of drinking at risky/high risk of harm in the short term across the age groups.

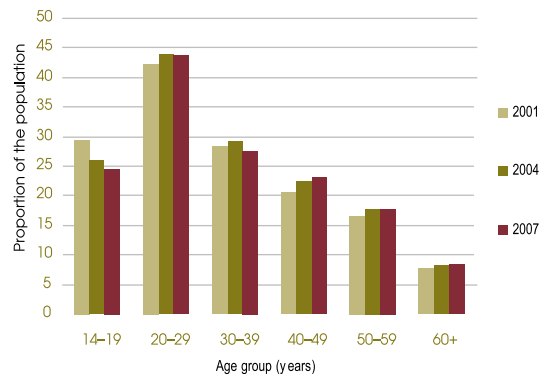


Figure 4: Monthly drinking at risky/high risk of harm in the short term* by age and year, proportion of the male population aged 14+ years, 2001 to 2007

Source: AIHW National Drug Strategy Household Survey(2)

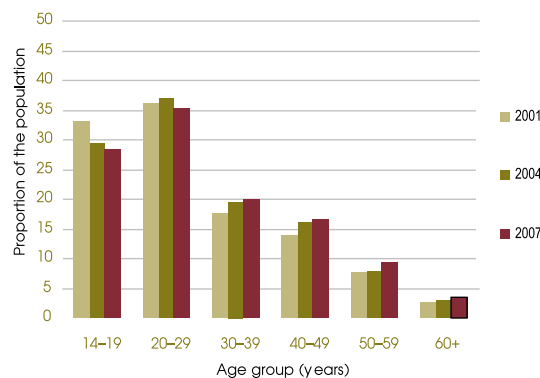


Figure 5: Monthly drinking at risky/high risk of harm in the short term* by age and year, proportion of the female population aged 14+ years, 2001 to 2007

Source: AIHW National Drug Strategy Household Survey(2)

(*Risky/high-risk drinking in the short term = seven or more standard drinks on any one day for males; five or more standard drinks on any one day for females.)



2.3 Product preferences

The most preferred types of alcoholic beverages among Australian female drinkers, in descending order, are bottled wine, bottled spirits and liqueurs, ready-to-drink beverages (RTDs) in a bottle and RTDs in a can. Over the 2001 to 2007 period, the preference for bottled wine had the greatest increase among females, growing from 57.3% to 63.8%. Among males, the most preferred types of alcoholic beverages, in descending order, are full-strength beer, bottled wine, bottled spirits and liqueurs, and RTDs in a can. Over the 2001 to 2007 period, the preference for RTDs in a can had the greatest increase among males, growing from 18.2% to 24.3% (see Figs. 9 and 10).

With regard to which types of alcoholic beverages are most commonly involved in the harmful consumption of alcohol, Stockwell *et al.* have estimated(16) that straight spirits (79.7%), alcoholic cider (78.9%), pre-mixed spirits (71.8%) and regular strength beer (72.6%) are the top four types of beverages consumed by Australian drinkers on days when they drank at risky/high-risk levels. Among 12- to 17-year-olds, the top three types of beverages are straight spirits (98.9%), regular beer (78.9%) and RTDs (76.7%). Spirit-based beverages held the highest market share, representing 62.7% of total alcohol consumption among this age group, with slightly more consumed as straight spirits than as RTDs.

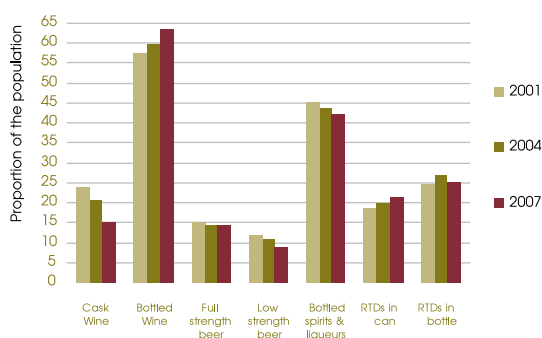


Figure 9: Preference for selected alcoholic beverages by year, proportion of the male population, Australia, 2001 to 2007

Source: AIHW(15)

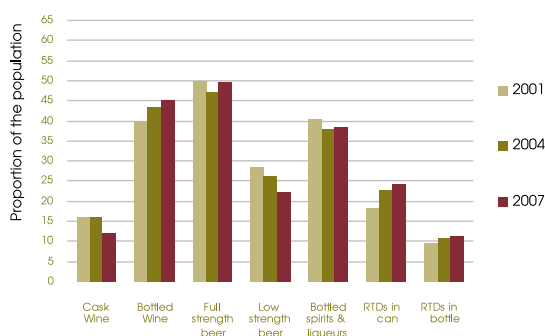


Figure 10: Preference for selected alcoholic beverages by year, proportion of the female population, Australia, 2001 to 2007

Source: AIHW(15)

2.4 Alcohol prices and consumer spending

The real price of alcohol in Australia has remained relatively low compared to other commodities, and in some cases has dropped. For example, a glass of wine costing \$1 in June 1999 dropped in real terms to \$0.90 in March 2008 (see Fig. 6).

The affordability of alcohol in Australia today is reflected in the fact that, on average, Australian households are spending proportionately less on alcohol nowadays compared to the amount they spent 20 years ago, despite total per capita consumption of alcohol changing little over the same period. The proportion of average weekly expenditure by Australian households on alcoholic beverages in 1984 was 3.4% (\$12.30), compared to 2.6% (\$23.32) in 2003–2004 (ABS 2005).⁽¹⁷⁾

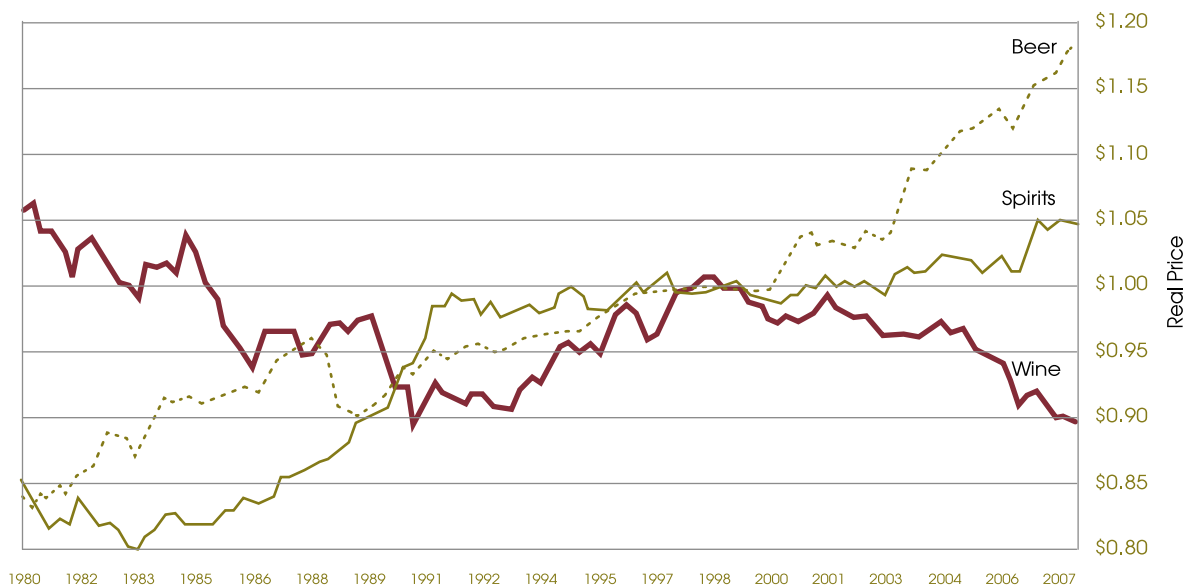


Figure 6: Prices of alcoholic beverages relative to other consumption (June 1999 \$1.00), Australia, September 1980 to March 2008

Source: ABS, various years