

Young people's opinions on alcohol and other drugs policy – National survey results

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Australia's largest ever survey of young people's opinions on drug and alcohol policy has found most young people are well-informed and well-placed to contribute to future policy direction, say researchers from UNSW Australia.

Researchers at UNSW's National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre surveyed over 2,300 Australians aged 16 to 25 via an online, anonymous, Australia-wide survey, on behalf of the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD).

Lead author of the study Kari Lancaster said that a key message emerging from the research was that young people saw themselves as active choice makers, in charge of their own bodies, who wanted access to reliable evidence and information so they could make informed decisions.

"What we found was that young people are keen to be part of policy deliberation, they are keen to have their voices heard and they are looking for ways they can be informed about their decisions and choice to use or not use drugs and alcohol," Kari Lancaster said.

Across a range of interventions this is not happening at the moment, she said. "They are looking for prevention programs, for example, that give accurate unbiased information and not scare tactics."

Kari Lancaster said that it was particularly important to engage young people in policy conversations around drugs and alcohol because a great deal of drug and alcohol policy is directed to young people but they are not often consulted.

"A lot of what they were saying showed a really sophisticated understanding of issues, for example around regulation, treatment and harm minimisation."

On other issues such as reduced trading hours for pubs and increasing the price of alcohol, where there was an evidence base, young people expressed less support, she said.

Co-author of the study, Professor Alison Ritter said "This shows the need to keep the dialogue open with young people to understand where they are coming from and significant caution in promoting these interventions is required".

Of the people surveyed, most:

- supported harm reduction measures - over two-thirds supported needle and syringe programs, regulated injecting facilities, and the availability of pill testing

- supported government intervention only when a person's drug use is causing harm to someone else, with a preference for education and treatment being the first line response by governments
- supported drug law reform (legalisation of personal use of illicit drugs) and for the regulation of new psychoactive substances, such as has occurred in New Zealand.
- opposed measures that are designed to restrict alcohol availability , including restricted trading hours, increased prices and reduced numbers of outlets selling alcohol.

The survey found differences between the opinions of those who had used drugs and/or alcohol and those who had never done so, but these differences were less predictive of opinions than attitudes towards alcohol and other drugs, such as beliefs about the risks and benefits of alcohol and other drug use.

Views also differed based on gender, age, and geographical location. Generally speaking, being younger, female, from a rural area or less experienced with alcohol or drug use was associated with more support for restrictive measures.

The research was funded by the Australian National Council on Drugs. A full copy of the report is available at: www.ancd.org.au

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