



No.77

Alcohol & Disorder in the Australian Community: Part II — Perpetrators

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Trends and Issues number 76 showed that it was common for people to report that they were victims of alcohol-related disorder. In this second part we see that around 17 per cent of a national sample report that they have committed some form of alcohol-related disorder or crime in the past 12 months.

These people tend to be young and male, and report either consuming alcohol at harmful levels or being binge drinkers. The data show a strong overlap between being a victim and a perpetrator, suggesting that prevention strategies need to recognise similarities and relationship between victims and perpetrators.

Within this strategy an important component will be the promotion of responsible drinking styles. However, more accurate and detailed data collections are required to better inform public policies.

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Excessive use of alcohol has been associated with a variety of anti-social and criminal activities ranging from homicide to low-level forms of incivility. In a previous Australian Institute of Criminology publication (see Makkai 1997) we found that the experience of alcohol-related disorder was not uncommon in Australian society. A significant minority of the community reported that they had experienced a range of alcohol-related disorder in the 12 months previous to the surveys. Economic analyses have shown that the consequences of alcohol abuse are extremely costly to both the private and state sectors (Collins & Laplsey 1992).

The link between alcohol and crime is by no means certain; many people who consume alcohol do not commit crimes of any sort. Some argue that abuse of alcohol and aggression coexist and are not causally related. Two theories that have been proposed to account for the purported link between alcohol and crime is the disinhibition model and the social learning model. The former model is based on the pharmacological properties of alcohol to lower criminal and other inhibitions that normally restrain individuals from antisocial behaviour. The latter model argues that individuals learn to behave in certain ways while intoxicated, knowing that such behaviour will not be condemned (Barnett & Fagan 1993).

In terms of empirical data on alcohol and crime, estimates vary and few jurisdictions routinely collect data on alcohol relatedness of non-alcohol-specific offences (Atkinson 1992). This report uses data from two national surveys to examine the extent to which individuals self-report committing alcohol-related disorderly activities (see Makkai & McAllister [forthcoming (a)] for more details). In other words, the focus is on those individuals who are perpetrators rather than victims of such activity. However, at the end of the report, the extent to which individuals self-report having been both a victim and perpetrator are examined.

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Prevalence of Disorderly Behaviour

The data come from two national surveys conducted under the auspices of the National Drug Strategy in 1993 and 1995.¹ Details of these are provided in Trends and Issues paper number 76.

Respondents were asked the extent to which they had committed any of six alcohol-related incidents in the past 12 months. Not unexpectedly the vast majority reported that they never committed any of the disorders in 1993 and in 1995. However, Table 1 indicates that in 1995 while intoxicated by alcohol:

- around 2 per cent have physically abused somebody;
- around 3 per cent have damaged property;
- around 10 per cent have been drink-drivers;
- around 8 per cent have verbally abused somebody.

Two further disorders were asked about while either being intoxicated or with others who were intoxicated. In these circumstances around 2 per cent reported stealing property and 6 per cent self-reported creating a public disturbance or nuisance.

The data show that respondents admit to higher levels of lower level disorder such as creating a public nuisance and verbal abuse than for more serious crimes such as physical assault and stealing and damaging property. This is consistent with an earlier report on victims (see Makkai 1997) which showed that it is low levels of disorder that people are more likely to report experiencing. There is debate in the literature on whether low-level disorder results in more

serious crime. Aggregate data show a strong correlation between lower levels of disorder, fear of crime, and more serious crime (Skogan 1990). Given this evidence, prevention strategies need to be directed at this broader level of disorder and incivility to forestall possible escalation to more serious offences. The total summary line in Table 1 indicates that almost two in every ten respondents self-report that they have committed some form of disorder in the past 12 months. Of those who have engaged in an act of disorder almost half report that this only occurred on one occasion for one disorder in the previous 12 months. But of the remainder, acts of disorder have occurred on more than one occasion in the past 12 months.

Socioeconomic Risk Factors and Disorderly Behaviour

Criminological research has demonstrated that crime is associated with a range of socioeconomic characteristics. These include being

male, being young, living in an urban environment, unmarried and from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. By having some understanding of the correlates of criminal behaviour it may be possible to more effectively target prevention initiatives. Table 2 examines the relative risks of a number of socioeconomic characteristics on self-reported alcohol related disorder. Given the small sample size and few differences between the 1993 and 1995 surveys, we pool the data. The values shown are the odds of committing a particular offence for that characteristic. Thus when the odds are below one it means the likelihood of this factor contributing to the offence are reduced while odds greater than one increase the likelihood of the offence occurring. Odds close to the value of one indicate that the factor is not a significant risk factor associated with the behaviour.

There are consistent age and gender effects. Females are significantly less likely to report committing alcohol-related disorders than

Table 1: Perpetrators of alcohol-related disorder^(a) (row percentages)

	Never only	Once	2 or more times	(n)
• Physically abused someone when affected by alcohol				
1993	96	2	2	(3342)
1995	98	1	1	(3706)
• Damaged property when affected by alcohol				
1993	97	2	1	(3342)
1995	97	2	1	(3707)
• Stolen property when you were affected by alcohol or while with others who were affected				
1993	98	1	1	(3342)
1995	99	1	<1	(3711)
• Created a public disturbance or nuisance while affected by alcohol or while with others who were affected				
1993	94	3	3	(3336)
1995	95	3	2	(3712)
• Driven a motor vehicle after drinking too much alcohol				
1993	88	6	6	(3334)
1995	90	5	5	(3730)
• Verbally abused someone when you were affected by alcohol				
1993	90	5	5	(3335)
1995	92	4	4	(3709)
Summary across all six disorders				
1993	82	8	10	(3500)
1995	83	9	8	(3849)

(a) Exact question wording was "In the past 12 months, how often have you...?"

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, weighted samples.

1. The data utilised in this report and Trends and Issues No. 76 were made available by the Social Science Data Archive, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. The data were originally collected for the Commonwealth Department of Family Services and Health. Neither the collector of the original data nor the Archive bears any responsibility for the analyses or interpretation presented here.

men. This is particularly the case for damaging and stealing property. In terms of age, except for drink driving, the likelihood of committing disorders decreases with age. Adolescents are consistently more likely to be involved in acts of disorder than older people:

- they are twice as likely as those aged 20 to 29 years to damage property;
- they are 1.8 times more likely than 20 to 29-year-olds to be involved in public disturbances.

Not unexpectedly, adolescents aged 14 to 19 years are less likely to report drinking and driving than those aged 30 to 39 years. However, they are somewhat more likely to drink and drive than those aged over 40 years.² Amongst the 20 to 40 year age group those in their twenties are 1.5 times more likely to drink and drive than those in their thirties.

Both educational qualifications and geography appear to have little to do with alcohol-related offending. Those with post secondary qualifications are somewhat less likely to report physically abusing someone when intoxicated and those who live in a capital city are somewhat more likely to report being involved in public disturbances when drinking alcohol. However, both measures are relatively crude indicators and more detailed information is required before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

There are consistent effects for marriage. Those who are married are significantly less likely to be involved in alcohol-related disorder other than damaging and stealing property. Thus the likelihood of physically or verbally abusing an individual, creating a public disturbance or driving while intoxicated with alcohol for married individuals is almost half that of non-married respondents. It

2. Unfortunately it is not possible to examine the reporting patterns of those aged 18 and 19 years as the 1993 survey did not collect age in individual years.

Table 2: Socioeconomic risk factors associated with alcohol-related offending^(a)

	Physically abused odds	Property damaged odds	Property stolen odds	Public disturbance odds	Verbally abused odds	Drink driving odds
Female	.36	.28	.18	.39	.43	.37
Aged 14-19 yrs	5.13	17.61	9.59	27.64	8.77	1.55
Aged 20-29 yrs	4.23	8.41	7.33	15.67	6.18	3.00
Aged 30-39 yrs	1.91	3.36	4.25	4.20	2.20	2.06
Post secondary qualifications ^(b)	.51					
Married	.45			.58	.66	.54
Lives in a capital city				1.65		
Paid employment ^(c)			.65	1.48	1.50	2.98
(n)	(6614)	(6614)	(6618)	(6615)	(6612)	(6636)

(a) Only significant odds values are shown. See text for explanation of odds values.

The model controls for the year of the survey.

(b) Defined as those with technical or university education.

(c) Defined as working full-time or part-time in the paid labour market.

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample.

is important to recognise that marriage could well be a substitute for other factors: greater economic and social stability and lower probability of being out and about at certain times.

Those in paid employment are more likely to report being involved in public disturbances, verbally abusing others and drinking and driving. However, those in paid employment are less likely to report stealing property while intoxicated. These findings suggest complex relationships may be at work. On the one hand those who work may have the financial resources to be out and about and in situations like clubs and bars where the opportunity for such activity is higher. Similarly, they may be more likely to use a car. On the other hand their financial situation means that they are less likely to be involved in other kinds of activity such as stealing property. Clearly a purpose-built survey that addresses these complex dynamics in alcohol-related offending is required before any definitive answers can be provided.

disputed. Around three-quarters of adults currently drink alcohol and the majority are regular drinkers consuming alcohol at least once a week (Makkai & McAllister [forthcoming] (b)). Just over one in ten individuals report that they no longer consume alcohol while another one in ten say that they have never had more than one glass of alcohol. Using data collected in the surveys on how often the respondent drank alcohol and how much they consumed on a usual drinking day it is possible to classify individuals into five different drinking types — harmful/hazardous, binge drinking, heavy drinking, moderate drinking and non-drinkers.³

3. The harmful/hazardous group includes males who consume five or more drinks on seven days a week, or seven or more drinks on four to six days a week, or more than 12 drinks on two to three days a week. As the levels of harmful drinking are lower for women, those in the harmful/hazardous group are defined as women who consume three or more drinks at least four days a week, or five or more drinks on two to three days a week or more than six drinks twice a week or more often. Binge drinkers are defined as males who drink more than seven drinks but once a week at most and females who drink more than five drinks but once a week at most. Males who usually drink five or more drinks and females who usually drink three or more drinks are classified as heavy drinkers. Moderate drinkers are those who drink lesser amounts than those defined above. The non-drinking category groups those who have tried alcohol and those who no longer drink.

Alcohol Use and Self-reported Offending

The prevalence of alcohol in Australia society has never been

Figure 1 indicates that one-quarter of the community report that they are non-drinkers and just over half are moderate drinkers. Just over one in ten respondents report that they are heavy drinkers while 5 per cent are binge drinkers and 4 per cent are harmful/hazardous drinkers. Figure 2 presents the relative risks of committing various disorders for the different styles of drinking. A number of conclusions can be drawn:

- harmful drinkers, in the main, have much higher odds of reporting that they commit various alcohol-related disorders than other types of drinkers;
- harmful and binge drinkers have greater odds of reporting various social disorders than heavy, moderate or non-drinkers;
- harmful, binge and heavy drinkers have much higher odds of reported involvement in public disturbances, verbally abusing others and drinking and driving than being involved in property crime and physical abuse;
- the likelihood of drinking and driving is very high for harmful and binge drinkers.

Propensity to Disorder

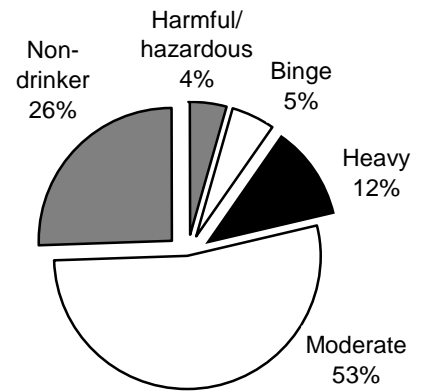
Criminological research indicates that some offenders commit a range of offences indicating a general propensity for disorderly conduct. To what extent is alcohol-related disorder a general feature of a very small group in the community? Such behaviour has important ramifications for public policy. The prevention paradox is that resources devoted to one group will not solve the problem — half the problem will remain. In addition, it is more than likely that different prevention strategies will be required for the different types of offenders.

Using data provided on the number of times a person self-

reports committing each of the disorders we can create a typology of offenders taking into account both their propensity to commit repeat disorder as well as their propensity to commit a range of different forms of disorder (see Makkai & McAllister [forthcoming (b)] for details on the creation of the typology). As the number of individuals who self-report drink driving is much higher than for the other forms of alcohol-related disorder, Table 3 shows the extent of the offending for all the disorders including drink driving while the second part of the table shows the extent of offending excluding drink driving. When drink driving is excluded the proportion of non-offenders in the past 12 months increases by 6 per cent.

Table 3 shows that 5754 individuals reported that they had not committed any alcohol-related incident in the past 12 months. Of the 1267 respondents who self-report perpetrating an alcohol-related disorder 411 had committed a single incident once in the past 12 months (single offenders). A further 302 reported they had committed only one type of incident but on repeat occasions (repeat offenders). Three hundred and thirty-one offenders reported that they had committed multiple offences on a number of occasions (repeat multiple offenders). At the other extreme there were 223 individuals who had committed between three and six of the alcohol-related offences six or more times. Thus around 3 per cent of

Figure 1: Drinking styles



Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample, n=7350.

the sample are chronic offenders of a range of alcohol-related disorders.

Further analyses of the typology in terms of the types of disorder committed indicate that chronic offenders are least likely to be drink drivers and most likely to self-report damaging and stealing property. Thus 19 per cent of those who had been intoxicated while driving in the past 12 months were chronic alcohol-related offenders. In comparison 74 per cent of those who had damaged property and 76 per cent of those who stolen property in the past 12 months were chronic offenders.

Socioeconomic Risk Factors

Table 4 examines a range of possible risk factors associated with different types of offending. A number of observations can be made from the data, however, we need to keep in mind that these risk factors may be surrogates for other factors. For example, the fact that single people are more likely

Table 3: Typology of alcohol-related offending

	All types		Excluding drink driving	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
<i>In the past 12 months:</i>				
No offending	5754	(82)	6205	(88)
Single offence, no repeat (single offenders)	411	(6)	255	(4)
Single offence, repeat (repeat offenders)	302	(4)	172	(2)
Multiple offences, repeat offending (repeat multiple offenders)	331	(5)	251	(4)
Chronic offending	223	(3)	146	(2)

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample.

to self-report being repeat multiple and chronic offenders may have less to do with their marital status and more to do with their likelihood of being young, fewer family obligations, and more disposable income. Better data are required. Given this caveat there are some interesting trends that are worthy of further investigations. These trends include:

- in terms of repeat multiple and chronic offenders there is little difference between those aged 14-19 years and those aged 20-29 years;
- those who are unemployed are more likely to report being repeat multiple and chronic offenders;
- there are no differences in offending rates between capital and non-capital cities.

Alcohol consumption

Is it the case that the individual's style of alcohol consumption is associated with their propensity for disorder? Table 5 focuses on this issue. There is a clear and significant association between individual consumption and disorder. Both binge and harmful/hazardous drinkers are more likely to report being repeat multiple and chronic offenders. Policy initiatives that focus on lowering levels of alcohol consumption for these groups could well result in less alcohol-related disorder.

Perpetrators and Victims

Criminological research has shown that offenders and victims are very similar in social and personal characteristics (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990, p. 17). This relationship does not tend to vary by gender although it is considerably stronger amongst the young (Makkai & McAllister [forthcoming] (a)). The risk factors associated with offending noted above—being male, being young, being single, having income, high alcohol consumption—are also characteristics found to be associated with being a victim (see Makkai 1997).

Table 4: Socioeconomic characteristics and propensity for alcohol-related disorder (row percentages)

	None	Single	Repeat	Repeat multiple	Chronic
Age groups					
Aged 14-19 years	72	7	3	9	9
Aged 20-29 years	65	11	6	11	8
Aged 30+ years	88	4	4	2	1
Gender					
Male	75	7	6	7	5
Female	88	4	3	2	2
Marital status					
Single	67	10	5	10	8
Married	87	5	4	3	1
Education					
University qualification	81	8	4	6	2
Post secondary qualification	79	8	6	5	3
Secondary/primary qualification	84	4	4	4	3
Employment status					
Non-manual occupation	79	8	6	5	2
Manual occupation	73	8	7	8	5
Unemployed	71	5	6	10	9
Domestic duties	93	2	2	2	1
Retired	95	2	2	*	*
Geographical location					
Capital city resident	82	6	4	5	3
Non-capital city resident	83	6	4	5	3

* sample size is too small to provide estimates.

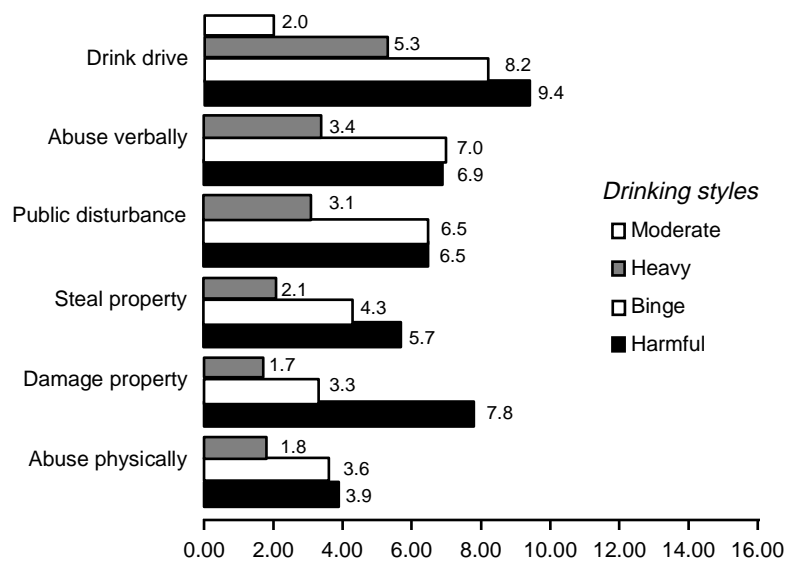
Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample.

Given the similarities between the two groups are those who report being offenders also victims? Table 6 shows the extent of the overlap.

Of those who report that they have not offended in the past 12

months, 61 per cent report that they have not been a victim in the past 12 months and a further 12 per cent report that they have only been a victim of alcohol-related disorder once in the past 12

Figure 2: Probability of committing disorder for different types of drinkers*



*The models control for the socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents. The values represent odds. See text for further details.

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled weighted data, n=7350.

Table 5: Alcohol consumption and propensity for alcohol-related disorder

	Non-drinker	Moderate	Heavy	Binge	Harmful/hazardous
Propensity for disorder	%	%	%	%	%
None	94	86	63	45	57
Single	2	6	13	12	7
Repeat	1	4	9	9	12
Multiple repeat	2	3	10	17	14
Chronic	2	2	5	17	10

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample.

months. A very different picture emerges for chronic and multiple repeat offenders. The vast majority report being victims. More importantly, of multiple repeat offenders, 80 per cent have either experienced multiple repeat or chronic victimisation. Of chronic offenders, 83 per cent report multiple repeat or chronic victimisation in the past 12 months. This high overlap in self-reported victimisation and offending is a common finding within criminological research generally. It has profound implications for preventative strategies — the issue of victimisation cannot be addressed without acknowledgment that they are also likely to be perpetrators.

Conclusion

Although these data have shown that the self-reported perpetration of alcohol-related disorder ranges from 2 to 12 per cent, the data source is limited in terms of the types of information collected. Without more detailed information on the nature of the offences, where they occurred, and the

offender’s attitudes and values, we are unable to address key issues about the nature and form of alcohol-related offending. It is also not possible to address the complex issue of the connection between drugs and crime in Australian society without more systematic data collection that incorporates key criminological variables upon which effective public policy can be based.

There are important policy implications from the findings that offenders and victims of alcohol-related disorder tend to overlap. Strategies designed to reduce the probability of being a victim need to be cognisant of the fact that the target group is highly likely to be offenders as well. As these kinds of behaviour tend to be concentrated within specific settings, places and socioeconomic groups, scarce resources can be carefully targeted and their impact evaluated to determine models of best practice. In particular, disorder appears to be concentrated amongst young males. It is this group that are also vulnerable to high unemployment and suicide. This suggests that early childhood prevention

Table 6: Co-existence of victims and perpetrators of alcohol-related disorder (row percentages)

	Victims				
	none	single	repeat	multiple repeat	chronic
Perpetrators					
none	61	12	6	14	7
single	17	11	13	28	31
repeat	40	5	15	22	18
multiple repeat	55	5	9	31	49
chronic	68	4	6	16	67

Source: 1993 and 1995 NDS National Household Surveys, pooled file weighted sample.

strategies to provide young males with general life skills would be beneficial. Finally, the close association between alcohol consumption and offending may require different approaches. Whereas harmful drinkers may be more suitable for treatment, binge drinking may be more amenable to changes in environmental factors.

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