

Heavy drinkers consuming more than half of all alcohol

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La Trobe University researchers have found the heaviest drinking 10 per cent of Australians drink over half the alcohol consumed in Australia, downing an average of six standard drinks per day.

Published today in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, the study also found Australia's heaviest drinkers are more likely to consume cheap alcohol, such as beer and cask wine.

The study was led by La Trobe's Centre for Alcohol Policy and Research (CAPR), and funded by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE).

Lead author from La Trobe University, Dr. Michael Livingston, said the findings are concerning.

"We found that the heaviest drinking 10 per cent of Australians drink 54.4 per cent of all alcohol consumed in Australia", Dr. Livingston said.

"This group are drinking well above the NHMRC's low-risk drinking guidelines, which not only jeopardises their health, but has negative flow-on effects for families and communities."

Dr. Livingston said the study also showed that heavy drinkers are more likely to be middle-aged men living in rural and regional areas.

"We know that [rural areas](#) have disproportionately high levels of consumption and alcohol-related harm compared to [metropolitan areas](#)."

"We found that 16 per cent of this heavy-drinking subset live in outer regional and [remote areas](#), compared with 10 per cent of other drinkers."

The study also found that the heaviest drinkers were more likely to drink cask wine and beer as their main drinks, and they were more likely to drink at home.

Significantly, cheap alcohol is the standout common factor among Australia's heaviest drinkers.

"Surprisingly, we found drinking patterns didn't correlate strongly with other socio-demographic factors such as employment status and neighbourhood disadvantage," Dr. Livingston said.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn said the CAPR study reinforces the important role of regulating alcohol prices as a population-wide measure to reduce alcohol harm.

"This research provides important evidence that addressing cheap alcohol is a highly targeted way to reduce harm among Australia's heaviest drinkers," Mr Thorn said.

This study further supports governments overseeing or considering introducing a floor price on alcohol, which is one of the reforms underway in the Northern Territory.

"The trend towards packaged liquor sales continues apace, with more than 80 per cent of the alcohol consumed in Australia now sold as packaged liquor," Mr Thorn said.

The alcohol industry maximises profits through this business model, which includes discounting, special offers and other point-of-sale promotions like shopper-dockets.

"This is concerning as packaged liquor stores are linked with high rates of assaults, domestic violence, chronic disease and road crashes," he said.

Mr Thorn said chain superstores such as Woolworths' Dan Murphy's contribute to this harm, particularly in relation to the risk of trauma.

"An earlier study found that each additional chain outlet is associated with a 35.3 per cent increase in intentional injuries (including assaults,

stabbing, or shooting) and a 22 per cent increase in unintentional injuries (including falls, crushes, or being struck by an object)," Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn said the superstore model enables Woolworths to sell as much alcohol as possible, as cheaply as possible, to the most vulnerable people in our country.

"Clearly government has a responsibility to address the problem of cheap alcohol by fixing the way alcohol is taxed, introducing floor prices and halting the proliferation of harm-causing packaged [alcohol](#) sales," Mr Thorn said.

Data for the study came from the 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey and the 2013 International Alcohol Control Study.

More information: *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1753-6405.12901](https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12901)

Provided by La Trobe University

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