

Alcohol-related harm, psychological distress, and coercive control among young Australians

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Introduction: Coercive control is a serious and prevalent form of intimate partner violence (IPV). While alcohol use and IPV co-occur at high rates, nationally representative Australian evidence on the relationship between alcohol-related harm and coercive control among young people is limited. This study examined associations between alcohol-related harm, psychological distress, and coercive control victimisation among young adults, and whether these differed by gender.

Method: Data were drawn from Wave 8 of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) K-cohort, restricted to those aged 18-19 years with at least one romantic relationship (n=1,350). Coercive control (past 12-months) was measured using eight behavioural items. Logistic regression models examined relationship between control and alcohol-related harm, and psychological distress (Kessler-10), as independent variables, adjusting for gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic disadvantage. 51% identified as female.

Results: A quarter of young Australians (24.5%) reported coercive control (past 12-months). Alcohol-related harm was significantly correlated with all coercive control behaviours, the strongest associations for gaslighting ($r=0.17$), isolation from family/friends ($r=0.16$), and blaming ($r=0.15$). In regression models, alcohol-related harm was significantly associated with coercive control (OR 1.40), while simply drinking alcohol was not. Psychological distress was associated with coercive control (OR 1.05), with those in the very high distress category at three times the odds of victimisation. Gender did not moderate associations.

Conclusions: One in four partnered or previously partnered young Australians reported experiencing coercive control. Alcohol-related harm was related to coercive control, suggesting that harmful drinking patterns rather than consumption per se is linked to risk. There were no differences in associations by genders.

Implications: Findings highlight the need to educate young people about the link between IPV and harmful drinking patterns. Results support routine coercive control screening in generalist health settings frequented by young people, including general practice, urgent care clinics, and university health services.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) in partnership with the Australian Government Department of Social Services. The findings and views reported in this abstract are those of the author and should not be attributed to AIFS or the Department of Social Services. The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.*