

Distress, dissatisfaction, and drinking: the psychological influences on Australian adolescents' alcohol consumption

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Introduction: Adolescent alcohol consumption has declined in Australia, yet the cause of this is not understood. Qualitative studies have highlighted that some adolescents are reducing drinking because they are increasingly concerned with their future health and financial wellbeing. Alongside this, some data shows steadily increasing levels of psychological distress among adolescents. No quantitative studies have examined how trends in wellbeing and mental health are related to the decline in alcohol consumption.

Method: Data from 15-year-old respondents were extracted from 18 waves (2002-2019) of an Australian cohort study. Logistic regression analyses were used to determine whether their satisfaction with their life, employment opportunities, financial situation, free time, home, community, neighbourhood, safety and health and psychological distress significantly predicted any alcohol consumption in the past year, and whether these relationships changed over time.

Key Findings OR Results: The prevalence of drinking among 15-year-olds has significantly declined from 50% in 2002 to 8% in 2019. Higher psychological distress was significantly associated with youth alcohol consumption ($OR=1.05$, $p<0.001$), as were lower levels of satisfaction with one's life ($OR=0.86$, $p=0.008$) and financial situation ($OR=0.91$, $p<0.001$). These relationships did not significantly alter across the period examined; however, distress and life satisfaction trends did diverge from drinking trends.

Discussions and Conclusions: Higher psychological distress and lower satisfaction with one's life and finances all increase the likelihood of adolescent alcohol consumption. Life satisfaction appears to be relatively stable across time, while psychological distress has increased. While adolescent drinking has declined, findings do not suggest that distress or dissatisfaction significantly contributed to this decline.

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