

Survey shows many young people are drinking less alcohol in lockdown

9 September 2020, by Monica Barratt, Adam Winstock, Jason Ferris



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Lockdown and other public health measures to halt the spread of COVID-19 haven't driven us all to drink (and other drugs), as many [news stories](#) would have us believe.

Our [Global Drug Survey](#) released today, which includes replies from more than 55,000 participants, shows a mixed response.

We found some people are increasing their use of alcohol and cannabis, mainly due to boredom, which [previous research](#) has found.

But other people have reduced their [drinking](#) and [drug use](#) now festivals, nightclubs or parties are no longer an option—a trend that has so far gained less attention.

About the Global Drug Survey

The survey provides a snapshot of changed patterns of alcohol and [drug](#) use, drug markets and other drug-related trends during the pandemic.

People from 171 countries responded to the web survey, which was available in ten languages. It was live for seven weeks, spanning May and June 2020.

This report, based on 55,811 responses, includes data from 11 countries where we had the most respondents: Austria, Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.

People reflected on how their alcohol and other drug use had changed in the past month (April to May) compared to February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and lockdown restrictions implemented in most countries.

Multiple stories on drinking during COVID-19

The Australian sample of 1,889 people consisted mainly of younger adults (73% were younger than 35). The sample spanned Australian jurisdictions, including 40% from Victoria.

We asked people about how often they drank alcohol, how much they drank in a typical session, and how often they binge-drink, defined as drinking five or more drinks in a session.

Some 39% reported drinking more compared to before COVID-19, whereas a similar number (37%) were drinking less. A total of 17% reported drinking at the same frequency and quantity, while 7% reported a mix of effects.

This challenges the existing narratives that people are mainly drinking more alcohol during lockdown. While we acknowledge many people did drink more, our results showed a varied response.

What's happening for people who drank less?

Of the Australian people who reported drinking less, this was largely due to a reduction in [binge drinking](#).

Indeed, 37% reported reductions in binge drinking compared with 30% reporting increases in binge

drinking, while the remaining 34% reported their binge drinking remained the same.

Looking at the reasons why people in the Australian sample reduced their drinking, the most common reasons were they had less contact with people they normally drink with (77%), less access to the settings where they usually drink (67%) and they don't like drinking at home or when not out with friends (50%).

It is also worth noting large proportions of the group that drank less reported improvements in aspects of their lives as a result. These include 52% reporting improved finances and 42% reporting improved physical health.

And what about people who drank more?

A total of 39% of the Australians in our sample reported drinking more often, a greater quantity per session, and/or more frequent bingeing.

Drinkers who reported having a diagnosed mental health condition (typically depression or anxiety) were more likely to report increasing their drinking compared to February, before COVID-19 restrictions.

Australians in our sample who increased drinking noted worse outcomes for [physical health](#) (55%), mental health (36%), work or study performance where relevant (30%) and finances (26%).

The negative impact on physical and mental health among this group was profound, highlighting the risk of choosing alcohol as a coping strategy for stress, anxiety and depression.

Use of other drugs

A total of 49% of the Australians we surveyed who used cannabis in the past 12 months said their use had increased compared to February, including 25% who reported their cannabis use had increase "a lot." The main reasons given for this increase were similar to alcohol: boredom (66%) and having more time (64%).

Over half (55%) of people who used cannabis

alone also reported they are now more likely to consume cannabis alone compared to before COVID-19.

Of those who used illegal drugs in the previous 12 months, MDMA, cocaine and ketamine were the most likely to have decreased since before the pandemic. Lack of access to nightclubs, festivals and parties was the most common reason for the change.

Drug market shifts were reported too: including 51% of the Australian respondents saying general availability of illegal drugs had decreased, 29% reporting increases in drug prices, and 17% reporting decreased drug purity.

What are the implications?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide ranging impacts on substance use. For some people, who would otherwise have spent a lot of time socializing and working with the public, they may now have more available time and alcohol and other drug use may fill this time.

For others, the lack of access to festivals, nightclubs, parties and other social settings where drinking and drug use typically occurs has resulted in a reduction in binge drinking and the use of drugs like MDMA, cocaine and ketamine.

For some people, the pandemic may have silver linings, as they have reduced their substance use and report better life outcomes.

However, we need to be mindful to support young people when restrictions lift, to encourage people to return to their socializing and partying in a safe way.

There is a risk people whose drinking and drug tolerance has reduced may consume too much and be at risk of overdose when life returns to normal over the coming months.

Australians who would like to drink less can get personalized, anonymous feedback on their drinking via our free Drinks Meter app. You can learn more and download it from

www.drinksmeter.com

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