



# Alcohol Education Tailored for Youth: What We Heard

## Key Messages

- Youth shared their perception that Canada's current Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines do not align with youth drinking culture.
- Youth-targeted alcohol education ads need to focus on providing facts.
- Youth use alcohol and partying with their friends as a reward system after working hard.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study were to build upon knowledge products previously produced by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) and develop tailored public education resources to support Canadian youth in making informed, evidence-based decisions about the use of alcohol. The specific goal was to learn how to develop knowledge products that resonate with young people to address the following points:

- The harms associated with alcohol use;
- Harm reduction strategies youth can take to reduce their risk of experiencing these harms; and
- The association between alcohol consumption and the risk of developing breast cancer.

## Approach

A World Café approach was initially planned for this study. However, due to unanticipated constraints in recruiting youth and to accommodate the schedules of participants, we had to modify our method to two online focus groups. Focus groups still allowed us to gather rich insights into young people's perspectives on a series of topics within a group setting that encouraged discussion among the young people. In total, the sample included 16 youth from 19 to 25 years old from different provinces across Canada. Each focus group was two hours long and was conducted virtually in February 2021.

The original World Café facilitation guide and table topics remained unchanged. The topics included Canada's current Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, alcohol consumption and youth culture, young people's use of alcohol to cope with stress, strategies for messaging about alcohol-related risks, and best approaches to messaging about the association between alcohol consumption and breast cancer. Discussion

### Key Question Areas

- Canada's Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines
- Drinking and youth culture
- Alcohol and coping strategies
- Harm reduction messages about alcohol
- Association between alcohol and breast cancer



of each topic lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. Participants received a copy of the consent form in advance and were required to give oral consent before participating in the focus groups. In appreciation for their time, each participant received a \$100 honorarium after the focus groups.

All the data collected from the focus groups were transcribed, coded and analyzed in MAXQDA using an inductive thematic approach.

## Previous CCSA Material Examined

Alcohol awareness resources previously developed by CCSA and shown below were presented to participants for their opinions and suggestions. They were asked what kinds of information materials (e.g., brochures, social media campaigns) about alcohol they would like to see CCSA develop for a youth audience and the messages they thought were most important for them.



## What We Heard

### *Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines and Youth Drinking Culture*

Awareness of Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines varied among the young people consulted. However, participants consistently felt that “low-risk drinking guidelines don't really align” with how they drink and with youth drinking culture generally. As one youth said,

“I feel that the majority of youth are not really aware of low-risk drinking guidelines; even if they are, they constantly feel more prejudiced to drink excessively at some situations ... peer pressure that forces them to go and exceed the low-risk drinking guidelines.”

Several youths went so far as to tell us that “my experience is that [young] people are aware of them [the guidelines], but I think they're totally out of touch and don't go by them whatsoever.”

In line with this thinking, findings from the focus groups highlight youth “invincibility” – their feeling that the long-term risks of consuming alcohol are not relevant to them. As one youth explained, “I think there's a general feeling amongst young people of being invincible and being just in general, kind of risky with their health.” This sentiment was echoed by other youth: “when we're younger, we almost think we're invincible. So, we don't really care about the effects on us.”

In today's youth culture, young people commonly report binge drinking (Chung, Creswell, Bachrach, Clark, & Martin, 2018; Martinotti et al., 2017). Focus group participants confirmed that many youth go out with the intention of “drinking to get drunk.” These quotes summarize this phenomenon:



“I feel like when you’re kind of in a setting where drinking is kind of the norm, you kind of internalize that norm that it’s the weekend, so we have to get blackout drunk. It just becomes a normal thing.”

“For me, when I was growing up, alcohol is like you’re getting drunk, you’re getting messed up, you’re going to have a good time, you’re going to let go.”

If the explicit intention of youth drinking is to drink until intoxicated, this intention is contrary to the very nature of Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines. “If you’re following those guidelines, you’re not going to get drunk. So, I feel like they [youth] kind of disregard it because it doesn’t really align with what they’re trying to do when they go out.” Further, youth drinking patterns are more sporadic in nature. As one youth told us, “I don’t drink on normal nights. When I would drink on a Friday night, I would go and go well above excess.” This finding has implications for how youth understand Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines and how they might modify their alcohol consumption patterns.

Alcohol researchers commonly raise the issue of what constitutes a “standard drink” when discussing alcohol drinking guidelines, as well as the question of whether people use a standard drink to measure their alcohol consumption (Osiewy, Stockwell, Zhao, Thompson, & Moore, 2015; Wettlaufer, 2017). The concept of a standard drink often gets talked about on campuses during alcohol awareness activities. One participant who works on campus as a student health promoter told us that “one of the activities we do during orientation and when we’re getting high numbers of incoming students is we get them to measure out what they think a standard drink is by just pouring it into a Solo Cup. And it’s always very, very off.”

It became evident during our discussions that some youth understand in theory “what the concept of a standard drink is, but then when it’s kind of in practice, it gets a little bit more difficult.” As one participant explained, “when you go to a restaurant, you do have standard drinks, but then you can have doubles.” Another youth explained, “I had no idea really, other than a shot should be an ounce ... but sometimes certain shot glasses are actually 1.5 ounces.”

## ***Understanding Alcohol-related Risks***

The disconnection between theory and practice can have implications for understanding the risks associated with consuming alcohol and adhering to Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines. In our discussions, youth primarily focused on short-term risks such as “hangovers and the Sunday scaries,” “alcohol poisoning,” “heightened anxiety” and “alcohol addiction.” As one youth told us,

“After you binge the whole night, and then you wake up the next morning really hungover ... your anxiety is heightened and stuff like that, and you just feel like, oh, I was such an idiot last night, or you found out about something you did that you may be really embarrassed about. And then you’re kind of like, wow, like, I’m not proud of myself for that. So, you’re really kind of hard on yourself the next day. And that has a lot to do with being hungover and heightened anxiety.”

However, youth participants’ understanding about the long-term risks, such as the links between alcohol and cancer, were mixed, as the following quotes illustrate,

“I’ve never heard about anything between alcohol and breast cancer. I did not know there was an association.”

“I think most people are kind of generally peripherally aware that [alcohol] might raise the odds of it [cancer], but that most people don’t know that it is a genuine source of higher rates of cancer.”



“I think I’ve seen so many things that says this causes breast cancer, that causes breast cancer, that I just kind of filter it through my mind now because I’m like, if I want to do all these things to avoid the risk of getting breast cancer, then I’d have to make all these like drastic changes to my everyday life. And especially because it’s not something immediate. I really think it’s something that I personally just filter through my head.”

Participants in the focus groups made it evident that messaging about alcohol for youth needs to be clear and focused on the facts. One youth explained it best when they said,

“I think if you’re wanting to create more awareness of that [alcohol cancer risks], that really reaffirming the correlation between alcohol and cancer, it’d be a good one. I think most people are kind of generally peripherally aware that might raise the odds of it, but that most people don’t know that it is a genuine source of higher rates of cancer.”

### ***“Work Hard, Play Hard”: Stress, Alcohol and Rewards***

Understanding whether youth use alcohol to control stress is essential, particularly during a global pandemic. Interestingly, youth consistently told us that alcohol “helps you stay motivated to finish your stuff.” Rather than using alcohol to cope with stressful events, youth in the focus groups told us they use alcohol as a reward system to motivate them to finish what needs to get done. In the words of one participant, “it’s a work hard, play hard kind of mindset” that helps “make sure I do my work.” Other participants also shared this notion of consuming alcohol as a form of reward:

“I know in first year when I was really, really stressed, it wasn’t really a coping, but my reward was often going out with friends during the weekend and going to bars. That was kind of a thing. It’s like, okay, I just have to get to Thursday. And then Thursday is the day that it doesn’t matter. I can go out to a bar and I don’t need to go to class on Friday. It’s fine. So, it wasn’t a coping mechanism. I guess it was more like a reward system, which isn’t much better. But I guess that’s just what it was.”

“I kind of agreed that drinking is kind of used as a reward sometimes because I know that a lot of times people will be really stressed during the week. And they’re like, I just have to push through. I just have to get this assignment done. And then on Friday, I’m going to get so drunk and like they anticipate that they’re going to be so drunk, that they’ll be on the floor vomiting and they just kind of use that anticipation and the excitement of whatever they’re going to do on Friday as a way to cope with the stress of school during the week and get back to school on Monday. And it’s a cycle that literally keeps repeating every single week.”

Engaging in a night of drinking with friends at a bar reflects the common drinking patterns of young people and the role alcohol plays in social settings. The following quotes summarize this nicely:

“I kind of associate binge drinking a lot more with also being able to see my friends at the end of the week and being able to party or go dancing. ... as a coping mechanism, it was not alcohol specifically for me ... For me, it was more of the social aspect. It was kind of a release. The alcohol just kind of helps you along with that.”

“I think there’s a big social aspect to drinking, say, if you’re going to a new school, and you want to make new friends and stuff like that, it’s kind of a social lubricant. It’s a way to try to fit in and feel a bit more comfortable.”



## Final Knowledge Products Created

Youth feedback from the focus groups was carefully considered in developing new knowledge products. Participants said that products should simply share relevant facts about alcohol consumption and potential harms, that images of alcoholic drinks should not be hidden, and that the use of stock photos should be avoided. CCSA developed the following knowledge products based on their input.

1. A knowledge product that highlights the health risk of binge drinking, a practice common among focus groups participants:



2. A knowledge product to provide tips for young adults to reduce their risks of experiencing alcohol-related harms:



3. A knowledge product focused on the relationship between alcohol consumption and breast cancer:





## Conclusion

Knowledge mobilization is meant to ensure that people have access to relevant information delivered in a format that makes sense to them. This project sought the feedback of young people to better understand the best approaches to messaging about alcohol consumption and harm reduction. However, this project also clearly brought to light that prevention alone is unlikely to change young people's drinking habits. It provided insight into the extent to which alcohol is ingrained in today's youth culture and everyday lives.

Finally, it is crucial to highlight that the young people appreciated the opportunity to have a voice in developing knowledge products. This project illustrates the importance of meaningful engagement with youth in co-developing knowledge products targeted them.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the young people who generously shared their thoughts and opinions during the focus groups.



## References

Chung, T., Creswell, K. G., Bachrach, R., Clark, D. B., & Martin, C. S. (2018). Adolescent binge drinking: Developmental context and opportunities for prevention. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 39(1), 5–15.

Martinotti, G., Lupi, M., Carlucci, L., Santacroce, R., Cinosi, E., Acciavatti, T., ... Di Giannantonio, M. (2017). Alcohol drinking patterns in young people: A survey-based study. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 22(14), 1889–1896.

Osiowy, M., Stockwell, T., Zhao, J., Thompson, K., & Moore, S. (2015). How much did you actually drink last night? An evaluation of standard drink labels as an aid to monitoring personal consumption. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 23(2), 163–169.

Wettlaufer, A. (2017). Can a label help me drink in moderation? A review of the evidence on standard drink labelling. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 53(4), 585–595.

