

Sharp drop in Australian teenagers' use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco

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The consumption of alcohol and tobacco has dropped among Australian teenagers and they are also using fewer drugs than 20 years ago, according to a new study tracking adolescent health since 1999.

The study, from Deakin University and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, found the number of teenagers who had consumed alcohol fell from 69% to 45% between 1999 and 2015.



Tobacco use dropped from 45% to 10% over the same period – the steepest decline of all substances – and marijuana use fell from 15% to 4%.

The study's authors attributed the drop to stricter parental attitudes regarding alcohol, and law reforms that reduced the availability of substances.



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Parental supply of alcohol dropped from 22% to 12% between 2007 and 2013, and underage purchases of alcohol fell from 12% to just 1% between 1998 and 2013.

Lead researcher Prof John Toumbourou said it was a success for Australia's public health campaigns over the years.

"We can see that parents are taking on the advice from our national health guidelines," Toumborou said. "It shows parents are making radical changes in their attitude to underage drinking and also how they model their own drinking behaviour."

The study surveyed 41,328 adolescents – with an average age of 13 and a half – between

1999 and 2015 in Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland. Data was collected from anonymous surveys where students self-reported drug and alcohol use.

Of those surveyed, 82.8% were from Victoria, 10.1% from Western Australia and 7.1% from Queensland.



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The study's authors said a "normative change" in attitudes towards teen drinking might have been influenced by a 2009 change to Australia's national health guidelines.

Between 1998 and 2007, the parental supply of alcohol rose from 15% to 22%. From then, it dropped to 12% by 2013.

"In 2009, the national health guidelines were changed to clearly say young people shouldn't drink until 18," Toumborou said. "They were widely promoted from that time onwards.

"By 2011, a number of states had brought in legislation making it illegal for adults to provide alcohol to young people without the parents' permission. That was a game-changer. Parents realised they needed signed permission if they were going to host a party serving alcohol."

Australia's success could also send a message to other countries, Toumborou said, as it had outperformed Britain and Europe in reducing alcohol use by teenagers over the same period.

"The United States led this movement, and then Australia has been the next one," he said. "Internationally we probably need to encourage other nations to look at this as an achievable public health target."