

# Drinking in the suburbs: The experiences of Aboriginal young people



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## **Preventing harmful drug use in Australia**

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The experiences of Aboriginal young people**

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2. Moorditj Keila Aboriginal Community Group (Southcare Inc)
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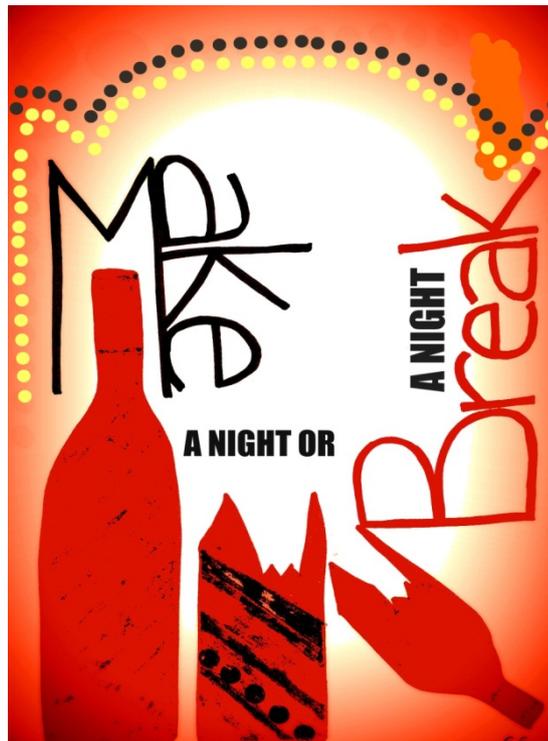
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## **Summary**

This project focused on the experiences of Aboriginal youth with and around alcohol in the south and south-east metropolitan area of Perth. Local Aboriginal organisation, Maamba, had expressed concern about their young people drinking and getting in trouble on the trains, particularly along the Armadale train-line<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the study was to provide a comprehensive picture of this group's experiences in order for services to better target future health promotion for Aboriginal youth. Specifically, youth were asked about their: level of alcohol consumption; experience of alcohol-related harms; trouble with police; contexts of drinking; knowledge of health effects; memory of health promotion messages; response to existing health promotion; and, ideas for effective health promotion for this population.

The research was conducted over two phases. Phase One involved consultation with members of the community, various key stakeholders, and with young people. The young people were instrumental in helping to develop and pilot the interview schedules, project materials and a project logo, and renamed the project 'Make a night, break a night'. Phase Two concentrated on data collection and analysis. A final sample of 32 young people between the ages of 12–21 (drinkers and non-drinkers) participated in in-depth interviews.

Findings indicate that many of the youth are consuming alcohol from an early age and at levels exceeding recommended guidelines for long-term harm. Over the short-term they are experiencing an alarming rate of alcohol-related harms while intoxicated. The majority had found themselves in trouble with authority and a third had been in detention, primarily related to alcohol. The youth showed low knowledge of chronic health effects associated with alcohol and little memory of existing health promotion campaigns

On a positive note, the majority of could identify someone to speak to if they had a problem and someone in their life they admired. They also identified strategies for keeping safe in the often precarious contexts in which they drank. Additionally, two key ideas for future health promotion targeting this group emerged.

The results of this study highlight the need for a youth-friendly approach to health promotion, specifically designed for, conducted by and in consultation with young Aboriginal people. Participants in this study identified what made 'health promotion sense' to them. Their ideas can potentially provide a guide for services wishing to target harmful alcohol use among this group and for future health promotion projects.

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<sup>1</sup> By the time the grant came through, unfortunately, Maamba Aboriginal organisation did not have the capacity to continue with the research. Instead, Moorditj Keila Aboriginal Community Group (under the auspices of Southcare) became partners in the research with the NDRI.

## **Objectives**

The research was a collaborative project between Moorditj Keila (Southcare) and the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI). Focusing on young Aboriginal people in the south and south-east metropolitan area, the objectives of the study were to:

- collect data on alcohol use, including patterns of heavy episodic or 'binge' drinking, and alcohol-related harms;
- describe the contexts of drinking behaviour;
- examine young people's understanding of alcohol-related harms; and,
- describe young people's awareness of, and receptiveness to, existing alcohol-related health promotion activities and materials.

## **Methods**

### **Phase One**

The research was conducted over two phases. Phase One involved consultation with members of the community, various key stakeholders, and with young people. Approximately 26 youth participated in a 'rotating reference group' during the consultation phase. The Research Assistant (RA) on the project came up with the idea for the rotating reference group because of the difficulty we were experiencing relying on one core group of youth to act as our reference group. Unsurprisingly, we found that the young people were a busy and mobile group, our research was not necessarily their top priority and the death of a family member of some of the reference group participants also occurred during the consultation phase. Our core group of eight youth remained and was instrumental in helping develop and pilot the interview schedules, project materials and a project logo and name (see page 3). However, we consulted and/or further tested the questions with groups of other youth recruited through the Ottey Centre, Halo, South Metropolitan Public Health Unit and the networks of the RA.

### **Phase Two**

Phase Two concentrated on recruitment, data collection and analysis. In line with the aim of the study to recruit 'at-risk' Aboriginal youth, young people were purposively recruited from the researchers' own networks and from organisations providing services to these youth rather than from local schools. A wide network of organisations was contacted by the RA, a number of which were able to help with recruitment (Figure 1).

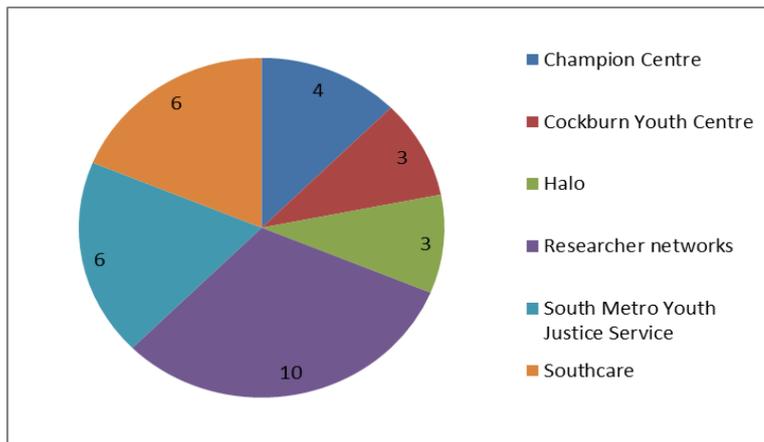


Figure 1 Recruitment

Thirty-two young people participated in in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This was a larger sample than the 25 anticipated. In response to community concern that the voices of youth presently involved with the justice system (on orders and bail) and in detention would not be heard, the RA and CI Wilson approached the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) requesting access to these young people. The project received Departmental support and six youth were recruited from the South Metropolitan Youth Justice Service. The researchers were also given permission to conduct a number of focus groups with young males and females in Banksia Hill Detention Centre. Unfortunately, this aspect of the project has not been possible. We had arranged to conduct the groups in late January 2013. However, due to an incident in Banksia Hill in the same month the groups were postponed as the young men were transferred to Hakea Prison. After further negotiation the focus groups were scheduled for July. Again, unfortunately, the groups were cancelled due to industrial action which was impacting on the day-to-day operations at both sites.

### Interviews

Interviews were conducted by two Aboriginal researchers and one non-Aboriginal researcher and took between 28 minutes and one and a half hours. Interviews took place at participants' homes and at the various organisations. Semi-structured interview schedules were used with separate schedules for drinkers and non-drinkers (see Appendices A & B); youth recruited through the South Metropolitan Youth Justice Services were asked some additional questions (see Appendices C & D). Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### Analysis

Analysis was performed by the Principle Investigator (Wilson) using qualitative software program NVivo and recurrent and unique themes were identified. Findings were presented and discussed with members of the Stakeholder

Reference Group, the Chief Investigators, the young people’s reference group and the South Metropolitan Public Health Unit Community Forum.

It was anticipated that the study would draw on both quantitative and qualitative research methods to meet its objectives. However, only a small number of participants completed the quantitative questionnaire component, the final sample of eight responses was too small to conduct meaningful analysis. Possible reasons for low response rate included: the length of the survey, the interface of the on-line survey not being ‘user-friendly’, young people not being motivated to participate, lack of access to computers and under-staffing.

**Characteristics of participants**

Participants were thirteen young women and nineteen young men between the ages of 12–21 years (Figure 2).

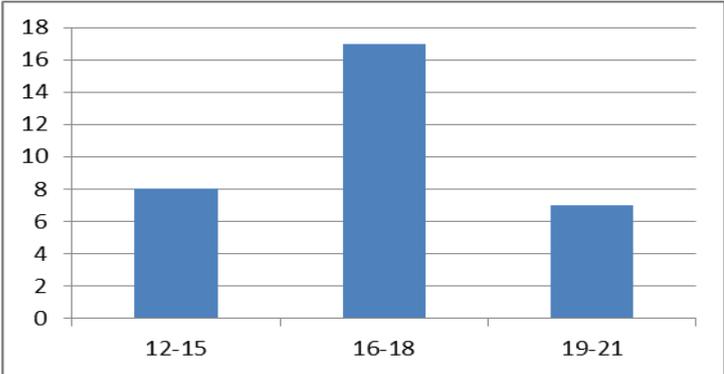


Figure 2 Age of participants

Nine youth were still at school, with five currently in primary school and the remaining four in Years 8 to 11. Of those who were no longer at school (23), 18 (78%) had left by the end of Year 10 (Figure 3).

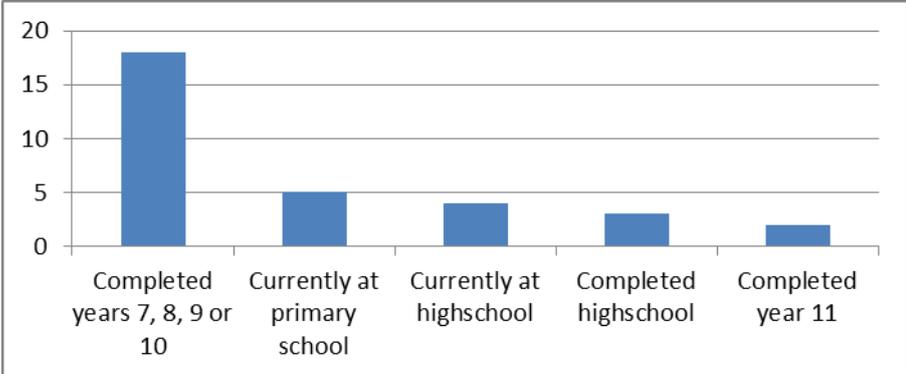


Figure 3 Educational level

Most participants either lived with their immediate families or grandparents (Figure 4). 'Other' includes housemates, multiple relatives and on own. Nine participants were parents including five young women and four young men.

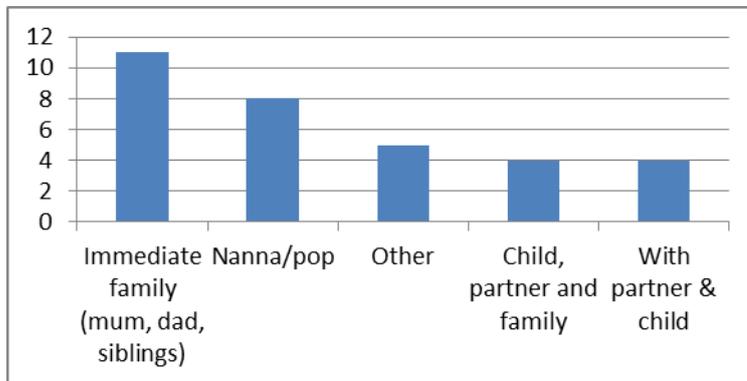


Figure 4 Currently living with

The majority of participants were either students at primary, high school and at tertiary institutions or were unemployed (looking for work). One quarter were involved in a course, which included those who were involved in court diversion, leadership programs and apprenticeships (Figure 5).

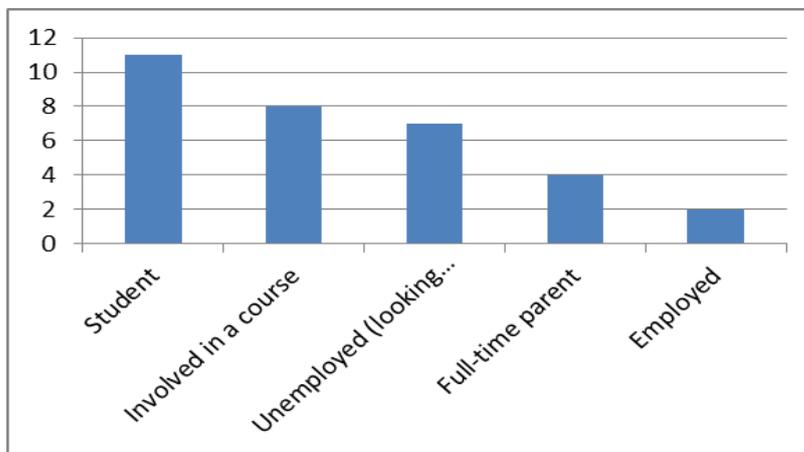


Figure 5 Current activities

## Results

### Experience with alcohol and patterns of consumption

Of the 32 participants, 21 identified as current drinkers. Of the 11 non-drinkers, six had never consumed alcohol, three had tried alcohol previously and two identified as drinkers, but were abstaining due to pregnancy (Figure 6).

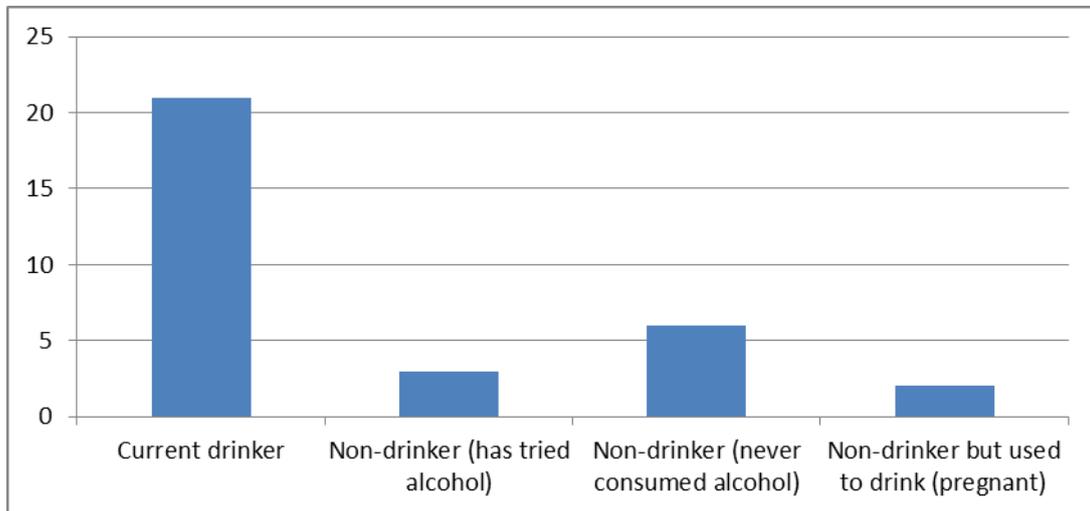


Figure 6 Drinking status

Of current drinkers, nine were under the legal drinking age of 18 (43%).

### Access to alcohol

Very few youth reported obstacles to obtaining alcohol underage with only one participant stating that it had become increasingly difficult to purchase alcohol as more retailers now ask for proof of age. Several participants purchased alcohol themselves when underage, as one young man described:

Just after my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, I've been buying my own alcohol and cigarettes ... I've been walking into a bottle shop. I still get asked every now and then but that's just at really strict places. But [when I was 14] that was Kwinana, they just didn't really care if they were making money (male 18yrs).

Another participant had been purchasing alcohol since she was 13, stating:

I could buy alcohol when I was 13 in a couple of pubs and drive-ins in Armadale and that there because they don't ask for ID (female 17yrs).

Other participants identified older siblings, friends, parents, cousins and other family members as sources for obtaining alcohol. One young woman obtained her alcohol through her cousin:

because she was over the age – she would have been 18 already. So there was a huge difference there, so she used to get all the alcohol ... They'll [young people] just find an older person to do it. If not they will just bribe their parents (female 17yrs).

Sitting outside bottle shops asking strangers to purchase alcohol on their behalf was also common strategy:

Yeah, I used to just stand out the front of the bottle shop and say, 'can you buy me a drink?' They're like, 'you're a bit too young'. But eventually you'd come past someone that would buy a drink (male 17yrs).

### ***Age at first drink***

Participants reported being as young as 12 years old when they first tried alcohol. The majority of those who had consumed alcohol (26 participants) had done so by the time they were 15 years (96%), with only one participant reporting that she first tried alcohol at 18 years. Participants described their heaviest drinking as taking place between the ages of 14–17 years.

### ***How much and what they drink***

While youth had difficulty quantifying how much and how often they drank, many described patterns of drinking that would be considered in excess of recommended guidelines. One young woman responded that she:

[drank] a lot, before I found out I was pregnant. I would do it on weekdays and yeah. It was actually a lot, two or three bottles and a bucket of shots, whisky, bourbon. It's just straight and you mix it ... [sharing with] all my girlfriends, yeah (female 19yrs).

Another participant described how much she consumes over a night, with parties usually going for five to six hours:

I'd say a bottle ... that would be a litre bottle [vodka shared with one other girlfriend]. Yeah, I'd have that slightly mixed but if I wanted to get drunk I'd have half of it – half-half. It's stronger, I get a strong vibe off it. People go around with cruisers and that's too weak for me actually (female 15yrs).

For one young man, how much he drank depended on a number of factors as the following quote reveals:

I drink a fair bit. It depends. If there's drink in here or – I don't know. Yeah, if there is [drink around]. It depends what type of mood I'm in and yeah, it depends on what company you're with (male 16yrs).

Most young people reported drinking spirits with a small percentage of older male participants stating they now drink beer because: it is cheaper, other alcohol upsets their stomachs or in the case of one young man who began drinking heavily at 13 years old, stronger alcohol makes him both sick and gets him into trouble:

I won't be able to drink much now. I've been to rehab, I've been to jail, everything. It's all catching up on me now. I just don't – I feel sick when I drink. I don't feel the best. I could have about – I can drink beer but if I start on the bourbon or anything then I start to feel sick really, really bad. Then I just want to go home. Because it kills me. So I'll have a few beers every now and then and then leave it as that. Plus sometimes if I get really drunk and I go out, something bad always happens (male 18yrs).

One young man chose his drink depending on what he had been doing and what state he wanted to end up in. If he'd played football, he explained:

I'd rather a beer you see. Yeah, some days I just – if I want to get drunk, I'd want to drink whiskey or something (male 18yrs).

Especially popular were Jim Beam and vodka, in both straight form – where they mixed their own – or in pre-mixed form (alcopops). Bottles of straight

spirits were preferred because “it’s a standard drink where you can get drunk” (male 18yrs) and makes a person drunk quickly. Pre-mixed drinks were enjoyed for the taste, “it wasn’t something that would come back up, it was just nice to go down, sweet” (female 19yrs), the ‘coke’ buzz and as a “good starter drink” (female 19yrs) before moving onto something else. A couple of participants described deliberately mixing drinks to get more inebriated as was the case for this young woman:

I’d go and mix them. I’d go from bourbon to vodka and back to bourbon and all that stuff, all sort of drinks I would drink ... When you’re drunk and you mix them, it’s like you end up getting drunker (female 19yrs).

Alcohol was commonly shared with others, predominantly friends, cousins, siblings and other family members. While on the one hand this could act to limit an individual’s intake (when the alcohol runs out), it may lead to unknown quantities being consumed over short periods of time as described by this participant:

Normally we just buy like straight bottles [of] anything really, like vodka, Jim Beam or we’d just buy a carton or something, Smirnoff ... if there’s a lot of us and there’s only 24 in a carton, I don’t know, it depends really on how many people you’re with. Otherwise you just sit back and – well, when you buy a carton everyone is trying to drink the most so they can get drunk, because you don’t really know how many you’re drinking, so yeah (female 19yrs).

### ***Changing patterns of alcohol consumption***

Notable among the older youths’ narratives (18 years and above) was as age increased, frequency of consumption purportedly decreased. Peak levels of consumption appeared to occur when the young people were between the ages of 14–17 years. However, a substantial number of older participants stated that they no longer drank frequently, and for some this also meant drinking less in one sitting as one young woman explained:

When I was like 16 or 17, between high school, finishing and stuff like that, when I got to that age it was a lot. It was like every second day kind of thing ... Now, it would be once a month, twice a month ... like there are days when I could – like now there would be times when I could just sit with everyone drinking and I won’t touch a drink (female 20yrs).

For another participant his drinking is now limited to the weekend:

Yeah, I drink every weekend. I’ve slowed down now. Yeah just Friday night gets you thinking what are we going to do tonight, where are we going? Yeah. It’s just on the weekend now (male 18yrs).

One young woman who had commenced drinking in primary school and described heavy consumption through her early and mid-teens, clarified the shift in her drinking behaviours by explaining,

I don’t even drink every weekend anymore ... I used to drink a lot, but I don’t even drink that much anymore. If I want to have a drink then I’ll have a drink, but now it’s not like an everyday thing or it’s not like a regular thing that I’d do each week. I’ll probably drink once or twice a week now (female 19yrs).

The same young woman had recently begun to realise that she had the choice *not* to drink:

But you don't have to drink, and that's what I'm starting to like realise, because yeah, I want to do normal things and sometimes I feel a lot of my friends that I've met and that I've only met them because I'm drunk, like I haven't actually met a good – there's only a couple of good friends that I actually know that are my friends and I don't have to be drunk to hang around them. But then there is those friends where it's like you've got to be drunk to hang around them or they only want to hang around with you because you're drunk so you're like the life of the party (female 19yrs).

These older participants gave a number of different reasons for changing their drinking patterns including: work commitments, involvement in sport, becoming a parent which restricted both time and money, feeling 'over it', and attending drug and alcohol counselling. These factors acted protectively for this group of participants.

### ***Why young people drink***

When asked why young people drink, participants admitted to not having given it much thought. Some felt alcohol helped people to unwind or de-stress and drinking was seen as fun as this young man highlighted:

[S]ome just do it for fun, to go with their mates, have a good time for the night ... I drink just to have a good night with my family (male 18yrs).

When young people described their 'best night' when drinking they spoke of pumping parties with hired DJs, drinking games, positive moods, long drinking sessions at someone's house, being with the girls and playing footy with the boys; these nights were characterised by the company of good friends and family, laughter and silliness, and importantly, the absence of conflict.

Other participants attributed the influence of peers and family as a reason why young people drink as this young women's comment attests:

I think some of them do it to fit in with the crowd. If they're not doing it, they think they're going to miss out on something when really you're not missing out on anything (female 15yrs).

Another young woman summed up her experience of being the recipient of peer pressure to drink:

My friends would buy drink and I said I wasn't allowed to drink, that was with my friends. They said, 'no-one's going to know, we're not going to tell', so yeah, ended up getting very drunk that night, yeah (female 19yrs).

Hanging around with and being encouraged by others who are consuming alcohol was believed to influence young people to drink as reflected in this remark:

The uncles and that, people offering them drinks and taking them with them to parties and getting them – when they're up at the party they want to drink – see everyone else drinking (male 18yrs).

Being cool and acting like 'big shots' was another common response as were references to the disinhibiting effects of alcohol:

Yeah, I think it's a lot of people I know feel shame when they're sober and that there. So a lot of people will get drunk so they don't care. [It's] a confidence booster. I think no one really wants to go dance in front of people that they don't even know (male 18yrs).

In addition to these commonly understood motivations were comments suggesting that some young people are using alcohol to deal with negative or challenging circumstances in their lives:

There are a lot of reasons. Family issues, they've got issues of their own, bullying, there's lots of reasons out there. Some people get – when they get bullied they get depressed. So they drink because of depression or they drink because their parents don't treat them like they want to be treated or their friends don't treat them the way they want to be treated (male 18yrs).

Some participants identified drinking as a means to block out past negative experiences or avoid having to deal with problems:

People, when they suffer trauma or something -when they suffer trauma, they drink. Then, in the back - in their minds then it becomes oh yeah, every time I become sad or I become - or a certain thing happens bad, I'll start drinking (male 21 years).

A young woman described her own reasons for drinking:

I think I drink alcohol to block everything out, like so I don't have to deal with what's going on in my life and I don't have to deal with anybody. I just do my own thing, and then when I get drunk everybody has to deal with me instead of me dealing with everybody else and situations what go on in my life ... Yeah, and then as much as like I'll say, 'yeah, I'm not going to drink, I'm not going to drink', and then, yeah, I'll go have a drink, like and then something happens and I'm like, oh, stuff this, let's go and have a drink (19yrs).

Removing oneself from or attempting to cope with a negative home environment was also cited by one participant as a reason young people drink. In his opinion, being away from home drinking may in fact be the safer option:

To get away from what their house - or whatever their home's like. Probably make them feel safe or whatever. There could be anything happening at home. Like domestic violence or anything (male 18yrs).

Only one participant reflected on using alcohol to deal with his depression, in the process discovering that drinking in fact heightened his sadness:

[Young people drink to] ease their mind or something. But really, when you're drunk, your mind thinks more and you're thinking of all the bad stuff. Then that's when you start crying and you're drunk (17yrs).

### ***Non-drinkers***

Non-drinking participants were asked why they chose not to drink. Four of the younger participants (12-13) had recently completed school education about alcohol and other drugs, and showed an awareness of the harm alcohol can do to their bodies. A young woman summed it up in the following way:

Because it can make my brain go small and like it could ruin my future, yeah, and I don't want my future being ruined" (female 13yrs).

For one aspiring footballer, to drink alcohol would:

... probably stuff up my footy career and I'd probably end up like everyone else and I want to be an AFL player. I want to play for the Eagles (male 12yrs).

Another young woman, an aspiring model and tennis player, spoke at length about the impact alcohol had had on her life; two of her brothers were incarcerated, she told a story of her cousin who had been murdered after drinking Jim Beam, and she and her siblings had frequently had to hide in the cupboard or jump over the fence into the neighbour's yard to escape fighting:

I don't know why they have to fight all the time. It's like weird because they all have to fight and it's like bad. It was like kids can't even hear it – they don't want to hear it, but every time there's a fight, we jump the fence to our next-door neighbour's. Because they always hit us because we're close. We always do that or climb in the walk-in cupboard (female 12yrs).

She described drinking a pink Ruski one day because she felt 'left out' when her cousins were drinking. However, her mum caught and 'jarred' her and as a result she was grounded. She explained:

My mum said 'don't drink it because who cares if it tastes like lollies or not?' Then, that's why I was like, I didn't want to do it again because it's going to harm me. Anyway who cares if I don't like drinks? I don't even swear. I go to church every Sunday. I always have my speech. I'm really good at talking and all of that (female 12yrs).

Previous experiences around and with alcohol were strong motivations for non-drinking. One young man had suffered a blackout when he had previously been drinking and had woken up with no memory of the night before:

I just couldn't remember the next day and then I woke up at my cousin's house, didn't even know how I got there. I was like no stuff that. Someone can get hurt - I could get hurt because it's dangerous, didn't even know where you are (male 15yrs).

Another young man described an incident he was involved in when drinking that had turned him off:

Like because it was my pop – my mum's dad's birthday but he's passed away and like my mum wanted to me to have a drink so I was - I had a couple, a few. Most of them got a bit tipsy, and me and my cousin walked down to the train station. That's when I seen this bloke and I started gypping him for no reason. Yeah so and like I started a blue, I just - I was swearing at him and I asked him for a smash. I don't want to do that. Yeah and like especially with drink like everyone drinks and just fights. Like makes arguments because I see it out of my own eyes, like everyone (male 18yrs).

Having witnessed the drinking of others and the impacts it had had on them acted as a deterrent for some youth:

The reason I chose not to was because like, I live like first hand, like from my people drinking and stuff, and like I saw all the problems it brought and the consequences of what drinking does (male 21yrs).

Another young man described the drinking in his family:

When my mum, brother and that and sister and that comes over they start drinking start getting a bit weary and that. It's just because I lived up watching people drinking, drunk, fighting, and I don't want that life. Like my whole life seeing what happens when people drink. It's not good (18yrs).

The same young man spoke about how the drinking and fighting of his relatives had impacted on his own life:

[W]hen they're drunk they just don't know what they're doing. It's pretty shame like how – the way they act and that yeah. I don't like drunken people. My uncles and that they used to drink and all that and just fight. That's probably why I didn't – don't drink and like I don't want to drink and that and be like them. Because they've got a lot of enemies.

Like the enemies like because I'm their cousin and the enemies they fight with – like because I'm their cousin they want to fight with me ... But my cousins' enemies they tried to mob me one time that's when I take off running (male 18yrs).

It was apparent that non-drinkers who had never drank alcohol identified alcohol consumption as something that may limit their future achievements while ex-drinkers explained past negative experiences as reasons to not to drink.

### **Other drugs**

The focus of the project was on the experiences of Aboriginal youth around and with alcohol. However, because the literature highlights that many young people engage in poly-drug use a question on other drug use was included. Only five participants admitted to their *own* other drug use, with the exception of dope (cannabis). Cannabis use was described by many participants as 'an everyday kind of thing. That is pretty much seen like cigarettes' (female 20yrs). It appeared to be easily accessible and was often not mentioned as a response to the other drug question, unless prompted by the interviewers to which they usually then responded "oh yeah".

Very few participants described their own use of substances other than cannabis. They did, however, mention the drug use of their friends and peers. According to their stories, the use of other drugs is common and the substances most frequently consumed include, ecstasy, amphetamines and four participants mentioned acid/LSD. Of the five who spoke about their *own* drug use (with the exception of those who smoked only cannabis), one young man described a nine-day bender that saw him running around the streets "butt-naked", smashing up cars, crashing his own car into a limestone wall and assaulting a stranger. He spoke of nine days of no sleep while he consumed ecstasy, cannabis, amphetamines and alcohol. Another participant was a former IV drug user who described heavy amphetamine use. This participant had been in violent relationship from the ages of 13 to 16, and had been introduced to amphetamines when she was 14. At the time of the interview she was pregnant and had quit when she found out she was expecting:

Because I didn't want my baby coming out with withdrawals, and that'd be hard because the kid will be up like all hours of the night crying (female 17yrs).

One young man had tried numerous drugs, but they did not have the intended effect on him so he preferred alcohol:

The only drug that's had an effect on me was dope. That's just me. I'm ADHD so my body's already immune to the uppers. ... If I have [dexies] – that's what I meant to say. I just feel stoned. If I have a cone, I'll just feel smashed. If I have a drink, I'll just be like, how're you doing? (male 17yrs).

The remaining two participants described experimenting with amphetamines and cannabis when they were younger before moving on to alcohol.

Other participants described young people they knew using drugs regularly. They spoke about snorting, popping and drinking various substances. It

appears that other drugs are a standard presence at parties as this young woman, who stated that she did not use any drugs other than alcohol, described:

When I went into the Canning Vale party there were a few rooms to the left so I walked in one. People were smoking out of a bong, like marijuana and stuff. Then in the next room people are snorting – I don't know what they were doing. People were just popping pills everywhere and they were just handing them out like it's candy. Teens were just popping them (female 15yrs).

The majority of participants believed drug use, in particular amphetamines, was common among their peers, “Yeah, like all these young people here are all on it [amphetamines]. It's just, yeah, gone really downhill these days” (female 19yrs). Most young people could identify someone in their lives who takes drugs (cousins, friends) with some saying the use occurred weekly, and with cannabis, daily.

These findings suggest that cannabis use is common and readily discussed. Other drug use, in particular amphetamine use, was described as well-known among young Aboriginal people, however, few participants described personal experiences with the other drugs. This may be due to participants in the current study not feeling comfortable discussing other drug use or that the sample did not engage in substance use beyond the use of cannabis.

### **Consequences of drinking and experience of alcohol-related harms**

Participants were able to easily identify the possible short-term consequences of drinking. The most common response was the lack of control that resulted, making a person vulnerable to harm as the following statement describes:

A lot of things can happen to them, whether it's dangerous because they don't know what they're doing – like they have no control of their body. They can end up anywhere ... They could get mugged, bashed, things could be stolen off them, raped and all that (female 15yrs).

A young man summed up potential consequences in the following way:

Anything can happen, literally anything. You know like if you drown in water that day - you fall face down anywhere – you could be drunk as, fall down, fucking pass out in Freo, knock yourself out by accident and be in your own pile of vomit or your own puddle of blood, and that's it. Anything can happen. Anything. Doesn't matter who you are, doesn't matter how big of a man you think you are, or how much you think you can drink. That's it. You know? Once you're drunk, then you're in a whole different world (male 18yrs).

Losing control was associated with impulsive actions such as taking attempting to take one's own life, an outcome that had occurred within some participants' own peer networks:

Well, one of my friends, she was drunk with a bottle and she laid on the train track, this was when we were younger and said, 'I want to die, I want to die' and all this, and then we had to get her off the track, because I was drunk too. Yeah, we had to grab her, get her up (female 19 years).

An absence of awareness for the consequences of drunken behaviours also featured prominently in young people's stories as the following young man, who had spent time in Rangeview Detention Centre, asserted:

When people go out and get drunk, you start seeing them all, starting to fight and out making trouble. People, they just fight over any little thing. People get mobbed, even. You see people robbing people ... They don't know what the consequences are (male 17yrs).

Another participant concurred, pointing out, as a number of other young people did, that the lack of awareness meant that young people could end up seriously hurting someone else:

Well, when they're drinking it's like they feel like they're invincible, and they think that they can just go out, start trouble, and think that they can just fight a person without getting knocked down, but in the end it ends horribly (male 18yrs).

Describing a fight she had been involved in one young woman's comments highlight how easily and unexpectedly things can go wrong: "I put one girl in the hospital then so I just wanted to stop fighting then because it was just – yeah" (female 17yrs). When asked what set her off she described her dislike of mobbing (discussed further below) so she had intervened:

I hate mobbers, that's why I grabbed one at a time and I just grabbed them and hit them and stuff. But this one girl, she was really small and I accidentally hit her... Yeah and she just laid there so I was like, what the hell? (female 17yrs).

Getting involved in violence and crime were other frequent consequences cited by participants. A 13 year old participant felt that when young people drink they:

go pick fights, swear at all the people that like, people that's older than them, graffiti, smash things, steal stuff, pass out everywhere, yeah (female 13yrs).

One young woman described what she used to do when she was drinking; the night often ended in crime:

Just walking around. I was running with a couple of girls and after we'd get drunk we'd always end up doing something stupid, always break into a car or try and steal a car or something. But most of the time we was breaking into cars was to get home (female 17yrs).

Another participant believed that alcohol gave people a false sense of confidence which meant they "probably get in trouble. Probably go stealing or whatever" (male 18yrs).

In addition, young people spoke frequently about drinking causing young people to act in ways that may cause them shame the following day:

Yeah, and the thing is when people drink, events happen that night; in the morning, they're thinking what the fuck happened last night? Then the family member or friend come along and say oh, remember when you did this last night, or that? Yeah, so it's like a burden on them, so if they do hurt a friend or family member when they were drunk then they'll feel shame and try and avoid that person (male 18yrs).

Regret the following day was enough to change one young man's drinking habits. Speaking about the fighting he had been involved in, he commented:

That's kind of why I stopped drinking so much and that, because you do things you regret. Yeah, one day you might do something you know - yeah, you might really hurt somebody (male 18yrs).

This was similar to the experience of another participant who had also cut down on her alcohol consumption:

I used to have – if there was nothing left to drink, I would actually drink Passion Pop, and that's when you're really, really drunk; you just don't care what you drink. But once I realised I had that taste and I was like stop it ... wake up the next day and think oh my gosh, what an idiot (female 17yrs).

One young woman, whose quote is worth including in full, spoke about her experiences with shame eventuating from the activities of the night before:

Like that night you could, like a whole big thing could happen or you could make – you could like make yourself shamed, like you say things that you don't really normally say or you do things you don't really normally do. Then the next morning you're like why did I do that or why did I say that? That's if you can remember. But most of the times you can remember, but then you just pretend, say, 'No, I don't remember'. Depends how bad you're doing, sometimes you just make yourself feel that shame, you know everyone is going to be talking about you. Then like for me then I just used to get drunk again, just so like it wasn't such a shame thing for them to be talking about me, about what I'd done the night before. So I'd just get drunk again to like cover it up. Then they won't be worried about what I'd done the night before, they'll be worried about what I'm doing now ... but, yeah, and then the next day you're like, oh shame, I was talking to that person. You don't even know what you're saying. You're just like saying whatever comes out of your mouth; you're just saying it (female 19yrs).

Surprisingly, few young people spoke directly about getting into unsafe sexual situations when drinking (however, some of their responses may imply this). One young man spoke about girls he knew drinking and “trying to get with older men” (male 18 yrs) who may then take advantage of them. Another participant, who had been sexually assaulted herself, spoke about rape as a possible consequence of drinking as did two other female participants.

### ***Fighting***

Possibly one of the most concerning theme to emerge from this research was the alarming rate of alcohol-related harms experienced by these young people, harms brought about almost exclusively by violence and fighting. Central to the young people's accounts was alcohol-fuelled violence. Almost without exception, participants had experience with fighting whether as observers or participants. Young people recounted stories of being involved in fighting, described ending up in hospital and putting someone else in hospital, showed the interviewers their physical scars or described the harms inflicted on others. Fighting was taking place between young men, young men against young women and young women against each other. It was apparent that the fighting was a key component of their drinking experiences.

Young people were asked to describe the worst night they had had drinking. Included in their accounts were: car accidents, fires, arrests and alcohol poisoning. However, the majority of 'bad nights' included a fight which usually involved the protagonist and/or a family member. One young woman described her worst night at a party in Maddington:

[E]veryone just started fighting and all the girls were fighting their fights. Then because I was hated so much by the people I got it. Boys were coming in and booting me in the

head and just from all different ways I was just getting booted into by all these drunken young people that I went to school with. I ended up going into hospital, yeah. Getting a restraining order on two of them, a couple of them (19yrs).

When asked why she was being mobbed she replied:

Because we had a fight. This was a week before this happened, we had a fight because they were ringing up my mum abusing her, then yeah, because they all had alcohol in them and they were all drunk, they just yeah, come in and booted me all over the head and everything (19yrs).

When the researchers enquired further about the fighting it became apparent that being involved in, or witnessing, fighting was a regular occurrence for many of the young people. Their descriptions indicated that fighting, on the whole, involved alcohol. However, when outlining the changing nature of fighting (a theme developed below) they spoke of Facebook as a vehicle for continuing a battle that may have started (and should have ended) one alcohol-fuelled night on the weekend. The majority of participants had stories to relate about fighting and their stories lent towards a sense of inevitability; many young people were going out prepared, and in some cases looking, to fight. One participant admitted to being involved in numerous fights. A solidly built young man, he showed the interviewer his numerous battle scars and explained that he spoke loudly because his ear was damaged from when a bottle was smashed over his head. He recounted some of his experiences:

I used to carry an axe with me everywhere. I used to carry a machete. I used to walk around with everything. [Now] because I know if trouble is going to follow me then I'm just going to take it head on. That's it. Do you know what I mean? If they're going to use a weapon then I'll pick up a brick off the floor or I'll pick up a rock or I'll pick up something (18yrs).

Likening himself to a bouncer due to his large build and ability to fight, his stories suggested that most of the time he 'came out on top'. While describing himself as a reluctant participant, "[l]ike I've been in a few situations where I've had to use weapons or use a brick or a bottle and I don't like it. I hate it. I hate doing it. But if I have to, I have to. You know what I mean? It's either me or them", violence appeared to accompany him, and he spoke about reacting violently and impulsively when under the influence of alcohol:

I don't go to parties to start trouble but when I'm drunk and then drunk people try to put their arm over me or try to talk shit to me, I hate it. I start clicking in the head. I can literally hear clicks in my head. Then I just snap, that's it. I'll throw an elbow or I'll throw a big punch or something and that's it. That's it for the night. They get a free lift home (male 18yrs).

His thoughts on leaving his house indicate that he anticipated violence around every corner:

Every time I go out I think am I going to come home? Am I going to make it home? Even whenever I go to the shop, just thinking what if this cunt catches up with me when I did this to him. You know? (male 18yrs).

Having described several incidents when he or family members have been mobbed, he highlighted the need to avoid travelling alone; being on your own means you become a sitting duck:

They see you walking away by yourself and they've got three or four boys in the car, they're drunk, someone's going to be a big shot ... there'll be a carload and two or three

boys that you don't get along with so the whole carload will get out and try and mob you (male 18yrs).

Several themes emerge from this man's stories which were common with those of other participants. Several participants spoke about having enemies (or family members who had enemies) who were, on the large part, other young people who wanted to fight them. They spoke about having to avoid places or situations where they may run into them:

I only go out; the only time I go out is in the car. I only go out in the car because I have a big sister, see, and she's got a lot of enemies because of our last name (female 17yrs).

Commenting on who the enemies were, a young man said:

Yeah, just people that live in the same area sort of. That's it, they just don't get along. The fights – people just don't let it go so it keeps getting carried on and carried on and every time you see each other you always fight (male 19yrs).

If he did happen to run into his enemies he would “just pick up bricks or something” (male 19 yrs).

Describing a fight with another young woman, the following participant's comments reflect her reluctance to fight at the same time as emphasising the ‘either me or them’ attitude:

Oh well you love me or hate me. But yeah, I mean the girl was older than me. She could have walked away but she didn't, so she ended up getting a hiding, not me ... but I don't go out to fight. I just go out to have a good time; enjoy myself (female 17yrs).

The following remark expressed a similar sentiment:

I'm not a trouble-maker. If someone came up to me and wanted to pick a fight with me, or wanted to fight with me, I wouldn't sit there, I wouldn't stand there. Yeah. I would let - if someone wanted to start a fight with me, I would let them start it but then, they wouldn't be able to finish it (male 17yrs).

Another participant spoke about a young woman who was using Facebook to let her [the participant] know she wanted to fight her “over something that never happened” (female 19yrs). Despite telling her she had proof that it did not happen, the young woman continued to rile her for a fight, telling her that she was “*koonyi* [useless, dumb, sad] anyway, you can't fight”. When asked if she avoided places she thought this young woman might be, she responded:

I don't really care because I'm not going to start with her but if she's going to start with me then we'll try and sort it out but then if she's going to hit me, then I've just got to defend myself back (female 19yrs).

Young women provoking each other to fight appeared reasonably commonplace and several participants, some as young as 13, spoke about being called derogatory names over Facebook or when they were out. While stating she:

Didn't care what girls say about me because I know it's not true and I don't drink or smoke or anything and like I'm glad I don't do that (female 13 yrs),

this participant, who had been called a ‘slut’ by other girls, admitted,

it actually does make me sad because they're just pathetic ... they're just picking a fight just to look good in front of boys or whatever (female 13yrs).

Another young woman had also been called a slut by other girls. She explained that she will:

just let it slide because that doesn't get to me. I just laugh at them because I'm just like, I'm still a virgin so shut your face' (female 15yrs).

However, this was not the case if someone said something against her family:

Well I don't fight, it's just when they talk about my family - because that's just, you know, I get really angry and I can't control my anger sometimes and I just let loose (female 15yrs).

Again, the reluctance to fight comes to the fore. However, as the young people's comments demonstrate, provocation – in its different forms, but especially slurs against family – frequently results in violence:

Oh, one fight – when we started to fight with some boys, it was because he was swearing at my little sister. It just turned out even bigger than what it should have got because we were arguing all the way for two or three years. Every time we'd seen each other we would just start fighting. I would end up getting like weapons and all that, like bricks, poles, whatever we got with to fight (male 18yrs).

### ***Reasons young people fight***

When asked why young people fight, participants cited numerous reasons including wanting to be 'big shots', for entertainment, "just to get a bit of fun out of the night" (male 18yrs) and because someone "mouthed off on Facebook" (female 19yrs). However, one of the most prevalent responses was in relation to family and family loyalty as evidenced in the quotes above, and about last name. Young people described how being a member of a particular family made them susceptible to the violence of others. Having a certain last name was often a precursor to on-going fights between young people; with one young woman dating the fighting between her family and another, to her grandparents' days in the shearing shed:

Well there was a shearer then, yeah, they were fighting over that and that carried on for years and then it got bigger and bigger. Like all the grandkids and that there, then they start fighting over something else and they bring it up, well your family's fighting with my family anyways, so they just kick on (17yrs).

Another frequent response to the question as to why people fight was because of jealousy. Young people fight, suggested one participant, over:

Most probably stupid things, like I know a lot of little kids – little boys – fight over girls. Like it's like, oh yeah you're going out with my girlfriend now so it's – you just want to fight them over that and it's like well, she dumped you or you dumped her and you didn't want her, so he's going to of course keep her back warm; make sure she's right and yeah (female 17yrs).

Describing the fights she had been involved in with other girls, one young woman explained:

Yeah but because they bring their boyfriends there and I'm just like, 'keep your boyfriend on a leash'. Then that's how it all starts. Yeah, that's how it starts' (female 15yrs).

Another young woman echoed this sentiment, "It's jealousy too. Sometimes the girls that want to start on you for no reason, about boys, they're jealous" (19yrs). "A girl probably. Always fighting over a girl" (male 16yrs) was the response of another participant and in the same vein a young man summed up:

Well, it could be like - you see one boy went out with this girl about a week ago and that's when she was with some other boy at this party. One boy would get funny with the girl because he'd just broke up with a week ago if he seen her with some new boy and they would just start smashing over that. It's a pretty dumb reason, but yeah, it happens these days ... most of the time I see fellas argue over girlfriends and stuff (male 18yrs).

A number of young people had witnessed (and intervened in) fighting between couples which appeared to be reasonably common. Describing his worst night, the following participant told the story of his mate's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday:

We had a drink up in the backyard, had the fire going and everything was going great, and his girlfriend - it was the influence of alcohol - his girlfriend smashed his bedroom window, so she ran off. They started arguing, so the rest of the boys, they were a bit younger than me, so the 16, 17 area, they all - we all had to stop them from arguing, so holding my friend back and his girlfriend is my cousin, so we're holding both of them back away from each other (male 18yrs).

The police were called and the party ended. When asked why the young woman smashed the window, he responded:

I don't know. One minute we were having a drink, and having a yarn, catching up, then the next minute out of nowhere she just grabbed a rock and banged it straight through his window. One minute you're happy, the next minute bang (male 18yrs).

Another young man described intervening in a particularly violent argument between a couple:

Well, he was hitting this girl with a broom stick - belting her - and I was like, 'Leave her alone, leave her alone'. He looked at me. 'What? Want to have a smash?' I was like, 'Bro, you don't want to. We're drunk, so just leave it'. Then he just didn't care. I was like, 'If you want to have a fight, then you hit me first', and he hit me - boof - straight across the head with a broom stick. So I came charging, bang, bang, bang, bang. Then he was running away like that. Then my mate tried stopping it and we all fell to the ground. Then because I was the smallest one, I got disadvantaged and I crept out, went and got on top of him - smack, smack, smack (male 17yrs).

Finally, fighting, for some, was simply something to do. One young man, who admitted that he had not given much thought to why youth fight, said:

Well when I used to go out fighting, there was like never really a reason. It was just something that we always did every week when we was out (male 18yrs).

The following participant's comments also suggest that fighting was an activity that some youth actively sought:

I think some people will look for a fight just because it's something to do. If you get cheeky or say something or look at them then they'll smash, you know. That's about it, yeah (female 19yrs).

The idea of fighting as a spectator sport and for entertainment, is a theme that emerged when young people spoke about the reasons they went where they did when they were drinking (discussed further in the following section).

All participants agreed that the fighting involved males and females. Some noted that fights between boys often involved weapons:

When it comes to the boys fighting, if you see a boy and he's with a group and those boys see him get a hiding, well it's all bottles; everything just comes out and then that's when the police - like they just like they can't control it' (female 17yrs).

Most young men admitted carrying weapons, hiding weapons in bushes in case of a confrontation or taking advantage of the environment around them

and picking up sticks, sand and bricks. No female participants spoke about carrying weapons themselves (other than pepper spray for protection).

Some young women also believed that fighting between girls was qualitatively different from that between boys in other ways. These participants saw female-female fighting as more likely to be incited over Facebook, to be caused by jealousy and to continue over an extended period of time. In contrast, they perceived fights between boys to be more spontaneous, over quickly and to end with shaking hands. However, other participants did not agree and described an overall change in the nature of fighting – which did not discriminate along gender lines – that they believed had occurred over the last three or four years. This shift was characterised by what young people referred to as the fair fight versus ‘mobbings’.

### ***Fighting as good and bad***

When young people were asked whether they saw the fighting as a good or bad thing, the majority felt that it could be both. It was good a good fight if the recipient had been “asking for it” and “they did something really bad to you” (male 16yrs). One young man, a fighter himself, felt that fighting was good when it was over territory and reputation, as he explained:

It depends who's involved. Like if it's three dickheads fighting over nothing then it's just like you guys are fucking idiots. But if it's over, you know, a bit of a turf war or something, then bam, that's it mate. That's it. You've got mad respect. That's how it is. If you fight you've got respect, if you don't, then you're a pussy (male 18yrs).

It was also good if:

they're having a fair fight because that's between them two. If they're going to have a fair fight and then shake hands after and get it over and done with, then that's finished (female 17yrs).

The fair fight, participants explained, is a fight involving only the two people with a grievance or score to settle. They fight it out between themselves and then shake hands afterwards; this marked the end of the fighting. Usually there is an audience. However, the audience does not join in with the fighting.

Fighting was considered to be a bad thing for a number of reasons. A fight could end the night with either police arriving, the mood being killed or someone getting seriously injured. While it made young people feel good at the time, the following day was different story:

At the time, because you're always – like your brothers are always with you. You're thinking you're all good and stuff. Then you wake up the next morning like sore and all that stuff because you got so drunk and you're not drunk no more (male 18yrs).

Fighting was associated with acting shame by some, as this young woman's comment show:

I actually find it as a shameful thing. Like I have seen a lot of girls that fight and their boobs pop out and they could be even fighting in dresses and the dress comes up – a lot of boys like that; they can see the dress come up and the boobs pop out' (female 17yrs)

and considered stupid by others:

I just feel bad in the morning. Then there are just other times when you can't wait to see them next time because you just want to hit them. It's just stupid' (female 20yrs).

The main reason that fighting was considered to be bad was when it was a mobbing. A mobbing was characterised by two key factors: the involvement of others and the continuation of the fighting (often through social media).

You just don't keep carrying it on. But it's not good when you're having a fair fight and then the other people jumping in, because that'll just bring more family members back and then they'll jump in' (female 17yrs).

The protocol of the fair fight requires spectators to remain on the sidelines. However, this was not the experience described by most young people. Their stories suggest that the fighting is becoming 'dirtier', as fights are on-going and involve large numbers of young people, and their friends and family. One young man commented, when speaking of the shift away from the fair fight:

But no it's not like that. People don't fight, shake hands, be friends. Just fight, keep fighting. Every time they see each other, fight. They don't shake hands. When they see each other again they'll have another fight' (male 16yrs).

Similarly, another young man stated:

Yeah. I've seen plenty of smashes over, people just don't shake hands. Come back the next day for another round (male 16yrs).

The changing nature of the fight is reiterated in the following woman's observation:

If it is girls disagreeing ... they will always have a boy or whatever with them and sometimes it's just, he will abuse and stuff and then that will just cause more tension and then we will end up bringing our brothers and it just ends up like that. There will be 50 or so people' (female 20yrs).

The youth linked the mobbings to an increased level of harm and those who had suffered serious injuries had all been set upon by a group of others. One young man described an incident that ended up with a stay in hospital and 18 stitches to his head:

There was about four blokes hitting my mate down the road. He had a fight with them. They rang us up and said that they [the other guys] mobbed them. So we went for a walk, we spotted them and we walked up and chipped them. So we had a smash with them and then I took one over here and then we just saw them all running – they was all running around just four of them. Then they all grouped back up together and I ran at the pack because my mate was there, they was mobbing my mate. So I run and tried to hit one, I hit one. Another fella come from the side, picked me up and dropped me straight on my back. Stomping me. Grabbed a brick and dropped it straight on my head then (male 18yrs).

Another young man spoke about a fight developing into a fight between two groups of young people:

Yeah, just to name one [incident]– we were on a train. Did our thing, got off. We were drinking in the streets with a few mates, and walking around, and then this other group – I don't know, they got fighting or something with one of my cousins. So I think that started it. Got into it, and a few more boys, and yeah – they all started, group against group sort of thing. Yeah, we had a fight in the street, and they come back with like one or two other bigger boys, and then yeah started again on the train. (male 18yrs).

Warring groups most commonly consisted of mates, enemies, cousins, brothers and other family members of each group:

Well, it's just like each group. It's just all groups. Your friends, their friends, your family, their family, it's just whoever you are with (female 20yrs).

Things frequently got out-of-hand when others jumped in:

Little things turn to big things, especially when kids fight. Kids get their dads and that into it, and that's how family fights start (male 18yrs).

Asked how fights started the following young man stated:

I don't know. It starts with one person mob one person and then it starts from there. Then he's going to get mobbed and then you're going to get mobbed from the others – some [others] will start fighting. Then he'll get hit with a machete or something and then it starts from there (male 16yrs).

The company the young people kept also appeared to dictate, for some, whether they became involved in fights or not: “if I'm with my other cousins, we end up going out, start fighting and that, fighting” (male 18yrs). Very few participants spoke explicitly about inter-racial violence. One young man spoke about being mobbed by a group of Māori boys and finding that he fights more often when he is with his Wadjela (white) mates. Another young man – with a string of fights behind him – described violent incidents involving groups of Italian and African young people; for him, fighting could involve anyone from any background. For others, fighting appeared to be limited to immediate family and other Aboriginal young people.

It was apparent that fighting was a key component of many participant's drinking experiences. Some young people admitted going out to look for 'trouble' and others spoke about being reluctant participants in the violence. Participants viewed fighting as both a good thing and a bad thing depending on what the fighting was about and whether they perceived it as 'fair' fighting. The changing nature of fighting was highlighted in the young people's stories – a shift which appeared to be increasing the level of injury the youth were experiencing because of involvement of multiple parties ('mobbings') and the on-going and unpredictable nature of the fighting. Both females and males were participating in fighting and while some believed it was qualitatively different according to gender, others disagreed.

## **Contexts of drinking**

### ***Trains and trains stations***

Young people were asked to describe what a typical night drinking involved – where did it start and where did it go. It was apparent that many young people were commencing their drinking at a house with their friends/cousins and continuing it out in public spaces. This made them a highly visible population who were often already drunk or in the process of getting drunk. In keeping with the objectives of this study, a high proportion of the youth interviewed were those who ride or rode the trains and spent time at the train stations. Trains were the most commonly used mode of transport for many participants. In addition, trains and train stations also provide the backdrop

for young people to socialise, drink and fight and have become a destination in and of themselves. Asked why she would ride the trains one young woman replied:

[To] see friends, see old friends if you're doing – usually I see a lot of friends and just get off and drink with them and then our group gets bigger and end up getting back on trains (female 19yrs).

Another young man spoke about when he used to travel on the trains, before he got his driver's license:

That's when we all used to go to Carousel [shopping centre] on Thursday nights. Friday nights just go along the train line. Just go to Oak Street [train station]. Nothing's at Oak Street, go back to Gosnells and everyone would be at Gosnells [train station] then, just sitting around Gosnells drinking – they would all sit around Gosnells drinking and fighting and all that (18yrs).

Another participant saw the trains and stations

like a second option if the night's boring where I am at. I just go there to see people I know. See what they are up to. Probably come back from another party (male 16yrs).

When asked what is happening at the stations he replied, “everyone's just being uncivilised” (male 16yrs).

Trains and train stations were associated with trouble and violence which is why young people both frequented and avoided these spaces. One young man described a typical night:

Usually [the night starts] with my cousins and my brother at my aunty's house drinking. Then we end up going to the train station. Yeah. We'll end up in trouble somewhere ... we'd end up going out fighting and end up, the police will pick us up and all that stuff. Then I'd end up going to – I'd end up going to the police station a couple of times drunk (18yrs).

Some participants spoke about riding the trains and actively looking for fights. One young woman spoke about the station as a place to go to:

... see all your cousins and that there ... with my family, we have a very big family, we're related to all the south westerners and so see all the cousins and that, they'd give me a drink or smokes or whatever, and make sure you've got money to get home (female 17yrs).

However, she qualified this by saying:

Peoples will mainly go there to go to have a fight because they all meet up with their family and another person's family and they all meet up, they're standing watching them fight them (female 17yrs).

In the case of Burswood train station, where the majority of youth are currently gathering, young people spoke about hanging around the periphery – just out of sight of the officers who are at the station – or in the dark areas of the Burswood Hotel car park as this participant comments:

Well, when I drink, I won't hang around the train station. I'll hang close to the train station, in the dark somewhere (male 17yrs).

This is where many reportedly consuming alcohol which they hid in the bushes. If a young person is drinking at the station itself, transit officers will come up and tip it out. The practice of pre-loading at someone's house or elsewhere prior to getting on the trains also appeared to be common for some

participants, rather than or in addition to, drinking in shadows around the train station:

I used to just go out, like just on the trains. I used to always stay out on the trains drunk. It wasn't really on the train. Like we would all get drunk somewhere. We'd all get drunk somewhere and go out on the trains. We used to look for trouble (male 18yrs).

It is apparent from the young people's stories that train stations are frequently the setting for battles and trains their designated transport to get from A to B. Despite being public space young people have claimed the stations as their own. They know the space and its surrounds intimately, hiding their alcohol and their weapons in the bushes nearby. The reason the trains and stations are utilised in this way by the youth appears to be largely practical – most of the youth who go there are underage and do not have driver's licenses. Once they have their licenses they spoke about moving away from the stations and gathering at other places such as parties, friends' houses and nightclubs. Usually by the time they have their licenses, they are not drinking as much and trains become simply a way to get home at night if, for some reason, they are not able to drive.

One young woman considered the Burswood train station to be a safe spot to hang out and her comments reveal again, the expectation these youth have of violence:

Yeah, and if anybody like ever wants to fight you, you have the transit guards there and the police at the platforms. But I mean there are a lot of people who don't care where they take it ... Also I'm safe from my boyfriend, because I mean he usually goes out and fights – he's more of the fighter. I'm more of a quiet person, but yeah, I just feel more safe when there are people who actually can do something instead of just hitting someone and it ends up getting bigger and bigger (female 17yrs).

However, other participants avoided the train stations because of the large number of young people who gathered there, the fighting and the potential for getting injured. As one young woman stated:

Even if I had nothing to do, I'd go home. I can't do that [go to the train station], like you see – they're just – even though you're Indigenous yourself, they still cause trouble, you know. Like, it's just a hassle so I avoid it (female 18yrs).

Another participant, who used to frequent Burswood train station when he was 14 and 15 years old, explained he no longer did so:

Because stuff, it's get badder and badder. People starting more smashes. Everyone – yeah, starting to fight. You can't go on the train unless you're going to have a fight or something ... [young people go there] to wait for their enemies. Just so you see your enemies there just to have a fight (male 16yrs).

The young people's stories illustrate that the station can be imbued with danger and some participants reflected on the potential for injury and death to occur, especially when alcohol is involved. A young woman, who had herself been involved in a fight at Burswood train station, spoke about how she felt after the event:

I mean once you realise that you had it like, you could end up killing somebody; like if they roll on the train and they get knocked out, unconscious, and then the train could be like coming in two minutes and then it's like are they going to get up? Like I mean you

feel bad after everything, but I have known a few people that, yeah, have been knocked out on the trains and knocked out on the platforms and everything (female 17yrs).

### ***Transit Officers***

Young people were asked about their relationships with the Transit Officers<sup>2</sup> and police. Their experiences of these interactions are included here under the contexts of drinking because their drinking is taking place in and around the trains and stations; hence their encounters with Transit Officers and other figures of authority are entwined with their drinking experiences.

Some young people described violent confrontations with the officers. One participant who had been arguing with his girlfriend on the train recounted the following incident:

Because me and my ex-girlfriend were arguing. I was just shouting at her and they told me to keep it down. I started swearing at them. Then they ended up kicking me off the train station. They kept following me and like to get me off the station. I just kept swearing at them. So I ripped a stick out of the ground that holds them trees up. They rushed me, so I hit one of them. Then they chased me. So I run – I took off on him. But they ended up catching up with me. So the next night I went out and they charged me with that (assault) (male 18yrs).

Another young man who had exclaimed he “wanted to kill them. Literally” (male 18yrs), told the following story about when an officer had asked him for his concession card:

I said ‘I don’t have to show you nothing mate, as long as I’ve got a ticket’. I said ‘I’m fine mate, that’s it’. Yeah, then they started getting all agro and shit. Well, I got agro (male 18 yrs).

When asked what happened next, he stated:

I put him to the floor and that was it. I didn’t knock him out because I knew I would have gone down for doing assault on a public officer. There was a few times when he tried to mace me. I grabbed his arm, I threw the mace onto the railway track and I just pushed him to the floor. That was it (male 18yrs).

Opinion was divided among the young people who spent time on the trains as to whether the officers targeted young Aboriginal people. Some, both female and male youth, felt that officers were racist as the following comments indicate:

Because like when they get on the train the first people they walk up to and ask is the black people, for their tickets. They don’t give us – Friday night they don’t even worry about asking anyone else, just check the black people and that’s it. Then they’ll fine us and jump off (male 19yrs).

This sentiment was mirrored by another participant who said:

Because they’ll be way up the other side of the train line and if they see us black kids get on there, bang, they’ll walk all the way down here and ask us for our tickets and walk back up (male 18 yrs).

Despite feeling singled out on the basis of skin colour, this young man felt that Aboriginal youth:

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<sup>2</sup> Transit Officers are employed by the Public Transit Authority and are responsible for dealing with safety, security and ticketing issues. In addition, their role is to provide a customer contact point for any passenger queries or assistance.

can't do anything about it. We can't even complain or they're just going to charge us (male 18yrs),

a position other youth shared and which made them angry. One female participant claimed that officers are “most definitely racist” saying she believed that:

back in the day they used to – like it's exciting for them. They get a kick out of it really [young Aboriginal people fighting and causing trouble on the trains] because their job is shit. So their job is exciting when there is violence and all that. That's an exciting night for them (female 20yrs).

Another young man who claimed that officers targeted Aboriginal youth was asked on what basis he felt this to be the case to which he responded, “Because I know. Everyone knows” (male 16yrs).

One participant described an incident on the train when she was travelling home with her sister and cousin. Another Aboriginal girl and her partner started accusing the participant's sister of staring at them. They came over to where they were sitting and started behaving in a way that the three young women felt to be threatening. The participant described the reaction (or lack of it) by the officers:

The transit guys were there. He just stood there, didn't do nothing. Just because we're Indigenous people doesn't mean like – you know how stereotypes and stuff – they think that they're going to hit you or whatever. Still, that's their job. They're still supposed to have safety on the trains and stuff and they don't. We wasn't safe. They [the officers] told us to move. They followed us and they did nothing. For them to just tell us to move when they should actually sort the problem out (female 18yrs)

Comments such as those above suggest that some Aboriginal youth are moving through these spaces getting into physical confrontations with officers, or feeling conspicuous, targeted and stereotyped by transit officers. However, other participants – albeit in the minority – felt either that the officers targeted *all* young people or reflected on the part they themselves played in the relationship. One young man believed that officers targeted all young people regardless of skin colour and commented, “It doesn't matter what race you are, they'll target [young people] anyway ...” However, he believed that the situation had changed somewhat and officers were now more careful not to target specific population groups, as doing so had negative consequences:

But I think they've kind of settled down because I've seen a few security guards – transit guards get belted because of that. They have been belted bad (male 18yrs).

Another participant reflected back on her relationship with officers when she used to ride the trains and hang out at stations, stating she was:

really friendly with them, always used to talk to them and when we get out, all my friends, we knew most of them, they knew most of us (female 19yrs).

The positive relationship she and her friends had formed with the officers made her feel embarrassed about a drunken incident where she swore at some officers she was not familiar with:

I got really, really intoxicated and I got taken into the back of a paddy wagon. I was swearing at transit guards, yeah, I was really drunk and then they were all like [next time they saw her], 'Oh, hi, how are you?' – I'm like 'hmm, do I know you?' 'Last Thursday'. Oh, embarrassing (female 19yrs).

Another young woman who had not ridden on the trains when drinking for some time reflected:

I haven't had trouble with them for ages, since I was a real drunken, roaming the streets. But back then I think I was a bit horrible. Very, I don't know, just really, I think you'd have to say something bad to them to get them to treat you the way they'll treat you, if they're angry (female 19yrs).

Another participant felt that "they're all right – transit guards" and the key to avoiding trouble with them was to fly under the radar:

Just don't be too loud and that when you've got your drink on you. That's more or less – I don't know if they don't know if you're having a drink or they just let you go. But if you're quiet enough for them to not draw attention then you should be right (male 18yrs).

### ***Trouble with police***

In relation to contact with police the same participant who exclaimed he wanted to 'kill' transit officers was also vehemently opposed to police. He stated:

I hate police with a passion. Believe me, if I knew I had cancer or something, if I knew I was going to die in a few days mate, I'm telling you, coppers would be dropping like flies (male 18yrs).

He detailed an extensive history of trouble with the police and had spent stretches in juvenile detention. Explaining his dislike of police, he believed police targeted Aboriginal youth and described his experiences with the following anecdote:

I cannot stand them because they literally do target us. They target me and my mate all the time. Like I see them pull people over, they let them go. They pull me over, I have to take my shoes off, I have to take my jumper off, I have to take my belt off. They punch me everywhere, everything. It's just like for what? (male 18 yrs).

Seventy-two per cent (23 youth) of the sample reported that they had been in trouble with the police previously. Seventy-four percent of those who had been in trouble with police, said that the trouble was to do with alcohol. A greater proportion of males (85%) had come in contact with police. However, over half of the young women (54%) also reported contact with police (Figure 7).

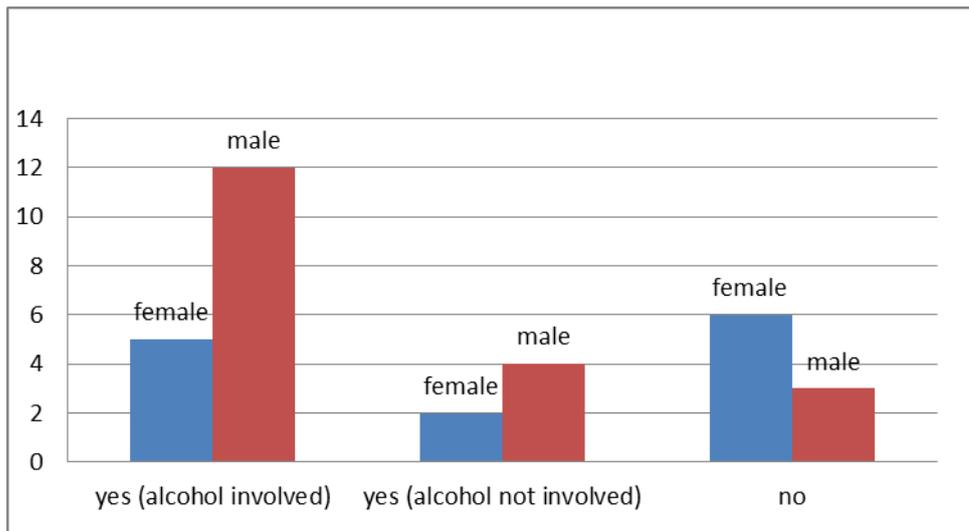


Figure 7 Trouble with police by gender

The high number of participants reporting trouble with the police indicates that they are coming to the attention of authority figures at a disproportionate rate. This may be attributed, partly, to their visibility at places such as train stations, and partly, as some participants claimed, to over-policing or the targeting of young Aboriginal people (a theme considered further in the discussion). Describing their contact with police, young people spoke about being caught or arrested for: fighting or arguing with police or others, disobeying move on orders, failing to stop when called upon by the law, grievous bodily harm (GBH), break-ins and burglaries (shops, private residences and cars), and street drinking. For the majority, alcohol was involved (75% of males and 71% of females). The six youth recruited through the South Metropolitan Youth Justice Service were asked additional questions around trouble with police. The age of first contact with police commenced for these youth between 11–14 years of age and all had been in trouble more than once. When asked what they could have done to avoid coming in contact with police alcohol featured prominently and the comments of one young man, who had been arrested for stealing, reflected those of the others:

I shouldn't have drunk as much, or shouldn't have drunk at all ... [Drinking] changes your decision making (male 16yrs).

One third of the sample – the majority of whom were male (91%) – had previously been in detention. Specific questions relating to their experiences of detention were not asked. However, young people volunteered information about their experiences throughout interviews. One young man, who had spent time in Rangeview, Banksia Hill Detention Centre and Hakea Prison, felt that his trouble with the law was associated with the lack of a father-figure growing up:

I don't know. It was just because I didn't grow up with a father figure. My dad he was locked up for quite a bit; he's still locked up, and I thought I'd just become my own boss.

Like if I had a father figure I wouldn't have been doing the stuff that I've been doing now; I wouldn't be here right now. Like I'll be – I would have been still in school; I would have had a job now (male 18yrs).

Young people also spoke about the violence and loneliness of being in detention. After describing a mobbing one evening in the community, a young man responded to the interviewer's comment that he certainly appeared to know how to fight by explaining:

You learn. You – believe me – even in Rangeview that's all you do. In Rangeview that's all I did. Anyone came into Unit Three trying to act hard, that's it, it was on. That's it. Because people will try and stand over you for your dinner, everything. If you're someone that's really quiet and you know you're in there for petty crime, they'll be like 'Give me your dinner now or you come in my cell' and we'll make him piss (male 18yrs).

Speaking about the possible consequences of drinking a young man, who had spent six months in detention when he was 14 years old, believed young people did not realise what going to detention involved. Under the influence of alcohol when he was arrested, he explained that while detention *per se* was “not that hard or nothing”, the loss of freedom was a challenge. He commented on the inability to make decisions for himself such as what time to have dinner or to go for a walk. The biggest impact of incarceration, however, was being away from loved ones – as illustrated in his comments:

They [young people] don't know what the consequences are. They don't. People say they don't care. At the end of the day when you're locked up, behind big, brick walls, away from your family it's a different story ... It doesn't really matter if your family's in there or not. It's not about your – it's about your family, but it's more about your loved ones. The ones you love on the outside. Yeah. Family's your family at the end of the day, but it's your loved ones (male 17yrs).

One young man who had recently been released from detention had been involved in an incident in Banksia Hill in January 2013 which had resulted in the transfer of male detainees to Hakea Prison – an adult prison for men. He spoke about his experience of being transferred to Hakea which he claimed involved manhandling by officers:

They just grabbed you and gripped you on the floor – smash you on the floor and just jump on top of you – 'You're not going to be any hassle, are you mate?' Then as I got into the cell, they opened the door, walked me through the cell, just chucked me in and I went straight up into the wall. They didn't care. They were just, 'oh well, just another prisoner'. Then I had this big graze here when I got out. All this got scratches and shit (male 17yrs).

The experience of being in Hakea, he told the interviewer, had made him realise that he did not ever want to go back to jail. This particular young man spoke about how he used get drunk with his friends and while he did not plan to, when he was under the influence of alcohol he would break into cars or houses and this had eventually landed him in detention. He said that he intended to get out of the city and away from the trouble; his uncle had found him a job up North and he believed that it would be his opportunity to turn his life around.

It is important to note here that the above reports of young people's experiences in detention are personal stories and have not been substantiated or verified.

## **Risks and protective factors**

### ***Family life and home environment***

The central role played by grandparents, in particular grandmothers or 'nannas', in many of the young people's lives was apparent. A quarter of the sample lived with their grandparent/s at the time of the interview and others had lived with them in the past. One young man described his 'nanna' in the following way:

Yeah, she was another mum. She was the mother, father, grandfather, aunties, uncles – she was everything in one (male 18yrs).

Another participant, who had been raised by her 'nan' and 'pop' commented:

So you look at my nan [father's mother], was the ones who's got the kids and the grandkids and the great grandkids, because the parents are off doing whatever (female 17yrs).

A number of participants made critical comments around family and parental responsibility. One particular concern of participants was children consuming alcohol and getting drunk. Participants were alarmed at the presence of these children, especially at night around train stations. While many had described their own heavy drinking at around 14 years old, they noted it was now common to see children as young as 11 and 12 drinking and out late at night, which was not the case when they were younger. The presence of children, especially drunk and out at night, prompted some young people to ask, "Where are the parents?" One participant commented:

I mean I know a lot of 12 year olds are drinking and it's not even 12 actually. Even 11 they're starting to drink. It's just like go home, you know you're only a little kid ... I don't usually go out, but when I do, I see little kids out and it's like 'where are your parents? Shouldn't they be telling you to get home?' (female 17yrs).

Another participant's comments mirrored this sentiment:

Yeah, when I go out like I just see kids, like little kids walking around drinking. I'm like shouldn't you be home in bed? They're like that small, just walking around and police not doing nothing, Nyungar Patrol not doing nothing. Nyungar Patrol they should be getting them in the car taking them home. Saying, look, your kids out on the street drinking and the parents wouldn't know what they're doing. They could be getting hurt or something (male 18yrs).

Parents' seeming lack of awareness of their children's whereabouts created unease among participants and one young woman, who had experienced a high level of alcohol-related harm, spoke from experience:

A lot of parents don't know like where their kids are half the time now. Most of the time they just go and I know because like I used to do that all the time. I used to just go, like for weeks, even I used to just go (female 19yrs).

A participant who had grown up with his 'nan' described his absent mother who he felt had chosen drink over her children:

Since – well, my mother gave me up when I was just a baby, since she drank all her life, still drinking, and so I've been living with my Nan since I was just walking. So for me it's like when I go see my mum, it's like you're still fucking drinking, you know? You gave all your children up for alcohol (male 18yrs).

A young woman was disapproving of parents who drank around their children and spoke about her family's influence on her own drinking behaviours. Pregnant herself, she was adamant she would not supply alcohol to her child or consume alcohol around her daughter. She felt that parents had a responsibility to ensure their children were not learning about alcohol through them:

The parents, if they don't want their kids drinking, they shouldn't drink around them. They just drink and they're not looking, even if they're looking and not touching it, that's still giving them the idea. That's how I started, looking at my mum and uncles and aunties and that, their drinking (female 17yrs).

### ***Strategies for keeping safe***

It is apparent from the young people's stories about alcohol consumption, fighting and the contexts in which many of them move, that participants were at high risk of harm, a finding that members of the local Aboriginal community have expressed concerned about. What is interesting and can provide optimism is that many young people reported strategies for keeping themselves safe. Even those who admitted to going out to look for trouble were able to identify methods for minimising harm as this young man's comments highlight:

I don't know. We keep safe. I usually go out with boys that I know that could have my back or something. So I would always fight every time I'd go out. I'll always have my boys there. They would help me fight as well. You know they'll back you up (male 18yrs).

Having one's 'boys' or 'girls' alongside was considered a no-brainer as they "just have my back or look after to me if I get too drunk" (male 16yrs). One young woman described how she always stuck with her girlfriend and her quote illustrates how the presence of friends and family can place pressure on young people under the influence of alcohol not to go through with decisions that could place them at risk of harm:

I'm very aware of the scenery around me. But my friend, when she's drunk she's just out of it. That's why I'm always with her because I'm the more sensible. She wanted to get in a van with a few guys and I was like, 'If you go in that van, I'll snap your neck'. We almost had a fight on the road. I was like, 'No'. Then I grabbed her and then we got back in the car that we came in. I've saved her so many times. So many girls have wanted to bash her but because I've got my girls there ... (female 15yrs).

Most young people stated that they avoided being out alone:

Yeah, you just always don't go around by yourself, you have to always have a couple of people with you (male 19yrs).

They also made sure that they had trustworthy friends around them:

I'd have a few mates with me and also a few guys. These guys are from school and our friendship is really strong. Yeah, we'd just stick in groups and stuff (female 15yrs).

Keeping company with the 'right' people was a strategy some young people used to keep safe and avoid trouble as one participant described:

I wouldn't choose the Wadjela boys because every time I drink with them they all go fighting and looking for arguments and that, but when I drink with my cousins they just sit back and smack it down at their house and we just drink (male 18yrs).

For another young man the presence of a large group of people helped him avoid potential run-ins with the law:

I found out if I drink with a couple of people I will go out stealing, but if I drink with heaps of people, I just stay there and just party (male 17yrs).

Another strategy that was deployed was being vigilant about one's surroundings. One young woman who frequented Burswood train station spoke about being aware of the setting and making sure not to sit too close to the edge of the platform. Similarly, another participant also spoke about:

hanging out at the back of whoever I'm with. Hang out at the back, so I can see what's going on. If someone wanted to walk off or anything else happens. Well, I make sure that I can see what's going on around me (male 17yrs).

Additional strategies included making sure to have money and a phone on them or to avoid going out at all: "just stay at home and don't go anywhere. I drink my drink in my home" (female 17yrs).

In spite of the above, a number of participants told stories of when strategies failed. One young woman's worst night was being 'ditched' by her sister and friends outside a nightclub. She had previously explained:

there's a difference with going out with friends and people you know from a long time, because if you go out with people you've been with a long time like my cousin and my sisters and stuff, you know you're safe (female 19yrs).

However, in this instance she was left to find her own way home. On another occasion the same young woman had been out with friends she did not fully trust; again she ended up having to make her own way home and described finding herself alone and frightened at Armadale station.

One strategy in particular seemed to, on occasion, go awry and involved friends or family members failing to protect participants in fights with other young people. A participant described an incident in which his friends did not run in to help him fight:

that's why I got my head split open. They [the young people mobbing him] were baulking me with the brick and [my friends] was watching them baulking me ... They were baulking me with the brick when I was on the floor. That's what I was thinking, if my other cousin was there he'd be straight down and smack them (male 18yrs).

Another participant spoke about a mobbing which landed her in hospital. Despite having been out with family and friends she had found herself alone:

I actually ended up being on – I found myself on my own in that situation. So that caused a lot of drama, like so much and then that, just caused a lot of drama, like family got involved ... No one was [there]. I was supposed to have friends and whatnot with me and they ended up not being there (female 20yrs).

Describing a particularly violent incident in which he was badly injured and his cousin was beaten and run over, one young man described the potential fallibility of relying on others to step in. His story confirms other young people's narratives about the changing nature of the fight and the tendency of mobbings to result in grievous injuries:

We had a mate with us that started this fight with I think it was about two or three guys. Then he got knocked out and then out of nowhere they came at us – those guys. We were waiting at the bus stop. They came at us and me and my cousin, we dogged the shit out of them. Then out of nowhere a four wheel drive pulled up and about eight boys jumped out of the four wheel drive ... Then out of nowhere someone hit my cousin in the back of the head with a bottle and knocked him out. That's when I went to grab my cousin – to pick him up and start running, but then by that time I was getting mobbed and then fucking he was on the road lane and then the car went over the top of him. The car went up, did a U turn, came back, ran over the top of him, and something grabbed onto his clothing under the car. It just dragged him (male 18yrs).

Despite having friends with them, he and his cousin ended up fighting on their own:

I've had like even family and best mates who tell me, 'Yeah, yeah, if anything happens mate I've got your back'. Shit will go down, I'll look behind me mate and no one's there. I end up getting mobbed or something bad happens or I'll end up hitting one of them with a weapon if I have to. If worse comes to worst. Do you know what I mean? Because that's how it is ... We had all of these guys that were supposed to be our brothers – left us. We had a carload sitting across the road that were supposed to be our mates and they left us (male 18yrs).

Other participants described themselves and friends being involved in a fight with a big 'mob' of others. In these situations friends were often too busy defending themselves to step in, as was the case for one young woman:

Well, they couldn't [look out for me] at the time because they were fighting, so yeah. Everyone was just fighting (female 19yrs).

In some instances, having the boys or the girls present may act as a deterrent for others wanting a fight. However, given the size of the fights the youth were describing and the tendency for them to get out-of-hand quickly, this strategy for keeping safe can, at times, be tenuous. On the whole, young people's strategies were enacted successfully and it is reassuring to know that even if they are, at times, drinking in risky environments, they are looking out for themselves and each other.

### ***Social support***

Participants were asked whether they had people who they could talk to if they had a problem, and if so, who they spoke to. The majority of young people had people to turn to when something was worrying them, as Figure 8 illustrates.

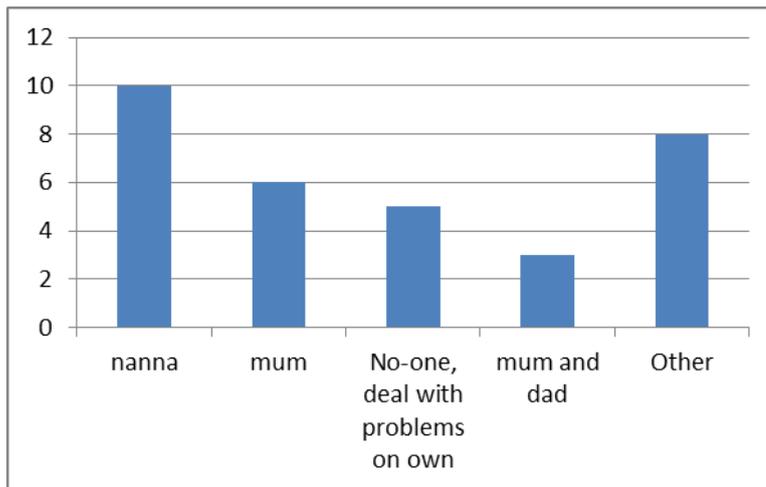


Figure 8 Support

Once again, ‘nannas’ comes to the fore, with almost a third of young people stating they would turn to them if they a problem – indicating their important presence and the role played in nurturing, supporting and ‘growing up’ these young people. ‘Other’ included friends, siblings, dad, and partner.

Participants were also asked if they had someone in their lives who they admired and respected (Figure 9). In contrast to who they chose to seek support from, an equal number of young people admired their fathers or mothers, or had no-one with whom they could identify. Brothers, sisters, uncles and friends were also admired. ‘Other’ included multiple relatives, work colleagues, aunties and cousins. When young people were asked what they admired about these people the answers were similar. Participants spoke of their: strength of character, non-drinking/non-drug taking status, ability to not worry what others think, commitment to family, employment in well-paid jobs, ability to avoid trouble, sporting ability and the difference between this person and themselves.

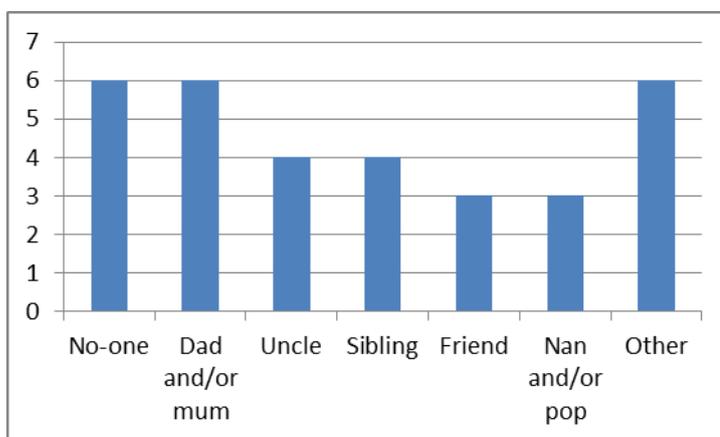


Figure 9 People they admired

### ***Positive skills and hopes for the future***

All participants were asked what their strengths were and what they hoped for in their futures. In terms of strengths, sport featured prominently for young people, particularly football, basketball and netball. Young people also spoke about creative skills such as being good at putting clothes and colours together, styling hair, doing graphic design and painting. The younger participants (12-13 years) who were still at school also mentioned subjects at school that they liked and were good at. In addition, a number of participants identified they were good at fixing things, putting things together, tinkering with cars, brick paving, and cooking and cleaning. One young man told the interviewer that he had:

... a lot of good qualities. It's just whether I want to use them or not. I don't know. Honestly, I'm a very happy person. I love living life. I just love to enjoy life, I just like to party. I just like to have fun (male 18yrs).

Some young people found it difficult to identify their good skills or identified what they used to be good at, but did not feel they were anymore. A number of these participants mentioned that they used to be good at sport such as running, basketball or football, but they no longer played. A small number of these young people simply stated they were not good at anything.

Most young people hoped for good things in their futures. They spoke about wanting to get jobs and a house and to have a family of their own:

I want to get a job, do that first, get my license, get my house and – get my house and make sure I do all that first. With my life, find a woman, have kids. Yeah, when I get my house I'll do my house up and get a job and that first' (male 18yrs).

Another participant said the future was about:

... owning your own house eventually; having everything that you generally see in movies – have the usual – the usual stuff. Have a normal family. That's what I plan to push for it to go. That's where I'm aiming for (male 21yrs).

Having money was important, “then you can buy anything you want” (male 17yrs) and being able to support their families was important to the young men who were parents. One young woman said when she grew up she wanted to:

... work on the mines, have money to put a tombstone on my brother's grave. Buy a car, buy myself a house, and live happy (female 13yrs).

Several participants spoke about wanting to turn their lives around, in particular those who had histories of involvement in the criminal justice system. As one young woman said;

I want to get a house, get a car, get my license, pay all my fines off and go and get a job and stay out of trouble then (female 17yrs).

Another participant stated:

I want to start fresh and like get on with my life and just make sure my life is set, like get a job and that, yeah like get a house, so when I have a kid and that and you've got a house and that and car (male 18yrs).

Similarly, a young man commented:

I just want to get a job and turn my life around, instead of being in here reporting, doing this shit for your life (male 15yrs).

Another young man simply wanted to:

... just make something of myself. Yeah, I just want to do something hopefully. I just want to do something with my life. Hopefully I'll do something. Get somewhere (male 16 yrs).

Two participants, who had described particularly difficult lives, stressed that it was important to them to break from the past and to be there for their children – one for the children he hoped for in the future and the other, for the baby she was carrying. One of these participants had spoken at length about the relationship he had had with his father growing up. He expressed a lot of anger towards the father he felt had let him down, who was never there for him, who broke promises, who beat him and regularly put him down. For this young man, it was important not to be like his father:

Honestly, I'm going to be the man my dad should have been. I want to be the complete opposite to what he is. I want to be a man, I want to be a father – a real father – and I want to be a provider. They're my three goals. That's all I want to do. Just provide for my family, look after my family, and be a man. That's it. Not a little fucking ponce that claims to be a man. I want to be a man. That's it. It is very sad, you know what I mean? (male 18 yrs).

The other participant, a young woman with a long history of drug use, family violence and contact with the law said that she:

... (didn't) want to be like other young mothers that leave their kid with their mum and dad or elsewhere, because I don't want my kid going to welfare. Because I've been to welfare. That's why I'm going to make sure the kid's got a home and that they get an education and don't go hanging around with bad people (female 17yrs).

### **Alcohol education and knowledge, and understanding of harms**

Participants were asked if they had ever received education around alcohol at school or in another context. Most young people had received some education about alcohol and other drugs at either school, mandated through the courts or in detention. The younger participants (12-13 years) who were still in school had all recently received some education and were able to talk about what they had learnt. A young woman who was in Year Seven described what she learnt at her school:

Someone came the other day and told us about alcohol. No that was drugs. We normally teach – drugs and alcohol in school just to let people know not to touch it and all that ... Because there's different kind of things that you don't know what's in there (female 13yrs).

A 12 year old boy who was an aspiring footballer said he had learnt at school that alcohol “can mess up your brain and your kidneys” and, similarly, a young girl had recently completed drug education at her school was able to describe what she knew about alcohol’s effect on the body:

It makes your brain small, it ruins your teeth, your eyesight, your hair and everything like that. It ruins your liver, your heart. It can kill you, yeah (female 13yrs).

While all but one of the older youth (15-21 years) had received some alcohol education at school, they professed little memory of it and took away few messages from the classes. The most common response was that school

education, in particular, went “in one ear and out the other”. Young people spoke about not being interested in the education as one young man attested:

Yeah, I remember learning about alcohol and drugs and that. But I didn't really pay attention but, wasn't really that interested ... I kind of forgot everything, yeah (male 18yrs).

Others felt that the messages were not helpful, for instance, those focused on abstaining from alcohol: “All they say is don't drink, that's not going to help us” (female 15yrs). One young man felt that youth did not take the messages on board because the messages being relayed did not prepare young people for real life. Having spoken at length about the difficult circumstances of his own life during the interview and his experiences of going “through bits of hell”, he scoffed at the ability of drug educators to relay the information in ways that would be meaningful for Aboriginal youth like himself:

Because the real world – like when they teach you about life and the world shit, it's all bullshit. I'm telling you. They don't know fuck all. They don't know anything. You want experience? You go to someone that's had experience on the street' (male 18yrs).

He also believed that the people providing the education or advice lacked credibility as this comment illustrates:

Because they had someone that went in there [to the youth detention centre] but they didn't know what they were on about. Because I've sat there and listened to them as well and they did not know what they were on about. Do you know what I mean? (male 18yrs).

Two of the older youth did remember the messages from the education they had received: one was a young man who received alcohol education through a court mandated program and the other, a young woman, remembered an older man coming to her school to tell his story. The male participant had become more aware of the amount he was drinking and told a story about an activity the educators got participants to do. This involved getting participants to pour what they considered to be a standard drink:

Did I tell you somebody that – I was pouring cups like that [participant indicated how much he put in a cup] because they had food colouring. I was like, 'yeah, that's how much I pour and that much coke'. They're like, 'Well that's a standard drink'. I was like, what?! (male 17yrs).

Since he had completed the alcohol education, together with drug counselling, he told the interviewer he had reduced his alcohol consumption from every day to once a week, “it was just like, what's the point of drinking?” (male 17yrs). The other participant, after initially saying she could not recall anything about school drug education, remembered a man called John who came to her school when she was in Year Nine:

He had a lot of drink, he went around, well or something, or his leg, he woke up on a train track, yeah. Yeah, it was kind of like sad in a way because – it was his own fault really, because he said he threw a rock at a train and it bounced on him. Like why would you go onto a train track where trains are? But I'm not saying it's his fault about his leg, but... Yeah, he knocked himself out and yeah, he fell on the train track. Yeah, he said he was really drunk. That's why he would never drink again, stuff like that (female 19yrs).

Her account suggests that John's story had left an imprint on her memory, but whether it modified her drinking behaviours was unclear. She had recounted being involved in incidents at a train station herself, including

fighting and being taken away in a 'paddy wagon' after drinking all day. She described herself as a heavy drinker, but was currently abstaining from alcohol because she was pregnant with her first child.

Most of these older youth appeared to have little knowledge of the longer-term health effects of alcohol although a number identified that alcohol "messes up your liver" and brain. While they were able to list the acute consequences of alcohol use, they struggled to identify what effects alcohol could have in the longer-term, and what they did identify was not always accurate. Those who were able to isolate some chronic conditions were mainly those who had family members who had experienced alcohol-related disease. These participants spoke about their 'pops', uncles and dads who had liver disease, had experienced strokes from alcohol and smoking, suffered from high blood pressure, had diabetes, had lost their teeth and had limbs amputated. While there was a certain indifference among participants towards the longer-term effects of drinking, those who had experienced the impact of alcohol on the health of family members appeared to be more cautious about the extent they were drinking.

For most young people, however, alcohol education was not memorable and youth were seemingly focused on being young and doing what everyone else did:

So, I mean when you're in school, when you're like in high school you just want to do what everybody else is doing, I guess. You just want to be around everything. Like I know a few of my friends they were drinking and smoking dope – like marijuana (female 17 yrs).

A number of participants believed that alcohol education would not change young people's behaviour around alcohol if they did not want to change themselves:

They'll think, 'oh yeah, whatever, who cares. I'm drinking because I can drink. I want to drink'. So they're not going to pay attention, whatever (female 18yrs).

This sentiment is reiterated in another participant's comments:

At the end of the day, it's just up to them. Like, you can give them all the education about smoking and alcohol and all of that and it's just up to them if they'll listen. But me, back in the days I just would not have listened, being young. I just wanted to drink and do all that' (female 19yrs).

When asked if there was anything that would have worked to encourage her to modify her drinking she replied, "Probably not, no. Because I just wanted to be like everyone else" (female 19yrs).

## **Health promotion**

### ***Memory of health promotion***

One of the key aims of the project was to explore Aboriginal youths' awareness of and reception to existing alcohol-related health promotion and to ask participants what they thought made health promotion sense for young people like themselves. All participants were asked whether they understood what

health promotion meant. If they did not understand the interviewers explained it to them. They were asked whether they remembered any health promotion around alcohol then were asked specifically about health promotion targeting both young people in general and Aboriginal youth in particular. Participants had little memory of health promotion materials, activities or campaigns. Those who could identify health promotion were most familiar with television advertisements; in particular, a recent ad focusing on drinking during pregnancy featuring Mary G aka Kimberley man, Mark Bin Bakar. This suggests that using Aboriginal people in advertisements may help to capture young people's attention. One young man conveyed what he felt was the main message of this particular ad:

Main message – don't drink while she's pregnant. Yeah. While baby's inside her belly because it can harm her more – harm the baby more than when it's out (male 17yrs).

Another participant went one step further and explained that the ad was not only targeting the pregnant woman, but also her partner:

Just snapped the guy into gear because he slapped him and he was like, 'what's wrong with you? You're not supposed to be giving your wife alcohol when she's pregnant' (female 15yrs).

Participants also mentioned having seen drink driving ads mainly targeting adults or involving car accidents, an ad where a father asks his son to get a beer from the fridge for him and one participant remembered an ad about underage drinking with the message that:

The child's brain doesn't stop developing until the age of 18 or something, or 21. I can still remember that. Under age and no drinking or something. No alcohol (male 16yrs).

One young boy had recently seen the local ad produced by the West Australian Drug and Alcohol Office's 'Strong Spirit Strong Mind' project. He explained that the ad showed young Aboriginal people aged about 14 or 15 drinking and fighting (male 12 yrs).

Young people mainly remembered seeing health promotion around smoking including an ad with a picture of smoke going into the lungs "and looking all black" (male 12yrs) and, in particular, an ad featuring a young man with no eyes:

I remember that smoking ad, where there's one dude sitting there smoking in the change rooms. He's rung all his mates who are out on the oval running around ... he's smoking. Said smoking's pointless or something, but some people can't see it. He had no eyes, he had like... it was like closed up. So he was smoking. That's kind of stuck with me that one. Maybe because of the eyes, and because he was sitting back smoking and the rest of his mates were out on the oval. Yeah, that's kind of the meaning (male 18yrs).

No participants could remember ever having seen or taken part in any health promotion materials or activities targeted at young Aboriginal people, aside from the one participant who had seen the Strong Spirit Strong Mind advertisement. When those who remembered advertisements were asked whether they liked them or felt they would influence the decisions of young Aboriginal people around alcohol, one young woman said she liked the

message she felt the Mary G ad conveyed about all looking after each other when a woman's pregnant. Another participant liked ads he had seen that:

... do realistic things and it – so to make it look like – you know, to make you actually pay attention to it (male 19yrs)

In relation to the Strong Spirit Strong Mind ad, the young boy replied when asked what he liked about the ad, “it's good. Making kids to stop drinking and all that” (male 12yrs). However, most young people said they did not like much about what they had seen or did not feel the ads influenced their own drinking behaviours, with one young man vehemently opposed to existing health promotion:

You get all these promotions like the don't smoke campaigns and shit. What the fuck do you think – that's going to help mate, what, giving out stickers and shit. Don't smoke. Like that's going to fucking help (male 18yrs).

### ***Responses to health promotion examples***

To prompt ideas, participants were shown some examples of health promotion produced by NSW Health and the Australian Government which specifically target Aboriginal young people and in one case their families (Appendix E). These advertisements feature young Aboriginal people engaged in a range of different activities (sport, dancing, at a club) with various messages about alcohol. All materials featured comment about culture or included cultural icons. Participants were asked whether they liked the materials, what they did or did not like and whether they felt this was a good way to get messages across to young people. A number of young people responded positively to the materials. Things they liked about them included that they: had young people who looked happy; used sport (especially for the younger participants who were engaged in sporting activities); were eye-catching; featured Aboriginal people; included culture and familiar colours; and, had messages about being able to have fun without alcohol and about not drinking just because your mates do – something some had struggled with in relation to their own drinking.

Other participants did not respond so positively. Commenting on one poster one young man said:

Honestly, if I see this, I wouldn't really read it. Because it does need to stand out. You know what I mean? It just looks like a picture of girls dancing ... None of these would attract me anyway – to read them' (male 18yrs).

Others agreed and said they were unlikely to stop and read them or would not take any notice of them. A number of participants said this would be because they could not be bothered reading it or had better things to do. Two participants also commented that Aboriginal kids may not be able to read or write well, so a poster with lots of words will not get their attention. Two further participants felt that the young people in the ads looked too happy and did not look like they had experienced any hardship or been on the streets (a theme that emerged in the ideas young people had for health promotion discussed below). One of these young men was particularly unimpressed and said something like that would not work for him; he had

been forced to learn about the harms of alcohol “the hard way” (male 16yrs). The other of these participants stated:

If anything, what they should have on there, is someone lying on the floor with a fucking needle hanging out of their arm or something. Something that's going to scare someone. Because these cunts are happy. They're all happy and it's saying don't do drugs and all the rest of it (male 18yrs).

In other words, these participants did not feel the advertisements were ‘real’ enough. One young man, when asked what he thought of the example which targeted parents commented that it would not work:

Because really, you could tell your kids ‘Oh, no, drugs and alcohol's a no-go’, but then they hang around their friends and their friends get different ideas, then they influence the kid who's trying not to, like ‘Oh, you're weird, just try it’. Then bang, they have a sip and they get drunk, then when they go home and their parents rip them up and maybe give them a flogging or whatnot (male 18yrs).

Two participants also commented that the health promotion they had seen previously and were shown during the interview targeted older youth, when they believed that it was the children who were at most risk. As outlined earlier, participants expressed concern at the number of very young children they had seen out late at night drinking and they felt that this was a group in need of intervention:

See that's where I would like to see something like that, especially for the real young Indigenous kids, because, well more Aboriginal kids in the Aboriginal community, they have more health problems than anything. I mean I don't see a lot of young white people have health problems. There are more Indigenous people dying than anything (female 17yrs).

### ***Young people's ideas for health promotion***

Participants were asked what they would do if they had the opportunity to create their own health promotion targeting Aboriginal youth around alcohol. The majority of the drinkers in this study drank at levels that would be considered risky, moved in contexts that, at times, could be described as precarious, and had experienced a high incidence of acute alcohol-related harms and consequences. Coupled with the lack of impact of school alcohol education within this group and the lack of knowledge around the health effects, it is even more important that health promotion is delivered in ways which are meaningful and likely to leave an imprint in their memories, making their own ideas of what would work even more significant. Ideas ranged from: using humour and making jokes so the messages were memorable; running a competition with a prize for young Aboriginal people to design a health promotion initiative; using pictures rather than words for a poster which shows different scenarios (good and bad) of how the night could turn out; an advertisement which focused on the effect of alcohol on the family and a video showing the consequences of drinking such as that described in this young man's comments:

Since it's aimed at youth, it would be like acting out. Since when people drunk, like youth, they tend to – let's see, car, unlocked, they're going to say let's go for a joyride. Then there's consequences for that. They can get a high-speed chase, they'll get wrapped

around a pole, they'll do time in Banksia Hill. Yeah. So I reckon that would be an eye-opener for the young youth (male 18yrs).

Participants spoke about how they would get the above messages out to young people. Unsurprisingly, they felt that areas where youth congregated would be the obvious choice. They mentioned bus-stops and train stations, on trains, skate parks, at the library, posting videos on Facebook, on the walls of shops and bottle shops:

so like just on the wall, something that people can just look at and think about before they get alcohol or before adults buy young people alcohol (female 19yrs)

and at fast food outlets such as, "McDonalds, yeah. KFC, because everyone loves chicken" (male 21yrs).

While there was some diversity in responses, as the ideas cited above show, two key ideas for promoting health messages about alcohol to this group clearly emerged.

### *1. Activity-based health promotion*

Activity-based health promotion was preferred to advertisements. Seventy-eight per cent of the young people in this study who were no longer at school had left school by the end of Year Ten. They were also less likely to be employed or involved in sport or other recreational activities. This is the period that many reported being at the peak of their drinking trajectories and at the height of their trouble with police, hence a particularly vulnerable time. One young woman, while she could not think of what she would do to reach this group, felt something needed to be done about young people not having enough to do, commenting:

I don't know, but all I can say is that they need something to do. They need to have an event or something – something to do. They're bored, kids are just bored. They can't go out. They can just go, they can drink or fight or whatever. They need to use that for good you know. Like I don't know (female 18yrs).

Some participants commented that Aboriginal and youth-directed organised activities would be a good way of reaching young Aboriginal people as the following comments highlight:

Like when you're doing stuff like that, it'll get more people's attention ... Like if young people organise it, there'll be young people who go there and – yeah (male 19yrs).

One young woman believed that there are fewer activities available for young Aboriginal people than there used to be and suggested various activities in order to engage different groups of young people:

I reckon an activity. For maybe the young girls who like to dance – do something like that. Maybe the young girls who like to play sports – like netball, basketball – do something for that. For the young men, maybe they like to dance – hardly, but... Maybe some of them who like to play sports – do something for that. There is hardly anything out there any more for the young people. I mean my mum was telling me that all the young Indigenous kids back in the old days, they used to just meet up and have like a little dance and whatever; do sports every weekend, but where has all that gone now? I mean nobody knows their tradition no more. Like nobody wants to go out to the bush and experience all that stuff anymore. It's like we're all losing our cultural stuff (female 17yrs).

The same young woman believed that health promotion and education needed to be designed and led by Aboriginal people because:

... young Indigenous kids don't like talking to white people, yeah, and if they see white people on an ad and they're talking about drugs and alcohol they're not going to listen (female 17yrs).

One participant thought basketball carnivals would be a good way to reach youth because:

Yeah. Like the basketball carnivals and that, a lot of young people like to play basketball and all that ... black kids love basketball carnivals (male 18yrs)

Another young man believed a football event would be a good activity for engaging the young boys commenting, "Yeah. Every Nyungar boy loves footy" (male 18yrs). This young man, however, felt that the problem was not so much a lack of available activities for youth, but about retaining young people in sporting and other activities. Speaking from his own experience of once playing football he commented:

but it's like – they like stuff up, muck around, start drinking and start going down the wrong track. That's where they stuff up. Like that's where I stuffed up. I followed a boy that got me into trouble and that hey (male 18yrs).

It is important to note that there are programs being run for young people after hours in Perth, such as youth groups and basketball competitions<sup>3</sup>, some of which participants were involved in. However, some young people either did not consider there to be enough activities available or simply appeared not to know about those that existed, suggesting that word about activities is not making it out to some of these youth.

## *2. Real person*

By far the most popular response from participants as to the best way for promoting health messages about alcohol to young Aboriginal people was through a real person, preferably a peer slightly older than themselves, but also someone the young people trusted and would listen to such as an uncle or elders:

And old fellas, a couple of old people, even if they have an ad just for old fellas to tell whoever's got respect for their nan and their pop they'll actually sit there and listen (female 17yrs).

They felt that Aboriginal youth would listen to these people who had been there and could tell their story. Interestingly, with the exception of one young woman, participants did not want to receive these messages from high profile people. The one participant who suggested a famous person had seen a high profile Aboriginal man talk about drugs and alcohol, but she commented that

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3. During the research period, Midnight Basketball, an afterhours basketball tournament for young people began in Armadale and was already running in Midlland, see:

<http://www.midnightbasketball.org.au/Locations/ARMADALE/Pages/default.aspx>

not all young people liked him. More appropriate, she believed, was Aboriginal boxer, Anthony Mundine. She commented:

Anthony Mundine, he should get up and do something. A lot of young people like him because that he's a fighter, yeah ... That's why he should get up and thing because he, yeah, well that point there too. He doesn't fight around the public or anything, just in that spot now (female 17yrs).

Participants specified that the person needed to have *really* experienced what s/he was talking about and would need to know and understand the lives of these young people. For example, a young man who is worth quoting in full, had been involved in fighting since an early age, had experienced multiple injuries, had a long history of trouble with the law and was a heavy drug user. He was the most vocally critical of existing health promotion and believed that:

They should have someone that goes in there that has had past experiences to share the knowledge. You know what I mean? Not from someone that's like, 'did you see on the news that guy that had – and oh yeah, one of my mates did this and that happened'. It's like yeah,' I remember that time when I went out and that happened and this'. You know? They need to hear it firsthand. Honestly, that's the thing though, you'd have to – what I'd do is I'd get a few of mates together that have all been down the same road as me and I'd get them to help me do it. Because we've all got different experiences you know what I mean? We've all been through the same shit but we've all done it differently. That's it. That's what it's all about; it's everyone's different experiences. Like I said, I've been through the violence and everything else. Then you've got – I've got a mate who was flogged his whole life, like I said. Now he's a complete junkie. I hate to say that about him but he's – you know what I mean? I've got another – I know this chick mate, she hates it. She wants to kill herself all the time, that's all she ever talks about. She's gorgeous, she's beautiful. 'I'm ugly, I'm fat' – because that's all her mum and dad ever said to her. You know what I mean? That's all she was ever told. That's what it should be about (male 18yrs).

He explained that it had to be:

... more about life, not about – it has to be real, not artificial. Because that's what that is, that's artificial, that's bullshit. You know what I mean? (male 18yrs).

This young man's sentiment was echoed by several other young people who believed that the impact of hearing someone's story would stay with the young people. They may not immediately change their own drinking behaviour:

... but it will still affect them. They will still have a talk about it. You won't see them not talking about it female 17yrs).

Another participant stated that hearing a young person tell their story would make her think, as these comments reveal:

If there was an actual talk in the school or something, if there was an affected teenager or something. Yeah, if a person with a bad experience or something or came in injured or something, that would have really affected me ... Yeah, just how some kids end up in comas and stuff just over alcohol being involved. Yeah, seeing that, you have just got the same old, like oh that's what happens but when things are in my face or when I actually see things then it really does – I am just like you know (female 20yrs).

Other young people agreed; messages needed to be hard hitting, real and credible. Another participant who had been through some difficult experiences and spent time in detention said that if he was to talk to other younger people he would:

Just tell them and then we'd do a stand up thing and I'd say, 'Well you don't want to listen to me, it's your own fault, but if you want to listen to me' – because I remember

when everyone used to say to me, 'I remember when I used to be young'. I used to get sick of hearing that. I know you used to be young, obviously. Yeah, I should've stayed in school. They shouldn't criticise. They should be like, 'I should've stayed in school but I did a dumb choice and I just wanted to drink and do this' – that type of stuff. Not 'I should have done this, I should have done that' – me, me, me. Well you should have but you didn't. You could have, but you didn't – that type of stuff (male 17yrs).

When asked if this would have worked for him when he was younger, he replied:

I don't know. I would have sat there and listened to that more than the ads. I would've been like, he knows what he's talking about (male 17yrs).

Another young man who was asked if the health promotion he remembered and the posters he was shown would have worked for him when he was younger answered:

I'd probably have to hear it from someone that's been there or something first ... depends how hard – like how hard you need it – how hard you need the help or something. Like someone that's been there. Someone that's a lot like them – well was like them. Yeah, someone a little bit older that was young and done all those things. Yeah, put them in front of them (male 21yrs).

In summary, participants preferred activity-based health promotion initiatives and felt that a person – preferably a peer or a person of trust and credibility – who had been there before them and experienced the harms of alcohol, would have the greatest impact on other Aboriginal youth; if not influencing behaviour directly *per se* at least leaving a lasting imprint. Participants who knew the most about the longer-term health effects of alcohol were those who had seen it first-hand in their families. Stories from those who have experienced the acute and chronic effects of alcohol use may increase a young person's knowledge around these effects. Participants felt that the key ways of promoting these messages were to target children early, have older Aboriginal youth deliver the messages and to distribute these messages in youth-specific spaces.

## **Discussion**

These data illustrate that drinking for some at-risk Aboriginal young people begins at a young age and well before the legal drinking age; alcohol is easily accessible for those under age and while different factors influence what is consumed and the frequency in which it is consumed, both female and male participants reported drinking at levels associated with both acute and chronic harm. This is consistent with evidence showing an increase in the number of Australian young people drinking at levels considered harmful under the NHMRC national guidelines (NHMRC 2009; Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia 2011). Many Australians perceive some use of alcohol and other drugs as normative and for most, use will not become problematic (Gowing, Proudfoot, Henry-Edwards & Teesson 2001). There is also evidence to suggest that there has been a reduction in the use of some substances among the general population. However, this has not been the case for young people, and for subgroups such as Indigenous Australians and women (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2008). There is also evidence that the age of onset of drinking has been getting younger in settings such as the United States and Australia (Loxley et al., 2004; Masten et al., 2009). Findings from this study reflect this, as – while the older participants reported their most heavy period of drinking between the ages of 14–17 years (consistent with the findings of Silburn and colleagues (2007)) – they were particularly concerned by the increase in young Aboriginal children they had seen out at night drinking around train stations.

Among participants there was a high level of early contact with police and a third of the young people had spent time in detention. It is well documented that Indigenous youth are overrepresented in Australia's criminal justice system, especially in detention (White, 2009; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). In 2011, Indigenous youth made up just five per cent of Australia's youth population, but accounted for 39 per cent of youth in the justice system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Indigenous young people are 18 times more likely to be in detention on any one day and four to six times more likely to be proceeded against by police, than their non-Indigenous counterparts (AIC 2012). Various reasons have been given for this over-representation including a history of over-policing, exclusionary policies and state intervention and monitoring (NIDAC 2009; White 2009). Among the drinkers in this study, the majority of drinking and/or fighting took place in public spaces, particularly along the train lines and at train stations. It is in these contexts that many of the young people reported feeling targeted, committing criminal acts and fighting – behaviours that drew the attention of authority figures and mostly negative experiences with these figures.

It was apparent that this group of young people was experiencing a high level of alcohol-related harm, in particular, injuries from fighting. This is also consistent with what other research has shown. That is, that alcohol is the most frequent precursor to hospitalisation from drug and alcohol-related conditions among young people in Australia – presentations in which Indigenous Australians are over-represented (National Preventative Health Taskforce 2008; Hulse, Robertson & Tait 2001). Participants spoke about harms they and their families and friends had experienced while drinking, many of which had resulted in attendance at a hospital. Fighting does not appear to be a new phenomenon for young people in this study or for other Aboriginal young people in Australia (see for example, White 2009). However, many participants reported that the nature of fighting had changed over the past few years, and this is important for understanding these young people's experiences around alcohol, and for responding to it. They referred to an increase in 'mobbings'. The move away from the protocol of the 'fair fight' – involving two individuals with a grievance – appears to have led to a breakdown of some strategies that young Aboriginal people have relied on to keep themselves safe. Fights have also moved from one off incidents that end in a hand-shake, to on-going affairs often incited through Facebook, which seems to have increased even further their chances of experiencing harm.

While there has been some improvement in some measures, such as educational achievement and employment, Indigenous Australians remain socially and economically disadvantaged across most indicators (Wilson, Stearne, Gray and Siggers 2010). In this study, the majority of participants who had left school had done so by Year 10, and if they were not studying they were most likely to be unemployed or undertaking a court diversion program. Factors such as financial stress, a difficult family environment including family violence and child neglect, poor educational achievement and a lack of employment opportunities have all been shown to increase an individual's vulnerability to coming in contact with the criminal justice system (National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee, 2009; Weatherburn et al., 2006; Putt et al., 2005). It was apparent from participants' stories that, for some, the wider contexts of their lives were impacting on their experiences and choices around alcohol, and their contact with the law.

It is important to acknowledge that not all youth in this study consumed alcohol or took part in risky behaviours, and participants reported a move away from heavy drinking as they got older; they also spoke about moving their drinking to contexts that were less likely to result in harm and negative consequences. It is also important to highlight that despite some of the challenges they were facing in their lives, the majority of young people had someone they could rely on for support, in particular their 'nannas', and were able to identify people they admired. Most had hopes and aspirations for their futures, could recognise their strengths and for those who had experienced

negative effects of alcohol, some expressed the desire to turn their lives around. In addition, young people exhibited a high level of awareness of the possible acute consequences of drinking and employed a number of strategies to reduce the likelihood of these harms.

The lack of impact of school alcohol education with this group and the lack of knowledge about the longer-term health effects is a concern, but perhaps not uncharacteristic of other young people in this age group. On the whole we do not have a clear idea of ‘what works’ in terms of intervening in alcohol use among young Australians, and young Indigenous Australians in particular. Loxely and colleagues (2004) found that evidence is limited for the effectiveness of existing AOD interventions among young people in general. The most commonly evaluated interventions for adolescents are school-based drug education initiatives and these have shown some positive outcomes in the short-term (Loxely et al 2004)<sup>4</sup>. However, drug and alcohol education is not mandatory in West Australian schools and is not always consistent across approach – it is up to the school as to which program is used and how much time is allocated for this education<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, Spooner and colleagues found that many alcohol and drug initiatives are ‘one-off’ interventions that target only one risk factor, such as knowledge of harms, rather than the multitude of risk factors associated with substance use (Spooner et al 2001). In a difficult to reach population, such as at-risk young Aboriginal Australians, the impact of such interventions is likely to be minimal; a finding supported by this current research.

There is reason for optimism, however, as participants were able to identify what they believed would work for Aboriginal young people like themselves in the suburbs of Perth; their ideas are simple and transferrable to practice and the implications for health promotion are discussed further below. Particularly, they believed that activity-based initiatives would work best for this group. They also felt that health promotion campaigns needed to be hard-hitting and memorable, and to use credible people to deliver the messages, a finding similar to other local research (Drug and Alcohol Office, 2011). Several young people expressed genuine concern about the Aboriginal youth coming up behind them and voiced an interest in playing an active part in putting their ideas for health promotion to work.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the SHARHP program, a Western Australian developed school alcohol education program that has been recognised for its contribution in reducing alcohol-related harm among young people. Further information can be found at: <http://ndri.curtin.edu.au/research/shahrp/index.cfm>

<sup>5</sup> M. McBride (personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2013).

### **Implications for health promotion/translation of research into practice**

It has been widely reported that a lower proportion of Indigenous Australians consume alcohol than non-Indigenous Australians, however a greater proportion of Indigenous Australians drink at harmful and hazardous levels (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009; Gray, Stearne, Wilson & Doyle 2010). Indeed, Indigenous Australians of all ages experience alcohol-related morbidity and mortality at levels far in excess of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Begg et al 2007; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009; Pascal et al 2009). Consequently, alcohol use and alcohol-related harms are key priority areas in Indigenous Australian health. Although health promotion in Australia has been successful at improving conditions for the general population, it has not had the same impact for Indigenous Australians (Wise 2008).

The findings of this research project have a number of possible implications for future health promotion with Aboriginal youth, which may also be transferrable to other urban settings in Australia. The results highlight the following.

- Aboriginal young people need to be involved in the conceptualisation, design, development and delivery of health promotion to other Aboriginal young people.
- Young people expressed a preference for activity-based health promotion and the important role played by organisations offering afterschool and after-hours activities, such as Midnight Basketball and activities run through the local PCYCs, cannot be underestimated.
- While the evidence for the effectiveness of 'scare tactics' in health promotion remains equivocal, many participants felt they were best positioned to understand the life context of their peers and to speak with authority to other youth about their experiences of alcohol-related harms and consequences. In the absence of other evidence for health promotion effectiveness for this group, their ideas of how to reach Aboriginal youth with health messages relating to alcohol can be used as a guide for health professionals and service providers.
- Health promotion targeting this group does not need to be cost-intensive. According to the participants in this study, it can be delivered simply. Young people expressed a willingness to use their own skills and experiences to be part of promoting local health messages to their peers, and this represents an opportunity for organisations, such as schools, community-based services and correction-based services, to involve young people in the delivery of health promotion. At the same time as potentially impacting on the drinking trajectories of a future group of Aboriginal young people, it has potential to provide employment opportunities for Aboriginal youth.

- Many participants identified their grandparents, particularly their 'nannas', as who they would turn to when they have problems and needed support. Given the important cultural role grandparents play in these young people's lives, there is obvious potential for the involvement of elders in promoting messages about alcohol to this group.
- Health promotion for this group clearly cannot focus on alcohol in isolation of the contexts in which these young people are drinking. Particular attention should be paid to fighting – in all the complexity young people described – which for many participants was ubiquitous with a night out drinking and causing a high degree of harm. Their reasons for and views on fighting should be taken into account when developing such health promotion.
- Young Aboriginal people have their own strategies for minimising the potential for harm when they are drinking. These strategies could usefully be incorporated into health promotion as they are familiar and meaningful to the young people and are already employed to keep safe in the contexts which they drink.
- Health promotion needs to target Aboriginal children. Participants believed that existing initiatives tended to direct most attention to and feature, adolescents.
- Participants were able to identify people in their lives that they admired and respected. They were not celebrities, but parents, uncles, siblings and cousins. There is potential for mobilising these individuals in efforts to intervene with these young people. What they admired in these people were qualities and achievements they often wished to emulate themselves. Possible intervention could be as simple as the individuals young people admired, sharing how they came to be who they are and the routes they took to achieve this.
- The contexts in which young people were drinking increased the inevitability of interaction between youth, police and transit officers. There is the need to maximise the potential for positive outcomes. Activities involving these groups together, for example role playing where each is given the opportunity to swap roles, has the capacity for improving relationships and expanding the understandings each have of the other.
- Some young people felt that parents and adults needed to take more responsibility for their children's drinking. They believed that young people were learning about alcohol from watching their own family drink and were consuming alcohol provided by family members. A number also felt that parents were unaware of or unconcerned about their children's whereabouts. These findings suggest that health promotion around alcohol should be targeted towards the whole family, rather than only the young person.

### **Community benefits from the research**

This research was a result of the Aboriginal community's concern about their young people drinking and getting into trouble along the train-lines. The findings from this research will present the community with a better understanding of what is happening for the youth and an increased awareness of their drinking behaviours and contexts, and provide further direction for health intervention. As this was a collaborative project and was initiated by the local Aboriginal community, dissemination among Aboriginal groups in Perth is particularly imperative. However, the researchers involved on the project intend to distribute the results widely.

### **Partnerships**

Initially, this research was a collaborative partnership between NDRI and Maamba Aboriginal Corporation. At a later stage, Moorditj Aboriginal Community Group (under the auspices of Southcare) replaced Maamba's involvement. Other partnerships included:

- NDRI: Provided leadership in research methodology, analysis of research findings and conducting and administrating research.
- Moorditj Keila: provided leadership in culturally safe methodology and recruitment of participants.
- Stakeholder Reference Group members who were drawn from a broad range of local organisations providing services for Aboriginal youth in the area, or who had relationships in other ways with the young people provided input in methodology, analysis of results, and guidance on effective dissemination.
- Young people Reference Group members provided input in methodology, analysis of results and project direction. The young people reference group were particularly instrumental in naming the project, developing a logo and providing guidance around the interview schedule.
- The Department of Corrective Services, through participation in the reference group, requested involvement in the project and supported participant recruitment within Corrective Services' facilities.
- Organisations which helped with the recruitment of young people: A range of organisations supported the project by assisting with recruitment and making space available for confidential interviews to occur.

### **Publications**

Possible publications have been identified and are currently being prepared by the researchers involved on the project.

### **Seminars**

A seminar on project findings is scheduled for the 29<sup>th</sup> August 2013. The seminar will be open to the public and hosted by the National Drug Research Institute. An abstract based on study results has been submitted to the WA Health Conference to be held in Perth in November 2013.

### **Further dissemination**

All stakeholders involved with the study will receive a copy of the results. The stakeholder reference group also identified a further avenue for presentation of the findings, which could take the form a small book drawing on young people's quotes around their experiences with alcohol. They felt this would be an effective means for not only getting the results out into the public domain, but also for use as a potential tool for service providers and families talking to young Aboriginal people about alcohol.

It is hoped that this study will provide a platform for further research into the experiences of Aboriginal youth around alcohol. In particular, research around alcohol-related violence among youth appears particularly pressing. There is also the opportunity for the collection of more detailed data on the frequency and quantity of alcohol being consumed by these young people, an objective this research aimed to address, but in the end was unsuccessful. Additionally, while this research set out and received the Department of Corrective Service's support to include the experiences of the young people in detention in WA, unforeseen circumstances arose that made this unworkable during the research period. The voices of these young people should, at some stage in the near future, be heard.

The research was both participatory and collaborative, and this approach can provide a framework for future researchers working with Aboriginal youth. It is also hoped that the results will help to develop future health promotion initiatives that are effective and meaningful for this population. The CIs involved on the project are in the process of identifying further funding opportunities to ensure that the findings of this research are translated into practice.

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## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULES – DRINKING IN THE SUBURBS**

### Drinkers

1. Do you drink alcohol? If no, go to non-drinker interview

#### *Reasons why young people drink*

2. Why do you think youth drink?
3. When was your first experience with alcohol [age]? Are you happy to tell me about it?
4. How do you think young people find out about drink?
5. How often do you drink?
6. How much do you think you drink over a week/month?

#### *Choice and cost of drink*

7. What's your best drink?
8. What do you like about this drink in particular?
9. Will you drink different drinks [mix drinks] over a drinking session?
10. How much money do you need to get you a good night?
11. Where is the money for drink coming from?
12. [If under 18] How do you get your drink?
13. How much drink do you think is enough drink? (How many drinks does it take to feel like a big shot?)

#### *Experiences with alcohol*

14. Can you describe a typical night [occasion?] drinking? Where does it start? Who are you with, etc?
15. Are there people you won't hang with when drinking or places you won't go? Why?
16. What is one of the best times you've had [drinking]? And what was one of your worst?

#### *Trains and train stations*

17. Do you ride the train or hang out at the train station when drinking?
18. What are the reasons you go there [to the station or on the trains]?
19. Do you have fines from riding the trains?
20. What are your experiences with the transit officers?

#### *Consequences of drinking*

21. What are some of the things that might happen to people when they are drinking?
22. Do you think about these things when you are drinking?
23. Have you and/or your friends ever been involved in a fight with another person/s when you've been drinking?
24. Do you see this [getting in fights] as a good or bad thing?
25. Why do you think young people fight?
26. What do you do to keep safe when drinking?

*Contact with authority*

27. Have you ever been in trouble with police? Yes/No
28. If YES, was alcohol involved? Are you happy to tell me about it?

*Drug education*

29. What do you know about the effects of alcohol [on the body/on health]?
30. Have you had any education around alcohol and other drugs? Yes/No. Can you describe this?

*Other drugs*

31. Do young people you know take other drugs with your drink?
32. What other drugs do they use?
33. How often do you think they use this/these drugs?

*Alternatives to drinking*

34. What else is there to do at night for young people in Perth other than drinking?
35. What do you think might be some other activities for young people that don't involve drinking?

*Strengths and supports*

36. Does anyone in your life not drink? What do you think of them?
37. Do you have people you look up to?
38. Are you proud of being a young Aboriginal person? If Yes, why?
39. Is getting an education or a job important to you?
40. Do you and your parents/family have a real good relationship with each other?
41. Do you feel comfortable talking to your parents/family when you have a problem?
42. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your parents/family, who do you talk to?
43. What are your good skills?

44. What do you really want to do with your life?

*Health Promotion*

45. Can you think of any health promotion materials/messages/activities that are aimed at young Aboriginal people and alcohol?

46. What was it about these materials/ads that made you remember them?

47. What did you like/not like about them?

*Health promotion examples*

48. What do you think of these?

49. Can you tell me what you like/don't like about them?

50. If you had the opportunity to create a HP message for Aboriginal youth around alcohol what would it be like?

51. What messages do you think would work the best for this group and why?

52. I have one last question. How did you find doing this interview?

### Non-drinkers

#### *Reasons, decisions for drinking and not drinking*

1. Why do you think youth drink?
2. Why do you choose not to drink?
3. Are there challenges to being a young person who does not drink?
4. What helps you not to drink?

#### *Experiences of alcohol*

5. Have you had any experiences around alcohol?
6. If yes, can you tell me about it/them?
7. Have you had any experience with alcohol at home?

#### *Consequences of alcohol*

8. What do you think are some of the things that happen to people when they drink or from drinking?
9. What do you know about the effects of alcohol [on the body/on health]?
10. Where/who did you find out about the effects of alcohol?
11. Do you think drink effects the decisions young people make?
12. What decisions might they make when drinking that you don't think they would if they weren't drinking?
13. What else is there to do at night for young people in Perth other than drinking? What do you do?

#### *Supports, resilience*

14. Do you have people you look up to?
15. Are you proud of being a young Aboriginal person? If yes, why?
16. Is getting an education or a job important to you?
17. Do you and your parents/family members have a real good relationship with each other?
18. Do you feel comfortable talking to your parents/family when you have a problem?

19. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your parents/family, who do you talk to?
20. Who do you rely on for supports the most?
21. What are your good skills?
22. What do you really want to do with your life?

*Health promotion*

23. Can you think of any health promotion materials/messages/activities that are aimed at young Aboriginal people and alcohol?
24. What was it about these materials/ads that made them memorable to you?
25. What did you like/not like about them?

*Health Promotion examples*

26. What do you think of these?
27. Can you tell me what you like/don't like about them?
28. If you had the opportunity to create a HP message for Aboriginal youth around alcohol what would it be like?
29. What messages do you think would work the best for this group and why?
30. I have one last question. How did you find doing this interview?

## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULES – DRINKING IN THE SUBURBS**

### **Young people - South Metropolitan Youth Justice Services**

#### Demographics (ask all young people)

- How old are you \_\_\_\_\_?
- What are you doing with yourself at the moment?
- Where do you live and who do you live with?
- How long have you lived there?
- What year are you at school OR when did you leave school?

Screening question: DO YOU DRINK ALCOHOL? If no, go to non-drinkers

#### Drinkers

##### *Reasons, age of onset, quantity and access*

1. Why do you think youth drink?
2. When was your first experience with alcohol [age]? Can you tell me about it?
3. How much do you think you drink?
4. How often do you drink?
5. How much money do you need to get you a good night?
6. Where is the money for drink coming from?
7. [If under 18] How do you get your drink?

##### *Contexts*

8. Can you describe a typical night [occasion?] drinking? Where does it start? Who are you with, etc?
9. Are there people you won't hang with when drinking or places you won't go? Why?
10. What is one of the best times you've had [drinking]? And what was one of your worst?

##### *Trains and train stations*

11. Do you ride the train or hang out at the train station when drinking?
12. What are the reasons you go there [to the station or on the trains]?
13. Do you have fines from riding the trains?

14. What are your experiences with the transit officers?

*Consequences*

15. What are some of the things that might happen to people when they are drinking?

16. Do you think about these things when you are drinking?

17. Do you do anything in particular to keep safe when drinking?

*Drug and alcohol education*

18. What do you know about the effects of alcohol [on the body/on health]?

19. Have you had any education around alcohol and other drugs? Yes/No.

Can you describe this?

*Involvement with police*

20. At what age did you first get in trouble with police?

21. If YES, was alcohol involved? Are you happy to tell me about it?

*Fighting (if not already answered)*

22. Have you and/or your friends ever been involved in a fight with another person/s when you've been drinking?

23. Why do you think young people fight?

24. Do you see this [getting in fights] as a good or bad thing?

*Other drug use*

25. Do you or other young people you know take other drugs with your drink?

26. What other drugs do you or they use?

27. How often do you use this/these drugs?

*Avoiding contact with law*

28. Now that you've come in contact with the law, what could you have done to not end up here?

29. Is there anything others could have done to prevent you from ending up here?

*Support, resilience*

30. Do you have people you look up to?

31. Are you proud of being a young Aboriginal person? If Yes, why?

32. Is getting an education or a job important to you?

33. Do you and your parents/family have a real good relationship with each other?

34. Do you feel comfortable talking to your parents/family when you have a problem?

35. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your parents/family, who do you talk to?
36. Who do you rely on for supports the most?
37. What are your good skills?
38. What do you really want to do with your life?

*Health promotion*

39. Can you think of any health promotion materials/messages/activities that are aimed at young Aboriginal people and alcohol?
40. What was it about these materials/ads that made you remember them?
41. What did you like/not like about them?

*Health Promotion examples*

42. What do you think of these?
43. Can you tell me what you like/don't like about them?
44. If you had the opportunity to create a HP message for Aboriginal youth around alcohol what would it be like?
45. What messages do you think would work the best for this group and why?

Appendix D

Non-drinkers

*Reasons, Decision not to drink*

1. Why do you think youth drink?
2. Why do you choose not to drink?
3. Are there challenges to being a young person who does not drink?
4. What helps you not to drink?

*Experiences of alcohol*

5. Have you had any experiences around alcohol?
6. If yes, can you tell me about it/them?
7. Have you had any experiences with alcohol at home?

*Consequences of alcohol*

8. What do you think are some of the things that happen to people when they drink or from drinking?
9. What do you know about the effects of alcohol [on the body/on health]?
10. Where/who did you find out about the effects of alcohol?
11. Do you think drink effects the decisions young people make?
12. What decisions might they make when drinking that you don't think they would if they weren't drinking?

*Avoiding contact with law*

13. Now that you've come in contact with the law, what could you have done to not end up here?
14. Is there anything others could have done to prevent you from ending up here?

*Supports, resilience*

15. Do you have people you look up to?
16. Are you proud of being a young Aboriginal person? If yes, why?
17. Is getting an education or a job important to you?
18. Do you and your parents/family members have a real good relationship with each other?
19. Do you feel comfortable talking to your parents/family when you have a problem?
20. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your parents/family, who do you talk to?

21. Who do you rely on for supports the most?
22. What are your good skills?
23. What do you really want to do with your life?

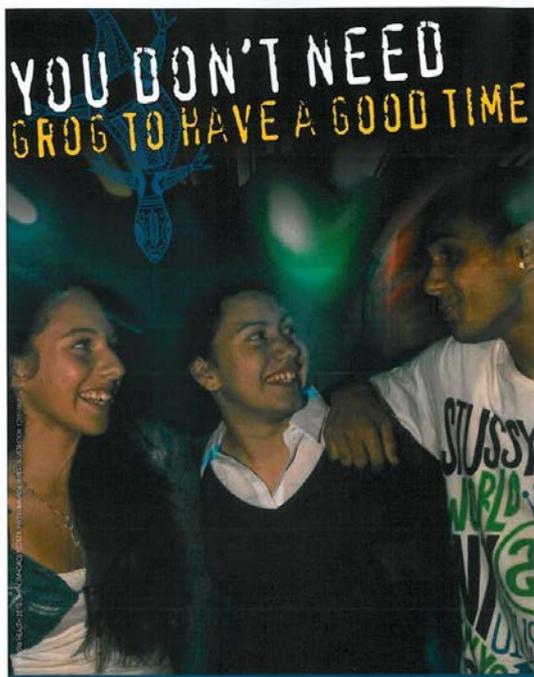
*Health promotion*

24. Can you think of any health promotion materials/messages/activities that are aimed at young Aboriginal people and alcohol?
25. What was it about these materials/ads that made you remember them?
26. What did you like/not like about them?

*Health Promotion examples*

27. What do you think of these?
28. Can you tell me what you like/don't like about them?
29. If you had the opportunity to create a HP message for Aboriginal youth around alcohol what would it be like?
30. What messages do you think would work the best for this group and why?

Appendix E



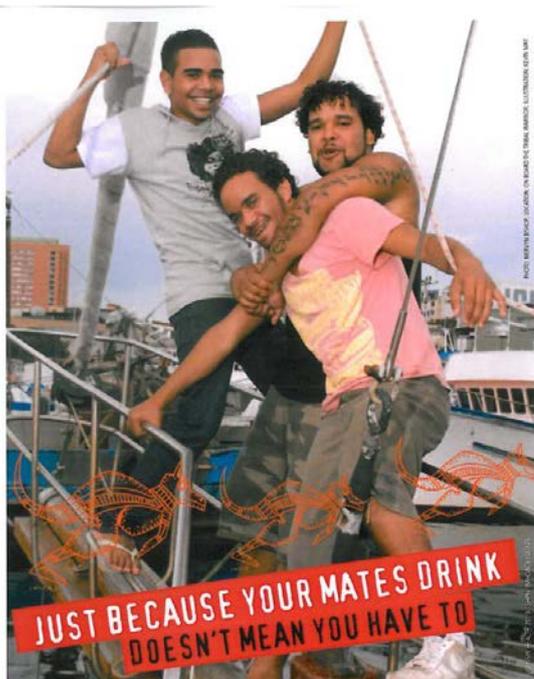
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"We're always laughing, we feel good. This is who we are."



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Drinking too much alcohol is a problem for many young people.  
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