

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



SNAP - A 'reality check' on youth drinking

University of Tasmania researchers have been investigating a new approach to both understand and tackle attitudes of underage drinkers.

Rather than educating young people about alcohol and its effects, a social norms approach focuses on their perceptions of 'normal' alcohol use among their peers.

The research, undertaken by the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies and University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) at UTAS, has been funded by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation (AER) Foundation.

Called the Social Norms Analysis Project (SNAP), the research has been the first major Australian trial of social norms. It has aimed to provide an accurate picture of the alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours of students attending four rural high schools in Tasmania.

SNAP has involved collecting local data, developing positive messages on the basis of the results, and disseminating those messages to participating schools via media campaigns involving posters, wristbands, drink bottles, mousemats and a range of other items.

The research has found that following the first media campaign, there were declines in self-reported frequency of drunkenness, and the perceived frequency of friends consuming alcohol and getting drunk.

Chief investigators, Associate Professor Roberta Julian and Dr Clarissa Hughes, said a social norms approach held considerable promise for reducing alcohol-related harm among young people.

"Attitudinal change is an important first step. If students realise that risky drinking is not as prevalent as they thought, there's less pressure for them to conform to the image of a 'bingeing teen'," Dr Hughes said.

Assoc Prof Julian said taking part in SNAP seemed to serve as a reality check which prompted students to question their assumptions about what was 'normal'.

"Contrary to their perceptions, many don't drink at all, or do so in ways that are not harmful to themselves or others. This is the positive message that SNAP aimed to get across," she said.

SNAP underscored the importance of both parental and peer influences on young peoples' drinking. Students who report lack of parental limits or conditions on their alcohol consumption

tended to be the riskier drinkers. Young people were also influenced by their perceptions of what their peers (particularly their friends) were doing.

“Perceptions of peer behaviour and attitudes are very influential, and they are often inaccurate - which can be a dangerous combination. However, SNAP has also demonstrated that many young people are making healthy choices about alcohol, and it’s important to acknowledge and encourage that,” Dr Hughes said.

Daryl Smeaton, CEO of AER, was pleased to learn that there was great advice for parents – “You can set limits on alcohol use for your teenagers - they want you to”.

“SNAP is one of AER’s major research investments with an ‘action research’ focus. Nearly half a million dollars, extremely well spent, with findings that have relevance right across Australia,” Mr Smeaton said.

The SNAP Final Evaluation Report was launched today by the AER, the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) and the University Department of Rural Health.

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