

The relationship between risky alcohol consumption, loneliness and social group membership during COVID-19

ANDRE QUAN HO NGYUEN², MARLEE BOWER¹, NICHOLAS OLSEN¹, GENEVIEVE DINGLE³, EMMA BARRETT¹ & MAREE TEESSON¹.

¹ Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia. ² Faculty of Social Work and Education, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia. ³ School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Presenter's email: marlee.bower@sydney.edu.au

Introduction and aims: International research suggests COVID-19 lockdowns, stay-at-home orders and broader restrictions may increase social risk factors associated with riskier drinking levels, such as loneliness and meaningful connections with different social groups. These negative social changes may have longstanding impacts on people's alcohol consumption, even after restrictions ease. This research aimed to understand whether these social variables influenced the likelihood of risky drinking amongst an Australian community sample during the first year of COVID-19.

Design and Methods: The Alone Together study is a national survey of 2,056 Australian adults. Online and in-person assessments were conducted in baseline (June to December 2020), at 6-months, and will be conducted at 12-months post-baseline.

Key Findings: Of the 2,065 surveyed, 66% identified as female, 32% as male and 2% as neither female/male. The median age was 44 years (range 18-88). Just over 40% reported drinking 'a bit-' or 'a lot more' alcohol since the beginning of the pandemic and 19.2% were identified as having risky recent alcohol consumption levels. Preliminary baseline data showed that controlling for mental health, demographic variables and the time since most-recent lockdown, participants who were lonelier and felt less connected to multiple social groups than prior to COVID-19 tended to drink more heavily than they had pre-COVID. Generalised estimating equations (GEE) will model how the relationship between these variables changed beyond 2020.

Discussions and Conclusions: COVID-19 restrictions disrupted social relationships amongst some Australians, potentially leading to increased alcohol consumption. We will explore whether this continued beyond 2020.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Policymakers should explore strategies that mitigate the impact of infection control on maintaining important relationships.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study. This work was supported by grant from the Henry Halloran Trust and University of Sydney LifeSpan network.