Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

How has Australian students' drinking, vaping, and illicit substance use changed over time?

The Australian Secondary School Students Alcohol and Drug survey

The Australian Secondary School Students Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) survey is Australia's largest national survey of adolescent substance use. The survey has been running since 1984 and the 2022-2023 survey results have recently been released. The data help us get a better picture of young Australian's substance use and how this has changed over time.

In 2022 to 2023, over 10,000 students were surveyed across Australia, from all states and territories, and from both metropolitan and regional areas. Students aged 12 to 17 years old were included.

There are a few things we need to keep in mind when looking at the trends over time. Some of the survey methods were changed, and data was collected over two years (2022 and 2023) instead of just one like in previous ASSAD surveys. Collection was also delayed from 2020 due to COVID-19. This means that changes we see in the data over time may be caused or biased by these changes in methods, instead of reflecting true trends.

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) is another reliable source of information about Australian alcohol and drug use. We have explored what the NDSHS says about young Australian's substance use here.

Alcohol

Youth drinking has been declining for over 20 years. We explored these trends and what might be behind them in awebinar. ASSAD data reveals that, in 2022/2023, one in five students (22%) said they had drunk alcohol in the past month, down from one in two (50%) in 1999. However, some of the downward trends plateaued over recent years. For example, there was not a statistically significant difference in the number of students who had ever consumed alcohol between 2017 and 2022/2023, despite large declines since the late 1990s.

The survey also found that young Australians are still drinking at risky levels. Of the students who had ever had an alcoholic drink, almost half (46%) had engaged in risky drinking (drinking 5+ drinks on a single occasion) in the past month. The rates of risky drinking were higher for older students (16-17 years old compared to 12-15 years old).

Pre-mixed spirits were the most popular type of alcohol for students who said they were current drinkers, and almost half (47%) of these students got their last drink from their parents. While some parents think supplying alcohol to their teens will reduce risky drinking, research has shown that the opposite is true. Read more about this inour factsheet.

Vaping and Smoking

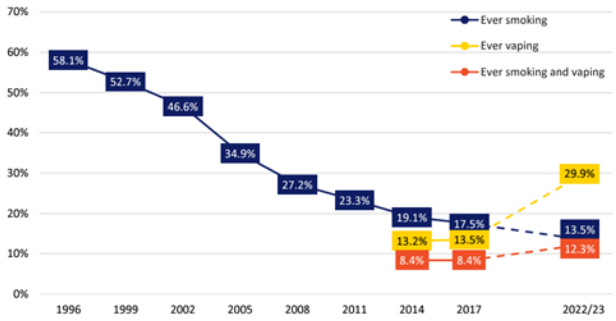
In 2022/2023, almost one third (30%) of students said they had ever vaped. This is a significant increase from 2017, when 14% of students reported ever vaping. It's important to note that only a small proportion of these students were using e-cigarettes/vapes regularly, with only 5% of students vaping on 20 or more days in the past month and 3% vaping every day.

Significantly more female students had ever vaped compared to males (35% compared to 25%). Students aged 16-17 were also more likely to have ever vaped than younger students aged 12-15 (43% compared to 24%).

Most (69%) students who had ever vaped had never smoked a tobacco cigarette before their first vape. However, 20% of these students went on to try a tobacco cigarette after they had vaped.

Smoking among Australian secondary school students has been declining for over 20 years, and smoking rates were at their lowest in the 2022/2023 results. While in 1996 58% of students had ever smoked, in 2022/2023 this had decreased to 14%.

The ASSAD survey also measures students' susceptibility to smoking by asking them whether they intend to smoke in the next year. Studies have shown that this measure is a good predictor of future smoking. Concerningly, susceptibility to smoking has increased in recent years. In 2022/2023, 15% of students who had never smoked were susceptible to smoking – up from 11% in 2017. This highlights the importance of ongoing prevention programs.



Lifetime ever smoking and lifetime ever vaping among Australian secondary school students, 1996-2022/2023. Source: Scully, M., Koh, I., Bain, E., Wakefield, M. & Durkin, S. (2023). ASSAD 2022-2023: Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol and other substances. Cancer Council Victoria.

Other Substances

In general, illicit substance use remained low among Australian students. Cannabis was the most used illicit drug, with 13% of students saying they had ever used it. This was followed by ecstasy (3%), hallucinogens (3%), cocaine (2%), and dexamphetamines (2%).

The proportion of students who had ever used inhalants increased from 16% in 2014 to 20% in 2022/2023.

Addressing Misconceptions

Young people often overestimate how many of their peers use alcohol and other drugs. It's important to address this misconception by providing up-to-date and accurate data. Our 'How many young people in Australia use alcohol or other drugs' student factsheet shows how low the rates of substance use actually are.

You can read the 2022-2023 Australian Secondary School Students Alcohol and Drug reports here.

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