



Failure to decline: older Australians and alcohol

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Older Australians and harms from alcohol

There is a focus on youth consumption and harm





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DRINKING SURVEY

Alarm bells on young boozers

EXCLUSIVE

■ **Cathy O'Leary**
Medical Editor

Young WA men are drinking on average 16 standard drinks on a big night, according to alarming figures that confirm the State's reputation for binge drinking.

A survey of more than 4250 adult drinkers found that 77 per cent qualified as binge drinkers by having five drinks or more in a single session, with men aged 18 to 30 without a tertiary education the heaviest drinkers.

Even across the whole sample, people notched up an average of 11 standard drinks on a big drinking occasion.

The results, from a Healthway-funded study of attitudes to health warnings on alcohol, were released ahead of today's launch of the WA Cancer Prevention Research Unit, jointly funded by Curtin University's faculty of health sciences and the Cancer Council of WA.

Curtin professor Simone Pettigrew, who will head the unit, said the findings were timely and confirmed many West Australians

were binge drinkers who drank far more than recommended levels.

"This was part of a bigger study but it gave us a chance to see who's drinking what, and it was in a big group where we were confident we had a really good mix of drinkers across both genders," she said.

"Across the whole group, the average number of standard drinks on their heaviest drinking times was 11, which constitutes a very high risk, and that's the average so for some it was a lot more.

"And it's even higher again in younger males."

Professor Pettigrew said drinking patterns in WA were polarised because more people were abstaining from alcohol or drinking at very light levels but many of those who were drinking were doing so at very harmful levels.

Apart from other health concerns, excessive drinking increased the risk of getting cancer, which was still not widely understood.

"With things like heart disease, people tend to be more aware of

the risk factors and what they can do to prevent it, but there are so many different types of cancer and there is a lot of fear about hereditary factors and people aren't sure how they can prevent it," she said.

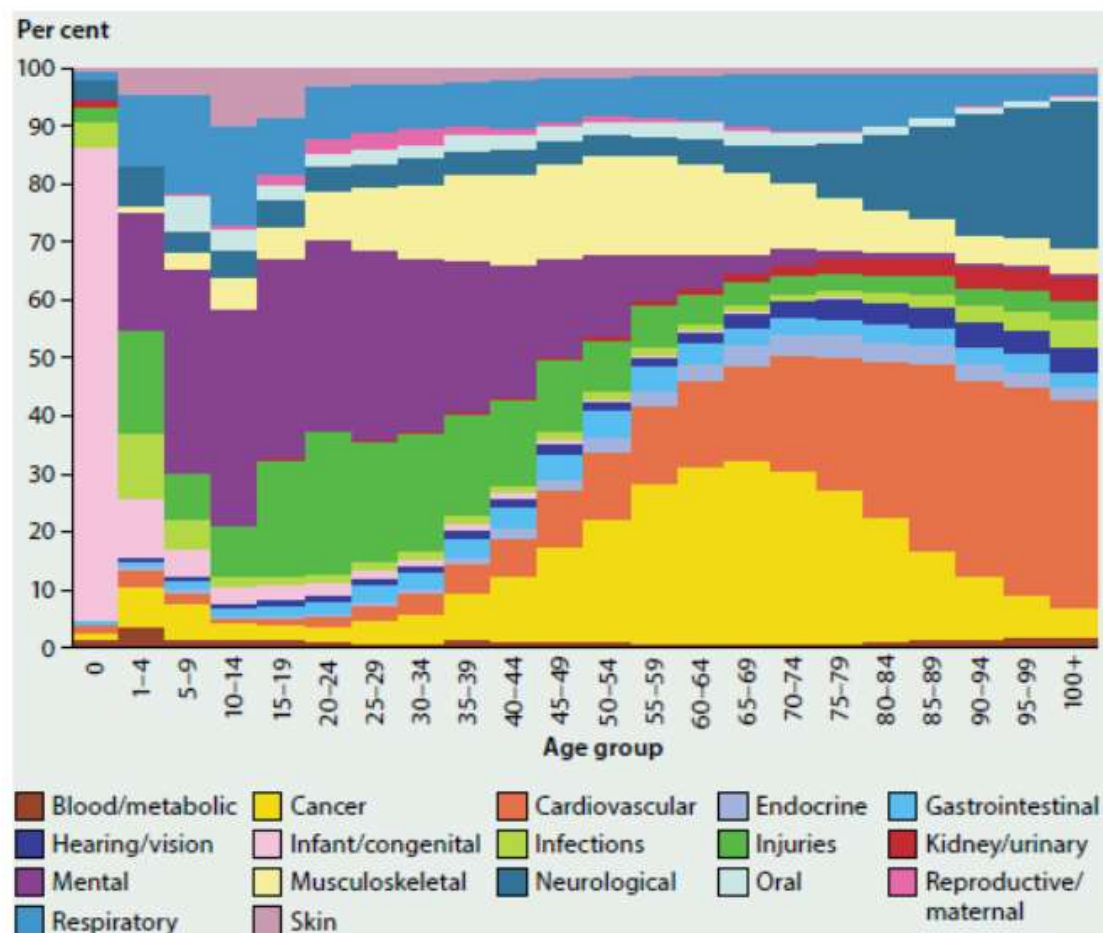
"That's why we need consistent, user-friendly messages we can convey to the public."

Cancer Council WA education and research director Terry Slevin said the unit was important because more than 11,000 cases of cancer were diagnosed in WA each year, with a least a third of them preventable.



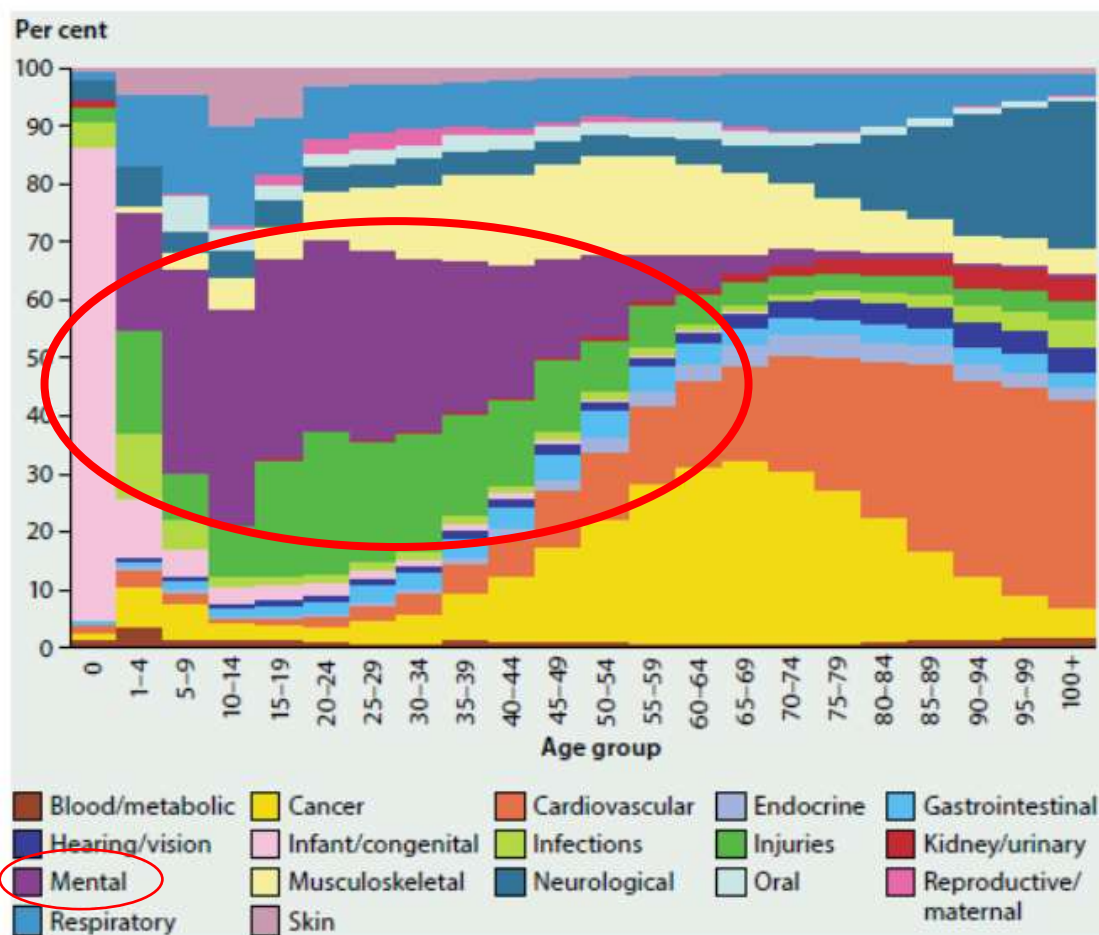
Young people appear to bear the burden of alcohol use disorders

Figure 3.1.3: Burden of disease, by disease group and age, 2011



Young people appear to bear the burden of alcohol use disorders

Figure 3.1.3: Burden of disease, by disease group and age, 2011



Source: Australian Burden of Disease Study 2011; Table S3.1.3.

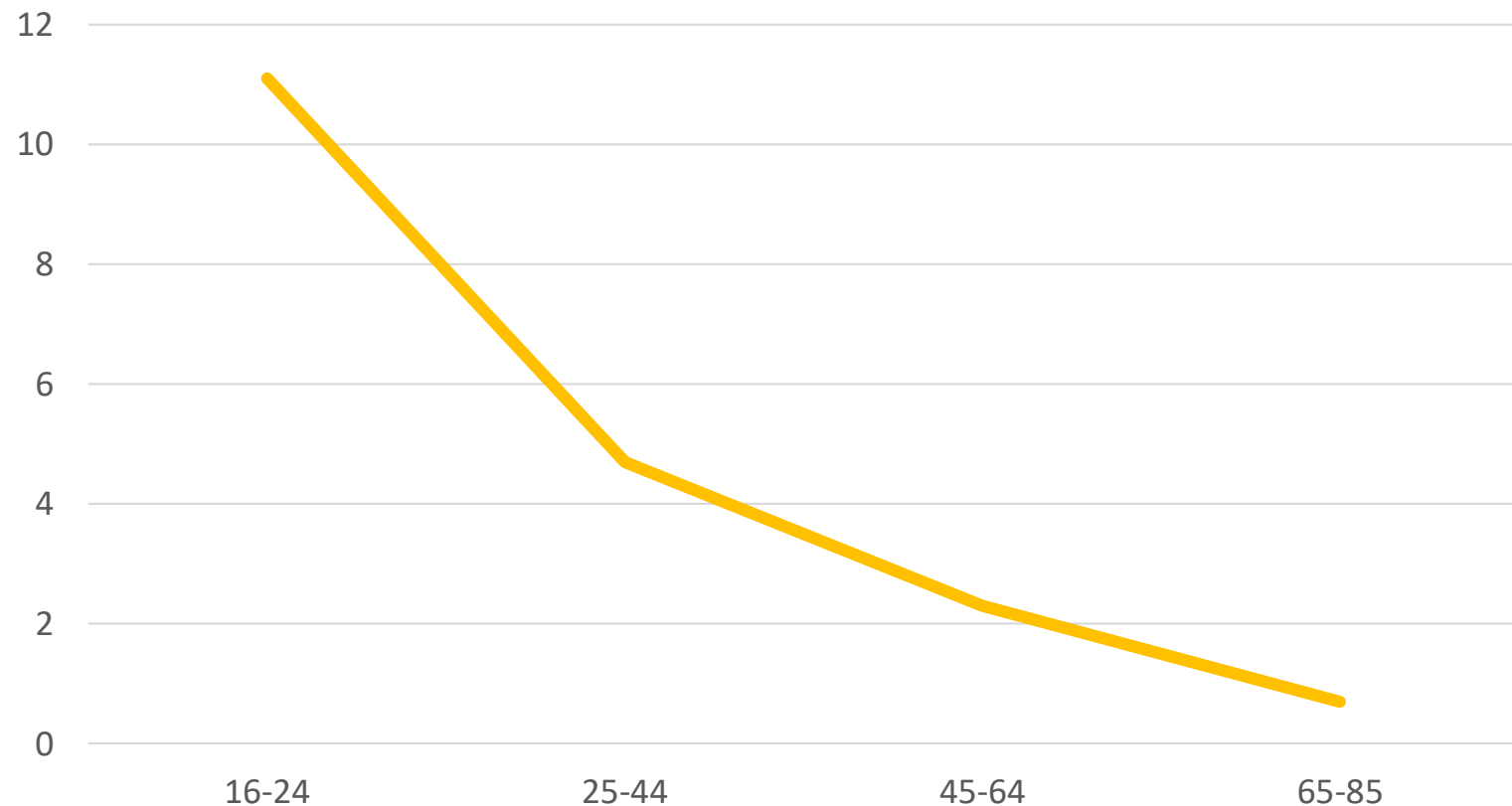
Young people appear to bear the burden of alcohol use disorders

		Age group							
		Under 5	5-14	15-24	25-44	45-64	65-74	75-84	85+
Males	1	Pre-term/lbw complications	Asthma	Suicide/self-inflicted injuries	Suicide/self-inflicted injuries	Coronary heart disease	Coronary heart disease	Coronary heart disease	Coronary heart disease
	2	Birth trauma/asphyxia	Anxiety disorders	Alcohol use disorders	Back pain and problems	Lung cancer	Lung cancer	COPD	Dementia
	3	Other disorders of infancy	Autism spectrum disorders	RTI/motor vehicle occupant	Alcohol use disorders	Other musculoskeletal	COPD	Dementia	Stroke
	4	SIDS	Conduct disorder	Depressive disorders	Poisoning	Back pain and problems	Diabetes	Stroke	COPD
	5	Other congenital conditions	Depressive disorders	Asthma	Depressive disorders	Suicide/self-inflicted injuries	Bowel cancer	Lung cancer	Prostate cancer
Females	1	Birth trauma/asphyxia	Anxiety disorders	Anxiety disorders	Anxiety disorders	Other musculoskeletal	Coronary heart disease	Coronary heart disease	Dementia
	2	Pre-term/lbw complications	Asthma	Depressive disorders	Depressive disorders	Breast cancer	Lung cancer	Dementia	Coronary heart disease
	3	Other disorders of infancy	Depressive disorders	Asthma	Back pain and problems	Back pain and problems	COPD	COPD	Stroke
	4	SIDS	Dental caries	Suicide/self-inflicted injuries	Other musculoskeletal	Anxiety disorders	Other musculoskeletal	Stroke	COPD
	5	Cardiovascular defects	Upper respiratory conditions	Bipolar affective disorder	Asthma	Lung cancer	Breast cancer	Lung cancer	Diabetes

Young people appear to bear the burden of alcohol use disorders

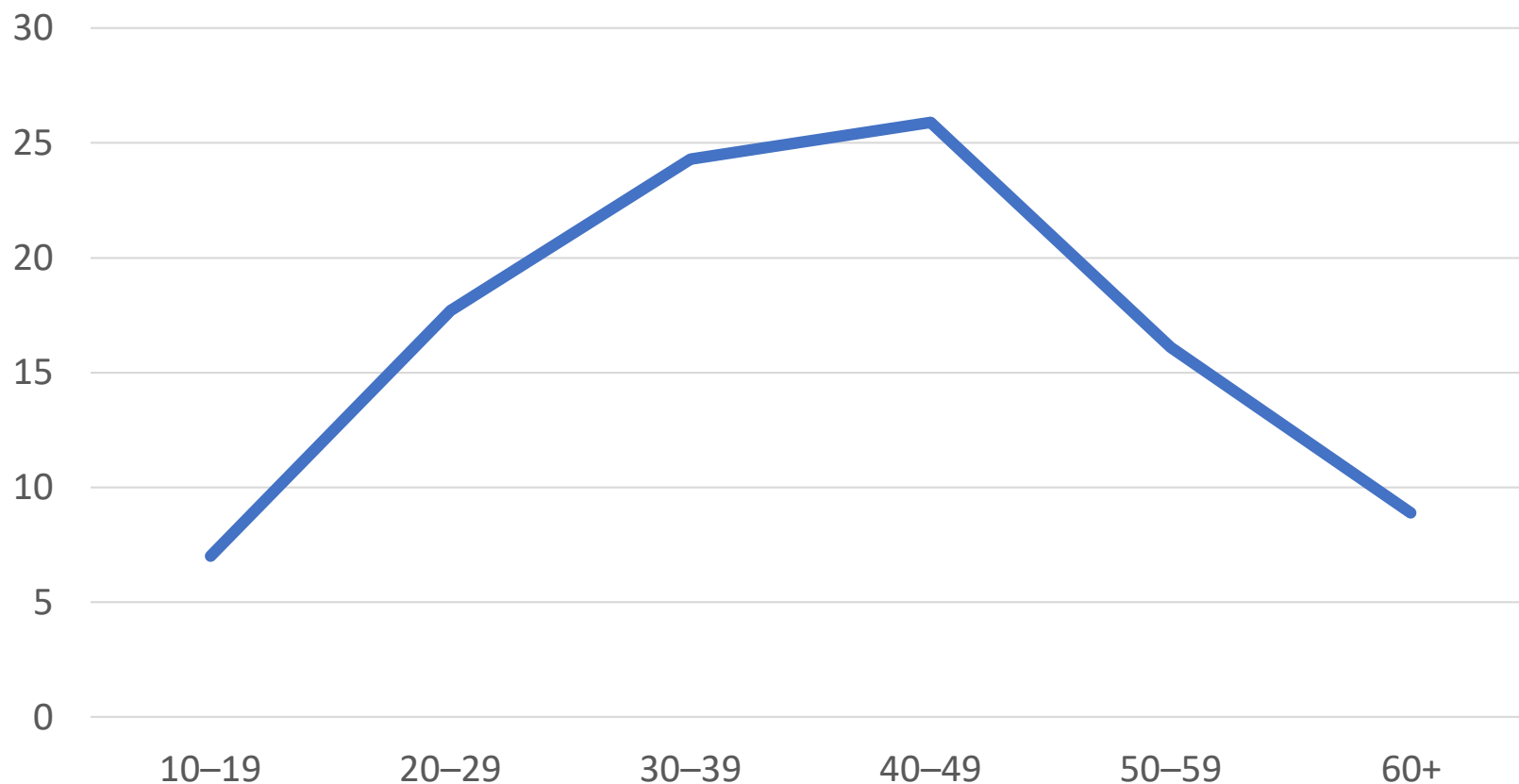
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Age of Australians with any Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)



Teeson et al, 2010

Age of Australians seeking treatment with alcohol as primary drug of concern



AIHW, 2017

What could explain this discrepancy?

- Global burden of disease for AUD is often calculated using responses to large scale surveys
- A recent study (Marmet et al., 2019) looking at diagnosis of alcohol use disorder in 5000+ young men using DSM-5 criterion found that more than 50% qualified for at least mild AUD between the age of 20 and 25, making it implausibly common.
- The most common combinations of items (exclusively) were:
 - Drinking more/for longer + hazardous use
 - Drinking more/for longer + increased tolerance
- These three criterion are the most commonly disputed.

What could explain this discrepancy?

- More than 50% of all the AUD in the sample were solely based on the five “mildest” criterion.
 - These were also selected at a much higher rate than you would find in a study of a wider age range
 - Some of these items that we use to identify AUD might be focussing on drinking patterns common in youth
- The way we talk about alcohol use disorders in a broader population context is not matching the experience of those working in treatment

Older Australians and harms from alcohol

- The most common demographic group for alcohol-related ambulance pick-ups is men aged 50 to 59 (Lloyd et al., 2014).
- Older Australians are at increased risk for adverse clinical outcomes from drinking and taking alcohol interactive medications (Cousins et al., 2014)
- In the UK in 2014, the rate of alcohol related deaths was highest in those aged 55-64 (Office for National Statistics, 2016)
- A systematic review on alcohol use disorders in older adults (Koechl, et al., 2012) found that:
 - Alcohol use disorders in older people are more likely to go undetected
 - Older people benefit as much, if not more, from interventions aiming to reduce alcohol consumption as young people.

What's going on?

- An English qualitative study found that middle class heavy home drinkers believed that problem drinkers are young people who drink at licensed premises and that their own drinking was “safe” (Brierley-Jones, 2014)
- This belief is reflected in much of the research and media coverage on consumption and harm, which often focuses on drinking at licensed premises and on youth.

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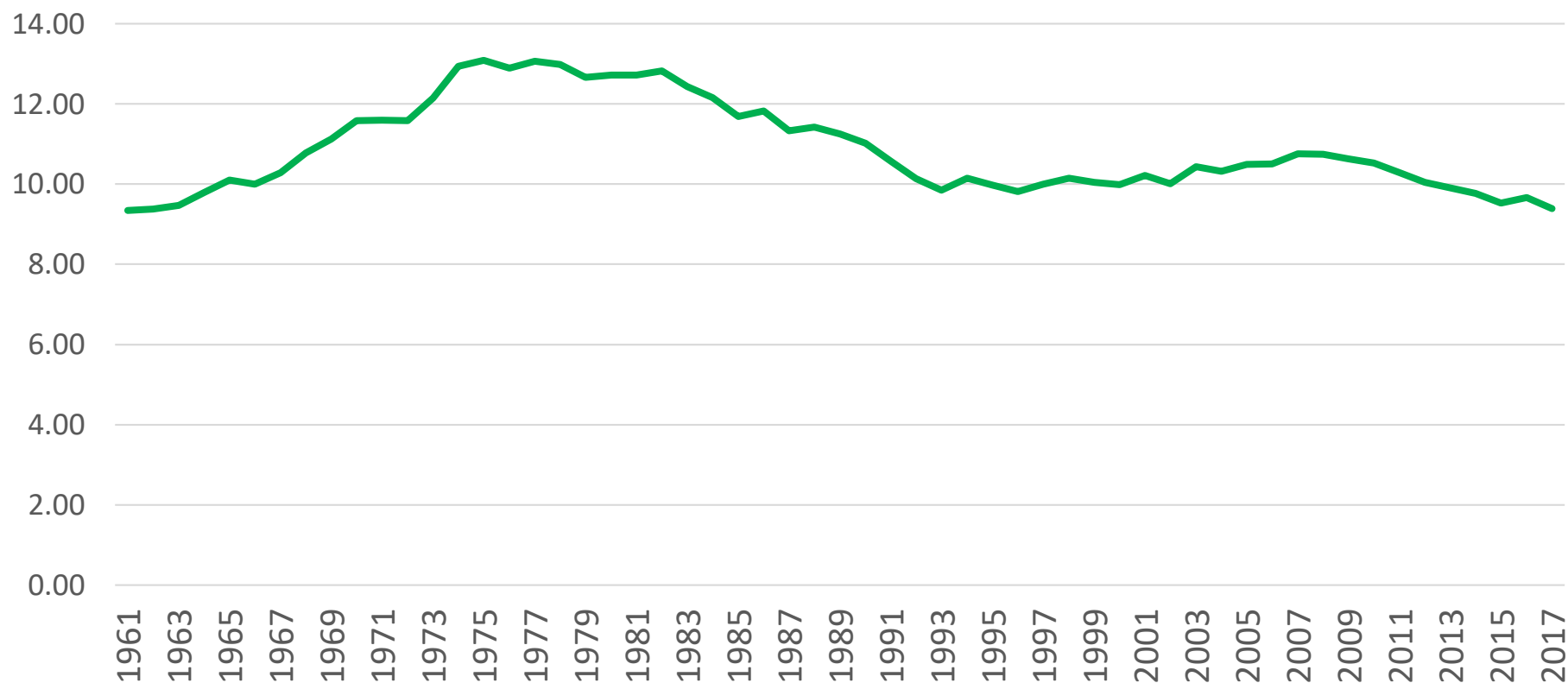
Trends for older drinkers

Alcohol Consumption in Australia

When trying to assess how much Australians are drinking at a population level, we often use per capita consumption taken from sales data

- This has the advantage of taking into account population growth
- There is also no problem with people answering survey questions inaccurately
- Consumption is measured in litres of pure alcohol consumed per person

Alcohol consumption trends across Australia

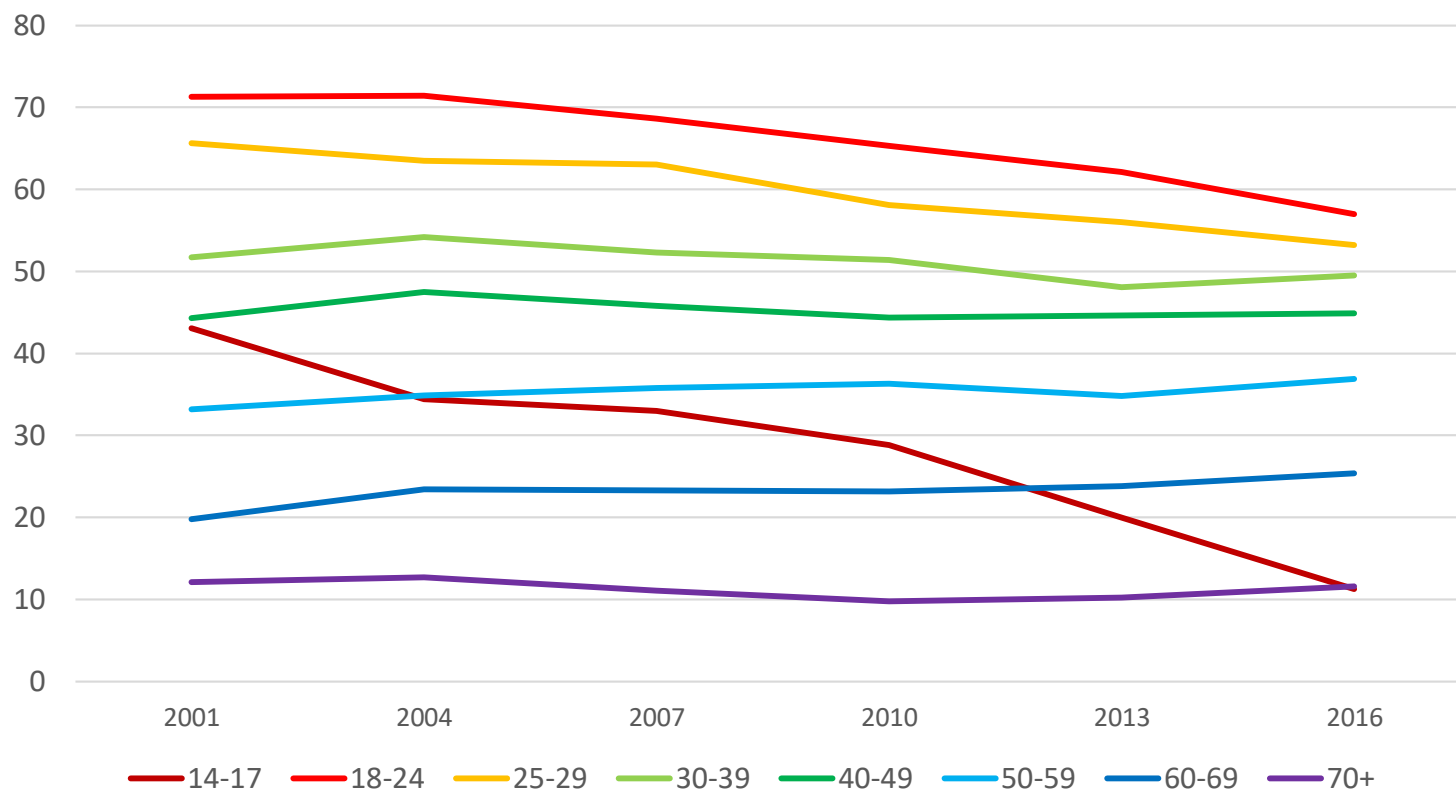


4307.0.55.001 - Apparent Consumption of Alcohol, Australia, 2016-17

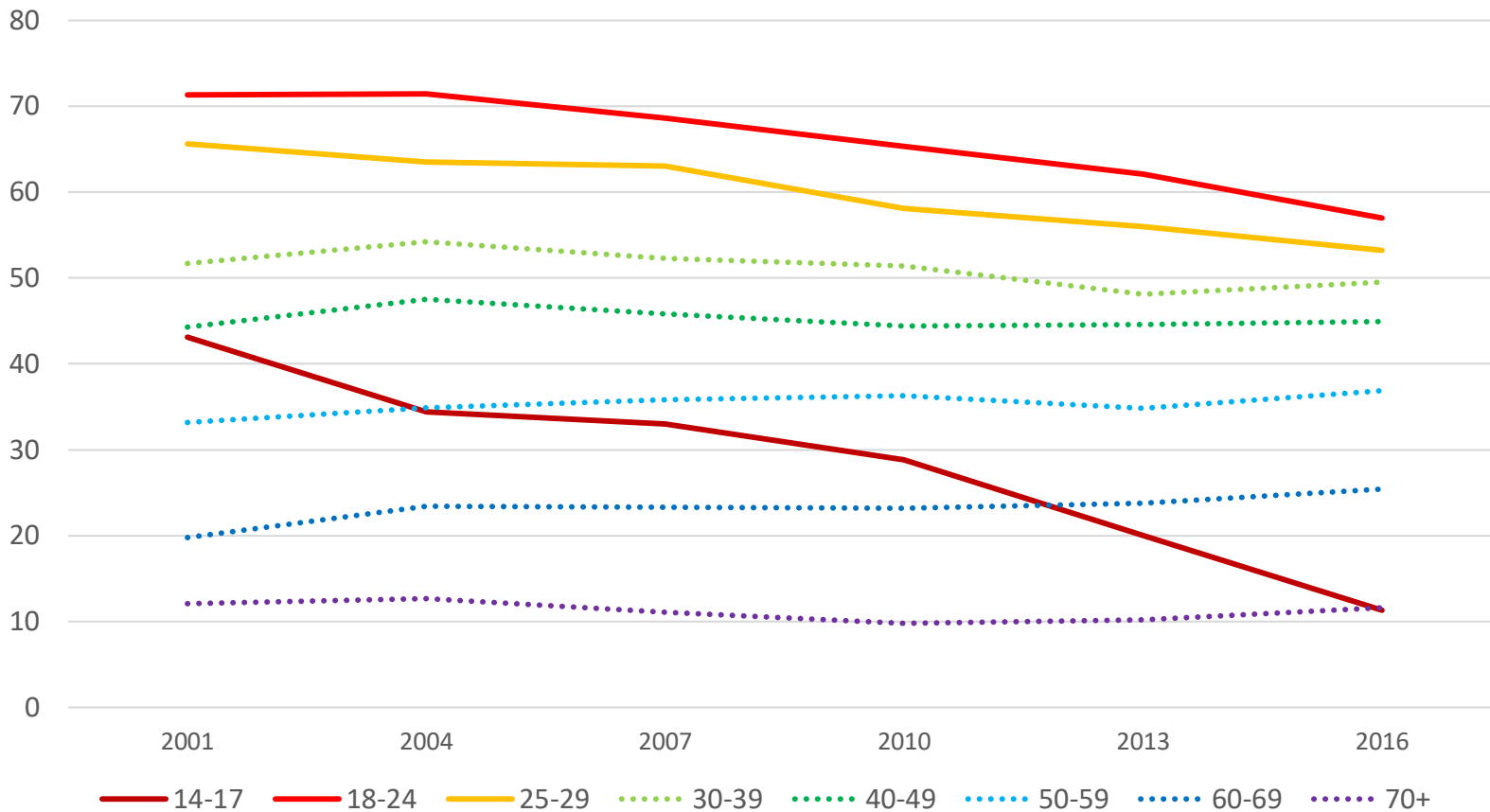
The National Drug Strategy Household Survey

- If we want to take a closer look at who is decreasing their consumption, we do need to turn to survey data.
- The NDSHS is administered every three years in Australia to 20,000+ people
- This sample is roughly representative of the general population, with some exceptions
- Respondents are asked about their alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use.
- We can use this to see if people drink at different risky levels
 - 5 standard drinks per occasion
 - 20 standard drinks per occasion

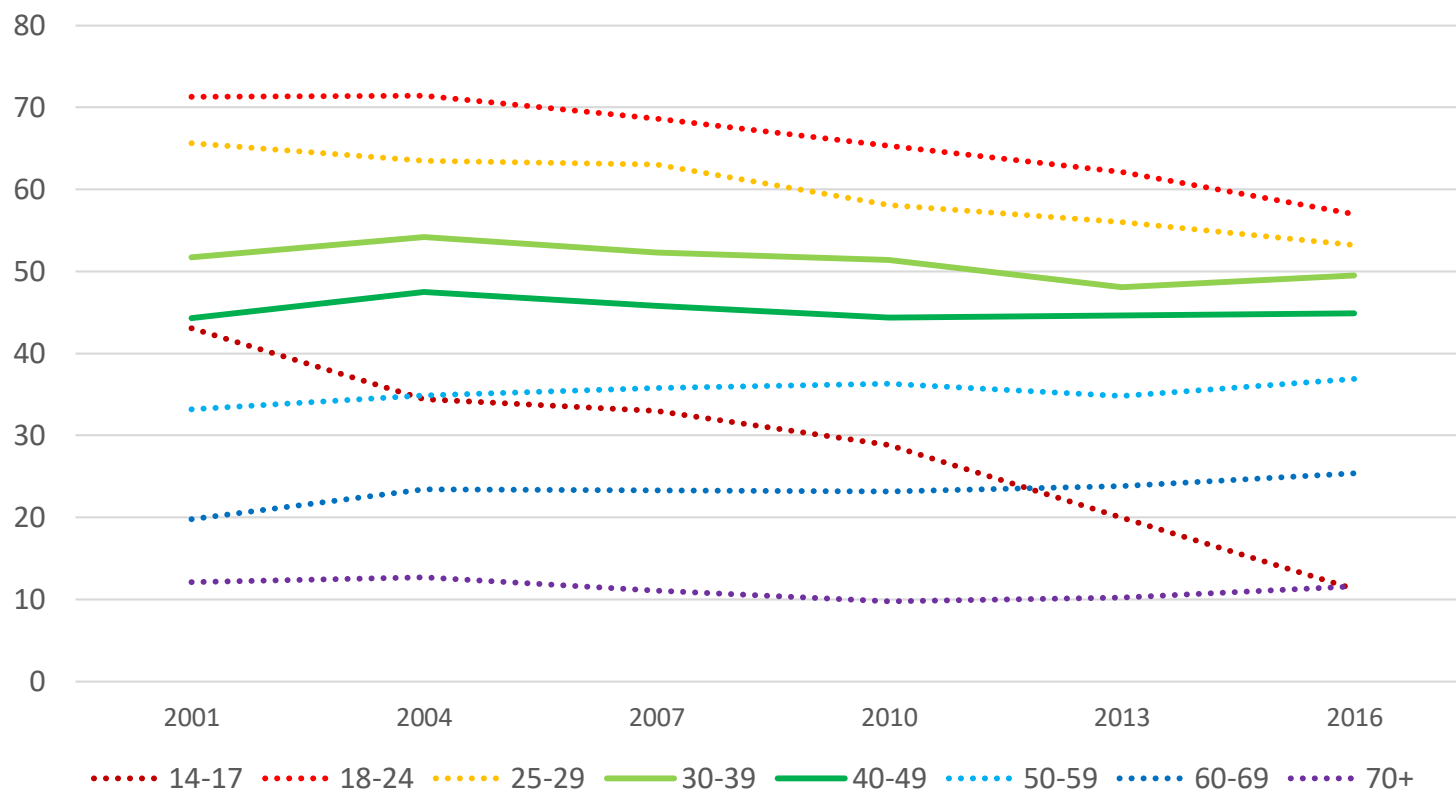
Prevalence of 5+ drinking occasions by age



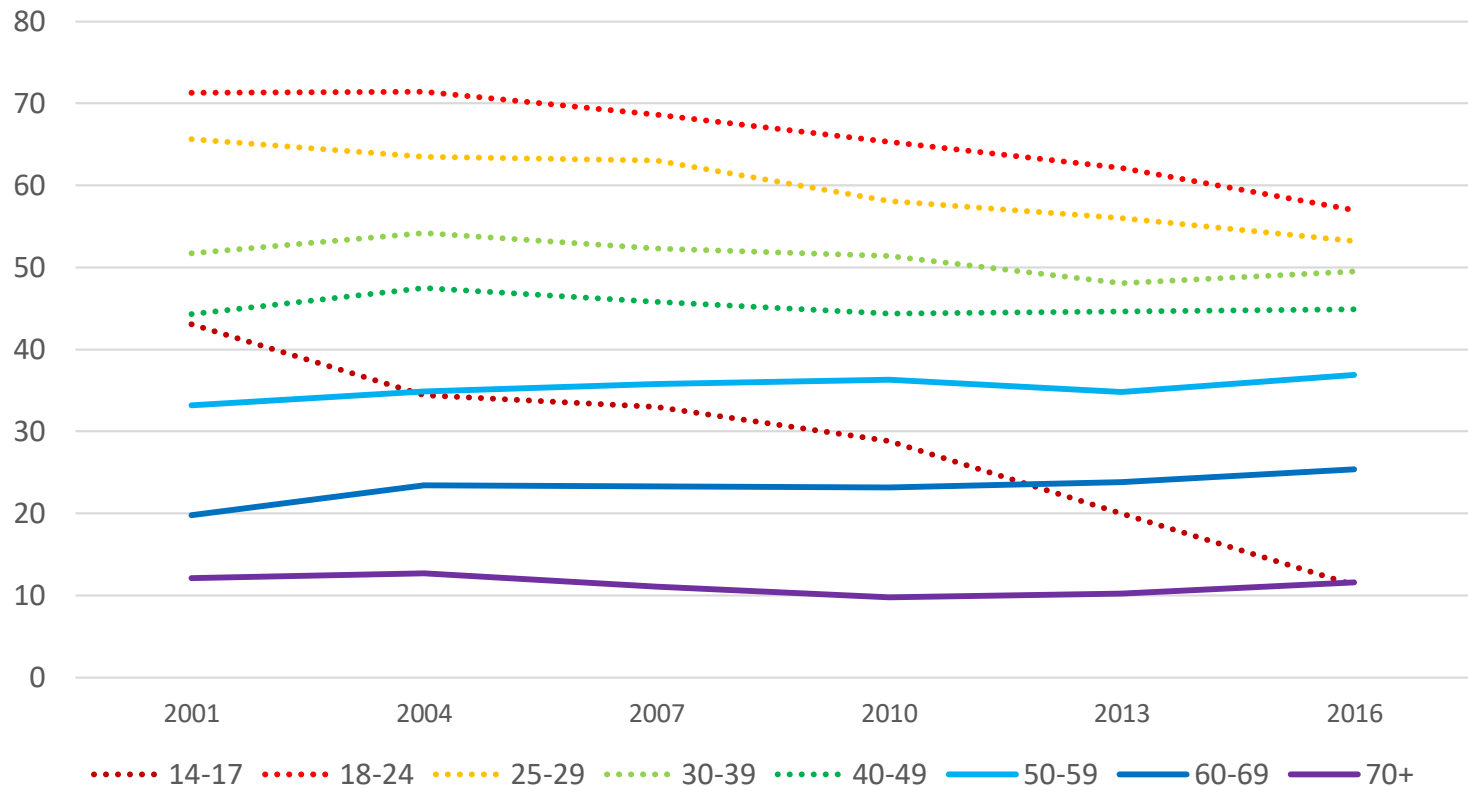
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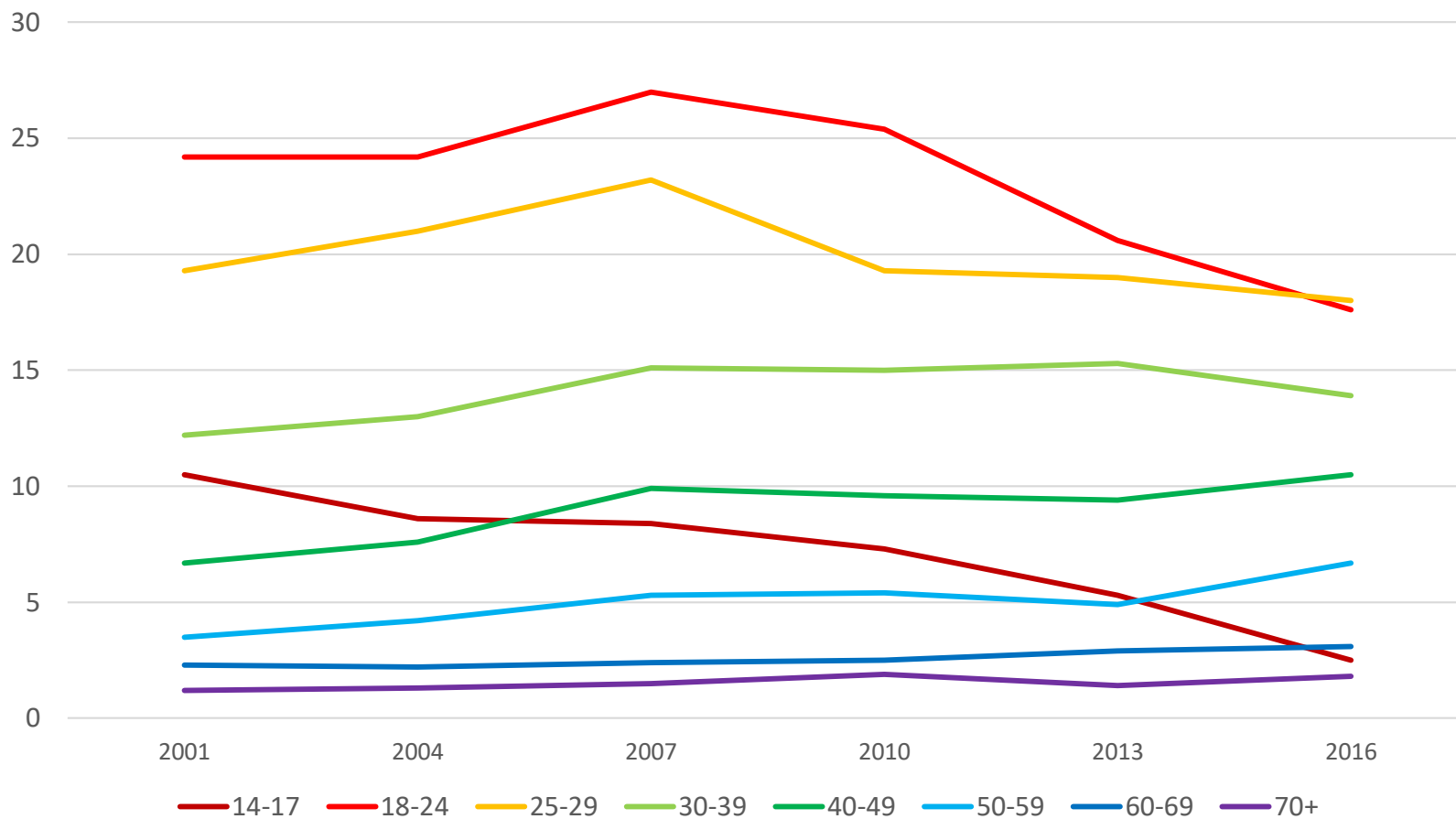
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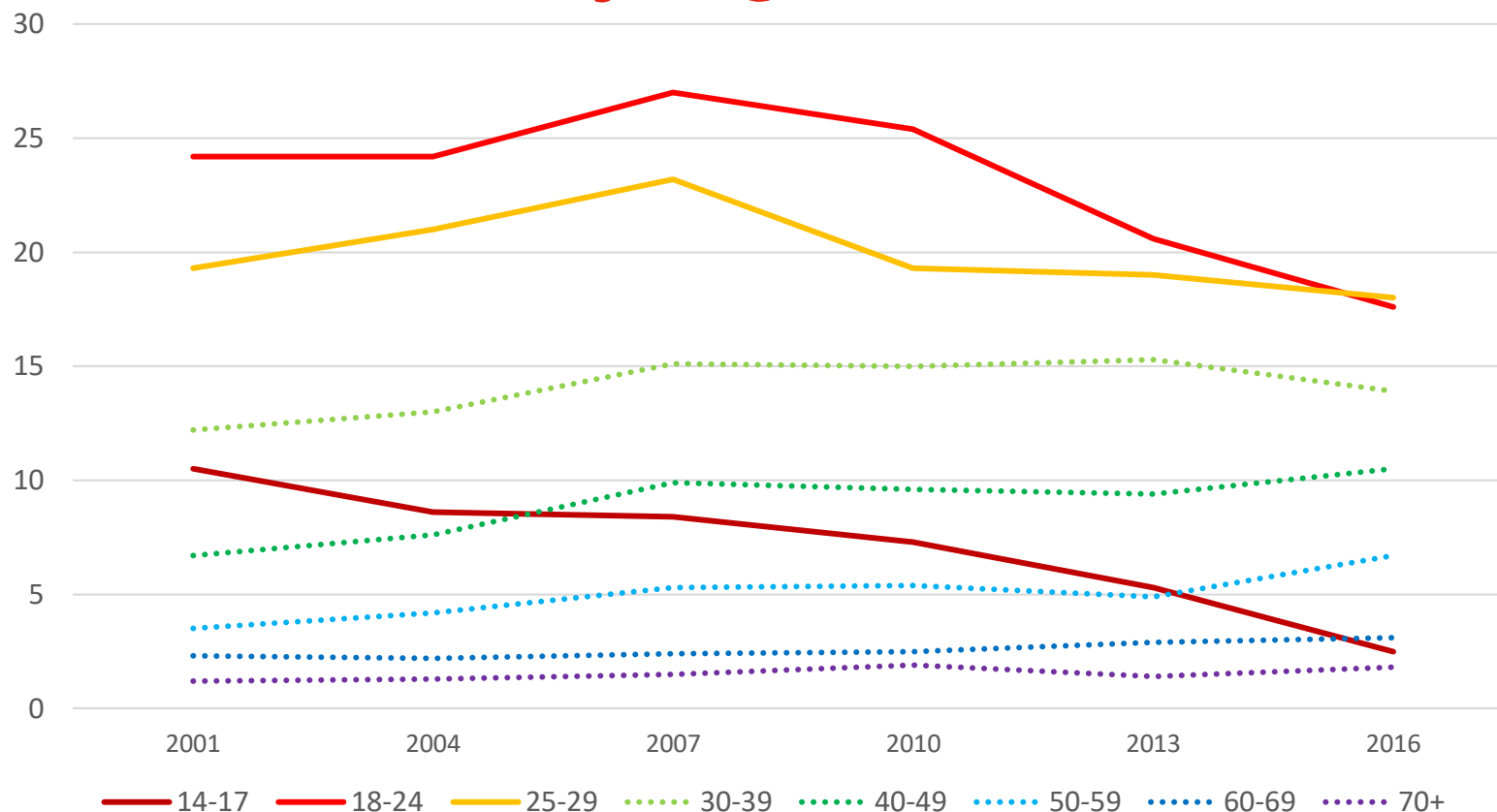
Prevalence of 5+ drinking occasions by age



Prevalence of 20+ drinking occasions by age

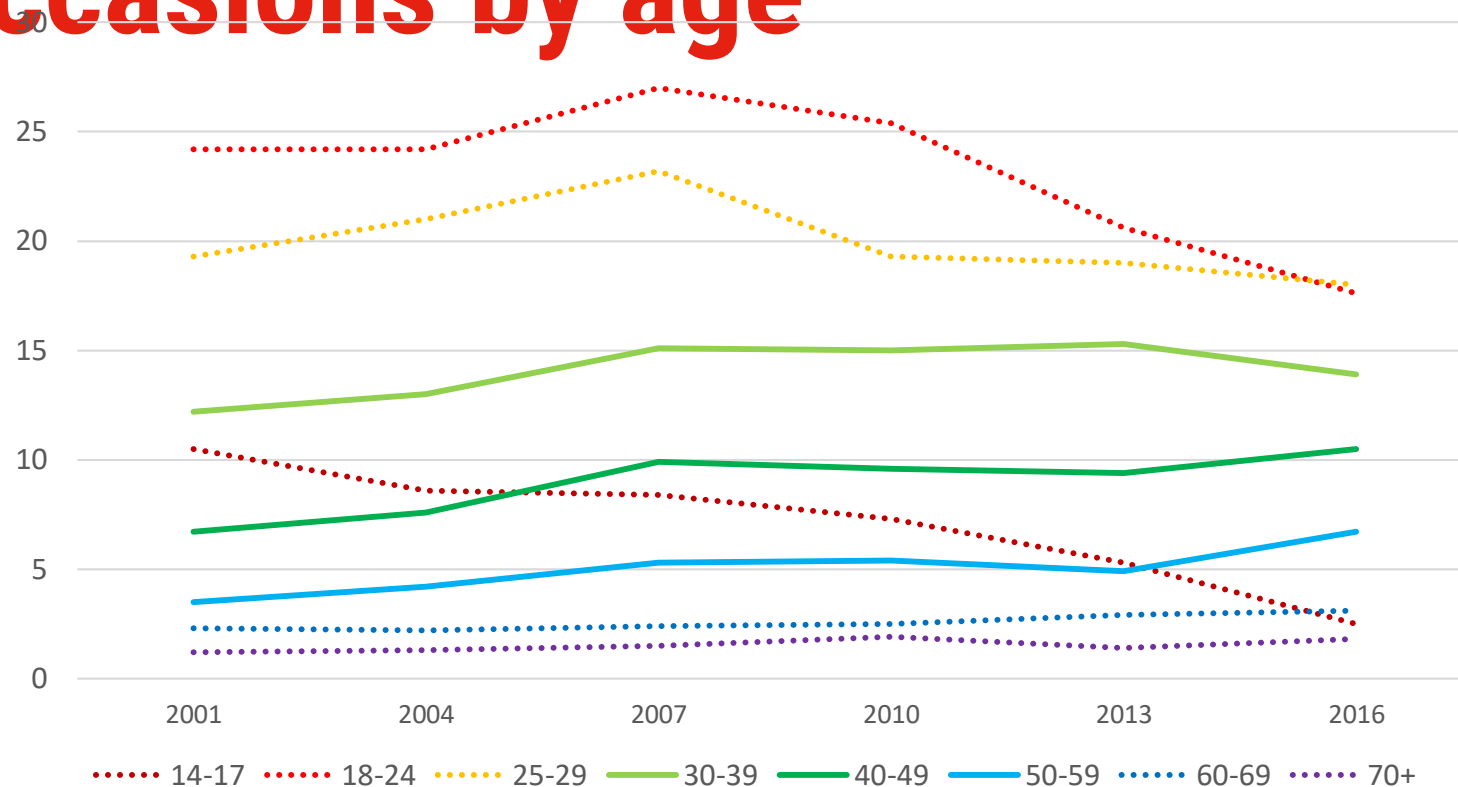


Prevalence of 20+ drinking occasions by age



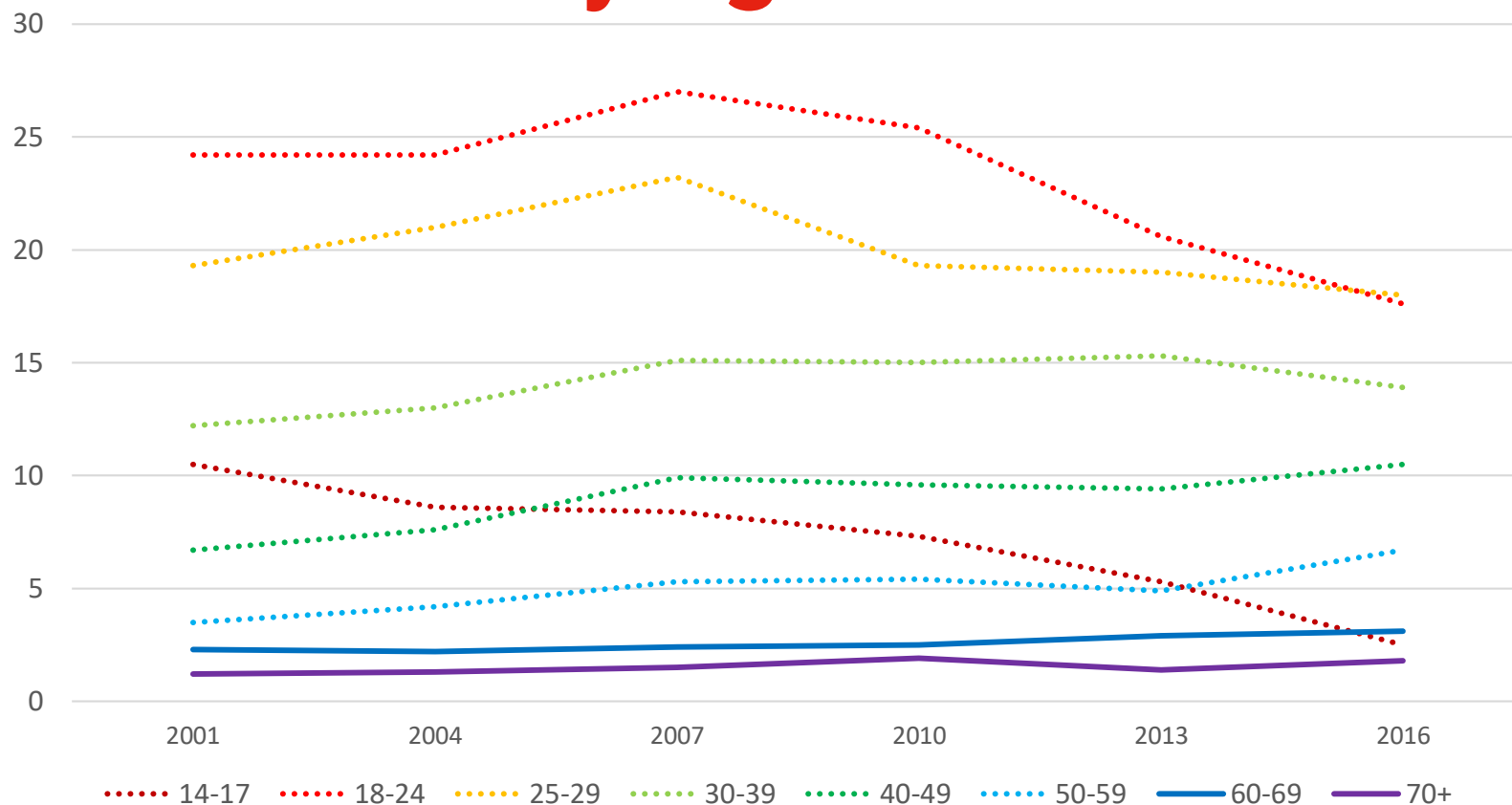
Livingston, M. (2015). Understanding recent trends in Australian alcohol consumption. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.

Prevalence of 20+ drinking occasions by age



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Prevalence of 20+ drinking occasions by age

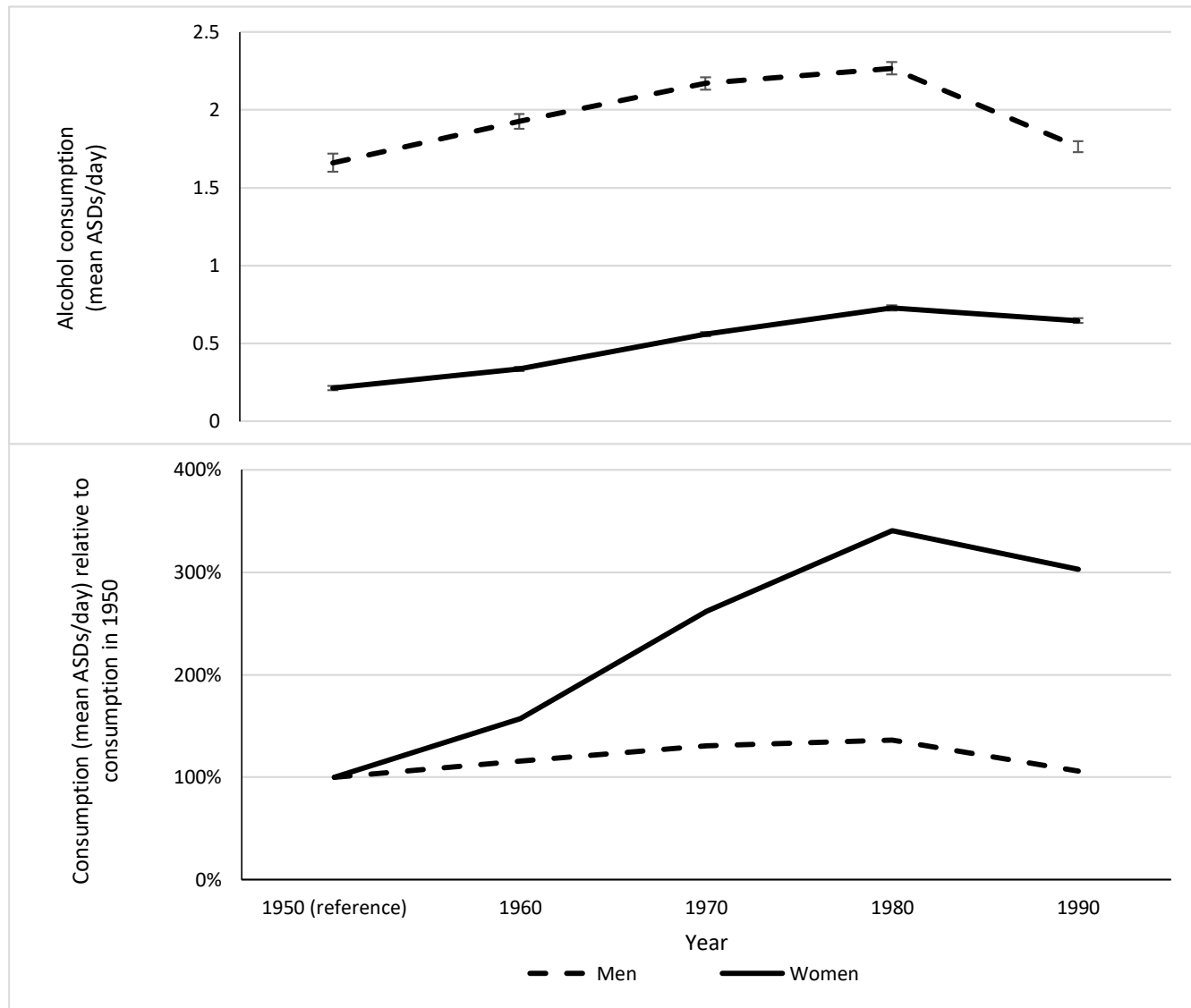


Livingston, M. (2015). Understanding recent trends in Australian alcohol consumption. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (with update for 2016).

Is this attributable to a rise in women's drinking?

- One plausible hypothesis for an increase in drinking in older drinkers is that the rise is due to the first generation of women with socially acceptable consumption (i.e., baby boomers) aging
 - If drinking, particularly heavier drinking, was more socially unacceptable for women in the past, then as baby boomers and gen-xers age, it will look as though consumption across the board is increasing, when in fact it is just women's consumption
- Results presented on the next slide are from a study where a cohort of respondents born between 1920 and 1949 were asked to estimate how much alcohol they consumed in each decade (Stanesby et al., 2018).

Gender differences over time



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**Where do older
Australians
drink?**

Age specific trends in alcohol consumption

- The following data is taken from a paper (Callinan et al., 2016) using data from the International Alcohol Control Study
 - We interviewed 2020 Australians about where and what they drank
 - We let people answer their questions about what they drank in their own terms (i.e., 4 cans of beer or half a bottle of wine) and we calculated the standard drinks ourselves later
 - This resulted in a higher level of consumption being reported so the prevalence of risky drinking is higher than you might find in other surveys.
- The results taken from the International Alcohol Control Study allowed for a detailed examination of where Australians consume their alcohol
- This allowed us to get a quite detailed look at what our drinking habits in different locations are

What proportion of alcohol is consumed in each location?

		Own home	Other home	Pubs	Clubs	Restaurant	Work	Public	Events
16-24	Male	34.9	25.6	23.0	3.4	2.8	1.4	3.2	5.6
	Female	38.9	21.3	27.0	1.5	3.6	0.3	2.4	5.0
25-34	Male	50.3	15.6	18.1	2.5	3.5	2.9	4.1	3.0
	Female	45.5	18.5	19.9	1.4	7.6	1.1	2.3	3.8
35-54	Male	72.4	8.9	9.6	2.1	2.9	2.1	1.0	1.0
	Female	70.5	12.3	9.0	1.6	4.4	0.2	1.0	0.9
55+	Male	76.7	8.2	6.2	3.5	3.0	1.4	0.3	0.7
	Female	77.3	8.6	3.8	1.7	8.0	0.0	0.2	0.4
Total		63.1	13.2	12.4	2.4	3.9	1.4	1.6	2.0

What proportion of alcohol is consumed in each location?

		Own home	Other home	Pubs
16-24	Male	34.9	25.6	23.0
	Female	38.9	21.3	27.0
25-34	Male	50.3	15.6	18.1
	Female	45.5	18.5	19.9
35-54	Male	72.4	8.9	9.6
	Female	70.5	12.3	9.0
55+	Male	76.7	8.2	6.2
	Female	77.3	8.6	3.8
Total		63.1	13.2	12.4

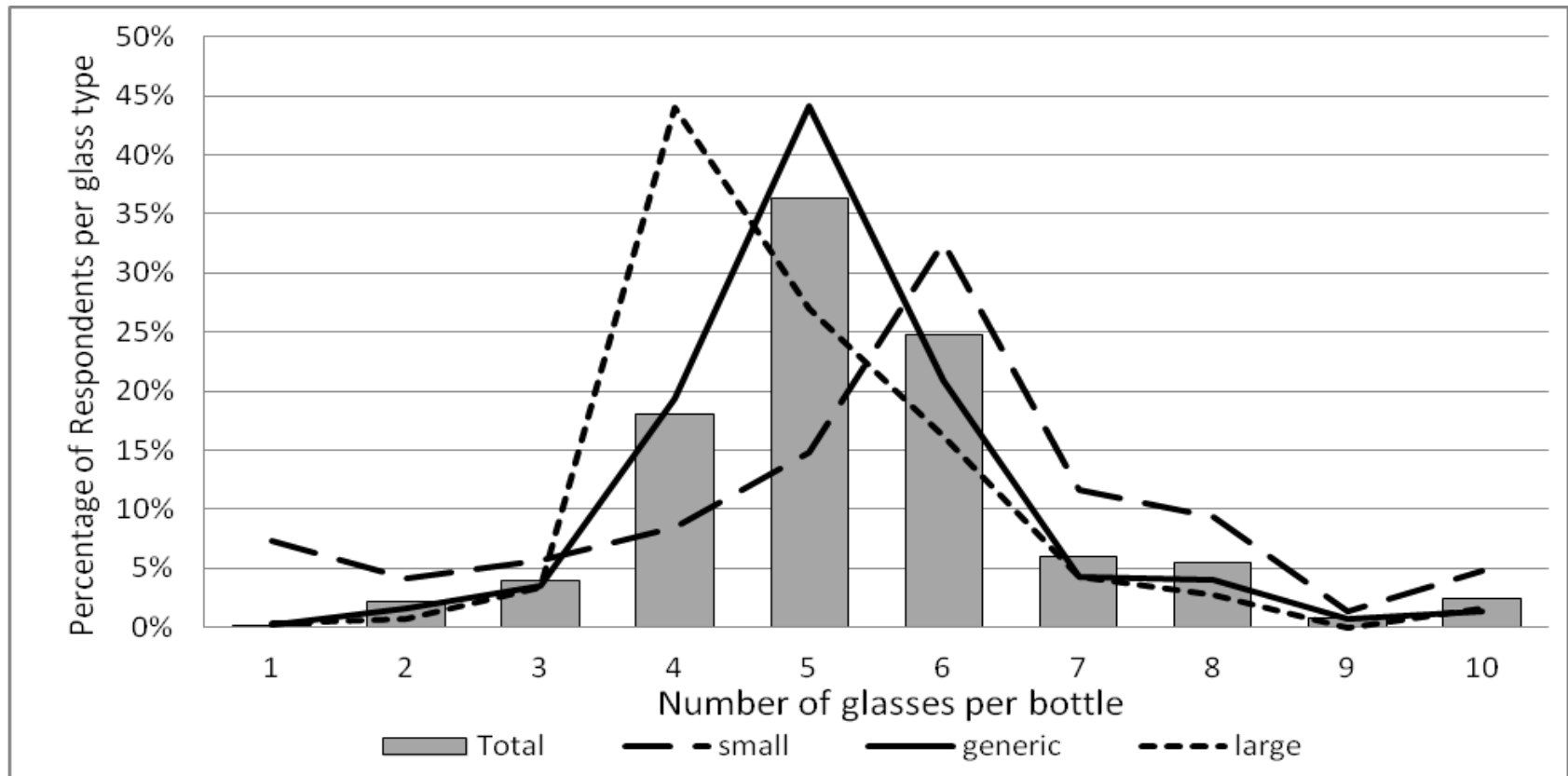
How often do drinkers who drink at each location drink there?

		Own Home	Other Home	Pubs
16-24	Male	6.2	2.6	2.9
	Female	4.2	1.5	2.1
24-34	Male	8.5	2.7	2.6
	Female	5.9	2.2	2.0
35-54	Male	10.7	1.6	2.2
	Female	8.7	1.9	1.6
55+	Male	14.0	2.6	3.3
	Female	12.0	1.8	1.4

How much do drinkers drink per occasion at each location?

		Own Home	Other Home	Pubs
16-24	Male	6.7	9.9	8.5
	Female	6.7	6.6	8.4
24-34	Male	6.4	7.9	8.0
	Female	6.3	5.7	5.8
35-54	Male	6.2	5.7	5.6
	Female	4.4	4.4	3.9
55+	Male	4.8	4.6	3.4
	Female	3.3	3.3	2.7

How many glasses of wine do you get to a bottle?



How much do drinkers drink per occasion at each location?

		Own Home	Other Home	Pubs
16-24	Male	6.7	9.9	8.5
	Female	6.7	6.6	8.4
24-34	Male	6.4	7.9	8.0
	Female	6.3	5.7	5.8
35-54	Male	6.2	5.7	5.6
	Female	4.4	4.4	3.9
55+	Male	4.8	4.6	3.4
	Female	3.3	3.3	2.7

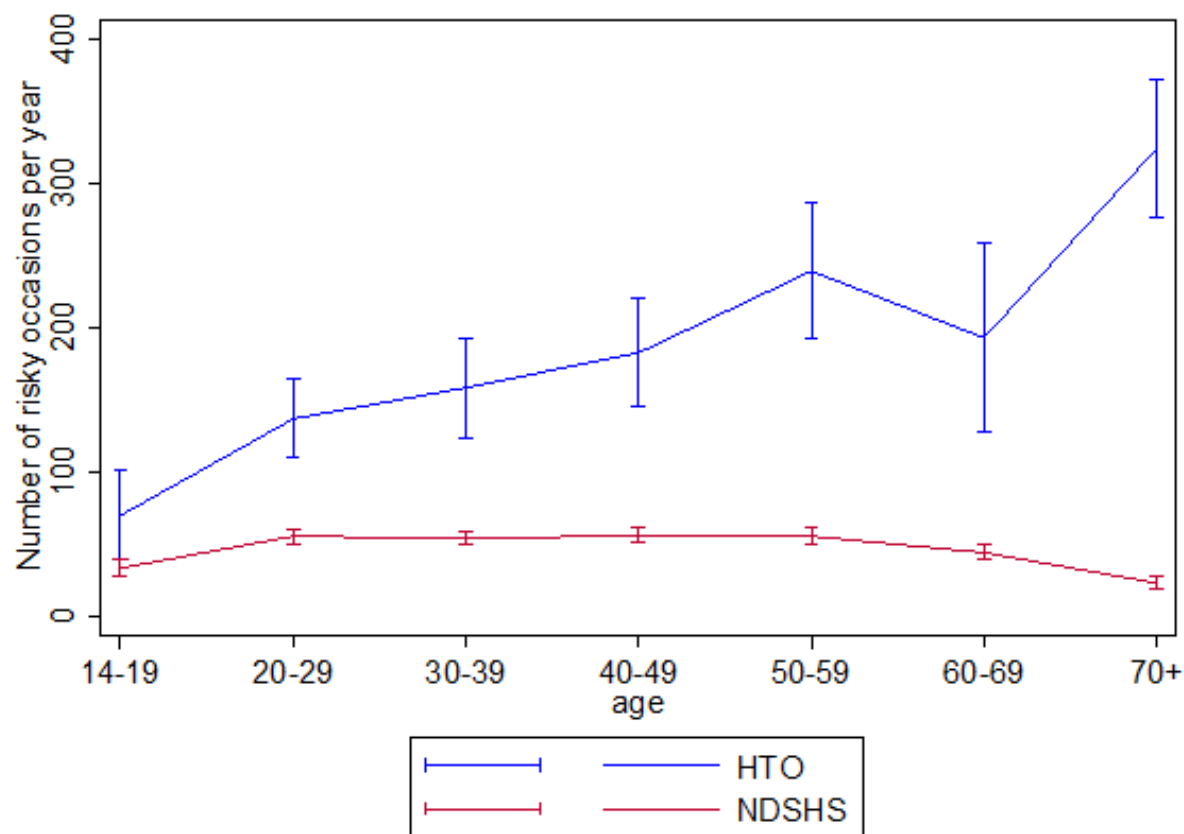
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**Who else is
getting hurt?**

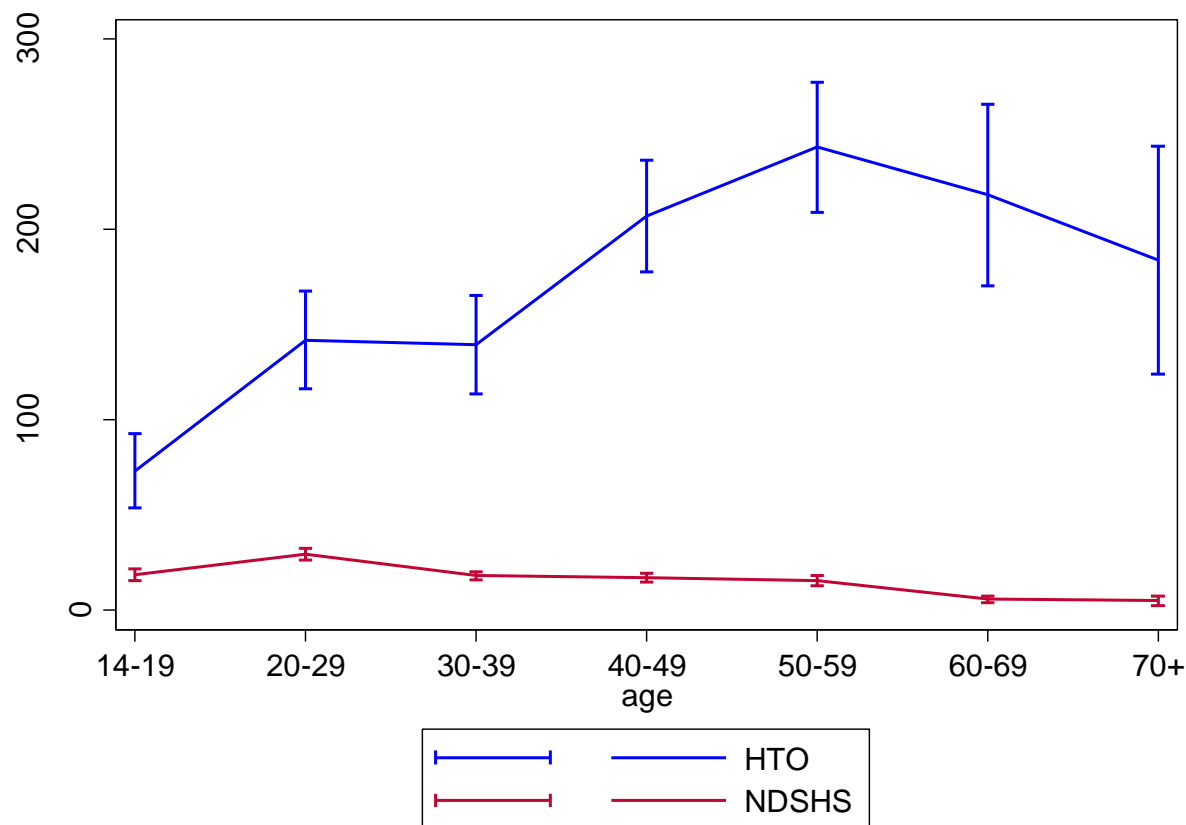
Alcohol's harm to others

- In 2008, 2649 Australians participated in a study aiming to assess the range and magnitude of alcohol's harm to others (Laslett et al., 2010).
- Respondents were asked questions about all the heavy drinkers in their life and the harms they had experienced because of the drinking of people they know and also because of the drinking of strangers.
- The following slides use data from the Harm to Others Study and the National Drug Strategy Household Survey to compare the demographic profile of 774 Harm to Others respondent's "most harmful drinker" to the demographic profile of Australian drinkers in the general population (Callinan & Livingston, in press)

How much do harmful male drinkers drink?



How much do harmful female drinkers drink?



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Discussion

Discussion

- There is a tendency for both the media and research teams to focus on the drinking of young people, particularly drinking in public space
- However this is not an accurate reflection of the age profile who are seeking treatment
- Consumption in Australia has decreased slightly over the past decade
 - Most of this decrease can be attributable to younger drinkers
 - Older drinkers are not decreasing and by some measures are increasing their consumption
- This increase in older drinkers' consumption is probably not attributable to an increase in female consumption as gender discrimination decreases

Discussion

- Just under two-thirds of all alcohol consumed in Australia is consumed in the drinkers own home
 - But for Australians aged 35 and over, this increases to approximately three quarters
- This is primarily due to the frequency of drinking in the home and the high proportion of people who do it
- However, the average amount of drinks consumed on a usual occasion for men and for women under 55 in the drinkers own home is in excess of the NHMRC guidelines to avoid short term risk

Discussion

- Harms from the drinking of others are common
- Women who live with a heavy drinker experience higher levels of anxiety and depression type symptoms and lower quality of life
- Older drinkers who are considered harmful drink more than younger drinkers who are considered harmful

What can we do about it?

- Heavy consumption by older adults can be harder to shift with policy than that of younger drinkers
- This is because most of it occurs outside of licensed premises and is therefore not subject to a lot of policies that we often use to reduce consumption.
- However, increasing the price of alcohol would be an extremely cost-effective way to reduce consumption in the heaviest drinkers
- A minimum price per standard drink across the country could reduce the heavy consumption of older home-based drinkers
 - Heavy drinkers purchase more alcohol under \$1 or \$1.25 per standard drink than other drinkers

Conclusions

- While the consumption of young people, particularly in public spaces, tends to receive most of the attention, a significant proportion of older drinkers are drinking harmfully, primarily in their homes
- This drinking, despite not appearing risky, results in considerable harms and is worthy of further research and attention
- This should hopefully result in a focus in research better targeting the age profile of people presenting to treatment for alcohol use disorders.

Acknowledgements



Foundation for Alcohol
Research & Education

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Thank you

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