

# Continuity and change in the function and social meaning of alcohol use (and non-use) for adolescents.

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## Abstract

Qualitative research aimed at better understanding the decline in youth drinking has so far been hampered by a lack of baseline data for comparison. This New Zealand study overcomes this limitation by comparing archival qualitative data collected at the height of youth drinking (1999-2001) with contemporary data collected for this study (June-September 2022). The aim is to understand continuity and change in the function and social meaning of alcohol use (and non-use), and related contextual factors, for two cohorts about 20 years apart.

Both archival and contemporary data were collected from 14-17 year old secondary school students (Years 10-12) through individual and small-group interviews in matched suburban co-ed schools. Interviews explored family life, social life, friend groups, and experiences and perceptions of substance use and non-use.

Preliminary analysis highlights important changes that may help to explain the decline in youth drinking. Such changes include an increased value placed on personal choice and acceptance of different ways of being a teenager; decreased face-to-face socialising and the emergence of social media as a central feature of adolescent social life, perhaps displacing drinking and partying; prevalence and pervasiveness of 'safety' discourses and greater knowledge and awareness of potential harms of alcohol use; increased framing of alcohol use as a coping mechanism by both drinkers and non-drinkers; and increased apprehensiveness about growing up.

Collectively, these changes appear to have shifted the social position of drinking from an almost compulsory component of adolescent social life in 1999-2001, to an optional activity that many contemporary adolescents perceive to have high risks and few benefits.