

# **Safer Celebrating: What can be done to reduce the Road Trauma Associated with Youth Celebrations?**

**Kristy Abbott<sup>1</sup> (Presenter)**  
**<sup>1</sup>Youthsafe**

## **Biography**

Kristy Abbott is Assistant Executive Officer and Community Programs Co-ordinator for Youthsafe, a non-government organisation committed to reducing serious injuries in young people aged 15-25years. Kristy is responsible for planning, developing, implementing and evaluating injury prevention initiatives for Youthsafe. Prior to joining Youthsafe, Kristy had worked with the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS) where she had research, rehabilitation and case management responsibilities. Kristy has a degree in psychology, is qualified in adult education and is currently completing her Masters in Behavioural Science.

## **Abstract**

End-of-year celebrations and celebrations of key events such as New Years Eve have long been recognised as potentially contributing to increased risk of injury to young people, particularly road related injury. Youthsafe, in partnership with the Roads and Traffic Authority NSW has undertaken research to explore strategies for encouraging safer celebrations for young people. The result of this research is a guide for road safety and health professionals to developing safer celebrating projects.

This presentation will focus on Youthsafe's 'Safe Celebrating Guide' project which involved extensive literature reviews as well as consultation with key stakeholders and topic area experts. Findings from the project will be discussed including promising strategies for encouraging safer celebrations amongst young people with the aim of reducing road trauma associated with these activities.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

The rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood is one of rapid change, of increasing affiliation with peers, and emerging independence from the boundaries of home, school and family. The period is also punctuated by a series of milestones such as major school exams, the passing of school years, significant birthdays and achievement of legal rights such as voting, driving and the ability to purchase and drink alcohol. Celebration of these new freedoms, milestones and achievements is a very important part of the social and emotional development of young people.

Celebrations not only bring young people together, they may also bring into play a range of risk factors that work in combination to heighten the risk of harm. These include:

- ◆ a desire for sensation seeking and a tendency towards risk taking
- ◆ the impact of group/peer dynamics
- ◆ a lack of maturity
- ◆ an inexperience with alcohol and a tendency towards binge drinking
- ◆ the use of illicit drugs
- ◆ increased independent use of roads and vehicles

- ◆ inexperienced drivers, car overcrowding, fatigue and limited transport options
- ◆ many of the activities occurring at night
- ◆ limited supervision/emergency support

While no-one would advocate for the abolishment of youth celebrations, many are keen to support safer celebrations amongst young people. But for health and safety professionals interested in promoting safer events and parties there is little information to guide them as to 'good practice' safe celebrating programs. To this end Youthsafe has undertaken to develop guidelines for developing safer celebrating programs based on available evidence and expressed needs of those people developing youth injury prevention projects.

*This paper focuses on the results of the youth consultation undertaken as part of this developmental research.*

## **2. AIM**

The overall aim of the Youthsafe Safe Celebrating project was to assist health and safety workers (including Road Safety Officers and injury prevention workers) to develop effective safe celebrating programs targeting local young people. The focus of the project was on reducing the road trauma associated with youth celebrations. Objectives of the project included developing an understanding of the current youth celebrations environment and the safety issues associated with this as well as an understanding of what works and what doesn't work in promoting safer celebrations for young people. The research undertaken as part of this project was to form the basis of a guide for health and safety professionals outlining good practice principles for developing safer celebrating programs.

## **3. METHOD**

The project was undertaken in four stages:

- Stage 1: Review of the literature  
Consultation with key informants and stakeholders  
Report on stage 1
- Stage 2: Focus groups with young people  
Report on Stage 2**
- Stage 3: Integration of findings from Stage 1 and 2 to form draft guidelines
- Stage 4: Test guidelines with target audience  
Modify and finalise guidelines for print.

Regan and Daley Consultants were contracted to undertake Stages 1, 3 and 4. Elliott and Shanahan Research undertook the focus group research in Stage 2. This paper focuses on the results of Stage 2. The results of the overall project are reflected in the 'Guide to developing safer celebrating programs for young people'.

### **3.1 Focus group methodology**

Focus groups were chosen because of their heuristic nature. The aim was to identify and understand rather than to enumerate. The group discussions, especially as they were relatively non-directive, allowed participants to explore issues raised by any individual. This process also revealed the intensity of feelings about various issues.

A series of six (6) group discussions was conducted, as follows:

- ◆ Four affinity group discussions with young people in Sydney
- ◆ One (1) group of girls in year 11 who had attended year 10 formal and after party;
- ◆ One (1) group of boys in year 12, who intended attending schoolies week or end of year celebrations;
- ◆ One (1) group of girls in year 12, who intended attending schoolies week or end of year celebrations; and,
- ◆ One (1) group of boys aged 18-19 years who had left school;

Two affinity group discussions with young people in Wagga Wagga

- ◆ One (1) group of girls aged 18-19 years who had left school; and,
- ◆ One (1) group of boys in year 11, who had attended year 10 formal and after party.

Each group contained 8 participants. All participants were secondary or tertiary students or employed. Groups contained a mixture of drivers and non-drivers, and a diversity of people in terms of socio-economic strata, schools (public/private), family composition and occupations.

#### 4. RESULTS

The key results from the focus group research are as follows:

- ◆ Youth aged 16-19 years are **not a homogenous group**. They represent a variety of different sub-groups ranging in interests with differing attitudes.
- ◆ For young people, celebrations are positioned on a continuum according to their frequency, preparation involved, anticipation and size, and may be grouped as '**minor**' and '**major**' celebrations. Minor celebrations include casual parties, and pubbing and clubbing; while major celebrations include formals, Schoolies, New Year's Eve, and 18ths and 21st birthday parties.
- ◆ Planning in both a logistical and a personal sense is more likely to occur for major celebrations than minor celebrations. As a result, **major celebrations are more likely to be controlled**, and transport is more likely to be pre-arranged.
- ◆ Celebrating **behaviour changes with age**, reflecting changes in the celebrating environment, familiarity with alcohol, and general maturity; for example:
  - the celebrating environment becomes more supervised and more controlled as youth get older;
  - attitudes to alcohol also change with age. Year 11 students are more likely to drink with the specific purpose of becoming drunk quickly. While binge drinking still occurs amongst older youth, drinking behaviour adopts other purposes such as socialising and relaxing;
  - as a result, celebrating behaviour also changes. Year 11 students are more likely to be reckless and unruly at celebrations. This behaviour becomes progressively less prevalent in older youth.
- ◆ Key concerns about celebrating relate to **physical and behavioural effects of intoxication** including: alcohol poisoning, violence, sexual assault, property damage and theft. Gatecrashing and lack of supervision weakens control of the party and increases risks generally.
- ◆ Deciding whether or not to drive to a celebration is directly related to **deciding whether or not to drink** at the celebration. As young people usually plan to consume alcohol at major

celebrations, they are less likely to drive. Young people do not have such fixed intentions in regard to drinking behaviour at casual celebrations, so may be more inclined to drive.

- ◆ In this study, young people's knowledge and awareness of the legal blood alcohol content limit for L and P plate drivers was mixed, while their understanding of how many drinks this equates to was vague. The effects of both alcohol and drugs on driving were thought to depend on individual differences, previous food consumption, and time lapse.
- ◆ Key safety issues in regard to driving to/ from/ at celebrations included:
  - Drink driving;
  - Speeding;
  - Burnouts/ doughnuts etc;
  - Drug driving; and,
  - Overcrowding.
- ◆ Risks for males mostly relate to driving themselves, while risks for females mostly relate to travelling as a passenger.
- ◆ Motivation for risky driving/ travelling includes **peer pressure; feelings of invincibility, freedom and fun**, and practical concerns in regard to getting home.
- ◆ Factors which **inhibit** risky driving/ travelling include **safety concerns** for others and self; **peer and parental influence**; the potential **loss of mobility**; and potential **financial loss**.
- ◆ Responsibility for behaviour at celebrations was thought to lie with the individual and to some extent with his/ her friends and parents.
- ◆ Parent organisers were thought to have more responsibility for attendees behaviour than other organisers. To some extent they were thought to be responsible for attendees' transport home.
- ◆ Non-parent organisers were said to have some responsibilities for attendees while they are at the venue. These responsibilities are generally **not considered** to extend to providing safe transport.
- ◆ There was **poor awareness of effective communication resources** specifically addressing safe driving at celebrations; though some knowledge has been gained through the school system and from mass media campaigns covering various social issues.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Young people and celebrations are inextricably linked. Whilst these activities provide an opportunity for young people to learn and explore new freedoms, they also come with an increased risk of harm, including injury. This research has drawn together information from young people about their experiences of celebrating, along with information from key informants and stakeholders, to better understand the current youth celebrations environment and the implications for safer celebrations. The findings of this research form the basis of a guide to developing strategies for safer celebrating for young people. The guide takes into account both the evidence regarding effective safer celebrating programs and identified needs of those working on youth injury prevention programs to provide a comprehensive yet practical guide to developing safe celebrations programs.

To obtain a copy of the 'Guide to developing safer celebrating programs' resource, please contact Youthsafe on 9809 4615 or email <a href="mailto:coord@youthsafe.org">coord@youthsafe.org</a>
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