



Centre for
Public Health

UK BACKPACKERS DRINKING THEIR WAY AROUND AUSTRALIA: NEW RESEARCH

- EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 AEDT TUESDAY 16 JANUARY 2007 -

The perception that UK backpackers do a lot of drinking while they are travelling across Australia has been supported by new research released today. Forty per cent reported drinking five or more times a week when in Australia, compared to only just over 20% when they were at home.

The study conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of NSW and the Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University, UK interviewed 1008 UK nationals aged 18-35 years, holidaying in Sydney or Cairns, Australia, during 2005.

“The image of the hard-drinking, hard-playing UK backpacker appears to be reinforced by the results of this research,” said one of the authors of the report, Paul Dillon from NDARC. “The backpacker industry is growing and these results clearly show that we need to examine how we deal with the range of possible problems linked to the alcohol and other drug use by this group of holidaymakers.”

During the five year period from 1999 to 2003 the number of domestic and international backpackers travelling in Australia grew 25% (753,000 to 943,000); accounting for 11% of overseas visitors. The largest single source of backpackers visiting Australia was the UK, accounting for 27% of individuals (121,500).

The study found that the use of alcohol and other drugs by UK backpackers visiting Australia was common with use of illicit drugs being substantially higher than in peers of the same age in their home country.

There was no significant change in proportions of individuals who drank in Australia compared with proportions who drank in the UK. However, there was a significant change in frequency of consumption with 35% of alcohol-using backpackers increasing the frequency of their drinking while holidaying in Australia.

Relatively few young people were recruited into drug use in Australia (3.0%, cannabis; 2.7% ecstasy; 0.7%, methamphetamine). However, over half of the sample (55.0%) used at least one illicit drug when backpacking.

“We found very few people were deliberately experimenting with drugs like methamphetamine, which is much more common in Australia than in the UK,” said

co-author of the report Karen Hughes from John Moores University. "However, backpackers were buying ecstasy and amphetamine and these drugs are much more likely to contain methamphetamine in Australia than in UK. It is vital that young tourists understand that what they buy is often not what they expect and they may actually be taking a drug with different and sometimes much stronger effects."

Risk factors for illicit drug use while backpacking were being regular club goers, being male, Sydney based, travelling without a partner or spouse, having been in Australia more than four weeks, Australia being the only destination on their vacation and drinking or smoking five or more days a week.

John Moores University in Liverpool, UK have been involved in a number of studies on risk behaviour and youth travel, primarily examining short-term vacations in holiday destinations such as Ibiza. This new research shows that the behaviour changes associated with backpacking might differ from those during shorter trips to holiday resorts.

"The increases in drug use often associated with shorter youth holidays was not a feature of backpacking," said lead author of the report, Professor Mark Bellis from John Moores University. "However, backpackers did show dramatic increases in alcohol consumption. Backpackers may think this is a safer option but heavy alcohol use in an unfamiliar setting can lead not only to accidents but also increased danger of violence and vulnerability to sexual assault."

Based on the research findings Paul Dillon concluded "Cooperation between airlines, holiday companies and health services in the UK and Australia could do a lot to raise awareness amongst backpackers of the short and long term dangers of alcohol and drug use. Investment in such information and interventions with hostels and bars may help avoid person tragedies and their detrimental repercussions on the tourist industry."

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Date Issued: January 15 2007

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