

Sin beyond Surfers? Young people's risky behaviour during Schoolies Week in three Queensland regions

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Abstract

The present study investigated substance use and interpersonal conflict within the previous 24 hours of young people celebrating Schoolies Week in the Queensland Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast or Wide Bay regions. Questionnaires were completed by 291 males and 367 females, who were predominantly 17 or 18 years old and Queensland residents. Participants engaged in very high levels of drinking, marijuana and ecstasy use in comparison to relevant population statistics. Males were heavier marijuana users and drinkers than were females, and suffered more negative consequences of drinking. They also experienced more interpersonal conflict, although females were more likely to report being sexually harassed. Behaviour was riskier at the Gold Coast than elsewhere, with males within regions engaging in riskier behaviour. Drinkers were more likely to report using marijuana and alcohol, and suffering from the consequences of alcohol, than were non-drinkers. The data suggest that harm minimization interventions targeted at Schoolies Week participants are needed in all areas in which Schoolies Week are celebrated, although there is a particular need at the Gold Coast. These data also suggest that current interventions may be inadequate in preventing harm to participants, and may need to focus on participants' expectations of the consequences of celebrations. [Zinkiewicz L, Davey J, Curd D. Sin beyond Surfers? Young people's risky behaviour during Schoolies Week in three Queensland regions. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 1999;18:279–285]

Key words: underage drinking; schoolies week; youth substance use; alcohol-related conflict.

Introduction

For students in the final year of secondary school, the completion of school is a significant event in the transition from adolescent to young adult. Social events which mark this transition facilitate an important rite of passage [1].

One major social event is Schoolies Week. This traditionally follows the last week of high school, and involves accommodation at a holiday location away from home, the most common location being Surfers Paradise on Queensland's Gold Coast. In 1995,

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15 000 young people were expected to congregate at Surfers Paradise for such celebrations [2]. During the week they socialize and celebrate, and reportedly drink excessive amounts of alcohol. This is of concern not only because of the health consequences of excessive drinking, but because of the possibility of related negative outcomes such as drink driving, violence and other drug use. In addition, there are legal implications associated with underage drinking, as at least a proportion of those participants are below 18 years of age. However, there is only one study to date that has looked at the extent of substance use associated with Schoolies Week.

Smith and Rosenthal [2] surveyed 1796 young people from Queensland, NSW, and Victoria about their alcohol and marijuana use during Schoolies Week at Surfers Paradise. Consistent with widely held beliefs about Schoolies Week, over 75% of males and 60% of females reported getting drunk most or every day or night of the holiday, with males reporting more frequently getting drunk and stoned.

However, Schoolies Week celebrations have now extended beyond the highly populated metropolitan area of the Gold Coast into more provincial regions of south-east Queensland such as the Sunshine Coast (particularly Noosa, Caloundra and Maroochydore) and Wide Bay (particularly Bundaberg and Hervey Bay). Unfortunately, it is unclear whether young people celebrating in these regions engage in substance use and experience interpersonal conflict to the same extent as those celebrating on the Gold Coast. The present study sought to investigate this. It also investigated whether young drinkers engaged in more substance use and conflict during Schoolies Week than did non-drinkers, as the literature would predict [3].

The aims of the study were to document the substance use and interpersonal conflict within the previous 24 hours of young people celebrating Schoolies Week in the three regions; to examine regional differences in these behaviours; to examine gender differences in these behaviours, both on a state-wide and regional basis; and to determine whether drinkers and non-drinkers differed in these behaviours.

Methods

Participants

There were 367 females in the sample (53%), with 291 males (42.1%), and 34 individuals (4.9%) omitting

their gender. While 10.4% of the sample did not provide their age, of those that did the majority were 17 (68.5%) or 18 (21.3%) years old. Almost all respondents were Queensland residents (99.1%), with 0.3% living in South Australia, 0.1% in Western Australia, 0.2% in Tasmania and 7.1% ($n = 49$) unknown.

Procedure

Respondents were approached by young field workers during Schoolies Week events (e.g. pool party, beach day, nightclub party) held in the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay areas of Queensland during the first week of November 1996. These events were alcohol free and open only to high school students, and were funded by local and state government authorities and organizations. Only respondents finishing high school in 1996 were eligible to complete the questionnaire. More questionnaires were completed at the Sunshine Coast (41%) than at the Gold Coast (32.8%) or Wide Bay (25.3%), with location unrecorded on 0.9% of questionnaires. The refusal rate was approximately 10% overall.

Survey instrument

The questionnaire was a one-page, self-administered and anonymous document. Demographic data collected were home postcode, date of birth, gender and where the person was staying (unit, caravan park, their home, a friend's place, other). Respondents were then asked whether they drank alcohol. They then ticked whether they had engaged in each of a number of behaviours in the previous 24 hours: been drunk; had a hangover; been in a car with a driver who had been drinking; consumed alcohol; used marijuana; vomited as a result of drinking; passed out as a result of drinking; used ecstasy or other designer drug; been hurt/injured; been in a fight; been hassled by adults; been sexually harassed; or been cautioned by police.

Results

Gender differences

The majority of respondents reported drinking alcohol, with 87.9% of males ($n = 254$) and 91.5% of females ($n = 333$) reporting doing so. These proportions did not significantly differ. However,

Table 1. Gender differences in substance use during the previous 24 hours

Behaviour	Males		Females	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Been drunk*				
No	112	38.9	178	48.9
Yes	176	61.1	186	51.1
Had a hangover**				
No	196	68.1	286	78.6
Yes	92	31.9	78	21.4
Been in a car with a drunk driver				
No	262	91.0	345	94.8
Yes	26	9.0	19	5.2
Consumed alcohol				
No	99	34.4	127	34.9
Yes	189	65.6	237	65.1
Used marijuana***				
No	195	67.7	303	83.2
Yes	93	32.3	61	16.8
Vomited due to drinking*				
No	251	87.2	338	92.9
Yes	37	12.8	26	7.1
Passed out due to drinking**				
No	255	88.5	345	94.8
Yes	33	11.5	19	5.2
Used ecstasy				
No	269	93.4	349	96.4
Yes	19	6.6	13	3.6

Differences significantly different by two-tailed Pearson chi-square tests. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

significant gender differences emerged on substance use over the previous 24 hours (Table 1). Males were more likely to have been drunk ($\chi^2(1) = 6.53, p < 0.05$), to have vomited due to drinking ($\chi^2(1) = 5.99, p < 0.05$), to have passed out due to drinking ($\chi^2(1) = 8.53, p < 0.01$), to have had a hangover ($\chi^2(1) = 9.22, p < 0.01$) and to have used marijuana ($\chi^2(1) = 21.50, p < 0.001$).

Males were also significantly more likely to report having been in a fight ($\chi^2(1) = 5.35, p < 0.05$), having been hassled by adults ($\chi^2(1) = 7.89, p < 0.01$) and having been cautioned by police ($\chi^2(1) = 21.33, p < 0.001$) during the previous 24 hours

Table 2. Gender differences in interpersonal conflict during the previous 24 hours

Behaviour	Males		Females	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Been hassled by adults**				
No	202	70.1	290	79.7
Yes	86	29.9	74	20.3
Been hurt/injured				
No	247	85.8	328	90.1
Yes	41	14.2	36	9.9
Been in a fight*				
No	248	86.1	334	91.8
Yes	40	13.9	30	8.2
Been sexually harassed*				
No	270	93.8	320	87.9
Yes	18	6.3	44	12.1
Been cautioned by police***				
No	244	84.7	347	95.3
Yes	44	15.3	17	4.7

Differences significantly different by two-tailed Pearson chi-square tests. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

(Table 2). However, females were more likely to report having been sexually harassed ($\chi^2(1) = 6.37, p < 0.05$).

Regional differences

Whether respondents drank alcohol significantly differed across regions ($\chi^2(2) = 22.32, p < 0.001$). Of Gold Coast respondents, only 18% reported that they did not drink alcohol, compared to 45.9% of Sunshine Coast respondents and 75.3% of Wide Bay respondents. Analysis of residuals ($p < 0.05$) showed that in comparison to the average of the regions, respondents at the Gold Coast were less likely than average to say they did not drink, while Wide Bay respondents were more likely to say so.

There was a significant difference between regions in substance use during the previous 24 hours (Table 3). Gold Coast respondents were more likely than average to have consumed alcohol, been drunk, vomited from drinking, passed out from drinking, been hung over, been in a car with a drunk driver, used

Table 3. Regional differences in substance use during the previous 24 hours

Behaviour	GC		SC		WB		χ^2 (2)
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Been drunk***							127.13
No	42	18.6	130	45.9	128	75.3	
Yes	184	81.4	153	54.1	42	24.7	
Had a hangover***							36.86
No	136	60.2	217	76.7	147	86.5	
Yes	90	39.8	66	23.3	23	13.5	
In car with drunk driver**							10.64
No	201	88.9	261	92.2	166	97.6	
Yes	25	11.1	22	7.8	4	2.4	
Consumed alcohol***							120.81
No	36	15.9	79	27.9	114	67.1	
Yes	190	84.1	204	72.1	56	32.9	
Used marijuana***							43.97
No	138	61.1	221	78.1	152	89.4	
Yes	88	38.9	62	21.9	18	10.6	
Vomited due to drinking***							23.48
No	186	82.3	262	92.6	163	95.9	
Yes	40	17.7	21	7.4	7	4.1	
Passed out due to drinking**							12.25
No	195	86.3	262	92.6	163	95.9	
Yes	31	13.7	21	7.4	7	4.1	
Used ecstasy***							18.44
No	201	88.9	271	96.1	166	98.2	
Yes	25	11.1	11	3.9	3	1.8	

Differences significantly different by Pearson chi-square tests. GC = Gold Coast, SC = Sunshine Coast, WB = Wide Bay. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

marijuana and used ecstasy. Wide Bay respondents were less likely to have consumed alcohol, been drunk, vomited from drinking, passed out from drinking, been hung over, been in a car with a drunk driver, used marijuana and used ecstasy. Substance use patterns at the Sunshine Coast did not significantly differ from the state-wide average.

Interpersonal conflict also differed across regions (Table 4). Gold Coast respondents were more likely than average to have been hurt, with Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay respondents less likely to have been so. Gold Coast respondents were more likely to have been in a fight and to have been cautioned by police, with Wide Bay respondents less likely to have been so. Gold

Coast respondents were also more likely to have been hassled by adults, with Sunshine Coast respondents less likely. Wide Bay respondents were less likely to have been sexually harassed.

Gender differences within regions

Gold Coast. Within Gold Coast respondents, a number of significant gender differences emerged. Males were more likely to report having experienced a hangover (males = 46.8%, females = 31.1%; χ^2 (1) = 5.49, $p < 0.05$), using marijuana (males = 51.4%, females = 23.3%; χ^2 (1) = 17.77, $p < 0.001$), and vomiting from drinking (males = 22%,

Table 4. Regional differences in interpersonal conflict during the previous 24 hours

Behaviour	GC		SC		WB		χ^2 (2)
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Been hurt/injured***							44.57
No	172	76.1	265	93.6	160	94.1	
Yes	54	23.9	18	6.4	10	5.9	
Been in a fight*							9.26
No	189	83.6	251	88.7	159	93.5	
Yes	37	16.4	32	11.3	11	6.5	
Been hassled by adults***							41.40
No	136	60.2	235	83.0	140	82.4	
Yes	90	39.8	48	17.0	30	17.6	
Been sexually harassed***							15.21
No	198	87.6	246	86.9	166	97.6	
Yes	28	12.4	37	13.1	4	2.4	
Been cautioned by police***							34.78
No	183	81.0	261	92.2	167	98.2	
Yes	43	19.0	22	7.8	3	1.8	

Differences significantly different by Pearson chi-square tests. GC = Gold Coast, SC = Sunshine Coast, WB = Wide Bay. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

females = 11.7%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.04, p < 0.05$) during the previous 24 hours. Males were also more likely to report having been in a fight (males = 19.3%, females = 9.7%; $\chi^2(1) = 3.98, p < 0.05$), having been hassled by adults (males = 46.8%, females = 32%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.82, p < 0.05$) and having been cautioned by police (males = 27.5%, females 8.7%; $\chi^2(1) = 12.45, p < 0.001$).

Sunshine Coast. Among Sunshine Coast respondents, only two significant gender differences emerged. Males were more likely to report having been drunk (males = 61.2%, females = 48.4%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.39, p < 0.05$) during the previous 24 hours, while females were more likely to report having been sexually harassed (females = 19.4%, males = 4.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 13.35, p < 0.001$).

Wide Bay. Within Wide Bay respondents, two significant gender differences also emerged. Males were more likely to report having passed out from drinking during the previous 24 hours (males = 6.5%, females = 1%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.06, p < 0.05$) and

were more likely to state that they drank alcohol (males = 28.1%, females = 15.1%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.24, p < 0.05$).

Differences between drinkers and non-drinkers

There were four significant differences between drinkers and non-drinkers (Table 5). In comparison to non-drinkers, drinkers were more likely to report having consumed alcohol ($\chi^2(1) = 72.82, p < 0.001$), to have been drunk ($\chi^2(1) = 65.52, p < 0.001$), to have had a hangover ($\chi^2(1) = 13.43, p < 0.001$) and to report having used marijuana in the previous 24 hours ($\chi^2(1) = 7.95, p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The findings of this paper confirm that the beliefs commonly held about Schoolies Week are to a large extent correct: participants do indeed drink heavily, take drugs, fight and generally engage in high-risk behaviour. In the previous 24 hours around 65% of respondents drank alcohol, over 50% took this to

Table 5. Differences between drinkers and non-drinkers in behaviour during the previous 24 hours

Behaviour	Drinkers		Non-drinkers	
	n	%	n	%
Been drunk***				
No	237	38.9	60	90.9
Yes	373	61.1	6	9.1
Had a hangover***				
No	436	71.5	61	92.4
Yes	174	28.5	5	7.6
Consumed alcohol***				
No	172	28.2	53	80.3
Yes	438	71.8	13	19.7
Used marijuana**				
No	449	73.6	59	89.4
Yes	161	26.4	7	10.6

Differences significantly different by Pearson chi-square tests. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

drunkenness and around 25% suffered a hangover. This compares to a 1996 study of Queensland Year 12 students [4], which found that 58% of males and 53% of females had drunk alcohol within the previous 7 days. Such comparisons suggest a rate of drinking at Schoolies Week that exceeds the already high levels of drinking in this age group in Queensland. However, the present study shows that behaviour engaged in differs by gender, by region and by drinking status.

Consistent with general Australian statistics[5], while there was no difference in the proportion of males and females calling themselves non-drinkers, males were heavier drinkers and suffered more negative consequences such as having a hangover, vomiting and passing out.

Levels of other drug use were also high when compared with population statistics. Nearly a third of males and nearly 17% of females reported marijuana use in the previous 24 hours. This compares with Stanton *et al.* [4], who reported that 19% of males and 15% of females had used marijuana within the previous 7 days. Consistent with previous studies [2,5], males in the present study were heavier users of marijuana than were females. In relation to ecstasy and other designer drugs, 6.6% of males and 3.6% of

females reported using these during the previous 24 hours. By contrast, Stanton *et al.* [4] found that only approximately 1% of both male and female students had used ecstasy within the previous 7 days.

Perhaps as a consequence of their greater use of alcohol and other drugs, males in this study were more likely than were females to report having been in fight, hassled by adults and cautioned by police. However, females were more likely to report having been sexually harassed. Nearly a third of males, as well as over a fifth of females, reported being hassled by adults. Between 10 and 15% of participants were hurt or injured. It appears that a significant amount of conflict may occur during Schoolies Week, despite findings [1] that few school-leavers expect this to be the case.

In terms of regional differences, young people reported engaging in a greater number of high risk behaviours at the Gold Coast than at the Sunshine Coast or Wide Bay, with Gold Coast participants more likely to drink and use drugs, and to be involved in situations involving interpersonal conflict. It appears that, in relation to Schoolies Week celebrations, "the original is worst", at least when it comes to risky behaviour.

It is likely that the reputation that the Gold Coast holds as a Schoolies Week venue, as well as a general holiday locale, attracts young people who expect and are prepared to engage in high-risk behaviours such as binge drinking. Evidence for this emerged in previous studies [1,2] into young people's expectations about Schoolies Week. Unfortunately, along with the positive consequences of drinking, such as making new friends, come negative consequences such as being hassled and harassed by adults and exposure to drunk drivers. However, it is also likely that some of the regional differences in behaviour may be due to the fact that Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay respondents were significantly more likely to be accommodated at their own homes during Schoolies Week. Such individuals are more likely to be under tighter parental control than are those staying away from home at a unit or motel.

Fewer gender differences emerged within regions than were found across the state as a whole, and those that emerged were generally consistent with the state-wide findings: males tended to engage in more high-risk behaviour. However, gender differences were more likely to emerge on the Gold Coast than the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay. An extremely high proportion of males at the Gold Coast engaged in risky behaviours during the previous 24 hours, with around

50% having had a hangover and used marijuana and over 20% having vomited from drinking. This contrasts with corresponding figures of around 32% and 13% for males statewide.

Few differences emerged in the self-reported behaviour of young people who reported drinking alcohol and those who did not. Unsurprisingly, drinkers were much more likely to report having consumed and to be suffering from the consequences of alcohol. However, it was interesting to note that 19.7% of self-reported non-drinkers had actually consumed alcohol in the previous 24 hours. Drinkers were also more likely to report having used marijuana in the previous 24 hours.

The findings emerging in the present study support earlier [2] conclusions that young people are engaging in risky practices on the Gold Coast during Schoolies Week, and suggest that they are also involved in risky behaviours at celebrations at the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay, although not to such a great extent. Males, especially those at the Gold Coast, are particularly at risk for harmful consequences. Young people who identify themselves as drinkers are also more likely to experience negative consequences of alcohol and also to use marijuana.

These data reinforce the importance of harm minimization interventions targeted at Schoolies Week participants everywhere, particularly since young people have indicated that they consider that excessive drinking during the period is inevitable [2]. The current interventions, focusing on no-alcohol events and warnings about penalties for underage drinking, do not appear to be sufficient to prevent high-risk behaviour. One possible avenue for intervention is to

focus on participants' expectations of Schoolies Week, as participants generally expect only positive consequences of celebratory binge drinking to emerge, such as mixing more easily and having more fun [1]. However, the present study demonstrates that negative outcomes can and do emerge, and alcohol and other drug use may play a significant part in these.

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