# Children can’t legally buy alcohol, but companies can still bombard them with marketing

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Children and young people under 18 can’t legally buy alcohol – for very good reasons.

Despite this, alcohol companies and digital platforms can mine their digital data and aggressively target them with online marketing.

Right now, there is an important national conversation about social media’s role in shaping young minds. What’s missing from the discussion is how we protect children and young people from harmful online product marketing.

[Recent research](https://fare.org.au/new-research-shows-kids-are-targeted-with-alcohol-gambling-and-junk-food-ads-online/) from Professor Kathryn Backholer at the Global Centre for Preventive Health and Nutrition, found young people aged 14 to 17 are served at least six alcohol ads every day they’re online.

One young person in the study was served 14 alcohol ads, two gambling ads and 70 junk food ads in just two hours.

A [VicHealth study](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/news-publications/research-publications/harmful-industries-digital-marketing-australian-children) found advertisers uploaded data about young people aged 16 to 25 to Meta, which then generated a range of interests about them, including an average of 6.3 alcohol-related advertising interests such as ‘alcohol’, ‘bars’ and ‘beer.’

Of the 54 children and young people aged under 18, more than half were targeted with alcohol adverts either regularly or sometimes.

A study by [Reset Australia](https://au.reset.tech/uploads/resettechaustralia_profiling-children-for-advertising-1.pdf) found that Facebook uses data it collects about children and young people aged between 13 and 17 years to tag them as interested in smoking, gambling, alcohol and extreme weight loss.

It also found that companies could advertise to 1,000 children and young people tagged as interested in alcohol for $3.03.

**The online world is a predatory marketing minefield but there are currently no protections for children and young people.**

Leaked internal Meta documents also reveal it gathered psychological insights on more than two million kids in Australia and New Zealand, monitoring them in real-time to pinpoint when they feel anxious and overwhelmed.

All these interests and insights go into a data profile which is sold to companies, including those that profit from making harmful and addictive products.

As these children and young people move through life, by design – the people most likely to see targeted advertising for alcohol and other harmful products will be the people who are most at risk.

The more they are sold alcohol online, the more they will be targeted.

This predatory marketing is particularly problematic for harmful and addictive products.

Given that by the time a child reaches their mid-teens, companies will have collected a staggering 72 million data points on them, it’s clear we have a perfect storm brewing.

The online world is a predatory marketing minefield but there are currently no protections for children and young people.

We know [the earlier children are exposed to alcohol marketing, the more likely they are to start drinking](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27565582/) at a younger age and at higher-risk levels.

This is why measures to help to protect children and young people are so important.

The Australian Government’s current review of The Privacy Act and Online Safety Act present opportunities to address this.

First, we need amendments that ensure children’s information is not collected, used or disclosed for commercial purposes.

The best way to protect children is to also make a safe system for everyone, by ensuring no-one’s information is collected or shared by these companies unless they opt in. This would also help protect people most at risk of alcohol-related harm.

But while privacy reforms can address some of the most egregious data-driven marketing, it won’t tackle contextual marketing – like harmful product ads being shown beside children’s content or in the games they play, or alcohol ads alongside information for people seeking anxiety or depression support.

We need greater transparency. The Online Safety Act could ensure companies provide clear explanations about how algorithms are used to make predictions, recommendations or decisions about the types of ads people are served.

Its scope could also be expanded to include advertising of addictive and harmful products, regulating this content under a new scheme within the Act.

The law has not kept pace with advances in digital technology and we’re playing catch up to safeguard our children.

With alcohol induced deaths at their highest rate in a decade, now is the time to put the health and safety of children and young people above corporate profits.