# Perceptions of low-risk drinking levels among Australians during a period of change in the official drinking guidelines

## Author

Mr Michael Livingston, Centre for Alcohol Policy Research

## Summary

This study uses data from the *National Drug Strategy Household Survey* to examine Australians’ perceptions of low-risk drinking over a period where the official Australian Guidelines relating to drinking were changed. The study used two sets of questions relating to low-risk levels of drinking in the short and long-term, and examined how perceptions of low-risk drinking varied from 2007 to 2010 between different sub-groups of the population.

The results suggest that few Australians are aware of the recent 2009 *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health risks from Drinking Alcohol*, with more than 40 per cent of respondents unable to provide an estimate of low-risk drinking levels and only five per cent accurately providing low-risk levels for both long and short-term harms. Australians generally estimated reasonable levels for low-risk long-term drinking, with mean estimates of 2.5 drinks per day for men and 1.4 for women (compared to the two per day).

In contrast, estimates for low-risk short term drinking were high, with two-thirds of men and one-third of women providing estimates in excess of the four standard drinks recommended in the Guidelines. Heavier drinkers (consuming more than four drinks per day) and younger people provided the most concerning estimates with, for example, a mean low-risk level of 8.8 drinks per occasion was estimated by 14-19 year old males.

The study also examined whether perceptions of low-risk drinking levels had changed following the publication of the 2009 Guidelines. The major differences between the old and new guidelines were reductions in the safe drinking levels set for male drinkers. This was reflected in changes in perceptions, with low-risk long-term drinking levels for males shifting from four drinks per day to two, in line with the changes to the guidelines. These changes, while statistically significant, were small, suggesting only a minor impact on public perceptions of the drinking guidelines.

## Outcomes

The results of this study have significant implications for policy, with Australians generally over-estimating the amount of alcohol that they can drink on specific drinking occasions. This results in much of the population is making poorly informed decisions about drinking and placing themselves at risk of harm. This is especially the case amongst sub-populations at high-risk of acute harm from alcohol including heavy drinkers and young people. The indication that perceptions have been shifted slightly by the new Guidelines suggests a role for official drinking guidelines in shifting peoples’ understanding of low-risk drinking. In spite of this small shift, it is clear that most Australians are not aware of the recommendations in the 2009 Guidelines.  For these Guidelines to contribute in any major way to reducing the harms from alcohol, a coordinated and substantial dissemination campaign is required, with a particular focus on high-risk population groups. For example, the campaign needs to be developed by social marketing experts and take into consideration ‘new media’ requirements and opportunities to link in with young people through online environments.

[view the report](/wp-content/uploads/Perceptions-of-low-risk-drinking-levels-among-Australians-FINAL.pdf)