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Title: What are School Leavers' priorities with festival preparation?

Short title: Schoolies prepare to party

Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from a qualitative research study that explored how young people prepared to minimise and/or avoid alcohol related harm while attending a Schoolies Festival (SF). Schoolies Festivals are mass gatherings at which young people (Schoolies) celebrate their graduation from high school. The attendance of Schoolies, in various Australian communities, ranges between 10,000 to 30,000 individuals during the event. The literature suggests that Schoolies are at higher than normal risk of harm at SF from misuse of alcohol, unsafe sex, aggressive behaviour, and other risk taking factors. As a result of these concerns, Schoolies' organizers developed an infrastructure that treat harm, on-site care (first aid stations) staffed by St. John's Ambulance. This study used focus groups to identify strategies employed by Schoolies to avoid alcohol related harm during SF. Data revealed that Schoolies did not actively seek health information prior to attending the event and did not display an interest in doing so.

It is important to note that Schoolies planned to use alcohol to celebrate and have a good time. Therefore a harm minimisation approach with a focus on providing the necessary infrastructure at a SFs to minimise the dangers associated with excess alcohol use is important. Schoolies indicated that they had no desire for information about hazards of alcohol ingestion. If any health messages were to be used by health authorities, it would be far more appropriate to target the message to 'take care of your mate' to contribute to building a supportive environment at the event. This may be of more benefit to minimise harm at SF than funding other health messages.

Title: What are School Leavers priorities with festival preparation?

Schoolies Festivals (SFs) are mass gatherings that give young people (Schoolies) the opportunity to celebrate their graduation from high school. SFs are a common phenomenon across Australia and literature suggests that Schoolies may experience adverse outcomes through the misuse of alcohol including unsafe sex, aggressive behaviour, and an increase in general risk taking behaviour (Bonomo, Coffey, Wolfe, Lynskey, Bowes and Patton, 2001). Even though most SF attendees are generally healthy these events can produce a 'higher incidence of injury than in the general population' (Arbon 2004, p212). In particular young people who attend SFs are at high risk of presenting to on-site care due to alcohol misuse (Hutton et al 2010). For example, Hutton et al (2010) found at SFs, 24% of Schoolies presented to on-site care with alcohol related issues. Significantly, 50% of those who presented to on-site care had ingested alcohol to dangerous levels and were transported to hospital (Hutton et al 2010). With the increasing popularity of SFs, these environments are becoming a prominent public health issue (Hutton, Cusack and Zannettino, 2011). In addition to local community resources, volunteer organisations such as St John's Ambulance and Encounter Youth provide on-site emergency services and support to Schoolies. In order to determine if additional strategies are available to minimise harm to Schoolies, the researchers conducted focus groups with young people who had attended SF. Questions explored how Schoolies prepare to minimise and/or be free from alcohol-related harm at SF. Results revealed that Schoolies expect the SF organisers and volunteers to provide a safe supportive environment for them while they party. The infrastructure that has been established over the years to support

Schoolies while they celebrate the end of their high school years has become a good model for harm reduction.

The Adelaide Schoolies Festival has an approximate population of 10,000 Schoolies. The SF is concentrated in one small geographic area, the rural seaside township of Victor Harbour. The main festivities are centred within a bounded, ticketed dry zone, with designated activities for Schoolies. A dry zone is defined as an area where alcohol is not permitted for sale or consumption (<http://www.ktc.nt.gov.au/About-Katherine/Dry-Zone-and-Alcohol-Restrictions>). At the Adelaide Schoolies Festival the dry zone exists within a 5 km radius from the reserve where the SF takes place. A number of caravan parks sit at the edge of the dry zone where many of the Schoolies stay. As the caravan parks are not within the dry zone many of the Schoolies 'load up' on alcohol before they leave the caravan. The majority of Schoolies walk between the Schoolies activities and their accommodation. For those who do not wish to walk there is a free bus service for the Schoolies to use. Infrastructure provided for this event is extensive. Emergency services are provided by St. John's Ambulance with an on-site mobile emergency department with 20 beds. A volunteer group from Encounter Youth, called the 'Green Team', provide alcohol free rest areas and a local presence by walking around the event venue and caravan parks to help Schoolies in need of assistance. Police and fire department staff are also available and on patrol. Members from these groups meet twice a day at 1000 and 0300 to assess current status of the venue and discuss any potential concerns.

Literature Review

School Leavers Festivals are often referred to as 'a rite of passage' from youth to the community of adulthood at the end of secondary education (Winchester, McGuirk, & Everett, 1999; Sande, 2002). Reports from SFs in South Australia and Queensland state that most Schoolies expect to be drunk most/every night of the holidays. In the majority of cases, these expectations were met (Smith and Rosenthal 1997). The festival is characterised as 'risky' and involves excessive levels of alcohol consumption and high risk behaviours, coupled with a party atmosphere.

Additionally, the incidence of risky behaviour by males is higher than females (Winchester, McGuirk, & Everett, 1999). Zinkiewicz et al (1999) identified that harm minimisation interventions targeted at participants are needed in all locations where celebrations such as SFs take place.

Alcohol is widely available and commonly used by adolescents (Rassool and Winnington 2003). Alcohol plays a prominent role in these celebrations, though it is a controlled substance, with legislation banning the sale to young people under the age of 18 (Trifonoff, Andrew, Steenson, Nicholas & Roche, 2010). Even with these bans in place access to alcohol is relatively easy for many Schoolies not yet 18 through older friends who would purchase alcohol on their behalf. It has also been noted by Midford et al (2004) that many Schoolies reported that their parents supplied them with alcohol. Midford also found self-reported illicit drug use, however this activity was not usually planned.

Harm reduction strategies associated with alcohol use during Schoolies week have been implemented in past events and many attempts have been made to educate Schoolies of the dangers associated with excessive alcohol intake (Wallace 2000). There are however, differing views reported in the literature on the value of health information and activities to reduce alcohol consumption by young people. In an

attempt to change drinking behaviours during SF on the Gold Coast, Quek et al (2012) investigated the impact of a theatre program aimed at reducing drinking and other risk-taking behaviours during SF. The authors employed diversionary activities but found that these had little or no effect on Schoolies drinking behaviours at this event. This finding supported Salom et al (2005) who asserted that unless Schoolies expect/want to drink less, the behaviour will not change. Rew and Horner (2002) report that knowledge is necessary before young people will initiate health-promoting behaviours. Mission Australia (2009) reports that health promotion strategies that are developed from and deployed within specific socio-cultural contexts are effective in modifying young people's drinking behaviour because the Schoolie can directly apply knowledge to the SF situation (Rew and Johnson 2004).

METHODS

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which young people prepare to minimise and/or be free from alcohol-related harm at SF. Participants were asked to discuss how, why and from where they sought information and what strategies they used to minimise and/or be free from alcohol related harm prior to attending the schoolies event. The same core group of questions were used at each focus group. Ethics approval was sought and gained. All participants were 16 years or above, and were able to give informed consent.

A descriptive interpretive qualitative method was used to determine how young people used health messages to prepare for the SF (Schneider Whitehead, & Elliot 2007 p, 115). This methodology was deemed the most appropriate way of gaining a deep and nuanced understanding (Polit and Beck 2008, p.220) of young peoples' access to health information prior to attending Schoolies.

Participants

Students from a South Australian University campus were invited to participate in focus groups. The only criteria was that the young person must have attended the South Australia Schoolies Festival in the past two or three years and be between 16 and 23 years of age. The researchers recruited students by situating themselves at booths and handing out postcards during the University orientation week. In addition, the study was advertised via posters and postcards around the University campus. Once it was established that potential participants had attended the South Australia Schoolies Festival within the last three years, they were invited to attend a semi-structured discussion in the form of a focus group.

The focus groups lasted between 35 – 45 minutes and were guided by a set of questions, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each session commenced with a safety statement about the voluntariness of participation and the confidentiality of information provided. Seven focus groups in total were conducted, with a total of thirty eight participants. Ten focus groups were planned; however only seven were conducted due to data saturation.

Demographic information

The focus groups (n=7) comprised a mix of male and female participants (n=38) of varying ages between 16–23 years of age. Eighty-one point six per cent of the participants were female (n=31) and 18.4% of the participants were male (n=7). The majority of participants, 63.2%, were 18 years old (n=24) when they attended Schoolies, followed by 21.1% being 17 years old. The youngest participant was 16 years old (n=1), and the eldest was 23 (n=1). Seventy-three point seven per cent of

participants attended the SF in 2010 (n=28), 15.8% in 2009 (n=6) and 10.5% in 2008 (n=4). The average age of SF participants is 17.7 years (Schoolies 2009 data).

Data analysis

Data from the focus groups were interpreted using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) and is 'a detailed and systematic recording of themes and issues' that are found in interview or focus group data (Burnard 1991: p462). The six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) were followed to identify themes. In addition to thematic analysis, brief notes of the discussed concepts were taken during the focus groups, and then summarised at the end of session in order for participants to validate the discussion undertaken during each focus group.

Results

Themes that emerged from this study include Schoolies not seeking health information; valued support from the Green Team; looking after your mate; and preparation for the event. All Schoolies (100%) reported that they did not seek **health information** messages prior to attending SF. Schoolies relied on friends, the Green Team, and SF organizers to keep them safe and meet any needs that may arise during SF due to excessive alcohol consumption. Schoolies reported being responsible to care for friends during the event. The purpose of attending the event was to drink with friends and that was one of the main focuses of their planning for the SF.

When participants were asked: *Did you look at any health promotion messages before you attended the Schoolies festival?* all participants (100%) indicated that

they did not access health information. However, they did access information such as bus timetables, bus routes and party themes. Ten per cent (n=4) said that they did gain some health information. When asked who they went to for advice, young people stated that they had sought oral advice from their peers and their parents.

- *Through friends mainly, that's how I like to discuss it (female)*
- *I guess the friends that you'd see as responsible (male)*
- *Mainly parents.... My parents mainly were saying just the friends thing, like do not drink too much and not take things and that sort of thing, not take drinks from people, not take anything apart from alcohol, that sort of thing (female)*
- *Mine was water. That was why I kept my water throughout - every time I drank, I always drank water, heaps of water (female)*

Most young people commented on the presence and role of the **Green Team** as an important element in creating a safe and supportive environment at Schoolies.

Young people described the Green Team as cognisant of young people's safety, relatable to young people, fun, never pushy, friendly and approachable:

Schoolies reported that the Green Team was always there to assist them if they got into any difficulties. The Green Team members provided food, water and emergency assistance.

- *Because the Green Team were really good. You could go and ask them for sunscreen or go and ask them for just anything. Just send your friends over there (male)*
- *On the first day we went and found all the Green Teams and made sure we knew where they were - they would save your life in every situation. It was the best thing ever (female)*

Schoolies further identified that they had at some time during the SF taken on the responsibility for **looking after intoxicated friends (mates)**. When friends had drunk too much there was an expectation that another friend would stay with them and support them. This role was automatically assumed by the most sober Schoolie within the group of friends. By helping others who had drunk too much Schoolies

stated that they had *missed out on some fun*, but helping others was considered part their group responsibility.

- *I took on the role after the Friday night. Yes, that wasn't real good (male)*
- *Yeah when people did get bad at least one friend would look after them. There was a few that did get bad and so we had to stay behind with them (female)*
- *On Friday night I drank but then the rest of my time was basically just spent looking after my friends ...//.. It kind of puts a downer on the whole schoolies thing (female)*
- *.....because then you have to stay behind. You don't mind but you're just like I'd rather be down there (female)*

Preparation for SF included planning for the type of alcohol they would consume, their accommodation and for having money for the event. Schoolies planned to get drunk and have a good time using alcohol. This was described as a central feature of attending the event. For examples, schoolies purchased 'good' drinks to have at the beginning of the night and 'cheaper' drinks for later as a way of economizing both the costs and the consumption of a large amount of alcohol:

- *By the time you're drunk enough on the nice drinks, you can just go to goon and it just goes down really well anyway (female)*
- *Yes, you can plan as well that your drink good drinks first and then the crap ones come out later when you're already intoxicated (male)*

Participants spent time planning how they would purchase alcohol prior to going to

Schoolies.

- *we got pretty much all of it before, about \$500 worth (female).*
- *[we] actually organized a meeting that went for 5 hours deciding what alcohol we were going to spend our money on (female)*

Discussion

Data from this study reveals that Schoolies do not actively seek out health messages to keep themselves safe and healthy. However, even though schoolies did not

actively seek health promotion material or messages they did plan for the SF event. The majority of planning focused on their time at SF, who to go with, bus time tables, and purchase of alcohol. Schoolies expected either their friends or the Green Team to keep them safe.

This study found that alcohol is widely used at schoolies to celebrate with and to facilitate a good time. Smith and Rosenthal (1997) also found that using alcohol at schoolies was an expectation, with young people stating they expected to get drunk most nights. Participants were satisfied to be spontaneous with activities, purchase food, equipment, and more alcohol as needed. They were not burdened or worried about what they did or did not take with them to event, except for the alcohol. The overall attitude was that things would work out. The participants had information handed down to them from Schoolies of previous years and the word was that *'support was available if needed, especially from the Green Team'*. Alcohol was viewed as a necessary aspect of having fun and enjoying oneself. Outside forces, friends and the Green Team provide for their safety.

This lack of focus on health is not surprising considering that young people are generally quite healthy and are therefore not accustomed to spending time and energy on worrying about or maintaining their health.

Part of being a member of a group and protecting others was a well-accepted philosophy for participants. Though not articulated, friendship and support was the expected group behaviour. Examples given of unsafe behaviour included their friends going off alone or meeting with young adults who are not part of the SF or drinking on their own.

The findings from this study should be interpreted in light of some limitations. The group of participants used in this study was predominantly female and sample size is

small. It is also important that the structure of events in other areas of Australia vary. Therefore the findings from this study are also quite context specific and reflect the experiences of those Schoolies only at this event.

Conclusion

Schoolies did not actively seek health information prior to attending SF. Their priorities were accommodation, alcohol, and having a good time with friends. Their planning was centred on these goals. However, they did unconsciously employ strategies to maintain their safety. These included being with friends they could trust, taking care of their friends, and accessing the infrastructure developed by the SF to provide a safe environment for the Schoolie.

It is important to note that that Schoolies planning around alcohol was primarily focused on having a good time rather than being safe. Harm reduction strategies should focus on an infrastructure that provides these supports to the Schoolies and prevents the dangers associated with excess alcohol use. On a final note, this study reinforces the importance of obtaining information from the target population before crafting any health messages. Schoolies did not express any desire for information about hazards of alcohol ingestion. Targeted messages to 'take care of your mate' or to 'look after your friends' would have far more relevance to Schoolies at this time of celebration.

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