Smart Start – Preloading and a Safe Night Out

Special Report: Gold Coast Preloading

By

Senior Sergeant Corey Allen, Associate Professor Grant Devilly & Kathleen Brown.
This paper aims to report the occurrence of preloading within a Gold Coast sample; collected in early February of 2015. The report is based on a sub-study of ‘Smart Start - A Preloading Project’ which ran predominantly in the Brisbane CBD between August, 2014 to late February, 2015. Three sub-studies have been completed from the Smart Start project, including Gold Coast, Mackay, and Melbourne Cup. Generally, the aim of the Smart Start project is to assess:

- Who is preloading
- Where they are preloading
- Type of preloading
- How much they are preloading
- What motivates people to preload
- Participants’ experiences of negative physical, psychological, and social consequences when preloading
- Participants’ perception of level of intoxication (i.e., Blood Alcohol Content – BAC reading) after preloading; and
- Levels of intoxication after preloading via recorded BAC readings

An important first step in understanding the phenomenon of preloading is to operationalise it. For the purposes of the Smart Start project, preloading was defined as drinking, taking drugs (illicit), or mixing energy drinks with alcohol (MEDA) before heading out to licensed entertainment venues (i.e., pubs, bars, or clubs) in the CBD of a city. Further to this, it is important to note that eating out at restaurants and frequenting a local bar or similar establishment were included amongst the places where people could have preloaded.

In consideration of this definition, it was deemed important to expand the scope of our Smart Start project to include another popular night-time entertainment district to inspect similarities, differences, and any unique location driven findings. In Queensland, the Gold Coast CBD is known for its night-life. According to the Queensland Government’s Drink Safe Precinct trial, Cavill and Orchid Avenue have the largest concentration of licensed premises in Queensland (Queensland Government Publications, 2014). In addition to this, on Friday and Saturday nights it has been reported that more than 30,000 people visit Surfers Paradise precinct (Queensland Government Publications, 2014). Therefore, it was considered important to investigate preloading
practices within the Gold Coast given its popularity as a night-time entertainment district. Additionally, results retrieved from the sub-study can help identify variables which may need implementing in future initiatives for reducing alcohol and drug related harm in the city’s entertainment district.

A LOOK AT THE PRELOADING LITERATURE

Reviews into the occurrence of preloading have only recently come about within the last two decades (Foster & Ferguson, 2014). Its investigation has been incited by the growing recognition that alcohol and other substances are readily consumed before entering licensed entertainment establishments (Forsyth, 2010; Hughes et al., 2011). Further to this, the practice of preloading is now commonly understood to be culturally endemic within the youth of today (Foster & Ferguson, 2014). So far, studies have aimed to understand this phenomenon in order to reduce the harm that this practice can have on society. For instance, Hughes et al., (2008) found that preloaders drank more than non-preloading peers which resulted in higher rates of assault, injury, and arrest. However, the sample in this study used retrospective reports on their preloading. Therefore, critical investigations into the substances consumed, motivations, and occurrence rates of preloading is important for future global and local prevention tasks. A brief snapshot of the current preloading climate will follow.

- Preloading was found to be associated with higher levels of overall drinking during the night (Paschall & Saltz, 2007).
- Bar attendees who had preloaded had higher levels of intoxication compared to non-preloading bar attendees, and the number of those who had preloaded was 70% (Glindemann et al., 2006).
- In a UK study of four European Cities, BAC increased at a rate of 0.13% for females and 0.17% for males drinking greater than 5 hours. Additionally, the majority of their sample (N = 838) had preloaded (Hughes et al., 2011).
- 64% to 74% of college students in the US preload with alcohol and drugs (DeJong, DeRicco, & Schneider, 2010).
- Black-outs are found to be common amongst preloaders (LaBrie et al., 2011).
- Typical number of drinks on a preloading occasion $M = 7.43$ (Borsari et al., 2007). Different reports from other studies $M = 3.91$ (Pedersen & La Brie, 2008).
• DeJong et al. (2010) found that distilled spirits were the most popular as they masked smell and were easily concealed/mixed.
• Forsyth (2010) revealed motivations for preloading which focused on socialising, inducing courage to dance and approach people, and to save money.

These studies reveal the high prevalence rates of preloading, the common substances consumed, and the motivations behind the practice. To date, however, there has been no systematic study of preloading which has captured accurate rates of intoxication before people have entered licensed entertainment venues. Until now all preloading estimates have been acquired either by retrospective survey completion when not in the entertainment precincts or incidentally as part of a cross-sectional survey of people at different times of the night. Without a reliable estimation of the degree, type and effects of preloading it is not possible to plan for public health interventions or emergency services utilisation. The Smart Start study has addressed this problem by investigating preloading as it occurs and in the environment in which it displays itself.

WHERE AND HOW

Data was collected on the 5th (Thursday), 6th (Friday) and 7th (Saturday) February 2015. Data was collected from Surfer’s Paradise on the Thursday (n = 34) and Saturday nights (n = 50) and from Broadbeach on the Friday night (n = 53). Between two and three researchers collected data in the presence of 2 police officers each night. A more detailed outline of the methodology for the research is contained in the larger report for the whole Smart Start programme.

WHAT WAS FOUND: GOLD COAST

The Sample

The sample comprised 137 participants, with 2 removed for inconsistent data, leaving a sample of 135 for analysis. They ranged from 18 to 51 years old, with a mean age of 24.16 years. The sample included 70 males (51.9%) and 65 females (48.1%).
Who is Preloading?

Where Are They Preloading?

Male participants reported that the main location where they preloaded was their own house. This was followed by a friend’s house or suburban pub. The third most popular preloading location for males was a hotel/motel/hostel.

Female participants reported that they preloaded most commonly at a hotel/motel/hostel. The next most popular preloading location was the participants’ own house or a friend’s house, followed by a suburban pub.

Preloading occurred most often in the same suburb as data collection (Surfer’s and Broadbeach) and represented 37% of the sample who had preloaded (i.e., BAC > 0) and provided suburb data. This was followed by Burleigh, Miami and Southport.
How Much Are They Preloading?

Participants were asked to report how many standard drinks they thought they had imbibed before being breathalyzed. The mean numbers were 5.8 for women (sd = 4.71; median = 5) and 8.5 for males (sd = 6.31; median = 8).

![Graph showing the number of standard drinks for males and females]

8.5 Standard drinks (Males)
5.8 Standard drinks (Females)

Participants Perception of Level of Intoxication (i.e., Blood Alcohol Content – BAC reading) After Preloading

The following graph represents participants’ predictions of what they thought they would blow in the breathalyser. All participants were provided with a prompt indicating the drink driving limit of 0.05 to aid in gauging their level of intoxication. It should be noted, in particular, that many participants did not even understand the question – having no knowledge of how the blood alcohol concentration measure works or the effects of BAC on cognition and behaviour.
Levels of Intoxication (Of Those Preloading)

Males received a mean blood alcohol content reading of 0.085 and females received a mean blood alcohol content reading of 0.074 for their preloading intoxication levels. See the below table for more details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean BAC</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. These readings were obtained using the Alcolizer – Law Enforcement Series No. 5.*

What Motivates People To Preload?

Both male and female participants reported that their main reason for preloading was to socialise with friends (40.7% and 52.9%, respectively). The next most common reason for preloading reported by both males and females was to save money (15.3% and 23.5%, respectively). Males reported that the third most common reason for preloading was to get as drunk as possible (5.1%); whereas women reported they preloaded to feel more comfortable/relaxed (3.9%).
Consequences of Preloading

The following table shows the number of participants who reported suffering negative consequences on nights when they have preloaded in the past. Participants rated the frequency of these occurrences on a scale from Never to Nearly Always.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>A Few Times</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Nearly Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often have you been punched/slapped/kicked?</td>
<td>100 (74%)</td>
<td>16 (11.85%)</td>
<td>15 (11.11%)</td>
<td>3 (2.2%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often have you punched/slapped/kicked someone?</td>
<td>106 (78.52%)</td>
<td>14 (10.37%)</td>
<td>11 (8.15%)</td>
<td>3 (2.22%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often have you woken up with a stranger?</td>
<td>87 (64.44%)</td>
<td>24 (17.77%)</td>
<td>20 (14.82%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
<td>3 (2.22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often have you been scared?</td>
<td>90 (66.66%)</td>
<td>17 (12.59%)</td>
<td>22 (16.3%)</td>
<td>5 (3.7%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often have you used police assistance?</td>
<td>107 (79.35%)</td>
<td>18 (13.33%)</td>
<td>8 (5.93%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often have you wanted police assistance when there wasn’t any?</td>
<td>110 (81.48%)</td>
<td>11 (8.15%)</td>
<td>13 (9.63%)</td>
<td>1 (0.74%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of particular note in the above table is the larger number of people who report to have been scared at some point during their times in the entertainment districts. Otherwise, the results are as one would expect from Australia’s premiere celebratory destination.

Preloading with Energy Drinks

![Pie charts showing the percentage of male and female participants who used energy drinks](image)
While we have confidence in the self-reported use of energy drinks (20.72% in total), we do not have confidence in the drug preloading data. Two police were with the researchers at all times and we believe that this has greatly influenced the results.

CONCLUSIONS

This special report reveals the level of preloading that occurs on a typical Thursday, Friday and Saturday night within two major entertainment suburbs of the Gold Coast: Broadbeach and Surfer’s Paradise. The figures unquestionably demonstrate that preloading is highly prevalent in the Gold Coast. They also suggest that the level of preloading as presented by estimated standard drinks and Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) is high. When patrons were asked why they preloaded the most common responses were to socialise with friends, for financial benefit, to get drunk, or for psychological reasons relating to increases in confidence and for relaxation. There were no significant differences in terms of gender, and the common age rage for preloading appeared to be somewhere between 18 and 25 years. Preloading with energy drinks and drugs received low ratings by participants. However, and as already commented upon, a police presence probably explains the low rates for drug intake.

The results suggest that preloading is present within the Gold Coast and that interventions targeted at reducing alcohol-related harm and
violence need to include preloading within their structure. More to the point, motivations around socialising and the cost of alcohol should be the top priority of targeted interventions. Further to this, the large inaccuracies in predictive BAC and actual BAC suggest that wider knowledge dissemination around this specific unit of measurement is needed. In fact, we received positive feedback from patrons when we engaged them and provided educational feedback related to their BAC. Patrons were also positively disposed to communications with the two uniformed police officers who participated in the data collection phases of the study.

Future directions are aimed at continuing the project through expanding the breadth to include end-loading (drinking after exiting entertainment precincts). It is also of interest to investigate the possibility of introducing the regular provision of breathalysers at entertainment hot spots to inform on alcohol consumption and allow self-directed diversions.

In closing, we hope that this report provides helpful information into the occurrence, motivations, and gaps in knowledge that exist in relation to the expanding preloading culture.

REFERENCES


