

POVERTY & DISADVANTAGE: BOTH STRESSFUL & SICKENING

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has highlighted new research indicating serious health problems among poor and disadvantaged groups. Evidence published in the latest edition of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health (ANZJPH) has found that disadvantaged groups are more likely to engage in binge drinking. Separate research finds that people battling other addiction problems are at increased risk of cancer.

“These findings illustrate how poverty and disadvantage can make you sick. Interestingly, the findings indicate that stress associated with social inequality may contribute to problematic alcohol and other drug use. Unfortunately, they also show how using alcohol and other drugs as a way of coping can lead to more serious health problems down the track,” said Michael Moore, PHAA Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

“People from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds were found to be more frequent consumers of alcohol overall, while their disadvantaged counterparts drank less frequently but in greater quantities on each drinking occasion. Studies among disadvantaged men suggest that the drinking norms of these groups may differ from that of their more-advantaged peers and this may contribute to more harmful alcohol consumption. Findings have shown that disadvantaged men are more accepting of excessive alcohol consumption, and that high rates of consumption may be a response to their more stressful life circumstances and the impacts of social inequality.

“It is consequently vital that health promotion initiatives to reduce alcohol consumption take into account different harmful alcohol consumption behaviours, and be carefully targeted to reach particular groups.

“There are also disturbing findings for people being treated for opioid dependency. Compared to the general population, opioid-dependent persons are at increased risk of death from cancer. As people live longer with opioid dependency, cancer will become an increasingly important cause of death. Researchers found that the excess cancer risk for this group is probably associated with greater exposure to tobacco, alcohol and a number of other risk factors.

“Further research will be needed to determine which health promotion and screening tools are best in the context of drug treatment programs. Such interventions will be vital to reduce the excess cancer burden in this already marginalised population.

“Both of these new research papers indicate that targeted public health promotion and prevention initiatives are needed to ensure that people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds aren’t left behind in efforts to address poor health outcomes and raise life expectancy across the population,” concluded Mr Moore.

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