

Young men's substance abuse: *The function of machismo and masculinity*

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Overview

- How do some young people come to experience problematic substance use?
- Life history interviews with 61 young people accessing YSAS or Barwon Youth AOD services
- 14-24 years (avg. 18 years), 59% male
- Trauma was pervasive, but how people managed it was very gendered

Gender

- Young women had striking similarities
 - Childhood sexual abuse
 - An absence of support
 - Subsequent abandonment
 - Self-injury
 - Substance abuse
- There *appeared* to be more diversity among the young men

Case-studies

Jerry was a middle-class young man sent off to elite private schools yet kept being expelled and always wanting to be involved with graffiti and taking drugs.

Jai was kicked out of home at age 13 when he 'came out' as gay and hasn't seen his family since.

Jahl had left school at grade six, been in and out of youth prison and sleeping on the streets.

Damian had been caring for his mother who experienced significant mental health issues to the extent that he stayed home from school to ensure she didn't suicide.

'Drugs make you feel better'

I think about the bad things a lot. It doesn't get out of my mind, no matter what I do, so I use drugs to make me feel better about myself, to make me feel differently. That's why I kept smoking a lot – it gave me something to do, put the shit out of my life.

- Brandon

Dancing with death?

Recently we were at this guy's house, and this girl had 50 bricks in an hour, and she'd drunk a bottle of methadone as well and we woke up and she was dead. Yeah, she died ... [she was] 15 or 16. So that was pretty bad. And another person died about a year ago, one of my mate's. Overdosed on Xannies and then choked on his vomit. That's happened to me a couple of times – where my mates have had to move my tongue around 'cause I take too many and pass out after a drink.

- Andreas

The early years

- 40% involved with child protection
- 46% parental mental health issue
- 46% parental substance abuse
- 21% developmental disorder

Time for targeted prevention?

Experiences of school

The teachers just knew that I was one of those kids that wasn't going to be the easiest ... I got expelled in primary school; that's just how school was for me.

– Mick

I'd go one day, and then I couldn't go for a month because my stepdad belted my mum and we'd be staying in a domestic violence place, or we'd have to move house, or some other reason ... my stepdad was very violent ... he was actually charged with the attempted murder of me and my mum.

- Shawn

Educational outcomes

Year level completed	%
12	9
11	6
10	20
9	26
8	17
7	9
6	14

Experiences of trauma

	N=35	%
Experienced homelessness	30	86
Involvement in justice system	24	69
Parent with drug problem	16	46
Parent with mental illness	16	46
State care and protection	14	40
Death of friend or relative	10	29
Bullying at school	9	26
Developmental disorder	8	21
Suicide attempt	6	17
Refugee	2	6

‘Becoming a man’

- Clear ‘traditional’ ideas of what it meant to ‘be a man’
- A ‘good bloke’ was a heterosexual, a provider, worked hard and was not emotionally vulnerable
- This was their ultimate future
 - ‘To have a job, a house, a wife and kids’
- This model of masculinity was not clearly attainable

How did this affect the young men?

I get depressed all the time. I get upset over nothing. I get upset over what's happened, and then it goes to anger and I blackout and whatever happens, happens ... I've smashed a lot of things, a few people—I'm always having trouble with cops.

- Brandon

I'd go to a pub or whatever, pick on someone, wait until they'd fight me. I'd get smashed – I didn't care; I loved it. I loved being hurt so much 'cause it relieved all the tension out of me and all that.

– Mick

The 'wrong crowd' and masculinity

'Wrong crowd':

A group of people that all of the young people reported falling in with. The self-identification of this crowd being 'wrong' indicated that the young men had a particular construction of what was 'right'

The 'wrong crowd' and masculinity

Just the whole cult thing, whether it's drugs, or fighting, or graffiti, or knives, it's all just cultures, sub-cultures. Wherever somebody feels they fit in, or feel comfortable with that group of people, then they want to do what those people are doing – that's pretty much what it is ... and I reckon that the people who are trying to be all unique and that, I reckon they have a harder time in life. It's good to fit in somewhere, it's good to be a 'type' of person rather than different to everybody – who are you going to talk to (if you are too unique)? ... There's nothing better than meeting someone who is like you on almost every level.'

- Chris

But why was the 'wrong' crowd right for these young men?

- An model of masculinity that was attainable to them
- A sense of belonging
- 30 of 35 had left school by year 11 with direct entry to unemployment
- The 'wrong' crowd were company
- Drug use was a way of 'killing time'
- Helped to manage emotions such as grief

Crisis of masculinity?

- Throughout the fieldwork, I took note of how ‘normalised’ crime and violence were. The young men had no reticence over disclosing their histories – they did not feel it an unusual aspect of their biography. The young men did not perceive their histories of crime as remarkable because they lived in worlds where it was utterly unremarkable – to be violent was to be a man.
- The worst thing a man could be was vulnerable or emotional.
- The two things they needed to be to break out of their current situation.

Conclusion

- Early life trauma and disadvantage had positioned these young people on the margins of society
- Clear concept of what a man ought to be, but not viable
- Machismo offered an attainable masculinity
- Not being able to be emotionally expressive saw young men internalise significant amounts of pain which encouraged further drug use
- This manifested into mental ill health, violence, emotional distress, crime

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