

# Submission to the House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability

Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Alcohol and Other Drugs in Australia

5 Nov 2025

By the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)

## About ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) connects people, evidence and ideas to improve the wellbeing of children and young people across Australia. ARACY leads the ongoing development and implementation of The Nest Wellbeing Framework (The Nest), Australia's national wellbeing framework, which identifies six interconnected domains that allow children to thrive: *Healthy, Valued, Loved and Safe, Learning, Participating, Material Basics, and Positive Sense of Identity, and Culture*. The Nest Wellbeing Wheel (Appendix A) represents the ecological nature of wellbeing; children's health and outcomes depend on supportive families, schools, communities, and systems working together. The Nest is available under Creative Commons for governments and services to adapt to local contexts. ARACY acts as a convener and catalyst, bringing evidence, youth voice, and partners together to drive system change for child and youth wellbeing.

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## Executive Summary

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) use among children and young people should be understood within the broader systems that shape their lives, specifically as a health and wellbeing issue influenced by relationships, environments, and opportunities for belonging. Prevention and recovery are most effective when policies and services strengthen the ecosystems that support young people's connection, capability, and hope, rather than relying on fear or punishment.

This submission draws on ARACY's Young and Wise Alcohol and Other Drugs Roundtable Report [2], ARACY Young and Wise Alcohol and Other Drugs Presentation Slides [3], and ARACY Young and Wise Report [4]. Together, these capture the experiences of more than 60 young Australians aged 14 to 24 from diverse backgrounds. National datasets and contemporary research provide context for these voices, showing that exposure, access, and education remain key drivers of harm.

Young people from ARACY's Young and Wise Alcohol and other Drugs Roundtable described AOD use as linked to coping, stress, and belonging rather than irresponsibility or defiance:



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“A lot of young people turn to alcohol to cope with stress or anxiety, but they don’t always understand how it makes things worse.” [2, p. 10]

“I feel like the alcohol, it's like you buy it and it just solves the problem for like a little while and then I guess that's where the continuation of alcohol and drugs come in.” [3, p.15]

Young and Wise participants called for honest, non-judgmental education, access to safe spaces, and early support that recognises their realities. National data supports these perspectives. Thirty-one per cent of treatment clients are aged 10 to 29, yet most services are adult-oriented [5]. In 2023, there were 1,667 alcohol induced deaths, with one-third of these occurring among people under 45 [6]. Risky single-occasion drinking among 14 to 24-year-olds has declined to 23 per cent, while vaping and stimulant use are increasing [5]. Recent research shows that young people are consistently exposed to alcohol marketing online. The #DigitalYouth report by Deakin University and FARE (2024) found that teenagers aged 14–17 years were targeted with an average of six alcohol advertisements and 24 junk-food ads per day [7]. Fewer than 30 percent of alcohol and other drug programs are Aboriginal Community Controlled, despite evidence of stronger engagement and retention in those models [8].

These findings align with The Nest Frameworks *Healthy, Valued, Loved and Safe, and Positive Sense of Identity and Culture* domains. Strengthening wellbeing, belonging and connection across systems is the most effective pathway to prevent harm and support recovery. ARACY welcomes opportunities to help government align frameworks, data systems, and evaluation approaches with The Nest.

## Summary of Recommendations

### 1. Build equitable, youth-safe systems

- Expand Medicare-subsidised youth mental health and AOD sessions beyond the current 10-session cap.
- Establish youth-led and Aboriginal Community Controlled wellbeing hubs that integrate mental health, AOD, and family supports.
- Fund a national youth peer workforce to build trust and engagement.
- Evaluate services using holistic wellbeing frameworks such as ARACY’s Nest Framework.

### 2. Strengthen prevention through co-design and education

- Scale the OurFutures (Climate Schools) program nationally.
- Develop a prevention evaluation framework aligned with The Nest’s *Healthy and Participating* domains.
- Regulate digital alcohol marketing to reduce exposure among children and young people.



- Establish funding to specifically support peer-led and culturally grounded education initiatives.

### 3. Integrate alcohol and other drug prevention across systems

- Establish coordinated youth wellbeing agreements that connect alcohol and other drug prevention with education, housing, justice, and employment systems.
- Fund school wellbeing hubs that include counsellors, peers, and cultural liaison roles.

### 4. Invest in culturally safe and trauma-informed practice

- Resource Aboriginal Community Controlled prevention and recovery programs that recognise family and culture as protective.
- Require cultural safety and youth participation plans for all federally funded AOD programs.

### 5. Establish shared outcomes and evidence infrastructure

- Establish a coordinated national outcomes framework under the AIHW to track youth alcohol and other drug wellbeing, drawing on existing national frameworks such as The Nest as a shared evidence base for holistic measurement.
- Support peer led and co designed Australian prevention research and long-term evaluation.

## Responding to the Terms of Reference

### (a) Assess whether current services across the alcohol and other drugs sector deliver equity, value for money and positive outcomes

#### *Issue*

Young people need timely, affordable and confidential supports that are designed for their developmental stage and realities. The ARACY Young and Wise, Alcohol and Other Drugs Roundtable Report found that stigma, cost and confidentiality were the most common deterrents to seeking help [2]. To illustrate, participants in that roundtable explained that parental notification rules and fear of being judged often stopped them from reaching out to relevant services and or supports. As Young and Wise participants explained during the Alcohol and other Drugs Roundtable:

*“...mental health consultations or like health consultations with the guidance counsellor, all those things it has like strings attached to that ... if things get worse, ... they need to contact our parents... sometimes some of us aren't comfortable with it.” [2, p. 10]*

*“some people are probably like scared of confidentiality being broken, especially if there's like illegal substances being used.” [3, p.34]*



These experiences sit within a broader pattern of system inequities. Young people in outer regional and remote areas wait significantly longer for support, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experience barriers when care is not culturally grounded [5][8]. The ARACY Young and Wise Report emphasises that respect, dignity, and belonging are essential to engagement and outcomes, which aligns closely to The Nest's *Valued, Loved and Safe* domain [4].

### *Evidence*

- The Young and Wise Roundtable participants described adult oriented services as inaccessible or unrelatable. They reported concerns about being judged or having information shared without consent [2][3].
- According to AIHW, 31 per cent of AOD treatment clients are under 30, yet programs are commonly designed for adults. Waiting times are notably longer outside major cities, averaging 26 days in outer regional and remote areas compared with nine days in major cities. Together, these data point to structural, not individual, barriers that impede early help seeking [5].
- SNAICC (2024) found that ACCO-led programs improve engagement and outcomes through family inclusion and community leadership, with retention and satisfaction rates up to 40 per cent higher in ACCO led services, which aligns with The Nest's emphasis on safety and belonging as protective factors [8].

### *Solutions*

Under The Nest's *Healthy and Valued, Loved and Safe* domains, ARACY recommends:

- Co design youth specific AOD models that ensure confidentiality, affordability and developmentally appropriate care.
- Establish integrated youth wellbeing hubs that bring together AOD, mental health, and family supports, including outreach and telehealth for regional and remote communities.
- Expand Medicare subsidised sessions for people aged 14 to 24 to strengthen early intervention.
- Invest in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to lead culturally grounded prevention and recovery.
- Build a youth peer workforce to improve trust, engagement, and continuity of care.

### **(b) Examine the effectiveness of current programs and initiatives to prevent and reduce harms**

#### *Issue*

Young people participating in ARACY's Young and Wise program described most school programs as repetitive, patronising, and fear-based:



“We had presentations come in and they were just either really repetitive or they were treating us like we were really little... then at my new school we had this guy... he was like, I know people are going to be doing these things already, so here’s how to do it safely and here’s how to talk about it.” [3, p.43]

The ARACY Young and Wise Report shows that learning through participation and open conversation builds engagement and supports healthy decision making. Belonging and voice are protective for wellbeing, and these map to The Nest’s *Learning and Participating* domains [4].

### Evidence

- OurFutures (Climate Schools) achieved a 25% reduction in alcohol and cannabis use 12 months after delivery [8]. This demonstrates that programs combining digital delivery with practical coping strategies can significantly reduce harmful use among adolescents.
- The #DigitalYouth study conducted by Deakin University and FARE (2024) found that young people aged 14–17 were targeted with an average of six alcohol advertisements daily, along with frequent exposure to gambling and unhealthy food marketing [7].
- Devine et al. (2022) found that only one-third of prevention programs in Australia use consistent wellbeing outcomes [9].
- Young and Wise Roundtable Report participants said they wanted honest, non-judgmental education that starts earlier, focuses on coping and participation, and recognises the social context in which choices are made [3].

### Solutions

Aligned with The Nest’s *Learning and Participating* domains:

- Scale the evidence-based OurFutures (Climate Schools) program nationally to provide consistent, interactive curriculum.
- Integrate AOD education within school wellbeing frameworks that focus on coping, participation, and belonging; with content co designed with young people.
- Co-design national campaigns using youth storytelling and peer leadership.
- Regulate alcohol and vaping marketing to protect minors.
- Develop a prevention evaluation framework based on holistic wellbeing domains, like ARACY’s Nest Wellbeing Framework to measure gains in connection, participation, and safety as well as reductions in harm.

Applying holistic wellbeing domains like ARACY’s Nest Wellbeing Framework would enable evaluation of prevention programs not only by reduced use, but also by improvements in wellbeing, participation, and connection. ARACY would actively support education and health departments to align national prevention frameworks with The Nest.



### **(c) Examine how sectors beyond health can contribute to prevention, early intervention and recovery**

#### *Issue*

Young people in the Young and Wise Alcohol and Other Drugs roundtable linked substance use to housing stress, academic, family and or peer pressures, in addition to the cost and availability of mental health care [2]. As one participant shared:

*“I think it is because sometimes to get, like, a psychologist or someone, you've got to go on a massive wait list. It can be quite expensive, whereas you might just have friends who have some alcohol. Or, you know, you don't have to wait months and months to find someone who you can talk to. It's just, like, a quick solution.”* [3, p. 16]

*“Yeah, I love zero-alcohol products... I feel like it helps me feel included in the activity, whether it's, you know, people like drinking. I'm just like, I'm not there drinking water, and that like sort of saves me from being lame.”* [3, p. 34]

*“I've noticed that, especially people that are my age, within my friend group, their parents kind of, like, if their parents are drinking, they'll allow the kids to drink with them.”* [3, p.20]

These lived experiences mirror national patterns. One in five young Australians delays or avoids healthcare because of cost, and AOD related ambulance attendances are concentrated in postcodes with high youth unemployment and rental stress [5][10]. The ARACY Young and Wise Report highlights that stability, safe housing, and belonging are foundational to wellbeing, which aligns with The Nest's *Material Basics and Valued, Loved and Safe* domains [4].

#### *Evidence*

- The AIHW (2025) found that one in five young Australians delays or avoids healthcare due to cost [5].
- Turning Point (2025) data shows that alcohol-related ambulance attendances are concentrated in postcodes with the highest rates of rental stress and youth unemployment, highlighting the need to integrate AOD prevention with housing and employment support [10].
- ARACY's Young and Wise report finds that connection to family, culture, and community protects against harm and supports recovery [4].
- In ARACY's Young and Wise Alcohol and Other Drugs Roundtable Report, participants described how alcohol use is often normalised in families and communities, for example, participants said that parents who drink may allow their children to drink with them and justify it as part of Australian culture. This insight underscores the need for approaches that engage families and community norms alongside school and clinical settings [2].



- International research demonstrates that integrated wellbeing hubs reduce risk behaviours and improve school engagement [10].
- Embedding AOD outcomes within wellbeing frameworks would allow governments to track whether social policy reforms are improving health, stability, and belonging.

### *Solutions*

Aligned with The Nest's *Material Basics, Healthy, and Valued, Loved and Safe* domains:

- Adopt youth wellbeing agreements that link AOD prevention with education, housing, justice, and employment portfolios with shared outcomes and accountability.
- Fund school wellbeing hubs that include counsellors, peer educators and cultural liaison roles to provide integrated support in places young people already are.
- Include AOD indicators within national wellbeing frameworks to monitor progress across systems, so governments can track whether reforms improve safety, stability, and belonging.

### **(d) Draw on domestic and international policy experiences and best practices**

#### *Issue*

Evidence shows that peer-led, trauma-informed and culturally grounded approaches improve engagement and outcomes, while further demonstrating that evaluation approaches are fragmented, which limits the ability to compare impact and scale what works across Australia.

#### *Evidence*

- The Ignite and Engage study found that peer-led storytelling improved empathy and help-seeking among more than 10,000 students [11]. These results demonstrate the importance of participation and identity, core domains of ARACY's Nest Wellbeing Framework, as drivers of engagement and wellbeing.
- Lee et al. (2020) found that therapeutic programs incorporating family engagement and cultural practices achieved treatment completion rates 40 to 60 per cent higher than standard clinical programs, with measurable improvements in wellbeing and community connection among adolescents [12].
- ARACY's Young and Wise Roundtable Report findings demonstrate how young people value peer-led learning and safe environments fostered trust and openness [2].



## Solutions

- Develop a National Youth Alcohol and Other Drug Outcomes Framework aligned with the AIHW and existing wellbeing frameworks like ARACY's Nest Wellbeing Framework, so outcomes include safety, participation, identity, and connection alongside harm reduction.
- Support Australian research trials of peer-led and co-designed prevention programs with cultural governance, and ensure evaluations report wellbeing outcomes, not only abstinence.
- Require youth participation and cultural safety plans in federally funded programs and publish evaluation results to build the evidence base.
- Engage ARACY as a convener to align frameworks and measurement systems across sectors.

ARACY's Nest Wellbeing Framework offers an ecological, holistic model that governments can adapt under Creative Commons to incorporate cultural or environmental well-being indicators. Adopting The Nest within national frameworks would enable governments to track progress in wellbeing across systems and ensure prevention and recovery strengthen inclusion, safety, and identity.

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## Appendix A – The Nest Wellbeing Wheel

The Nest Wellbeing Wheel shows six interconnected domains of wellbeing shaped by family, community, and system ecosystems:

- Healthy – physical, mental and emotional health.
- Valued, Loved and Safe – trusting relationships and safety.
- Learning – engagement and confidence in education and development.
- Participating – involvement in decision-making and community life.
- Material Basics – access to essentials such as housing, food and transport.
- Positive Sense of Identity and Culture – cultural connection and personal identity.

This ecological model recognises that wellbeing grows when systems work together. It provides a national structure for aligning policies, programs and data across sectors, ensuring prevention and recovery efforts strengthen lifelong wellbeing



