



# Trajectories of alcohol use for rural participants in a court-based illicit drug program (MERIT)



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Co-occurrence of risky alcohol use and substance use is widespread in treatment populations and rural residents are known to often drink at higher risk levels than their urban counterpart.

**Aims:** To investigate alcohol use outcomes for participants in treatment for illicit substance use by describing alcohol use trajectories at entry into treatment through to exit and at a follow-up 3-months after completing treatment. The study explores relationships between changes in drinking behaviour and main drug of concern, severity of dependence and psychological distress.

**Method:** Participants on the 'Magistrate's Early Referral into Treatment' (MERIT) program from four NSW rural towns formed the sample. Prospective data from self-reports of alcohol use collected via a modified 'Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test' were used at three time points to establish trajectories of alcohol use. Quantity and frequency measures were applied to test the dependent variable.

**Results:** Based on quantity measures at entry, 76% of participants were risky drinkers whereas 35% remained risky drinkers at exit. Based on frequency measures at entry, weekly use had a lower proportion of 57% risky drinkers and only two participants on this measure were risky drinkers at exit. Binge-style drinking (six or more drinks per session) was reported by 65% at entry and only one participant maintained that level of alcohol use at exit; all others reduced frequency to monthly. Sixteen participants continued to drink heavily when they drank. Trajectories from 3-month follow-up data showed a considerable proportion of risky drinkers decreasing their alcohol consumption by exit to low risk. A proportion of those same drinkers had returned to risky drinking by follow-up. No associations were observed between drinking behaviour at entry and main drug of concern or changes in psychological distress or severity of dependence.

**Discussion:** More than half the risky drinkers in our sample made some changes in their alcohol use and by exit from MERIT drug treatment they were categorised low risk. A considerable proportion of risky drinkers however returned to risky drinking by follow up.

**Implications:** The findings from our study suggest that treatment service providers need to encourage and strengthen treatment practices that accurately estimate the dangers of comorbid alcohol and other substance use.

*For the full report on this project visit our website, follow the link to the Rural Research Capacity Building Program and click on 'view completed projects'*

Christian is a case manager employed by North Coast Area Health to deliver drug and alcohol services with the court-based "Magistrate's Early Referral into Treatment" (MERIT) program in Lismore. From a nursing and social science background, and following a decade-long detour via disability services, Christian returned 8 years ago to complete a full circle and resume work in drug and alcohol. The opportunity provided by IRCST to conduct his own research project has focused Christian on issues specific to rural health.



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