

ALCOHOL & YOUNG PEOPLE

Continuity and change: young people's drinking and 'deviance' in the 1990s.

The relationship between alcohol and youthful 'deviant' and disorderly behaviour has received considerable attention from both academic and media sources over recent years. In the mid-1980s, for example, media attention focused on the alleged 'lager lout' phenomena in small towns and the 'yukkies' or drunken yuppies in the City and the Home Counties. Such periodic 'moral panics' in the popular press, whether linked to a particular outburst of disorder or not, have heightened public concern about young people's alcohol consumption and possible links with 'deviance' and crime.

The findings from a growing body of alcohol research in the 1970s and 1980s contrasts with this popular view of spiralling adolescent drinking reaching epidemic proportions. Evidence from surveys of young people's alcohol consumption and related behaviour suggest consumption has changed little over the last two decades, reflecting the broader picture of general stability in drinking amongst the British population. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the United Kingdom has remained 10th or 11th in rank order of 12 European Community countries regarding national alcohol consumption, ahead of only Greece and Ireland, with approximately seven litres of pure alcohol consumed per head of population per year throughout this period.

Focusing on young people, most appear to drink in moderation with relatively stable alcohol consumption with reference to two of the key measures; frequency and quantity consumed.

Drinking behaviour has changed little amongst young people aged 14-24 over the last two decades. Over 9 in 10 young people have tried their first alcoholic drink by their early teens, most usually given to them by a parent or other relative. In the early teens, drinking alcohol is most usually experienced in the home under parental supervision. In the 14-17 years age group alcohol use shifts from the private to the public sphere and from family to peer-oriented, drinking in licensed premises with single sex and mixed sex groups of friends. Young women reach a peak of alcohol consumption in terms of frequency and quantity at around the age of 16, whereas young men's consumption continues to

rise and peaks later at 18-21.

Since the late 1980s, popular attention has switched from young people's drinking to their illicit drug use and specifically the growing popularity of 'dance drugs' such as 'Ecstasy' (MDMA), amphetamine and LSD, associated with the 'rave' scene. Currently out of the spotlight, how is young people's drinking developing in the 1990s?

One of the most recent longitudinal studies of young people's drinking is currently underway at the University of Manchester. The Alcohol and Offending Research Project in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work is exploring the relationship between alcohol use and various forms of 'deviant' behaviour amongst a cohort of over 700 young people in North West England. Initial results from the first stage of the three year project confirm that there is no overall increase in young people's drinking but suggest that, nevertheless, there are important new developments in patterns of young people's alcohol use. For a considerable number of more frequent users, alcohol appears to be a 'gateway' through to various other 'risk' activities at this age including smoking, sexual intercourse and use of illicit drugs.

An anonymous self report

questionnaire was administered to Year 10 pupils (aged 14-15) by researchers without teachers present in eight schools in North West England in Autumn 1991. The sample was chosen to be broadly representative of the source population in terms of social characteristics such as gender, race and social class. Analysis shows 9 in 10 respondents reported have tried alcohol by the age of 14-15 with the mean age of consumption of first whole drink at 11 years.

Two key variables in measurements of alcohol consumption are estimated **frequency** of drinking and **quantity** consumed during a specified period. Frequency will be discussed in relation to similarities with previous research and a strong association with 'deviance' and quantity will be discussed regarding changes within young people's patterns of drinking.

Frequency: How often young people drink

Four main types of drinking frequency were identified; weekly drinkers (30%), monthly drinkers (24%), occasional drinkers (32%) and non-drinkers (14%). These results compare with previous surveys of this age group; for example Marsh (1986) found very similar reported frequency of drinking amongst 14 years

Table 1 - Drinking Frequency by Deviance by Gender
(All figures are rounded percentages)

	WEEKLY DRINKERS		MONTHLY DRINKERS		OCCASIONAL DRINKERS		NON-DRINKERS		P
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
Current Smoker	63	39	54	29	14	09	13	07	*
Drug Offers	87	74	81	54	51	42	17	36	*
Drug Tries Ever	62	58	53	39	17	20	15	07	*
Drug Tries Last Month	46	37	26	17	06	10	06	02	*
Had Sex	34	52	25	25	08	18	04	09	*
At least 1 of 14 Deviant Acts in last year	97	90	93	82	83	66	64	68	*
Stopped by Police	32	42	26	41	07	21	02	12	*
Caution/Conviction	06	37	10	21	03	11	02	09	F=ns M=*
Total Weekly Personal Income in £	12.36	16.35	11.17	10.75	7.79	10.50	9.20	8.79	*

* + P < 0.001 for female and male except where specified

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olds seven years earlier in 1984. Dividing the sample by drinking frequency, Figure 1 shows the association between age of first drink, amount of alcohol consumed on last drinking occasion and reported drinking frequency by respondents. Weekly drinkers report having their first drink at about the age of 10, compared with 12 for occasional drinkers, and weekly drinkers report consuming an average of 11 standard units of alcohol on their last drinking occasion, compared with 5 for occasional drinkers.

The research strongly associates weekly drinkers, both girls and boys, with other forms of risk-taking and deviant behaviour. Weekly drinkers are statistically less likely to get on with their parents, to dislike school more, to have a higher weekly personal income, to report having sexual intercourse, to smoke, to have been offered illicit drugs, and to have tried illicit drugs ever, in the last year and in the last month. Weekly drinkers are also more likely to have been involved in 'deviant' behaviour in the last year (measured using a scale of 14 listed activities) and to have been drinking before at least one of their most recent 'deviant' activities. Weekly drinkers are also more likely to have been stopped and arrested by the police, and to report cautions and convictions for criminal offences (See Table 1).

Quantity: How much young people drink

A second measure of alcohol use is the quantity consumed, most usually on last drinking occasion or during the week prior to data collection. The findings of the Alcohol and Offending research, whilst very similar to previous studies on most measures of drinking, reports a considerably higher quantity of alcohol consumed per drinking session, with girls consuming a mean of 7 units. This sessional heavy drinking may be in part of the result of regional variations. (The North West is ranked equal first by region in men's heavy drinking and second in women's heavy drinking in the 1988 General Household Survey, [Foster, 1990.]

A second possible reason for this higher level of alcohol consumed on a single drinking occasion may be the result of changing types of drinks. The early 1990s has seen the rapid growth in choice and availability of high-strength alcohol drinks which are packaged, promoted and targeted to appeal to young people of both sexes. There are three main groups of these emerging high alcohol content drinks available in licensed and off-license premises: strong bottled ciders

and lagers (over 8% alcohol by volume, with names such as Diamond White, K and TNT Liquid Dynamite), aperitifs/fortified wines (over 13% alcohol volume, with names such as Thunderbird and 20/20) and the new 'designer cocktails' packaged in 'fun-shaped' containers such as syringes. The development of such alcohol-potent drinks will result in higher consumption levels on a typical drinking occasion and therefore per week, without a necessary corresponding increase in drinking frequency.

As found by previous surveys, preferences in choice of drink are already highly gender-specific by the age of 14-15. Girls are significantly more likely to prefer wine, liqueurs and aperitifs and boys prefer beer and lager. Whilst this may not be surprising in itself, "it is remarkable how sex-based preferences for styles of drink emerge so strongly in people so young." (Marsh, 1986:21.) This has further implications when many of the more recent high-strength drinks are being launched into a highly gendered drinking arena, in the form of aperitifs, fortified wines and cocktails most popular with young women.

The overall picture of young people's drinking in the early 1990s remains one of stability and continuity, with moderate drinking by most young people as a 'normal' and non-deviant behaviour, at first under parental supervision and later with friends.

Ongoing research at Manchester suggests that for a significant minority of young people, however, a strong relationship exists between frequent drinking and various different forms of 'deviant' behaviour. It should not be assumed this means alcohol use simply leads to 'trouble', however. The relationship is much more complex.

There are also the first tentative signs of an undercurrent of change, with different sub-groups developing in different ways and forming distinct markets for specific drinks. Further research is needed on alcohol consumption by young people to provide updates on quantities consumed, a key possible change in youthful drinking in the 1990s with the growing popularity of high strength bottled and 'designer drinks', especially amongst young women.

References

- MARSH, A., DOBBS, J., and WHITE, A., (1986), *Adolescent Drinking*, London, HMSO.
FOSTER, K., WILMOT, A., and DOBBS, J., (1990) *General Household Survey 1988*, London, HMSO.

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Figure 1 - Age of first drink, and amount of alcohol consumed on last occasion, by drinking frequency

