

# Drinking places: where people drink and why

Findings  
Informing change

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The recent relaxation of the licensing laws has focused attention on binge drinking by young people in public places. This study examined alcohol consumption in two contrasting geographical areas (one urban, one rural), including attitudes to and use of alcohol across various social groupings, by age, gender, social class and faith.

## Key points

- The priority given to public drinking by government policy and the media has detracted attention from a much broader spectrum of the population's routine domestic drinking practices.
- Binge drinking, though technically referring to episodic heavy alcohol consumption, has come to mean high levels of street drinking by young people. This has left many people who consume high levels of alcohol in very different social circumstances feeling unwarrantedly insulated from concern. In the study, many whose home consumption far exceeded government-recommended weekly limits continued to regard their own drinking practices as unremarkable.
- The research identified clear differences in tolerance thresholds and expectations of appropriate behaviour between the urban and rural areas.
- Important differences in the ways that men and women in the study drank also indicate that alcohol strategies need to take account of these gender differences.
- The study showed that home was increasingly where young people learned to drink. As such, young people's drinking habits need to be understood and addressed in relation to their parents' attitudes to and use of alcohol, and the wider changing nature of intergenerational relationships and parenting practices.
- The study highlighted that strategies to revitalise the urban night-time economy predicated on alcohol implicitly exclude faith communities such as Muslims; this in turn contributes to social segregation.
- The researchers conclude that drinking cultures are not uniform across the country, but are embedded within wider historical, socio-economic and cultural contexts. They suggest that more recognition is needed of how national alcohol strategies might be interpreted differently or have a different impact on specific locales. This is particularly pertinent in the light of the *Licensing Act 2003*, which has given local authorities more power to potentially dictate local licensing strategies. Geographical disparities may thus emerge in approaches to regulating and policing alcohol consumption.

## The research

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# Background

Patterns of drinking have transformed in the past decade. With the decline of traditional industries, many UK cities have sought to reinvent themselves by developing their night-time economies. Themed pubs and hybrid café/bar/club venues have targeted more diverse customers, including women and students. The UK's first major relaxation of alcohol licensing for almost a century, in November 2005, has prompted concern about alcohol-fuelled disorder. Tensions between the potential benefits and problems associated with alcohol were reflected in the White Paper *Time for Reform* (2001) and the *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy and Licensing Act* (2003), which simplified the procedures for alcohol sales to encourage more and later night-time activity, while giving the police tougher powers to deal with disorder.

This study investigated cultures of alcohol consumption in two contrasting areas – urban Stoke-on-Trent and rural Eden in Cumbria – and considered a range of drinking practices from abstinence to bingeing.

## Drinking cultures in Stoke and Eden

Drinking cultures are not uniform across the country, but are embedded in specific historical, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Stoke-on-Trent's drinking patterns link to its industrial heritage. In the nineteenth century industrialists were slow to stop paying workers in pubs and tackle absenteeism and on-the-job drinking. A weak temperance movement, poor working and living conditions, low pay and the availability of cheap alcohol ensured that rowdy, drunken behaviour dominated the city's street culture. With the steady decline of The Potteries since the 1900s, excessive and public drinking has continued to be a dominating feature, despite a fall in the number of alcohol venues. Over the past decade, Stoke has instigated regeneration and economic development strategies. Promoting the night-time economy has led to a proliferation of city-centre drinking venues over the past five years, and problems with a historical resonance have come to the fore.

Eden's drinking culture illustrates the importance of close-knit, stable communities in regulating public attitudes towards alcohol. The temperance movement emerging in the Eden Valley in the mid-1800s was highly influential. By the end of World War Two, however, it was in serious decline, with final demise in the 1990s. But the role of community in inhibiting excessive public drinking has continued. While the majority of younger interviewees showed little awareness of temperance values, their drinking habits were still tempered by a culture of surveillance and judgement, which limited public displays of drunkenness.

## Public drinking

The study found that there has been an over-emphasis in both Stoke-on-Trent and Eden on alcohol's negative impacts on public places and those who use them. It also demonstrated place-specific tolerance thresholds for public drinking.

For most interviewees in Stoke, a night out drinking was pleasurable and safe. Being drunk in public and sharing this experience with others was part of the fun. Despite recognising violence and disorder as attendant disadvantages of mixing drinking and crowds, few interviewees had experienced violence first-hand. Drinking allowed people to share a sense of commonality and ownership of public space. Local street policing recognised that drinkers were active citizens and contributors to economic and urban regeneration, only intervening when public disorder or individual safety was an issue.

Likewise, Eden residents considered that political and popular depictions of drunkenness as generating violence and disorder were misleading in the context of rural communities. The pub has traditionally played an important social role in villages, especially for men. The lack of rural entertainment and leisure venues meant that the pub, and greater home-based drinking, provided the focus for many adults' social lives. Young people's drinking in pubs and informal places was not only tolerated, but often regarded as normal by adults who knew that their children (like themselves) had limited social opportunities. Some rural commercial venues provided socially sanctioned underage access to alcohol in certain situations. This acceptability of underage drinking may be because the close-knit nature of such rural communities deters young people from drinking to excess and behaving anti-socially, as they have less anonymity in the countryside than in larger towns or cities. The countryside also affords young people secluded places for informal drinking without disturbing local residents.

## Social drinking patterns

Among the interviewees, young people ignored the health implications of binge drinking; they justified it as a phase and did not recognise the potential longer-term risks. Older people lacked awareness of the alcohol content of drinks and the extent to which their consumption might be defined as binge drinking.

Men drank more heavily and drank alone more often than women. A culture of 'showing off' was often associated with young men's drinking. They seemed keen to show stamina by being able to drink heavily, and were competitive about the amount they drank and how quickly. Men also tended to continue drinking the same drinks when in groups, ordering 'rounds'.

In contrast, women usually sat in groups and focused on the social side of drinking. They enjoyed drinking as much as men did, but were less concerned about showing off. They tended to approach the bar in groups and have different drinks, were happier to drink at different paces and skipped drinks. This enabled them to control how much they drank.

There was little dispute among interviewees that women had greater access to public drinking than ever before, but it was also apparent that women's drinking, and particularly drunkenness, was viewed more negatively than the same behaviour by men. Public drinking was regarded as less respectable than drinking at home. While some men identified becoming a father as a factor in changing their drinking patterns (less money and time), women tended to focus on how drinking, particularly in public, conflicted with maternal responsibilities. Being seen as a 'good mother' was a particular concern for young mothers and lone mothers.

There were significant levels of alcohol consumption within the Muslim community, whose faith usually presumes abstinence. This was mainly confined to young men, with a common pattern of starting to drink in their mid-to-late teens, largely through peer pressure and curiosity. This drinking mainly took place in informal locations (the park, cars, bus shelters etc) for risk of being seen by family or community members. Informants concealed their drinking from their parents. Particular areas of Stoke were also described as potentially unsafe for minority ethnic groups, who might be subject to racism or threats of violence from drunken revellers.

This pattern of drinking among young Muslim men appeared to be a temporary phase. Once they married they took their family and community obligations more seriously and abstained from alcohol. Emotions of guilt and shame were frequently described in relation to married men drinking compared with young, single men. Alcohol

was also associated with lack of respect and control. Some Muslim respondents prided themselves on their ability to resist the temptation to drink, and identified financial and health benefits of abstinence. Those who did not drink preferred to socialise with other non-drinkers, and excluded themselves from public places or events where alcohol was involved. This effectively contributed to the social segregation of Muslims from leisure venues in the night-time economy used by white people. One interviewee claimed that social integration was a threat to the Muslim faith because more young people would drink to fit in with the wider social environment.

## Domestic drinking

The priority given to public drinking cultures has deflected attention from domestic drinking, which accounts for 43 per cent of the drinks market (in volume). In social terms, regular in-home drinking is more popular than frequent use of commercial venues. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed for this study regularly drank at home; 63 per cent also listed family and friends' homes as regular drinking venues.

Despite acute awareness of issues connected with young people's binge drinking in public places, the health implications of routine domestic drinking for the broader population have not been highlighted. The health dangers of domestic drinking are less apparent because binge drinking, though technically referring to episodes of heavy alcohol consumption, has come in cultural terms to mean dangerous drinking by young people in town centres. Thus many interviewees, whose home consumption far exceeded government-recommended weekly limits, regarded their own practices as unremarkable and felt unwarrantedly insulated from public health messages.

Some interviewees also tried to justify why public concerns about levels of alcohol consumption were irrelevant to them. Some argued that domestic drinking should be considered in the context of a wider lifestyle, with healthy eating offsetting or balancing out excess alcohol consumption. Some used the limited health benefits of small amounts of alcohol for some demographic groups to justify domestic drinking practices where intake could exceed government guidelines. Equally important, in rejecting what some characterised as the moving goalposts of health advice, was the notion that because individual drinking sessions did not induce illness they were not inherently unhealthy.

However, drinking was clearly marked as problematic in the home environment when associated with domestic violence. Several respondents discussed the impact of alcohol-related domestic violence on their lives.

## Learning to drink: intergenerational patterns

The research involved adults aged 18+, differentiated as the 'older generation' (mid-50s and over); the 'mid-generation' (30s to 50s); and the 'younger generation' (late teens, early 20s). There were significant patterns in experiences of drinking across the generations.

A more liberal consensus appeared to be emerging in relation to adults' attitudes towards young people's alcohol consumption. While all three generations described underage drinking and drinking to excess, for the older and mid-generations these had largely taken place without the knowledge or consent of parents. In particular, young women's drinking had been strongly socially regulated among the older generation.

The younger generation, however, had largely been introduced to alcohol at a young age within a family context, and described a much more relaxed attitude by their parents towards their experiments with alcohol than the mid and older generations. Parents often appeared to condone and even supply alcohol for under-age drinking by their children and their peers. This sometimes reflected parents' belief that early, controlled access to alcohol would enable their children to develop responsible attitudes to drinking and prevent them getting into trouble behind their parents' backs. It also reflected contemporary parents' desire for a close relationship with their children and to give them freedoms they had been denied. There was also recognition, in light of their own domestic drinking, that it was difficult to preach abstinence.

## Policy implications

The diverse patterns of drinking identified in Stoke-on-Trent and Eden hint at the importance of alcohol-related policy initiatives that recognise the complexity of different drinking cultures, and how national policies might be interpreted differently or have a differential impact on

particular locales. For example, work to prevent alcohol misuse needs not only to address the issue of public drinking in urban places, but also to acknowledge and respond to the importance of alcohol and consumption patterns in rural communities.

In addition, if the message about the long-term health implications of heavy drinking is to be effective, it needs to address the significance of everyday drinking practices at home as well as in public. This means addressing contemporary parenting practices and their role in how young people learn to drink.

Areas needing further research include:

- assessing different tolerance levels towards public drinking within different communities;
- studying the range of local strategies for controlling the type, concentration and mix of bars in the night-time economy;
- investigating how people perceive, experience and manage risks and benefits associated with drinking;
- examining patterns of home consumption and parents' attitudes and practices in relation to underage drinking and drinking by young people in their late teens;
- evaluating why some abstain from or give up alcohol.

## About the project

The study was conducted in two contrasting geographical communities. Stoke-on-Trent is a deprived urban area with levels of alcohol consumption higher than the national average and a changing landscape of consumption. Eden in Cumbria is an isolated rural area where the pub's centrality in village life was historically linked with the development of a strong temperance movement. Archival work on the history of drinking cultures and participant observation was conducted in each area. A telephone questionnaire survey of 1,000 adults (500 in each location) was conducted, plus in-depth interviews with key informants. Intergenerational interviews were completed with five families in each location.

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## For further information

The full report, **Drinking places: Where people drink and why** by Gill Valentine, Sarah L. Holloway, Mark Jayne and Charlotte Knell, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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