

Alcohol

Investigations
Work in progress

Start date: February 2007

How can we halt or reverse negative drinking patterns among young people in the UK?

With alcohol becoming increasingly affordable in recent times, individual consumption has also gone up. In particular, drinking among 11- to 16-year-olds has escalated quite dramatically

This programme:

- seeks to reduce problems or harm among young people in the UK by halting or reversing negative drinking patterns.

We aim to:

- collect evidence on drinking cultures and patterns;
- understand what influences young people's drinking;
- identify what actions or interventions are most likely to have an impact on drinking cultures and patterns in the UK.

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For the latest information, visit:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/alcohol>

At a glance

Programme title: Alcohol

Aim: Reversing or halting negative drinking patterns among young people in the UK

Timescale: 2007-2011

Budget: £1,000,000

Contact: Christine Appleton (Research Administrator)

In 2007, the JRF launched a programme of work looking at drinking patterns among young people. This paper outlines what we are doing, why, and what we hope to achieve through this work.

This summary gives a broad overview at the start of the programme. However, our programmes of work develop throughout their course. For the most up-to-date information, visit: www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/alcohol

What is the issue?

Individual levels of drinking have been growing in the UK since the mid-1990s.

Perhaps the most disturbing trends are in young people's drinking. While the proportion of secondary school pupils saying they have drunk alcohol in the past week has gone down since 2001, those that do drink are drinking considerably more. The average has gone up from 5 units in 1990 to 11 units in 2006. The speed of change has been most rapid among 11- to 13-year-olds: in 1992 average consumption in the past week was 3.4 units for 11- to 13-year-olds and 8.1 units for 15-year-olds; in 2006 these figures were 10.1 and 12.3 units respectively.

Comparison with other European countries also shows our 15- to 16-year-olds have one of the highest rates of 'binge' drinking (defined as five or more drinks in one session on at least three occasions in the previous month in this study).

Reflecting increasing media and public concern about alcohol, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of new government policies in the area. In particular, the *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England* (2004), the *Licensing Act* (implemented in 2005) and *Safe. Sensible. Social.* represented significant new landmarks on alcohol policy. There are increasing differences between England and Scotland on alcohol policy, with the Scottish Government looking to take more radical steps to tackle the considerable damage caused by alcohol in Scotland.

What do we want to achieve?

Our overall aim is to identify the most effective ways to bring about positive changes in drinking cultures and patterns among young people in the UK.

This programme will look at:

- collecting evidence on drinking cultures and patterns;
- understanding what influences young people's drinking;
- identifying what actions or interventions are most likely to have an impact on drinking cultures and patterns in the UK.

We want to communicate key messages about the effectiveness of different approaches to halting or reversing harm to policy-makers and practitioners in the alcohol field. There may also be messages for the wider public – in particular parents and young people.

What are we doing?

We are looking at a number of related areas.

What influences young people?

The programme has begun by focusing on how drinking cultures are passed on – within families and peer groups, within the local area and through the media. We want to gain a greater understanding of this so as to identify which approaches will have most impact on negative influences.

Projects include literature reviews and studies of:

- peer influence and ethnicity;
- teenage drinking cultures;
- family influences;
- family life and alcohol consumption;
- media influence on young people's drinking cultures;
- local influences on young people;
- what influences young people to drink little or nothing;
- multiple influences on young people's drinking.

How does the social impact of drinking vary?

We want to explore:

- what published research tells us about the different social impact of drinking across income, socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity;
- whether there are any gaps in this research;
- what this research tells us about the prioritisation and targeting of interventions.

What works in changing drinking patterns and cultures?

We want to look at what are the most effective approaches to bringing about changes in drinking patterns and cultures, for example:

- are there effective ways to impact on risky drinking among teenage peer groups?
- what interventions would work best with parents and families?
- how might peer interventions affect young people's drinking?
- how might media reporting on alcohol be changed to have a beneficial effect?
- what are the most effective local approaches to changing drinking patterns and how might they be best brought together in the form of a multi-component intervention?

What can help or hinder policy and practice change?

While it might be possible to identify the most effective interventions, policies and practice, this does not mean that they will be implemented. We want to explore:

- how policy-making on alcohol works at international, European, national and local levels;
- how changes in policy are brought about nationally and locally;
- what public attitudes to alcohol policy options are;
- what we can learn from other social policy initiatives that have succeeded in changing behaviour;
- how policy change might be brought about;
- how people can be encouraged to reflect on their own alcohol use.

Why is this topic a priority for the JRF?

There is a need for independent evidence

There is a dearth of independently funded research in the alcohol field. The Alcohol Education Research Committee funds an annual programme of alcohol research and development projects but other than this, there is little non-governmental funding.

Given the political sensitivities surrounding alcohol – and policy responses to alcohol-related problems – it is important to have research funded that is independent of government and industry.

It builds on existing work

We have already published work in this area through our Drugs and Alcohol Research Programme. This included support for studies into drinking and place and the links between social deprivation and substance misuse.

It fits our strategic agenda

Poverty is one of the three key themes structuring our work. While alcohol use and abuse transcend class and income boundaries, those who are vulnerable or facing multiple disadvantages may be more at risk of drinking problems taking over their lives. Previous JRF work has shown how drunkenness accentuates the vulnerability of socially excluded young people. In terms of the wider work of the Foundation, alcohol was one of the social evils most commonly identified by respondents to our survey on social evils (see www.socialevils.org.uk).

What has informed our thinking?

This programme builds on earlier work by our Drugs and Alcohol Committee, which ran until 2007.

Of particular relevance is an in-depth two-year study *Drinking places: where people drink and why* by Gill Valentine (December 2007). This study examined drinking cultures within two very contrasting geographical areas of rural (Eden in Cumbria), and urban (Stoke-on-Trent in the Midlands), and across very different social groupings.

The work of the programme is guided by an Advisory Group with members drawn from the voluntary sector, government departments and academia.

About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust are two independent charities that work together to understand the root causes of social problems, identify ways of overcoming them, and show how social needs can be met in practice.

Our purpose is to influence policy and practice by searching for evidence and demonstrating solutions to improve:

- the circumstances of people experiencing poverty and disadvantages;
- the quality of their homes and communities;
- the nature of the services and support that foster their well-being and citizenship.

Most of our work centres on the interconnected themes of poverty, place and empowerment.