

Young people, alcohol and influences

Findings
Informing change

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This study examines the levels and patterns of drinking among students in Years 9 (aged 13-14) and 11 (aged 15-16) in England. It explores the wide range of influences on their drinking and assesses the relative importance of the factors that influence young people's alcohol use.

Key points

The experience of drinking alcohol is widespread:

- 70% of Year 9 students and 89% of Year 11 students have had an alcoholic drink. Regular drinking is significantly lower amongst Year 9 than Year 11 students.
- The most common age for a first drink was 12 to 13; usually when with an adult and celebrating a special occasion.
- Year 9 students are most likely to have been drinking alcopops, beer or lager. By Year 11, students are most likely to drink beer, lager, spirits or liqueurs. In both year groups, those drinking beer and lager are consuming much larger quantities of these drinks than any other type of drink.

Young people are more likely to drink, to drink frequently and to drink to excess if they:

- receive less supervision from a parent or other close adult;
- spend more than two evenings a week with friends or have friends who drink;
- are exposed to a close family member, especially a parent, drinking or getting drunk;
- have positive attitudes towards and expectations of alcohol; and
- have very easy access to alcohol.

While friends play a critical role, family has a strong direct and indirect influence. The parent or guardian has a particularly strong influence on their child's behaviour. This ranges from the point at which alcohol is introduced, to exposure to adult drinking and drunkenness, to the amount of supervision placed on a young person (such as knowing where their child is on a Saturday evening or how many evenings their child spends with friends).

There are critical points where a carefully timed intervention could generate a positive outcome by reducing the likelihood that a young person will drink frequently and drink to excess. These interventions require co-ordination at a national, local and frontline level involving families, schools and support services.

The research

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Background

Increasing alcohol consumption amongst some young people (in particular those aged under 18), and the harm related to it, have become significant concerns in the UK. Studies of what influences the levels and patterns of risky drinking by young people have tended to focus on specific influences in isolation or on the relationship between two or three different factors. However, it is not clear from previous studies which factors have the most influence on behaviour.

This study is the first in the UK to analyse the relative importance of, and the relationship between, a wide range of factors influencing young people's approach to alcohol. The study surveyed 5,700 teenagers in England in school years 9 (aged 13-14) and 11 (aged 15-16). Data were statistically modelled using binary logistic regression to test the influence of factors on drinking. The modelling highlights the strongest influences on and predictors of young people's drinking across five key areas: demographic characteristics; individual factors; family; local context (e.g. time spent with friends); and media and celebrity.

The survey results

The experience of drinking alcohol is widespread amongst young people.

How many young people drink?

Most students in Years 9 and 11 have had an alcoholic drink (70% and 89% respectively). Amongst Year 9 students, girls are significantly more likely than boys to have had a drink; this gap closes by Year 11. For the minority who have not had a drink, lack of interest in alcohol was the primary reason.

Most young people were aged eleven and over when they had their first drink, most commonly having their first drink at around 12 to 13. Around three-quarters of each year group reported being with an adult when they first drank alcohol. They were likely to have been celebrating a special occasion at the time, such as a family or religious event.

How often are young people drinking?

The proportion drinking regularly is significantly lower amongst Year 9 than Year 11 students. Almost half (47%) of Year 9 students who drink alcohol, drink at least once a month with two in ten (20%) drinking every week; this increases to around seven in ten (72%) and almost four in ten (39%) respectively amongst Year 11 students.

Over a quarter (27%) of Year 9 students who drink alcohol had a drink in the week prior to the survey; for Year 11 students this increased to almost half (49%). The number of drinks consumed also increases between Years 9 and 11. Around half (47%) of Year 9 students who drink are most likely to have had one or two drinks the last time they were drinking. One-quarter (25%) of Year 11 students say they drank six or more drinks the last time they drank. Whilst both year groups are most likely to have been drinking at home the last time they drank, this reduces as young people get older. Around four in ten (43%) Year 9 students were with parents or siblings when last drinking, compared with around three in ten (34%) Year 11 students. Year 11 students were more likely than the younger students to have been with friends (23% in Year 11 compared with 13% in Year 9).

What are young people drinking?

Year 9 students are most likely to have been drinking alcopops in the seven days before the survey. The second most frequently consumed drink is beer or lager. By Year 11, students are most likely to have been drinking beer, lager, spirits or liqueurs. In both year groups, those drinking beer and lager are consuming much larger quantities of these drinks than any other type of drink. In Year 9, almost four in ten (39%) students who had consumed alcohol in the previous seven days drank seven units or more. In Year 11, the same proportion drank 14 units or more. (For this research, these levels are used to determine 'excessive drinking'.)

Being drunk

Over half (54%) of Year 9 students who have had an alcoholic drink say they have been drunk: a relatively equal proportion say this happened only once as say that they have been drunk more than once. By Year 11, around four in five (79%) students have been drunk, with over half (52%) drunk more than once. In many cases, getting drunk is intentional, with almost half (47%) of Year 9 and two-thirds (66%) of Year 11 students who have been drunk saying that they and their friends drink to get drunk at least once a month.

Understanding drinking patterns

The researchers assessed the relative importance of the factors that influence young people's alcohol use in order to determine the strongest predictors of different drinking patterns.

What influences young people to drink at all?

A number of factors strongly predicted whether a young person had ever had an alcoholic drink, including:

- *Having friends who drink*; this is the strongest factor. Exposure to at least a few friends who drink alcohol significantly increases the likelihood that a young person will have had an alcoholic drink.
- *Family influence*; this is also a very strong factor. Family drinking habits, particularly perceptions of drunkenness and frequency of drinking among family members, were very important. Young people who have witnessed any level of family drinking and drunkenness have a greater likelihood of drinking than those who have not witnessed such behaviour. Family supervision is also important. The less parental supervision (eg knowing where their

- child is on a Saturday night), the greater the likelihood that a young person will have had an alcoholic drink.
- *Expecting positive outcomes* from drinking and finding a range of drinking habits acceptable for someone of their age are also strong factors.
- *A young person's religion* (typically a shared family value) and ethnicity are other key predictors of having had an alcoholic drink.

What influences 'current drinking'?

The study looked at what had influenced 'current drinking' (drinking in the week before completing the questionnaire). The predictors include:

- *Age*; this is the strongest predictor. Overall, the younger someone had their first drink, the greater the likelihood that they will have been drinking in the previous week.
- *Expecting positive outcomes* from drinking and finding a range of drinking behaviour acceptable for someone of their age.
- *The influence of friends*: a strong indicator of current drinking is when most, rather than some or a few, of a young person's friends drink.
- *Frequency of drinking in the family*: young people have a greater likelihood of being a current drinker if at least one member of their family drinks each week.
- *The circumstances of their first drink*. Those introduced to alcohol at a family celebration have a lower likelihood of having been drinking in the previous week, suggesting some degree of family monitoring or supervision plays a part here.
- *Finding it very easy to obtain alcohol*.

What influences excessive drinking?

Overall, the expectation that young people will 'have a lot of fun' or be happy is the strongest individual predictor of current excessive drinking. However, a range of other factors are also very influential, including:

- *Drinking levels of friends*: This is a particularly strong influence, again, likelihood increases when most of a young person's friends drink.
- *Finding alcohol very easy to obtain* multiplies the odds of a young person drinking excessively by almost four times.
- *The amount of time spent with friends*. In many cases, simply spending more than two evenings with friends is key; spending all evenings with friends is particularly influential, also multiplying the odds of a young person drinking excessively by almost four times.
- *Being with older friends* the last time they were drinking.
- *The source of alcohol* when last drinking: the odds of being an excessive drinker increase respectively if a young person is buying their alcohol, is given alcohol by an older sibling or is stealing alcohol (either stealing themselves or aware that others have stolen it).

This is the only area where family is not among the strongest influences. However, parental supervision is reflected indirectly in the amount of evenings a young person spends with friends.

What influences drunkenness?

Frequency of drinking is clearly the strongest indicator of drunkenness. There is a linear relationship between frequency and drunkenness; the more frequently a young person drinks, the greater the likelihood that they will have been drunk more than once. Other strong indicators include:

- The likelihood of having been drunk more than once increases with *age*, with 14 to 15 years being the critical turning point.
- *Having a first drink* when extremely young (6 or under) also influences drunkenness. Those who had an adult present when they first drank alcohol were less likely to report being drunk more than once.
- *Family drunkenness* is a very strong influence, particularly if it is parents who have been drunk. The odds of a young person getting drunk multiple times is twice as great if they have seen their parents drunk, even if only a few times, as those who have never seen their parents drunk. There is a similar pattern if they have seen their older siblings drunk.
- *Buying their alcohol* or asking an adult relative/other adult to buy it for them.
- *Being with friends last time they were drinking*, although overall the influence of friends is not quite as strong as in the other areas.

Conclusions

Peer influence: One of the main factors associated with young people ever having drunk alcohol is how they perceive their friends' behaviour. The more friends they thought were drinking, the more likely young people were to have been drinking alcohol in the last week. Friends' drinking also influences the amount young people drink: the likelihood of young people drinking heavily reduces significantly among those who say some or a few friends drink alcohol compared with someone who says that all of their friends drink alcohol.

Family influence: Parents strongly influence young people's alcohol-related behaviour through supervision and monitoring, as well as playing a role in modelling this behaviour. Being with a parent suggests an element of supervision and monitoring, which can reduce the likelihood of drinking, frequent drinking, and higher levels of alcohol consumption or drunkenness. Witnessing family members drinking and perceptions of drunkenness among family members in the home can make this kind of drinking appear normal.

Attitudes and expectations: Unsurprisingly, young people are more likely to behave in certain ways with alcohol if they believe it is acceptable to act that way. The expectation that drinking will be fun and make you happy increases the likelihood of a young person drinking. Negative associations, including a fear that you will not be able to stop drinking or will be sick, decrease the likelihood of drinking.

Implications for policy and practice

This research shows that, whilst it is not inevitable that young people will drink, large numbers do drink. The researchers conclude that there appears to be little benefit in policy aiming to prevent young people from trying alcohol; rather policy should seek to prevent immediate and long-term harm to young people from alcohol. These findings highlight the strongest predictors of current, excessive and risky drinking. The new government alcohol strategy offers the opportunity to set out a strong central policy direction and send out a set of clear messages to parents, local policy-makers and frontline services.

The findings suggest that efforts to improve drinking behaviour among young people at a **national policy** level are best directed at supporting and educating parents. This should include positive messages for parents about how they can influence their child's behaviour and stress the importance of parent's own drinking and what their children see and think about this.

Friends are another key area of influence. Schools could help here by challenging incorrect perceptions about the regularity and scale of heavy drinking by peer groups. Schools could also be a channel for information, getting targeted messages to parents encouraging actions at specific times in their child's development.

Access to alcohol is important. The most common place for getting hold of alcohol is in the home. How parents store alcohol and, critically, how they monitor its use are important. Those young people who do buy their own alcohol are most likely to be harmful drinkers: controlling the price of alcohol and enforcing licensing policy on underage sales could help prevent harmful drinking.

At a **local policy** level, support services and guidance for parents and families should incorporate clear messages about the importance of parents' drinking, access to alcohol at home, parental supervision and encouraging young people into positive activities. It is also important to highlight key predictors outside the home which parents can still influence, such as how often a young person spends evenings with their friends and whether their parents know where they are on a Saturday evening. Joined-up approaches between police, licensing departments and Children's Services could also help those with riskier drinking behaviour such as taking action on underage sales and proxy sales of alcohol.

Frontline services have a vital role to play by delivering these key messages to parents via midwifery and health visiting services, parenting programmes, family interventions, schools and youth services.

About the project

This study was in four stages. A scoping phase with a literature review generated the optimum set of indicators to be collected in the survey in terms of their value and policy relevance. Questionnaire development with cognitive testing ensured that the data collection instrument was fit for purpose. The data collection itself involved over 5,700 self-completion questionnaires administered through interviewer-supervised sessions in class groups in schools in England with a representative sample of students in Years 9 and 11. Statistical modelling took place for each of the different drinking behaviours and groups of interest, looking across the various significant influences to identify the factors that have the strongest influence on different drinking behaviours.

Find out more

The full report, **Young people, alcohol and influences: A study of young people and their relationship with alcohol** by Pamela Bremner, Jamie Burnett, Fay Nunney, Mohammed Ravat (of IpsosMori) and Willm Mistral (Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Trust & University of Bath), is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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