

FINDINGS

LOCAL VARIATIONS IN YOUTH DRINKING CULTURES

This study explores the lives of young people, aged 15-24, in two study areas located in regions of England where the harm caused by alcohol is markedly different. The aim of the research was to explore whether living in these places influenced young people's drinking.

Key points

- Significant differences in alcohol-related harms have been observed between English regions. The north has a higher degree of reported indicators of harms than the south-east and the south-west.
- Despite these variations, young people's drinking behaviour in the two areas studied followed similar patterns with regard to their choice of drink, where they drank, and the days of the week and times at which they drank.
- The differences between young people's behaviour in the case study areas was subtle and related to how those places had developed over long periods of time.
- The primary motivation for drinking at all ages was sociability, having a good time and avoiding trouble. On a 'good night out', laughter and fun were important. In the case of the north-eastern city, this was a significant part of local culture. Young people rarely drank on their own.
- Young people actively sought out 'clusters' of youth-orientated bars. A concentration of 'clusters' in the north east formed part of the impetus for young people to drink more than they originally intended.
- In the south east, young people below the legal age of drinking engaged in a wider range of leisure activities, sports and hobbies.
- In the north east, adult drinking was more visible both in the city centre and in streets and parks. There were more spaces where young people drank alongside adults.
- Despite a wish to limit the number of licensed premises in the north east, planning authorities had been unable to resist commercial pressures to allow clubs and bars to fill units that would otherwise be vacant.

The research

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BACKGROUND

Drinking is one of a variety of leisure activities that young people engage in. This study investigates drinking as an activity in terms of place, comparing an area in the south east with low levels of alcohol-related harms and an area in the north east with a higher level of harms.

The researchers examined how and where young people aged 15-24 spent their leisure time. They asked them where they went, when, how often and who with. The study considered the impact of other leisure activities, the number and range of facilities, transport, policing and the influence of family or other role models.

Leisure activities

Young people in both case study areas shared many similar patterns of behaviour. At all ages, home was the place where they spent the most time, watching TV and DVDs, playing computer games, social networking, and listening to music. For teenagers below the legal age for drinking, favourite pastimes outside the home were spending time in local parks, going to shopping centres and going to the cinema.

The importance of sociability for drinking

Drinking was important to young people of all ages as a social activity. It was a rarity for a participant to report drinking alone. Teenagers below the legal age limit drank in parks and other open spaces and at home or friend's homes.

In the north-eastern area drinking outside was more commonplace, whereas in the south-eastern area teenage parties in people's homes were more significant. The study found little evidence of peer pressure in relation to under-18 drinking, though some peer selection was found.

In the north-eastern area, above the legal age for drinking, the balance shifted towards drinking in bars, clubs and pubs, although family barbecues and other celebrations were still important. In the south-eastern area, drinking at home continued to be important, although some participants felt constraints about drinking in front of their parents if they still lived at home. Home drinking was often associated with saving money.

The 'big night out'

The pattern of going out with a group of friends was common to both case study areas, with pre-drinking in groups at home or, more frequently in the north-eastern area, in a cheap bar or pub. Although some participants reported 'pre-drinking' to get drunk before going out, the majority reported its significance for reinforcing friendships.

The 'night out' had elements of predictability and spontaneity. The pattern was to visit a number of bars, dance bars and nightclubs in succession, ending the night with fast food, a taxi or a lift home. The choice of bars and clubs to be visited was spontaneous and groups would form and re-form. There was no evidence of an established circuit and little evidence of peer pressure to continue drinking. Groups of friends looked out for each other and a good night out was one that involved some banter, listening or dancing to music and no problems (avoiding fights, being ill or being thrown out of venues).

The most enthusiastic age for going on a night out was around 18, but participants with young families still reported the occasional 'big' night out.

Youth drinking venues

In both study areas young people actively chose to go to youth-oriented bars and clubs for a night out, and travelled up to 25km, although 10km was more widely reported. This was not due to any absence of 'traditional' pubs or other venues, which might be visited on other occasions. In the south-eastern area, young respondents were reluctant to visit venues with even slightly older (or younger) people on a night out.

Clusters and concentrations

The places visited on a night out had clusters of youth-oriented venues. Small towns with only one street of bars and clubs were as popular because they offered a different experience, such as the opportunity to dance or listen to music.

The north-eastern area had one major city with a high concentration of youth-oriented venues separated into different clusters within the 1km² area of the city centre. The close proximity of these licensed premises and the competition between them heightened the pressure to drink more. The atmosphere in the streets was more exuberant and uninhibited.

This experience was diluted in the south-eastern area. There was less choice here and places where venues were located were further apart. Public transport was limited and did not function late into the night, whereas in the north-eastern area the public transport routes were focused on the city centre and ran relatively late. Driving was more common in the south-east and some participants reported that the need to drive after a heavy night out curbed their enthusiasm for going out. The need for a greater degree of organisation to arrange a night out acted as a constraint.

The importance of parks and other pastimes

For the younger age group, below the legal age of drinking, going out to clubs and pubs was not an option. This seems to have been a successful aspect of enforcement involving both the police and bar operators. The overwhelming majority of participants in the 15-16 age group commented that it was not worthwhile even to try to get into a pub or bar.

The key difference between the leisure activities of this younger age group in the two case study areas was the variety of hobbies and pastimes outside the home enjoyed by the south-eastern participants. In addition to the mainstream activities of spending time in parks and shopping centres and going to the cinema, they reported hobbies such as going to drama groups, playing in bands, going to music lessons and volunteering, while in the north east hobbies were more restricted, e.g. playing football or going to a local youth club.

While some of the south east activities, such as go-karting, were related to living in a more affluent household, other types of activity were linked to better services and facilities. In the south-eastern area parks were more frequently praised for offering peaceful, restful spaces, whereas in the north-eastern area there were complaints about the parks being boring and having broken equipment.

Dedicated facilities in the south east, such as local authority and church youth clubs, were open at weekends and were in higher-quality buildings. There was also more evidence of support from the private sector in the south east, for example with low concessionary rates in sports centres.

Visibility of heavy drinking

Under-18s were more likely to encounter adults drinking heavily in the north-eastern area. It was more commonplace to see street drinkers and young adults drinking in parks, streets and open spaces in local neighbourhoods. The most popular cinema for this age group in the city centre was located amongst a set of crowded bars and clubs, which started to attract customers from the late afternoon.

The local planning authority had tried to diversify the city centre with more retail. In the case of one major development, they had to allow a change in use from retail to licensed premises to prevent units remaining vacant. This had also happened with another development geared towards knowledge-based enterprises.

Conclusions

The research team found that youth drinking behaviour was more about sociability than getting drunk. Youth drinking is seen as a 'problem' for regulation but the study recognises that there are positive attributes of drinking behaviours.

The team found subtle variations between the two study areas. Place does have an influence over youth drinking behaviours, below and above the legal age limit. Many of the differences relate to urban layout, the qualities of particular spaces and the long-term impacts of licensing and planning policies.

For young people, binge drinking is associated with parties and the 'big night out'. Age-segregated bars and clubs were particularly important and young people were prepared to travel considerable distances to go to them.

The degree to which clusters of bars and clubs were dispersed across urban centres appeared to have an impact on the frequency and intensity of 'a good night out'. Licensing and planning authorities could encourage dispersal rather than concentration of youth drinking clusters to 'dilute' the experience. Encouraging the non-alcohol-related activities that are part of a night out, such as live music and dancing, could also reduce individual alcohol consumption.

The extent to which excessive alcohol consumption is visible and hence 'normalised' was more apparent in the north-eastern study area. The team would recommend a greater distance between places where under-18s go, and bars and clubs.

The study supports greater expenditure on, and more support for, leisure activities for under-18s. In the north-eastern sample, under-18s were more restricted by choice and access to non-alcohol-related youth leisure. Future planning in our towns and cities should ensure land is clearly allocated for such facilities and separated from alcohol-based leisure. The use of vacant premises for temporary 'pop up' youth facilities should be investigated.

The role of parks and shopping centres as the backdrop to young people's social lives needs more careful consideration. Young people spend a great deal of their leisure time in these 'public' spaces and must feel welcome and safe. This research suggests this is not necessarily the case.

About this project

The team used the same methods in both case study areas. Participants were drawn from similar backgrounds. Evidence was gathered from focus groups of 22-24 year olds and 18-19 year olds and semi-structured interviews. Young people aged 15-16 undertook a diary exercise followed by interviews alone or in small friendship groups.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This *Findings* is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF. See www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/alcohol For more information, please contact Nancy Kelley, email: Nancy.Kelley@jrf.org.uk

The main report, **Local variations in youth drinking cultures** by Marion Roberts, Tim Townshend, Ilaria Pappalepore, Adam Eldridge and Budhi Mulyawan, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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