

# Teenage drinking cultures

**Findings**  
**Informing change**

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This study explores alcohol use within small groups of teenage friends, and how underage drinking is influenced by the wider friendship group.

## Key points

- Most young teenagers are drawn to alcohol by curiosity. Often, older siblings or other family members introduce a young teenager to alcohol. This new experience is quickly shared with close friends. Some teenagers start drinking alcohol so as not to be the odd one out amongst their friends.
- When drinking, young people want to get drunk, have fun with their friends and sober up before having to go home. They rarely set out to drink so much that they are sick, lose control or pass out. There is a considerable stigma associated with getting too drunk.
- Groups develop a range of customs (their drinking culture) that surround their alcohol consumption. These customs cover what they drink, how much they drink, where they drink and their intended level of intoxication.
- Most teenagers appear to develop a degree of self-control over their alcohol consumption through trial and error, with mistakes occurring along the way. Teenage drinkers are particularly vulnerable when they change the social context in which they drink alcohol.
- Parental attempts to restrict their teenager's contact with alcohol seldom lead to a reduction in drinking. On some occasions parental actions actually increase the risk of young people getting too drunk.
- Certain social activities are associated with lower levels of consumption, such as dating in early teenage years. It is only when teenagers are a little older and drinking moves indoors that we see the mixing of alcohol and dating. Being part of a sports team or being committed to school are also associated with reduced levels of consumption. When young drinkers get too drunk they can be at risk of a wide range of alcohol-related harm, such as getting into fights or trouble with the police, or engaging in risky sexual behaviour. Teaching young people techniques and strategies to control their drinking may reduce their exposure to alcohol-related harm.

## The research

By Andrew Percy, Joanne Wilson, Claire McCartan and Patrick McCrystal, Queen's University Belfast, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

# Background

Underage drinking is a social activity, usually undertaken by small groups of close friends, well away from parents and other adults. As young teenage drinkers experiment with alcohol, the drinking group begin to develop a set of shared beliefs, habits, and rituals around their drinking behaviour. Together these are referred to as their 'drinking culture'. This study explored the social aspect of teenage drinking and how drinking cultures emerge and evolve within groups.

## Intoxication tightrope

Teenagers drink alcohol to get drunk. While curiosity may drive their initial desire to try alcohol, it is the pleasurable effects of being drunk that underpin their continued consumption. They like the way alcohol helps you have fun, makes you lose your inhibitions, gives you more confidence and status in front of other teenagers, and the risk and excitement associated with it. When out drinking, young people aim to get drunk, have fun with their friends, and, importantly, sober up before they need to go home.

Whilst everyone got drunk, the level of drunkenness that was acceptable varied across the groups. Some groups indulge in much higher levels of intoxication than others. Being able to consume alcohol in large quantities without losing control was a skill recognised and respected by young people. However, even the high level drinking groups had accepted limits on their consumption. Considerable stigma was associated with getting too drunk, passing out or being sick in front of your friends. This displayed that you could not handle your drink, increased the risk of everyone getting caught, and tended to ruin the evening for the group. When teenagers drink alcohol they attempt to negotiate this intoxication tightrope between not consuming enough and drinking too much. Sometimes mistakes happen.

## Drinking etiquette

To help facilitate this pattern of drinking (getting up, getting down and getting home), each group independently developed a specific drinking culture (shared knowledge, beliefs and norms) around their

use of alcohol. Drinking culture was not static, but evolved over time as the young people became more experienced consumers. While major differences in drinking cultures were apparent between groups, a number of common transitions could be identified.

Firstly, most young people started drinking alcopops or other sweetened premixed drinks. However, they quickly expanded their drinking repertoire to include cheaper beverages such as cider and beer, as alcopops were considered expensive and childish drinks. Some young people did progress onto drinking spirits (not premixed), usually vodka. When more experienced, alcohol purchases were informed by cost, strength (alcohol by volume), convenience and brand image.

Secondly, the amount of alcohol purchased and consumed displayed drinking skill and experience. As a result, the size of the container was of considerable symbolic importance. Young people wanted to progress towards purchasing alcohol in larger containers, for example moving from buying a 1ltr bottle of cider to buying a 3ltr bottle. Often young people would pool money to buy a larger bottle of alcohol, for example a 70cl bottle of vodka rather than two 35cl bottles.

Finally, as young people grew older they generally made the transition from drinking outdoors to drinking indoors, either at house parties or in pubs and clubs.

## Managing intoxication

Teenagers strive to develop drinking expertise; the ability to control their level of intoxication. This expertise draws on the group's drinking etiquette and their own drinking skills. Young people use a range of strategies to manage their level of intoxication. When drinking on the street, consumption was usually limited to the amount of alcohol purchased at the start of the night. Young people were generally aware of how much they could drink and how much they could afford to purchase. This often provided a natural ceiling on consumption.

Another common strategy was to rely on their ability to spot the early stages of intoxication, such as starting to slur speech or wobble on their feet, as an indicator of when to adjust their drinking (taking account of time they had left to drink). Some group members would also compare their drinking (and level of intoxication) to others within the group. If young people felt they were not as drunk as their friends they would often increase their drinking, or if they felt they were getting more intoxicated than their friends they would slow down. One easy way to increase the level of intoxication, without actually drinking more, was simply to pretend

to be drunker than they actually were. This hides any obvious discrepancies between their drinking and that of their friends. Drinking games were also used by groups to increase actual consumption. Common methods used by young people to reduce the speed at which they got drunk included skipping drinks, eating food, and switching to soft drinks.

These strategies were not always effective and mistakes (overshooting the desired level of intoxication) occur. Teenagers appeared to be at their most vulnerable to mis-controlling their alcohol consumption when drinking outside their normal social (drinking) context. This often occurred when young people moved drinking locations, particularly when they first gained access to licensed premises or other group members' homes. Here, the rules and strategies employed by groups to govern their alcohol consumption no longer appear to be effective within the new drinking context.

Changes in drinking context also occur when young people start drinking with new groups or new friends, when they change the type of alcohol usually consumed or when the young person goes on holiday with other friends. Existing signposts in the alcohol landscape, such as a group member against whom they may have benchmarked their own consumption, or the volume and strength of particular brands, can be removed or significantly altered, making it more difficult for a young person to manage their drunkenness.

Sexual risk taking, aggressive behaviour and fighting were associated with loss of control and acute intoxication. On occasions such incidents triggered a change in drinking behaviour both at an individual and group level – suggesting that young people, by and large, can learn from their alcohol mistakes. However, not all resultant changes in drinking behaviour resulted in an actual reduction in the risk of alcohol-related harm.

## The need to consider age

Underage drinking is a dynamic phenomenon – closely linked to the social and maturational changes young people undergo during the teenage years. Drinking etiquette evolves rapidly with a strong association between age and drinking style. In a relatively short period of time (usually around four years) young people progress from their first encounter with alcohol to drinking in bars and clubs (even though many are still under the legal age). Their drinking patterns undergo considerable change including the type and volume of drinks consumed, drinking locations (from outside to inside) and the social reasons underlying consumption, culminating in the incorporation of alcohol into their wider social lifestyle. It must be remembered that the

issues and challenges surrounding underage drinking amongst 14-year-olds are radically different from the issues surrounding 16-year-old drinkers. Interventions must take account of teenage development.

## Parents

While parents attempt to restrict their teenager's contact with alcohol, by setting rules and monitoring behaviour around consumption, most teenagers are able to circumvent these strategies and manage drink and have a good time with their friends whilst concealing it from their parents. Parents tended to provide boundaries to the young people's leisure time in an attempt to restrict opportunities to consume alcohol. However, given the levels of consumption reported, even when the teenagers were quite young, these practices were rarely successful. Few parents appeared to be aware of the full extent of their offspring's alcohol consumption. Even when the teenagers were older, and the parents knew they drank alcohol, they were often unaware of how much the young person actually consumed. To an extent, there was often an implicit contract established between parents and young people around alcohol, which varies according to the age of the young person. While parents tended to believe that this contract was non-negotiable, many young people worked under the assumption that it was. Many continued to drink in the belief that their parents would turn a blind eye to their drinking as long as they did not overstep the mark (e.g. as long as they were relatively sober by the time they arrived home).

## Conclusion

Most alcohol interventions targeted at young people aim to prevent or delay initiation into alcohol use. The assumption is that any delay in starting drinking reduces the risk of serious long-term harm. But once young people start drinking alcohol, and most do before they are legally entitled to purchase it, they also face the risk of harm associated with the acute effects of alcohol intoxication. There is little to suggest that current primary prevention activities reduce these alcohol-related risks.

When considering this general issue, a number of important findings emerge for this study. Firstly, the risks of teenage drinking are real. Young people do engage in risky behaviours when drunk and the outcomes of these actions can be severe. Secondly, most young people learn to moderate their alcohol consumption as they get older and suffer few long-term consequences of their teenage drinking exploits. Thirdly, this learning is gained through trial and error, in the company of other young

people trying to get drunk but not caught, and without any real adult input. Finally, the strategies (drinking culture) used by teenagers to control their drinking and intoxication are relatively simplistic, prone to failure and of little use if the context changes.

It is argued, therefore, that there is a clear need and justification for the development of more pragmatic interventions for underage drinkers that are focused on reducing the acute risks associated with drinking. In essence, these interventions could attempt to teach young drinkers better strategies and techniques to control and regulate their consumption and to reduce instances of excessive intoxication.

## About the project

This study was an in-depth examination of eight teenage friendship groups. The young people had all previously participated in a large-scale longitudinal study of adolescent development. Social network data collected during the longitudinal study was used to identify the friendship groups. Participants were aged between 19 and 20 at the time of the interview and were asked about their underage drinking, from onset until age 18. The interviews focused on their initial exposure to alcohol, the development of more regular drinking behaviours, instances of alcohol-related problems, and the transition to more adult drinking patterns.

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## For further information

The full report, **Teenage Drinking Cultures**, by Andrew Percy, Joanne Wilson, Claire McCartan and Patrick McCrystal, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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