

John Balding & David Regis

More alcohol down fewer throats?

Are fewer young people now drinking alcohol than they did in the Eighties? This question was prompted by a parliamentary researcher working for an MP, who recently asked us to look back over the last 11 years of our surveys to examine alcohol consumption by young people.

From regional data to nationwide statistics

To some extent any interpretation is difficult, whatever you find, because different parts of the country are represented in each annual sample. Locally, survey co-ordinators work hard on getting an appropriate selection of schools to participate; but if you discover a difference between successive years in a nationwide collection you cannot know if young people have changed throughout the country between successive years, or if they have always been different in the parts of the country represented in the successive surveys.

This is a particular difficulty for us, because there are no comparable attempts at national data collection for many of the items in our questionnaire to which we could refer for guidance. For example, while OPCS assesses children's smoking, there is no national screening of their self-esteem, participation in aerobics, or the type of breakfast they eat.

Consistency

One of the arguments that strengthens the case for comparing our data from different years is the consistency of the levels of certain behaviours reported across the years. This consist-

ency suggests to us that for these items at least the percentages are probably representative of the nationwide picture. Moreover, if trends year-on-year can be seen in one behaviour, while others remain steady, then these probably are a reflection of a genuine nationwide trend.

If a difference is found between successive surveys in one district, it can be helpful to discover the same difference in other districts, and in the collection of all districts, surveyed in the same year.

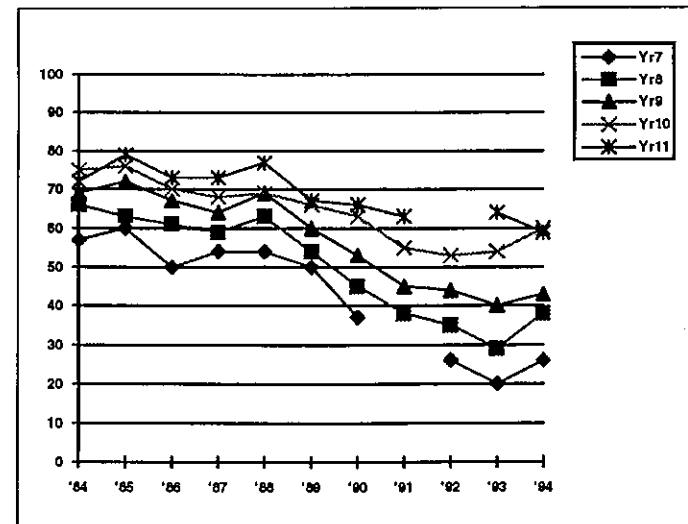
We believe that we have just identified one such trend. In 1989 we looked at smoking and drinking over the five years from 1984 to 1988, published in *Young People in 1988*. Since then we have struggled to find the time to look at other behaviours and in other years, although a start was made when we published two volumes of our *Young People into the Nineties* series.

Although the interest and possibly the value of doing so is great, we have insufficient funds to support our research of the data base as well as provide the service we do — there are, after all, 11 years of data and hundreds of questions to examine.

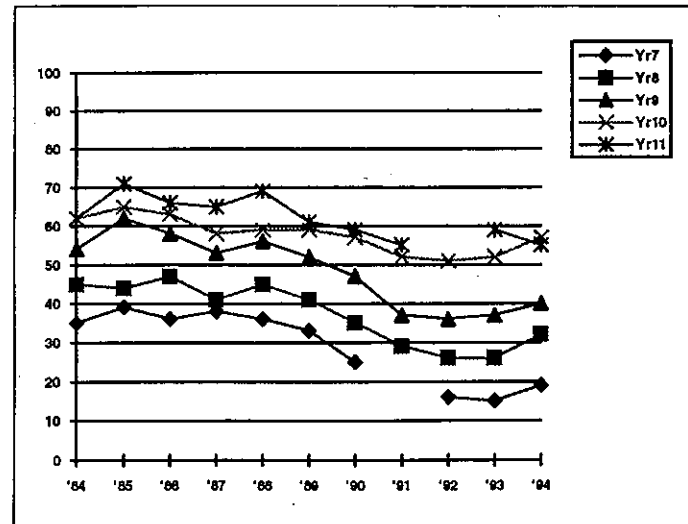
Fewer drinkers in 1994?

However, any one behaviour doesn't take too long to look at, and when this parliamentary researcher recently picked up *Young People in 1994* and compared the tables in it with the trends shown in *Young People in 1989* we were prompted to do so.

The proportion of young people reporting that they had drunk alcoholic drink during the week previous to the survey was fairly steady



	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94
Yr7	57	60	50	54	54	50	37	-	26	20	26
Yr8	66	63	61	59	63	54	45	38	35	29	38
Yr9	69	72	67	64	69	60	53	45	44	40	43
Yr10	75	76	70	68	69	66	63	55	53	54	60
Yr11	72	79	73	73	77	67	66	63	-	64	59



	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94
Yr7	35	39	36	38	36	33	25	-	16	15	19
Yr8	45	44	47	41	45	41	35	29	26	26	32
Yr9	54	62	58	53	56	52	47	37	36	37	40
Yr10	62	65	63	58	59	59	57	52	51	52	57
Yr11	62	71	66	65	69	61	59	55	-	59	55

The percentage of boys (above) and girls (right) that recorded having had at least one alcoholic drink during the previous week, from the Unit's annual nationwide data.

during the period 1984–1988—for example, for 15–16 year old boys (the most frequent users) about three-quarters reported having had a drink during the previous week. However, the equivalent figure for 1994 for this group of boys was only 59%. Was this a one-off (perhaps 1994 was a very dry year), or a sampling effect (we had surveys from dry counties only), or a genuine trend towards less frequent use?

A careful search of the archives yielded the figures shown in the tables. The first thing to say is that there is an obvious and fairly consistent downward trend for all year groups and both genders. Secondly, there is no suggestion that 1994 is a particularly low point in this behaviour. What could be the cause of this?

Changes in the question?

The question changed once between 1984–1989 and 1990–1994, where instead of asking pupils to write in a number, we now list the digits 0–7 and ask the respondents to circle the appropriate number. Our overall instructions to schools have changed in detail, but the principles for collecting data have not.

Changes in the composition of the sample?

The sample in some sense is never the same twice — one year we have a big Yorkshire survey, then a large East Anglian regional sur-

vey, and so on. But we know of no generally applicable difference in geography or timing that could account for this trend in the figures.

Real changes in the behaviour?

This is the most natural and most attractive interpretation. We think that there is a change in the proportion of young people that have had an alcoholic drink in a given week.

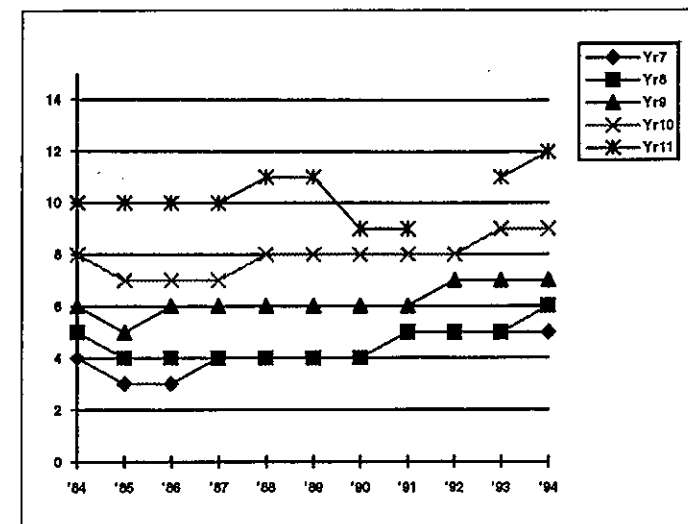
This conclusion raises many questions.

- *Why should young people nowadays be less likely to drink in the previous week?*
- *Is it their decision or their parents' (since we know that they are most likely to drink at home)?*
- *Is it that they are less attracted to alcohol (perhaps because of cost) or more attracted to other pursuits (work or leisure)?*

Without any other way into the issue, using these data, we can only speculate.

Consumption levels

As mentioned above, we have always been interested to see if there are changes in behaviours year by year, and in fact this is a very common question put to us by journalists. However, the behaviour that we have historically



	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94
Yr7	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	-	5	5	5
Yr8	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
Yr9	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7
Yr10	8	7	7	7	8	8	8	8	8	9	9
Yr11	10	10	10	10	11	11	9	9	-	11	12

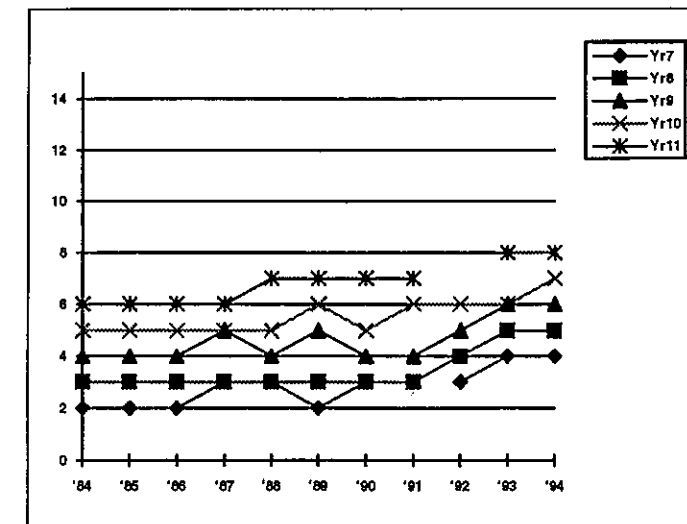
The average number of alcohol units consumed during the previous week by boys (above) and girls (right) that recorded having had at least one alcoholic drink, from the Unit's annual nationwide data.

been interested in is the level of consumption of alcohol, rather than its frequency, and these data are also presented.

Here, no such downward trend can be seen — rather, those who are drinking are reporting that they drink more. We have always suspected that these levels are under-estimates rather than over-estimates because 'glasses' or 'measures' poured at home may be generous and well in excess of official retail measures. In fact, given that over the last few years more high-strength products have been on offer from the drinks industry, this possible direction of bias may have been reinforced.

An unexplained trend

This additional information does not make analysis any easier. We seem to be seeing two contradictory trends in alcohol use by young



	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94
Yr7	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	-	3	4	4
Yr8	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	5
Yr9	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	6	6
Yr10	5	5	5	5	5	6	5	6	6	6	7
Yr11	6	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	-	8	8

people — fewer drinking alcohol in any given week, but those who are drinking are drinking more. It is hard to think of any general social trend that could simultaneously have these two effects, and have them fairly consistently from 1988–1994.

Has anyone any comments or suggestions with respect to this finding?

The Unit databanks

This 'discovery' is an example of the unmined riches lying dormant in more than a third of a million sets of data about young people collected since 1980. We would welcome funding to help us carry out further research.

For anyone wishing to dip into our long series of health related behaviour surveys, copies of our annual *Young People* reports for 1994, 1993, 1991 and 1986 are still available.