News from the Unit

Some Unit publications...

Young People and Illegal Drugs in 1996

- £7.00

A report based on data from the 1987 and 1996 using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

Cash and Carry?

- £12.00

A report based on data from 1987 and 1996 examining the financial aspects of illegal drug use.

Young People and Alcohol

- £17.00

A study of the drinking habits of young people aged 12-15 in England and Wales.

Young People and Smoking

- £15.00

A report on smoking habits among young people aged 12-15 in England and Wales.

Do we care about young drinkers?

- £20.00

A report on the attitudes and behaviours of young people aged 12-15 towards alcohol consumption.

Mark Griffiths: Video games aren’t all bad

- £18.00

A report on the effects of video games on young people’s mental health and behaviour.

Gurch Randhawa: How schools can help to save a life

- £10.00

A report on the role of schools in promoting health and wellbeing among young people.

The Unit team is here to help!

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J.M.

Education and Health

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The Unit’s latest ‘alcohol’ survey examines (among other things) amounts, attitudes, and aggression

John Balding

Young people and alcohol: its use and abuse

Confusion reigns. This was the conclusion we reached as the result of a survey entitled Alcohol Education in Schools, published by the Unit in 1992.

No consistent pattern of Alcohol Education in the schools was discovered. Variations are from almost nothing to ‘overkill’. Where it was delivered varied (PSE, Science, RE, Humanities, PE). It was targeted to the year groups involved, varied. The resources used were far from consistent. Levels of satisfaction with the programme in the schools amongst the staff also varied considerably.

Alcohol Education lessons are typically not boring. The purpose is not to produce a race of test-takers, but to promote sensible drinking.

The survey was based on a questionnaire response of 8315 boys and girls, equally divided between Years 8 and 10, all the surveys taking place in 1996. Most of them were in mixed comprehensive schools. There is plenty of classroom material here, and most is photocopiable.

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How many, and how much?
The proportions of young people recording that they drank any alcohol at all during the previous 7 days were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 boys</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 girls</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 boys</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 girls</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examining just these 'drinkers', the average number of units of alcohol they recorded consuming during the previous 7 days were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 boys</td>
<td>7.1 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 girls</td>
<td>6.3 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 boys</td>
<td>10.6 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 girls</td>
<td>7.9 units</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This means that the Year 10 'drinking' boys are, on average, consuming the equivalent of 5 pints of beer a week.

What are they drinking?
We have arranged the histogram (Figure 1) in decreasing average order of the most commonly recorded alcoholic drinks during the previous 7 days.

1. Wine
2. Spirits
3. Beer
4. Cider
5. Other drinks

The category none of these includes those boys and girls who reported no consumption of the listed drinks within the past 7 days. Note that canned shandy is not included as an alcoholic drink.

To conclude the analysis, it is immediately obvious that beer or lager shows a higher percentage for the boys than for the girls. Noticeable differences with higher percentages for girls include wine and fortified wines (Marlins, Chambertin, etc.).

It is interesting to discover 'alcopops' or alcoholic soft drinks in second place. Cider and alcopops are equally popular amongst boys and girls. Around one in five consumed spirits. The low-alcohol drinks mixed shandy, low-alcohol beer and low-alcohol wine were consumed by the smallest percentages.

Where do they get it from?

Here, we focus on the pattern of where these drinks were obtained.

- Family
- Friends
- Supermarket
- Off Licence
- Other

Because friends do drink, overall, the most popular response, agreed with by about 75% of all the Year 8 and Year 10 respondents. Interestingly, because parents do drink is given by a minority. To feel good is also very high on the list for both year groups. To look grown-up becomes less important for the older respondents, while to get drunk is the most widely quoted reason for all this older group. What messages are there here for the health educator?

Do their parents know they are drinking?

More than a decade of surveys using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire has consistently shown that the most commonly reported venue for the consumption of alcohol by young people is their home.

This immediately raises the issue of whether this consumption is carried on with the permission, or even awareness, of the parents. Is drinking at home a shared and accepted part of family life? Many parents take the view that modest supervised drinking at home is an appropriate, even essential, part of preparation for adult life.

We therefore ask the young people if their parents know about their home drinking, if any, and get the following responses for the derived category parents don’t always know:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 boys</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8 girls</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 boys</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10 girls</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The full breakdown is given in the report. The percentages given here are of the whole sample, not just the 'drinkers'.

We then examined the average amount of alcohol consumed during the previous 7 days to see if there is any statistical correlation with 'secret' home drinking, and indeed there is. Putting both ages and genders together, the mean amount of alcohol that the 'drinkers' reported consuming during the previous 7 days was 8.2 units. However, this was not consistent for those choosing different answers to the question of parental awareness of consumption in the home.

- Both years and genders: Units
  - Don't drink at home: 7.4
  - Parents always know: 7.1
  - Parents usually know: 8.7
  - Parents sometimes/never know: 10.1

This seems to imply that heavier drinking is partly based upon secret drinking at home. The heavier or more frequent drinkers are not only more likely to drink at home without the knowledge of their parents, but they are also more likely to drink in places other than their home.

One can summarise therefore that if the parents always know when the child drinks at home, then consumption is below average for the sample; if the parents do not always know when the child drinks at home, consumption is above average for the sample.

What lies behind this important association? Clearly, it is possible that the climate at home in relation to alcohol, or other parental attitudes, has effects on the children’s attitudes towards consumption. But also the parents' absence from the home at certain times may create extra opportunities for the children to consume alcohol, whatever the child's attitude. One is an
How do we encourage 'sensible drinking'? 

The large percentage of young people that report drinking alcohol, and the continuing problems of drunkenness and accidents among young people in the 16-24 age group, suggest that even if we hope to encourage sensible drinking in the home there is still some way to go before responsible attitudes and practices prevail elsewhere. It may even be suggested that some parents encourage their children to drink too much, too early. Is the age of 13 too early? Is anything more than a unit or two a week too much? Without clear guidance from authorities, parents are left to improvise in a climate where the opportunities and even pressures to consume may be keenly felt.

The survey asked the young people if, and when, they had experienced an 'aggressive' domestic scene. The following parameters were recorded:
1. Type. Two classes: verbal or physical.
2. Presence of alcohol. Three classes: no drinking by anyone, drinking by the respondent, drinking by other family members.

The report discusses all these combinations, but within this article I shall make the following points.

Frequency of aggression of any sort

The following percentages had been involved in episodes of verbal or physical aggression at home:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Ever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8 boys</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 girls</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 boys</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 girls</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Ever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8 boys</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 girls</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 boys</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 girls</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>68.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So it is not uncommon to experience aggression in the home. One almost suspects that the substantial percentages that record never having experienced aggression may have a different interpretation from those who say they have, although the prompts (verbal: shouting and arguing and physical: pushing, slapping, punching) do not seem to leave much room for debate as to what is meant.

We note that the Year 10 girls are consistently the most likely group to have been involved in domestic incidents.

Who is involved?

A question asked the respondent to indicate the family members involved in the incident. Mothers are more often cited than fathers. There are substantial numbers of young people whose father does not live at home, but even if single-parent families are excluded from the analysis the percentages are very similar. Shouting and arguing may seem to be unwarranted, or may result from legitimate attempts to discipline or otherwise manage the behaviour of the young.

Are there 'aggressive' family types?

We examined the frequency of aggressive incidents according to the family structure. Typically, the lowest percentage of young people reporting these incidents is found in families where both mother and father are living at home; the highest is almost always found where one parent has either re-married or is living with a partner. Single-parent families are somewhere in between these levels.

Do we care about young drinkers?

Is the consumption of alcohol by young people ill-advised? Where it causes poor behaviour in public places, action may be taken. But out of sight, who cares? Is it really our problem? Do we mind what happens in people's homes? What action should we be taking? How about:

Step 1 Decide if we really are concerned about so-called under-age drinking.

Step 2 If the answer is 'yes', decide on an age below which the consumption of alcohol by young people is at least against all reasonable judgment, if not against the law.

Step 3 Use this decision to clarify and revitalise the 'alcohol curriculum'; also, encourage parents to use it as a point of reference when deciding how to introduce their own children to alcoholic drink.

Some thoughts on 'under-age' drinking

The 'under-age' market is a very important one. For more than a decade, SHEU has been monitoring the levels of the disposable income of young people. In our publication Young People in 1996, the weekly levels for the 14-15 year olds are discovered to be about £10. Alcohol is one of the items on their list of purchases; it is not the most frequent, but over a quarter of the boys and girls in this age group that we surveyed in 1996 reported its purchase in the previous week.

The teenage market must be a target for the world of commerce. It cannot be ignored, and the alcohol industry appears to consider youngsters a legitimate target since teenage consumption of alcoholic products is not illegal. The new 'alco-pops' are clearly popular with boys and girls, but so were most other alcoholic drinks before this new variety arrived on the market.

Children model themselves upon the older generation in preparation for becoming adults.

Most parents have no idea of the amount of home drinking that is going on.

The Year 10 girls are the most likely to report involvement in 'domestic aggression'.

The alcohol industry appears to consider youngsters a legitimate target.