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What do we know about young people’s use of alcohol?

A review of the literature provides an evidence-base and shows worsening trends with young people drinking more regularly and in greater quantities.

Young people’s consumption of alcohol has been attracting growing interest as a serious social and public health issue facing the UK. For example, recent headlines have included ‘Mournful after: young drinkers face the epidemic of early death’ (The Independent, 2003) and ‘Primary school children turn to drink’ (The Observer, 2000). Partly in response to this concern, the UK Government is planning its first ever National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy. A credible starting point for all those who are concerned is to gain a quick insight into the breadth of evidence surrounding young people’s use of alcohol.

The reviewed literature

‘Young people,’ in this paper, are defined as those aged 11-16 years. Unless deemed unsurpassed by recent research, this review will report on findings published between 1995 and 2003. The review includes published papers from journals and books chapters, as well as unpublished and ‘in press’ data that have been obtained from personal correspondence with the authors or from seminar and conference presentations. For published literature, a number of data bases have been used such as BIDS, POPline, PSYCinfo, PUBMED and MEDline. The review has also involved the attendance to specialist libraries, including those at Alcohol Concern and the Royal Society of Medicine, and the liaison with key informants in this field.

Findings

To present the existing evidence-base in the young people and alcohol field, the review of the literature will endeavour to answer the following four key questions:

1. What age do young people start drinking alcohol, what proportion drink and how does this drinking progress?
2. What types of alcohol do young people drink?
3. How often and how much alcohol do young people drink?
4. Where do young people drink alcohol?

Age and drinking

At what age do young people start drinking alcohol? What proportion drink and how does this drinking progress?

Alcohol consumption is common practice among young people within the UK. From a previous review of the literature, Wright (2000) concludes that the first experiences of drinking alcohol usually occur between the ages of 8 to 12. More recent research concurs with her findings and there is no strong evidence to suggest that young people are drinking at a progressively younger age. By the time young people reach the teenage years, most would have drunk alcohol. Harrington (2000) reports that 96% of their 12-17 year olds had ever drunk alcohol at some point in their lives. Moreover, I’Hoff et al (2000) report that 94% of their 15-16 year olds had ever consumed alcohol. From the national survey of secondary schools series, Boreham and Shaw (2002) found that 61% of their 11-15 year olds had ever had a ‘proper drink’.

The experience of drinking alcohol clearly increases with age. For example, Boreham and Shaw (2002) note that 27% of 11 year olds had ever had a ‘proper drink’ compared to 86% of 15 year olds. Interestingly, more boys report ever having alcohol compared to young girls (indicating that boys start drinking earlier than girls), although these differences even out at ages 13 to 14.

Apart from ever consuming alcohol, an additional indication of the proportion of young people drinking is derived from consumption in the previous week. Overall, the Department of Health provisional data reports that 24% of their 11-15 year olds drank in the previous week. Unsurprisingly, this measure also increases with age: 5% of those aged 11 had drunk alcohol in the previous week compared to 47% of 15 year olds (Department of Health, provisional data). Similarly, Balding (2002) reports that around one quarter of those aged 12-15 drank alcohol in the previous week, compared to around one-half of 16-15 year olds. Again, boys are marginally more likely to report drinking in the previous week, with this discrepancy being more marked at younger ages within the 11-15 range (Department of Health, provisional data).

Interestingly, the national survey of secondary schools series also show that the proportion of young people who have ever drunk alcohol has shown no sustained increase or decrease since 1988. Between 1998 and 2001, the proportion of 11-15 year olds ever having a
Age and drinking - key points

- First experience of drinking alcohol usually occurs between the ages of 8 and 12 and is usually controlled by adult supervision.
- The age at which young people start drinking has not changed in recent years.
- Experience increases with age; around 25% of 11-15 year olds, and 60% of 15 year olds, have drunk alcohol. 5% of 11 year olds have drunk in the previous week compared to around 65% of 15 year olds.
- Boys tend to experience alcohol at a younger age than girls, with these gender differences disappearing by age 13 or 14.
- The proportion of young people drinking alcohol has remained relatively stable over the previous decade; there are no obvious differences in drunk alcohol, although those drinking in the previous week has shown a marginal increase.
- Adults (parents/carers) have the greatest influence over young people when they are first introduced to alcohol. As young people progress through adolescence, friends and peer groups become more influential.
- Young people may drink for a range of reasons. These may include enjoyment, relaxation, escapism, and for increased confidence.

Types of alcohol

What type of alcohol do young people drink?

Beer, Lager, Cider and Alcopops are the most popular drinks among young people.

Girls are more likely than boys to drink Wine, Spirits and Alcopops.

Beer, Lager, Cider and Alcopops are the most popular drinks among young people.

How often/how much

How often and how much do young people drink?

Boreham and Shaw (2002) reported that 20% of their 11-15 year-olds (total sample, not just those who drink) said that they usually had an alcoholic drink at least weekly. Note that this measure at least weekly (or frequency of drinking over the past 4 weeks) is a measure reported earlier. This proportion increases with age (% of 13 year olds compared to 43% of 15 year olds) and is slightly greater among girls (22% compared to 18% for girls). Of notable concern, the proportion of boys and girls drinking at least weekly has increased from 13% in 1998 to 20% in 2001 (Boreham and Shaw, 2002).

For those who drank in the previous week, 11-15 year olds drink an average of 10.5 units (Department of Health, provisional data). These levels increase with age (6.8 units for 11-12 year olds, 7.6 units for 13-14 year olds, 9.9 units for 15 year olds). Boys tend to drink more than girls (7.5 units for 11-15 year old boys compared to 9.6 units for the same aged girls). Balding (2002) found that the mean number of units drunk by the drinkers was 10 for males aged 14-15, and 8 for girls of the same age.

In terms of trends, research points to a worrisome situation higher levels of consumption. These increases have also been evidenced in previous reviews by Wright (1999) and Newburn and Shiner (2001). To provide an example of more recent evidence, the Department of Health (provisional data) report that the average weekly consumption of pupils who drink in the last week' increased from 5.3 units in 1990, to 10.5 units in 2002. These increases were generally consistent among boys and girls from a variety of ages within the 11-15 year range. Further evidence of this increasing consumption, this time associated to a significant trend, has been reported by Measham (1996). She found that 'heavy drinking' (11-40 units) on the last drinking occasion, among her sample of 'current and ex-drinkers', had increased from 22% to 31%. Although most sources have recorded increased levels of consumption over the course of a week, these trends (in particular the Measham study) could also support the supposed increases in 'binge drinking', or loosely defined here as excessive quantities of drink consumed over the course of a single session. This binge drinking was also evident in the Balding (2002) survey which found that one-half of their 10-15 year old 'drinkers' drank on only one day in the previous week.

In conjunction with these increased levels of consumption, some researchers have reported how often their sample report episodes of being drunk. For example, Haselden et al (1999) found that 20% of their 15-16 year olds, who drink at least once a week, reported being drunk more than 10 times in their lifetime. Similarly, Hibell et al (2000) found that 33% of boys and 27% of girls aged 15-16 (from the total sample) had been drunk 20 or more times in their lifetime. This measure reported earlier. This proportion increases with age (% of 13 year olds compared to 43% of 15 year olds) and is slightly greater among girls (22% compared to 18% for girls). Of notable concern, the proportion of boys and girls drinking at least weekly has increased from 13% in 1998 to 20% in 2001 (Boreham and Shaw, 2002).

Among those who drink...levels of consumption over the week have nearly doubled over the last decade.
ever the last decade. Boys and girls of all ages.

> Among those who drink (in the previous week), levels of consumption over the course of a single session and reported drunkenness, has also increased.

**Discussions**

Where do young people drink alcoholic drinks? Compared to other measures reported previously, fewer surveys have identified the most popular locations for young people’s drinking. Goddard and Higgins (2000) found that the place where young people usually drank were at their own home (43% of 13-15 year old drinkers), parties with friends (22%), outdoors / on the street (21%) and at someone else’s house (18%). Similarly, Balch and SHU (2000) show a dominance of drinking at home among 10-15 year olds, with ‘friends or relatives’ and ‘outside in a public place’ also being reported (to a lesser extent than at home).

In contrast to age, these surveys reported very little difference according to gender (Hillibull et al, 2000, Goddard and Higgins 2000 and Balch and SHU 2000). However, there were variations in location according to frequency of drinking. Those who usually drank once a week were twice as likely to drink in pubs, clubs and outdoors. Although there were less likely to report drinking in their own home (Goddard and Higgins, 2000).

A study by Forsyth and Bernard (2000) is shown to focus on drinking in more depth. Among their sample of 1420, 13-16 year olds, they too find the popularity of own and friends’ houses and outdoors / hidden locations (more so than the Goddard and Higgins work). Of particular interest, they report that the location of drinking is a good indicator of potential for alcohol-related harm, even before the environmental risks inherent to that setting are taken into account. They found that drunkness was less likely in own home, but much more likely in friends’ houses and especially in outdoor / hidden locations (Forsyth and Bernard, 2000). They also found that high volume drinkers (eg, Wong Chisum) were more likely to be found in these areas.

The most popular location

Drinking venues - key points

> The most popular location for drinking alcoholic (among underage drinkers) is in one’s own home.

**References**


