

# Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink

Findings  
Informing change

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Current rates of alcohol consumption among young adults suggest future increases in alcohol-related harm, with considerable social and financial costs. This study investigated the influences, motivations and decision-making underpinning the drinking choices of young adults aged between 18 and 25.

## Key points

- Excessive drinking was characteristic of young adults when drinking in friendship groups. Alcohol had an important cultural role in offering one of the few occasions in their lives for fun, making and maintaining friendships and group bonding.
- Excessive consumption was given considerable encouragement and opportunity in the youth-orientated bars and clubs they felt comfortable drinking in.
- In deciding how much to drink on a given occasion, the price of alcohol was more likely to curtail consumption than concerns about health or personal risk associated with drunkenness.
- Some individuals suggested that if they were priced out of alcohol consumption they would seek intoxication through substances available illegally, such as black market alcohol or other drugs.
- Young adults did not worry about the health risks of alcohol, perceiving their drinking as part of the normal experience of young adulthood and therefore temporary.
- The authors conclude that the potential for harm is not the same across all groups, as the many pathways through young adulthood give different opportunities and scope for excessive alcohol use. Those who find it difficult to attain aspects of full adulthood, such as steady employment or independent housing, may continue this phase of their life over a prolonged period.

## The research

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## Background

Increasing rates of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity across the United Kingdom suggest that attitudes, values and practices concerning alcohol have shifted considerably in recent years. Although the leisure choices of young people have always attracted concern, their drinking behaviour is shaped by wider cultural norms around alcohol. Understanding the drinking behaviour and choices of today's young adults is vital to reduce future levels of alcohol-related harm.

This study used interviews, alcohol diaries and focus groups with young adults aged between 18 and 25 to examine their influences, motivations and decision-making regarding alcohol consumption.

## Current norm of excessive drinking in young adulthood

The researchers found getting intoxicated to be the main intention of young adults when drinking in the company of their peers. Although moderate consumption was more likely in family contexts or mixed age groups, among young adults moderation was considered to be against the agreed intentions of such occasions.

I know what I do is bad for me, but I don't see the point of like just having one drink because if you are only going to have one drink you may as well have nothing at all. (Female student)

A key reason for this excessive drinking in peer groups was in giving young adults a valuable opportunity to relax, have fun and form and maintain relationships. The presence of alcohol marked 'time aside' from the stresses, formality and focus on achievement that often characterised their lives. Consequently, many described their typical style of alcohol consumption as 'drinking to get drunk'. Intoxication bonded young people together. Other occasions for bonding appeared to be absent, almost giving alcohol the monopoly in enabling this type of peer group involvement.

I think you can just know each other much better [when drinking] and just have a good laugh because obviously in work you have just time for lunch for like one hour so if you don't have enough time just to have a chat to speak about, I don't know, our lives, or about what we've done. (Female in employment)

Alcohol is good for getting people together. People are definitely more persuaded by alcohol to do things and meet up. (Male student)

## The influence of where young people drink

Young adults matched their drinking to the norms of a given situation. This highlights how different contexts for drinking can encourage either excessive or moderate consumption. The availability of cheap alcohol and drinks designed to attain drunkenness rapidly (such as shots and shooters) reinforce the norm of 'drinking to get drunk' in some contexts. Although the extent to which newer, youth-orientated bars create the desire to get drunk is contestable, they can at least be seen to limit the possibilities for other ways of drinking.

This was illustrated through discussions about 'pre-loading' – drinking at home before going out. An important factor in pre-loading was that "the right level of drunkenness" (student focus group statement) was required to fully enjoy destination bars and clubs. Drinking at home also allowed people an informal space to 'catch up' in a more intimate and conversational setting, which the atmosphere in youth-orientated venues prevented. Pre-loading was therefore not only a preparation for, but also a partial resistance to, the type of alcohol culture on offer in bars and clubs.

## The influence of peers and price

Being 'in the moment' and one of the crowd was a central intention for young adults when drinking with their peers. Hence the concept of individual 'decision-making' can over-rationalise and over-individualise the experience of drinking on such occasions.

I guess I'm doing it because other people are doing it ... Even though they don't influence my decision sometimes I just feel like I want to join them. (Male student)

Consequently, 'normal' everyday decision-making was not appropriate in the transformed experience of intoxication. Criteria such as the short and long-term health effects of heavy drinking and the risks to body and reputation of being drunk were not robust enough to limit consumption after intoxication was reached.

Financial considerations, however, were more important in limiting consumption. Many would restrict how much they drank by putting a monetary limit on the evening rather than one based on alcohol units or an idealised level of drunkenness or sobriety.

**Sometimes I go out and get really drunk, especially when it is pound a drink night, because you don't realise how much you are drinking because you are not spending much money, but if you are in a more expensive place, you notice what you drink, because it costs you more.**  
(Female student)

## Alcohol's relationship to the young adulthood stage of life

A cultural driver for excessive drinking was young adults' understanding of 'where they were at' in the course of their life. They saw young adulthood as providing a 'safe' period for regular heavy drinking as a time of independence without full responsibility, and of self-exploration, boundary-seeking and self-focus. This view is supported by marketing and advertising promotions celebrating and encouraging alcohol consumption as part of the expression of youthful adulthood. In such circumstances it is possible to sustain the belief that current behaviour does not affect long-term life chances or lead to having a drink problem.

Taking a longer view, all the young adults saw their current style of drinking with their peers as temporary. Many reflected on how their drinking in their early twenties differed from that in their teens. They already showed signs of awareness of how, what and where they drank rather than the determined pursuit of drunkenness that characterised their teenage experiences. Many felt that a more moderate style was inevitable as they got older and took on the responsibilities of adulthood, changed their peer networks and became less comfortable in youthful venues.

**I don't think old people should go to clubs.**  
(Female in employment)

## Different pathways to full adulthood

The young adults in the study were achieving the responsibilities of full adulthood at different rates and in varying orders. Most reported excessive alcohol use featuring as a key component of their social lives at some point, and in the manner described above. However, although the intentions displayed broad similarity, the ways in which they were carried out highlighted different opportunities to act out cultural norms around alcohol and with different short and long-term risks attached.

For those on the economic margins, the consumption of off-sales alcohol in outdoor or domestic settings was often the only option. Alcohol competed with illegal drugs (including black market alcohol) and co-existed with gang-related activities and violence. For those already comfortable with the idea of illegal intoxication, price increases and the reduction of availability of alcohol were predicted to promote use of other drugs.

**But I do think if they put the price of alcohol up more people would turn to ecstasy ... you need to have fun on a night out!** (Female student)

For those who had children in their early twenties or before, becoming a parent would offer resilience to street-based cultures as it led to a change in their social networks, bringing parenting and care-giving into prominence over street-based activity. Those who were unable to attain markers of changing status such as employment, home ownership or successful study had difficulty in imagining their peer-based drinking changing in the future.

## Conclusion

A period of excessive alcohol consumption in young adulthood is considered normal, with little long-term risk attached. The increasing commercialisation of leisure and lifestyle through which young adulthood is enacted also makes a significant contribution. At this time in their lives, young adults find it hard to imagine other ways of associating with their peers than through the collective consumption of alcohol. The proliferation of drinking opportunities for this age group, including low-cost ones, has not been matched by the growth of other realistic occasions for peer association beyond alcohol. Thus the socialising of young adults has increasingly developed a culture that reinforces the need for drinking to participate and belong.

While controlling the price and availability of alcohol should limit the amount drunk on an outing, consideration also needs to be given as to how young adults' peer association and intoxication have become so intertwined. Having a variety of attitudes to alcohol within a social network appears to offer young people glimpses of alternative ways of socialising (such as parental examples of moderate drinking). Yet young adults' social worlds are increasingly separated from mainstream adulthood through greater market segmentation in venues, media and other aspects of lifestyle. Consequently, the same processes that are keeping older adults out of city centres at night also appear to be concentrating and reinforcing a norm of harmful consumption among younger adults.

The researchers also draw attention to the possibility of current drinkers substituting alternative forms of intoxication if they are priced out of alcohol – particularly those who are already excluded from 'official' drinking venues and/or are comfortable with the idea of illegal intoxication.

## About the project

The research was conducted by Pete Seaman and Theresa Ikegwuonu at the Glasgow Centre for Population Health. It involved multiple interviews and alcohol diaries with 35 individuals aged between 18 and 25 living in Glasgow. Focus groups with participants' friendship groups increased the number of those taking part in the study to 80. The data was collected between autumn 2008 and summer 2009.

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## For further information

The full report, **Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink** by Pete Seaman and Theresa Ikegwuonu, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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