



# Adolescents and Alcohol

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## IAS Factsheet

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## Introduction

The World Health Organization's European Charter on Alcohol states that:

*"All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages."*

The Charter also calls on Governments to *"Promote health by controlling the availability, for example for young people, and influencing the price of alcoholic beverages, for instance by taxation."* The WHO Charter has been signed by Member States of the European Union, including the UK.

In the interwar period in the UK young people aged 18-24 were the lightest drinkers in the adult population and the group most likely to abstain. Nor did alcohol play a significant part in the youth culture that came into existence in the 1950s, this being more likely to involve the coffee bar than the pub. It was not until the 1960s that pubs and drinking became an integral part of the youth scene. By the 1980s, those aged 18-24 years had become the heaviest drinkers in the population, and the group least likely to abstain.

By the year 2002, hazardous drinking i.e. drinking bringing the risk of physical or psychological harm now or in the future, was most prevalent in teenagers and young adults.<sup>1</sup>

In women, hazardous drinking reached its peak in the age group 16-19, with just under one third (32%) having a hazardous drinking pattern.

In men the peak was found in the 20-24 age group, with just under two thirds (62%) having a hazardous drinking pattern.

These changes were accompanied by a decline in the age of onset of regular drinking. Nowadays, most young people are drinking regularly, though not necessarily frequently, by the age of 14 or 15. One survey<sup>2</sup> found that more than a quarter of boys aged 9 - 10 and a third of those a year older reported drinking alcohol at least once in the previous week, normally at home.

Most surveys suggest the trend of drinking for effect and drinking to intoxication grew during the period up to around 2003/4, although it may now have peaked. A related aspect is the partial merging of the alcohol and drug scenes in the context of youth culture, with alcohol being one of a range of psychoactive products available on the recreational drug market.

A large survey of teenagers in England, Wales and Scotland<sup>3</sup> found that by age 15/16 binge drinking was common, as was being 'seriously drunk.' In this study, binge drinking was defined as consuming five or more alcoholic drinks in a single session.

The growth in binge drinking may be regarded as particularly significant as there is evidence that drinking, and especially heavier drinking, in adolescence increases the likelihood of binge drinking continuing through adult life.<sup>4</sup>

## KEY POINTS

- Drinking increases with age: 14% of 12–13s, 33% of 14–15s and 62% of 16–17s have drunk alcohol in the last week.
- Most 12- to 17-year-olds (84%) have drunk at some point in their lives. For most of those aged 12–15, drinking is occasional – about one in ten reported drinking at least once a week on average. Half of those aged 16–17 drank at least once a week.
- The latest survey data suggest that girls have caught up with, and in some measures, overtaken boys in relation to binge drinking.<sup>5</sup>

- Beer and lager are the most popular drinks among under-18s. Spirits, wine and alcopops are also popular.
- Ethnic minority teenagers are less likely to drink alcohol. One in 20 non-white 12- to 17- year-olds are frequent drinkers compared with one in four whites.
- Under-18-year-olds cannot legally buy alcohol themselves but 63% of those aged 16–17 and 10% aged 12–15 who have drunk in the last year say that they usually buy their alcohol themselves – most often in pubs, bars and nightclubs.
- 15% of all 12- to 17-year-olds have been involved in some form of antisocial behaviour during or after drinking – mostly getting into a heated argument. Frequent drinkers are more likely to have behaved antisocially.
- A higher proportion of offenders aged 12–17 are frequent drinkers (36%) than non-offenders (20%).
- Most under-18s view drinking positively. They see it as a means of socialising with friends (62%). More than half say young people like getting drunk. Increasing confidence is also important.<sup>6</sup>

### **Problems in schoolchildren**

In 2004, a survey of secondary school head teachers carried out by the BBC Six O'Clock News<sup>7</sup> found that nearly 70% believed that drinking by pupils increased over the previous 5 years, predominantly in the under 16 age group. A majority of the heads thought alcohol was a bigger problem in their school than drug abuse. The BBC quoted the head teacher of a Community School in Hampshire as saying:

*"Some pupils come into school drunk or with hangovers.*

*"It has quite a devastating effect. They come in to school with a hangover, they've got a headache, they want to sleep, they can't concentrate,"*

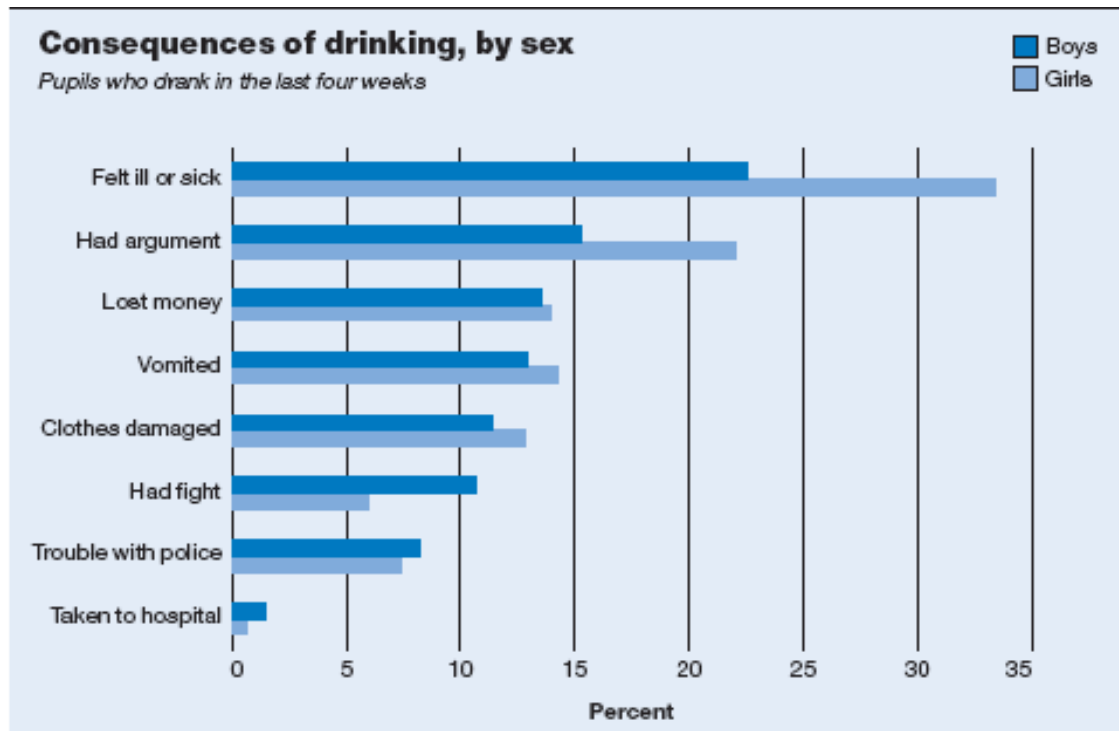
*"It sometimes leads to different behaviour that then has a knock-on effect on the rest of the group so their learning is affected."*

*The head teacher was particularly alarmed to find people driving onto the school grounds to sell alcohol to pupils.*

*"The children would then come and amass round the boot and buy cans and bottles of beer and alco-pops to drink.*

*"We eventually caught them and they now no longer come on to school site, but they do park elsewhere."*

**(See also IAS factsheet ' Adolescents & Alcohol: Problems related to drinking')**

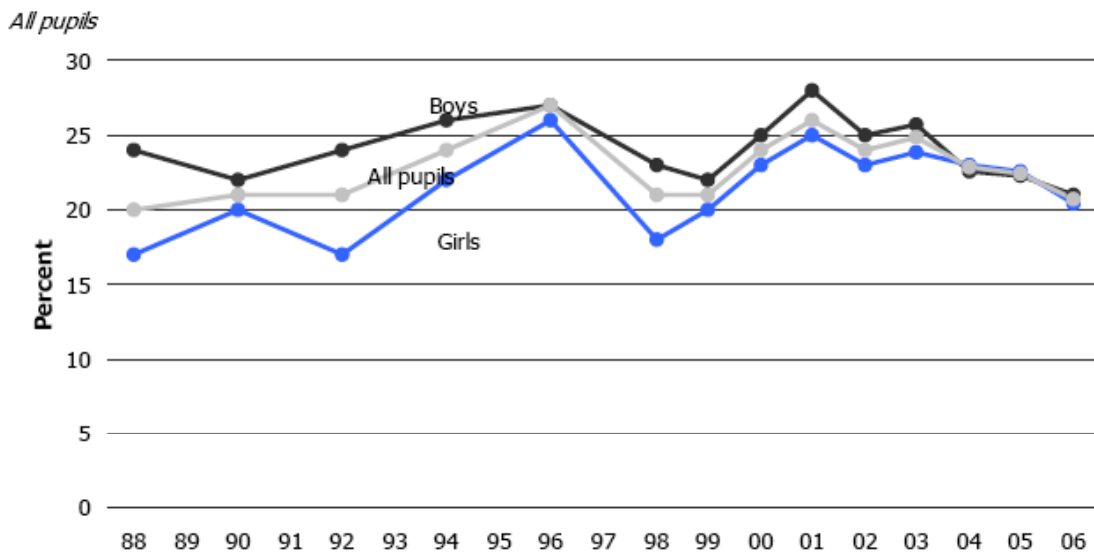


Note: percentages are of those who had drunk alcohol in the last four weeks.

The same Government monitoring survey of English school children, aged 11-15, found:

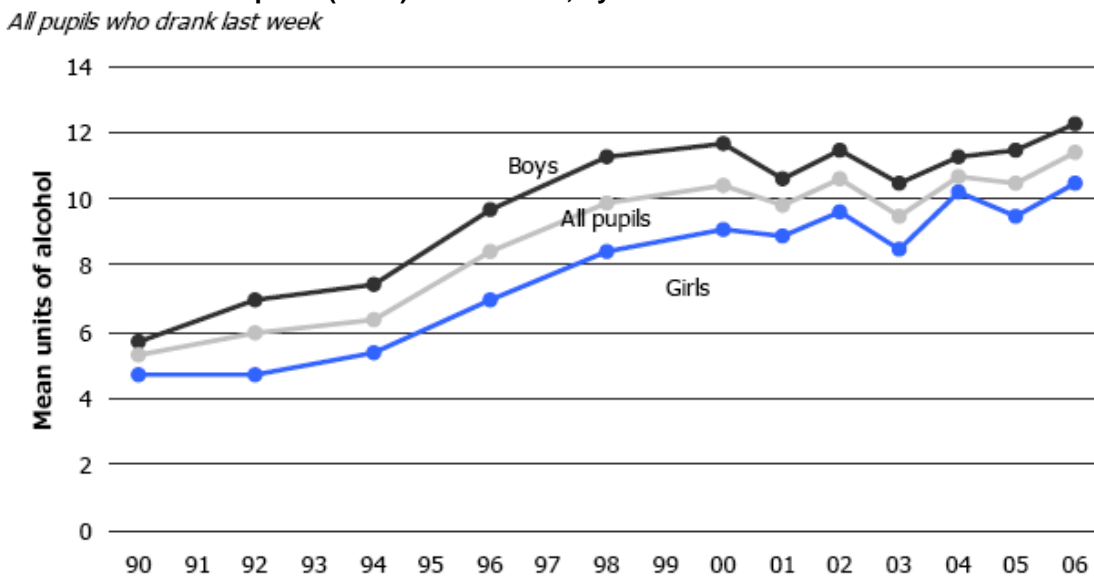
- Prevalence of drinking alcohol in the last week has not changed markedly since 1988, though there has been a small decline since 2000. However, the amount consumed by those who drink has doubled.

### Prevalence of drinking in last week, by sex: 1988-2006<sup>8</sup>



- In terms of the amount of alcohol drunk, the average weekly consumption of those who drank in the last 7 days increased from 5.3 units in 1990 to 11.4 in 2006.

### Mean alcohol consumption (units) in last week, by sex: 1990-2006<sup>8</sup>



- Among those who drank, boys drank an average of 12.3 units in the previous week in 2006 compared with 10.5 units drunk by girls.
- The 'gender gap' has now disappeared, in that girls are as likely as boys to drink.
- There was a sharp increase in prevalence of drinking with age: in 2006 only 3% of all pupils aged 11 had had a drink in the previous week, but 41% of 15 year olds had done so.

An international survey<sup>5</sup> found that girls are as, or more, likely than boys to report binge drinking or drunkenness

**UK – Proportion of 15/16 year-olds who reported being drunk 3 times or more during the last 30 days (2003)**

**Boys**  
22%

**Girls**  
25%

**UK – Proportion reporting binge drinking 3 times or more during the last 30 days (2003)**

**Boys**  
26%

**Girls**  
29%

**UK – Proportion who have been drunk at age of 13 or younger (2003)**

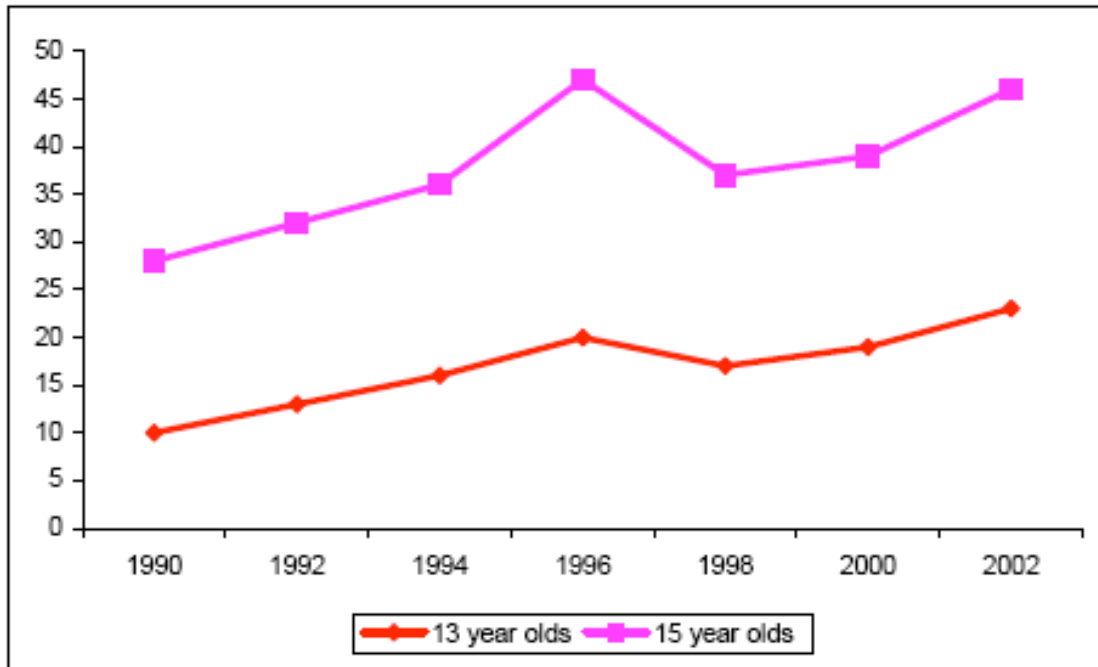
**Boys**  
42%

**Girls**  
35%

## Scotland

There has been a 60% increase in reported drinking among 15 year olds and more than a 100% rise among 13 year olds in the past 12 years<sup>9</sup>

### Percentage of pupils who reported drinking in the week before the survey by age group: Scotland 1990-2002



Also in 2002

- Almost a quarter (23%) of all 13 year old pupils and nearly half (46%) of all 15 year old pupils reported drinking at some time in the week before the survey
- 36% of both 13 year old boys and 13 year old girls; 59% of 15 year old girls and 56% of 15 year old boys; who had ever drunk alcohol, reported drinking 5 or more alcoholic drinks on the same occasion in the last 30 days.
- 14% of 15 year old pupils who had ever drunk alcohol reported having had unprotected sex on at least one occasion in the last year as a result of drinking alcohol.
- 11% of 13 year olds reported staying off school on at least one occasion in the last year as a result of drinking alcohol.

## How Much Do Young People Drink?

Mean alcohol consumption of pupils who had drunk in the last seven days, by gender and age, 1990 to 2006<sup>10</sup>

England	Units of alcohol											
	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>All pupils</b>												
<b>All ages</b>	5.3	6.0	6.4	8.4	9.0	10.4	9.8	10.6	9.5	10.7	10.5	11.4
Aged 11-13	..	3.4	4.1	5.5	6.3	6.4	5.6	6.8	7.1	7.8	8.2	10.1
Aged 14	..	4.7	6.1	7.7	9.9	9.8	9.6	10.3	9.0	9.9	10.3	10.9
Aged 15	..	8.1	7.7	10.4	11.5	12.9	12.3	13.0	11.3	12.9	11.8	12.3
<b>Boys</b>												
<b>All ages</b>	5.7	7.0	7.4	9.7	11.3	11.7	10.6	11.5	10.5	11.3	11.5	12.3
Aged 11-13	..	3.6	5.2	7.1	6.2	8.3	5.5	7.3	7.7	8.1	8.6	11.9
Aged 14	..	5.3	6.7	7.3	12.3	9.5	10.0	10.7	9.4	10.1	11.1	10.1
Aged 15	..	9.6	8.8	12.9	12.9	14.5	13.8	14.3	12.9	13.9	13.1	13.9
<b>Girls</b>												
<b>All ages</b>	4.7	4.7	5.4	7.0	8.4	9.1	8.0	9.6	8.5	10.2	9.5	10.5
Aged 11-13	..	3.1	3.0	4.0	6.4	4.6	5.7	6.3	6.4	7.3	7.9	8.4
Aged 14	..	3.8	5.5	8.2	8.1	10.1	9.3	10.0	8.7	9.7	9.5	11.7
Aged 15	..	6.0	6.6	8.0	9.7	11.2	10.7	11.4	9.8	12.1	10.5	10.9

Source: Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2006. The Information Centre for Health and Social Care

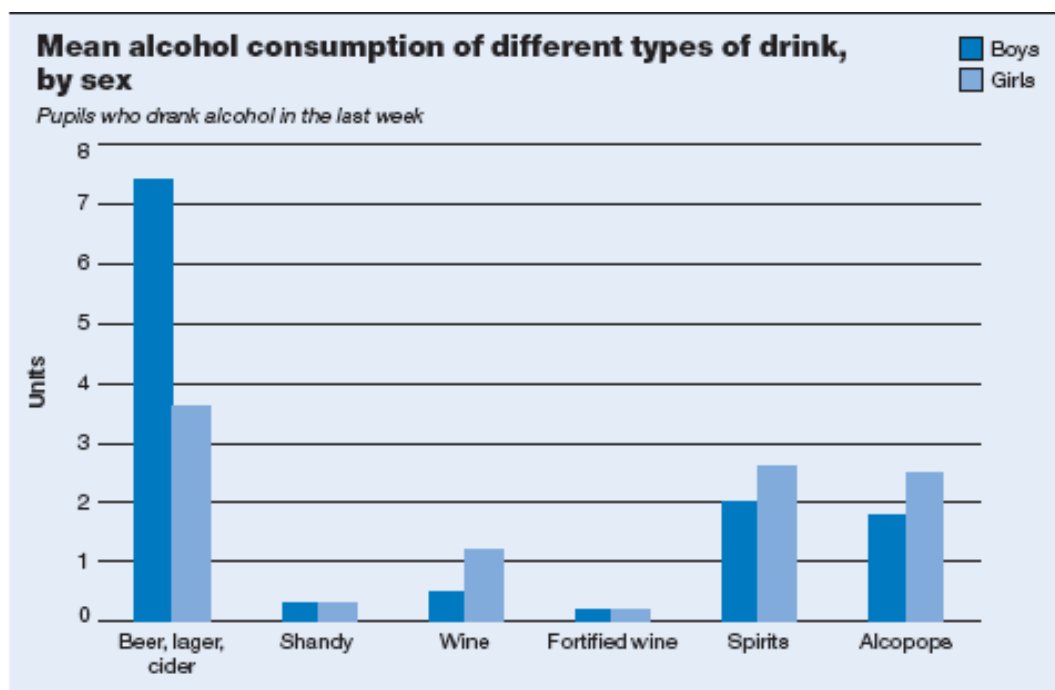
## How Many Young People Drink?

Proportion of pupils who drank alcohol in the last week, by gender and age, 1988 to 2006<sup>10</sup>

	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>All pupils</b>														
<b>All ages</b>	20	21	21	24	27	21	21	24	26	24	25	23	22	21
11 yrs	5	6	6	6	7	3	6	5	6	5	6	4	3	3
12 yrs	9	8	10	9	11	10	9	10	12	11	11	10	8	8
13 yrs	16	18	13	19	24	15	16	19	22	20	21	18	18	16
14 yrs	22	32	29	30	36	29	28	32	35	34	33	33	32	29
15 yrs	40	40	45	50	53	44	45	48	52	47	49	45	45	41
<b>Boys</b>														
<b>All ages</b>	24	22	24	26	27	23	22	25	28	25	26	23	22	21
11 yrs	7	8	8	8	7	4	7	5	8	7	8	5	4	5
12 yrs	12	9	13	10	12	14	10	11	14	12	12	11	7	8
13 yrs	20	17	15	22	27	16	15	18	22	20	22	17	18	16
14 yrs	25	32	32	34	37	28	28	34	35	34	32	32	31	29
15 yrs	45	42	49	52	50	48	48	51	54	49	49	44	45	40
<b>Girls</b>														
<b>All ages</b>	17	20	17	22	26	18	20	23	25	23	24	23	23	20
11 yrs	4	4	5	4	6	2	4	5	4	4	5	3	2	2
12 yrs	7	5	7	9	9	6	8	9	11	9	9	9	9	7
13 yrs	11	19	11	16	22	14	17	19	22	21	19	19	18	15
14 yrs	19	32	25	26	35	29	28	31	35	34	34	33	33	30
15 yrs	36	39	40	48	55	40	41	45	50	45	48	46	45	41

Source: Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2006. The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2007

## What Do Young People Drink?<sup>8</sup>



In Scotland in 2002, beer, lager or cider were the drinks most commonly consumed by 15 year old boys, while 15 year old girls reported drinking mainly spirits or alcopops. 13 year old boys were as likely to report drinking alcopops as beer, lager or cider.<sup>11</sup>

## Where Do Young People Drink and Where Do They Obtain Alcohol?

Among the youngest adolescents the usual drinking place is the home. As they grow older, young people continue to drink at home, but the usual site of their drinking shifts, first to parties, then to clubs and discos and finally to pubs. In the table below, 'somewhere else' includes public places such as streets and parks.

<b>Where pupils usually drink, by age</b>						
<i>Current drinkers</i>						2006
Where usually drink <sup>a</sup>	Age					Total
	11 years	12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
At home	62	58	48	43	34	44
On the street, in a park, or somewhere else outside	14	17	26	35	37	31
Someone else's home	15	20	25	29	35	29
Parties with friends	6	17	23	28	40	29
Pub or bar	7	6	4	7	13	9
Club or disco	2	7	3	5	8	6
Somewhere else	10	8	7	5	5	6

Note: Percentages are of those who currently drink, at least occasionally (42% of the sample).<sup>8</sup>

Although young people 'usually' drink at home, this does not necessarily mean that most of the alcohol they consume is at home. They may drink a little at home quite often but when they do drink somewhere else, drink a great deal more. This could result in most of the alcohol being drunk somewhere other than at home, even when the usual place for drinking is in the home.

The young people were also asked whether they had obtained any alcohol (or tried to buy some but failed) in the last four weeks, and if so where they had got it from. Overall, 44% said that they had obtained alcohol in the last four weeks, about the same number as those who said they currently drink.

Overall, 23% said that their parents had given them alcohol in the last four weeks, a slightly higher proportion than the 18% who said that they usually drink at home (a teenager might have been given a drink by his parents in the last four weeks but still 'usually' drink somewhere else). 26% of the young people said that they had been given alcohol by friends and 20% had asked someone else to buy alcohol for them (note that more than one answer could be given to this question, which is why these answers add up to more than the 44% who had obtained any alcohol).

For the youngest children (11 and 12 yr-olds) parents were the most common source of alcohol, but from the age of 13 upwards, friends were the most common source.<sup>8</sup>

Although under 18s cannot normally buy alcohol legally, the Youth Lifestyles Survey found that 63% of 16-17 year olds, and 10% of 12-15 year olds, who had drunk in the last year usually bought their alcohol themselves. Only a third of under 18s who tried to buy alcohol reported that retailers had refused to sell to them on at least one occasion in the past year. The most popular places where under 18s try to buy alcohol are pubs, bars and nightclubs and they are normally successful.<sup>6</sup>

A Home Office report suggests that around 13% of 10 to 15 year olds who have drunk alcohol in the past year have tried to buy alcohol (illegally) from a shop, and 11% from a bar or a pub in the last 12 months. For 16 to 18 year olds, the figures rise to 47% and 59% respectively. The report also suggested that most of those who had attempted to buy alcohol illegally had been successful at least once, and some had been successful much more frequently:

**Number of times successful at buying alcohol from shops or pubs in previous 12 months amongst 10 to 17 year olds who have tried to buy alcohol<sup>12</sup>**

	10-15 years		16-17 years	
	Shops	Pubs/ nightclubs	Shops	Pubs/ nightclubs
	%	%	%	%
Not at all	16	7	4	2
1-10 times	70	71	56	32
More than 11 times	14	22	39	66
Total %	100	100	100	100
Base n	142	121	342	436

Notes: 1. Source: 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, weighted data. 2. Results are based on those aged 10 to 17 who had reported they had tried to buy alcohol from a shop, supermarket, off-licence or a pub, bar or nightclub.

In the Home Office 'summer blitz' on alcohol and disorder in 2004, it was found that of 1,825 'sting' operations on specially targeted licensed premises, over half (51%) of the on-licences, and just under a third (32%) of the off-licences were selling alcohol to the under 18s.<sup>13</sup>

## What About Alcopops?

There has recently been much concern over 'designer drinks' and 'alcoholic soft drinks' or 'alcopops'. 'Designer drinks' such as 'K' Cider, TNT, MD 20/20, Diamond White and Thunderbird are all strong in alcohol and are produced in smaller, more manageable bottles. Alcoholic soft drinks or 'alcopops' are drinks such as lemonade or cola with alcohol added and have become very popular since they were first launched in the summer of 1995, although surveys normally find that the most popular alcoholic drinks with teenagers are beer, lager or cider, and sometimes spirits.

Some surveys have suggested that alcopops are associated with heavier drinking. One survey, of more than 8,000 young people aged from 12 to 14 also found that "alcopoppers" were more likely than others to drink in pubs, discos and at parties.<sup>14</sup>

Another, in Scotland<sup>15</sup>, found that by the age of 14 more than half of the school children reported having been drunk and at all ages consumers of white cider and fruit wines were significantly more likely to report having been drunk. Consumers of the new drinks were also found to be drinking alcohol more often.

A study<sup>16</sup> carried out for the regulatory authorities in regard to alcohol advertising found that, while alcopops comprise only a small proportion of the total alcohol consumed by the population as a whole, in its sample of 10-15 year olds, alcopops were the most popular drinks across all age groups, both male and female, typically Bacardi Breezer, Smirnoff Ice or WKD. The report suggests that alcopops make alcohol taste reliably pleasant and, therefore, make it more accessible to adolescents. While there have long been drinks that include mixers which effectively mask the taste of alcohol - rum and coke, gin and tonic etc - alcopops give such mixes a more unitary identity and link them with brand images which are appealing to adolescents in their own right. For example, Bacardi is perceived as signalling sophistication. The report also suggests that the brand values of alcopops are strikingly attuned to adolescence: they celebrate mocking the older generation and getting away with things.

The controversy about alcopops increased attention to the problems of underage drinking in general and, following an increase in criticism from both politicians and the public, a voluntary code of practice governing the marketing of alcopops was drawn up.

The code seeks to prevent any alcoholic drink using a brand name, packaging or promotions that are "likely to attract the attention of younger teenagers or children"; draw on associations with violence, drugs or sexual prowess; encourage excessive or irresponsible consumption or "blur the distinction between childhood and alcoholic drinks". The code also informs retailers that alcoholic drinks should be displayed separately from soft drinks.

## Why Do Young People Drink?

Qualitative research<sup>17</sup> suggests that young people drink for a range of reasons and that drinking performs multiple functions, symbolic as well as practical: it is not simply a question of identifying with or copying 'adult' behaviour. Brands of alcohol and drinking styles can function as fashion statements as well as means of altering consciousness.

Three separate sets of reasons have been identified:

- Individually-based reasons e.g. changing mood, coping with stress, feeling happy.
- Socially-based reasons – these are more common, and relate to the ways alcohol and drinking are used to facilitate social relations, e.g. developing trust with friends, exploring sexual relationships. Alcohol is seen to serve both relaxing and bonding functions within the peer group, as well as providing an excuse for 'bad behaviour'.
- Peer influence, which although including unwanted pressure more generally involves a tacit social expectation that certain kinds of events involve drinking.

## Motivations for Binge Drinking

### Social facilitation

- increased enjoyment of social situations
- increase in 'confidence' in regard to social group scenarios eg securing a sexual interaction

### Individual benefits

- escapism
- forgetting problems
- the 'buzz'
- 'something to do'

### Social norms and influences

- accepted culture of heavy drinking – behaving 'normally'
- peer influence
- gaining 'respect' and 'image' in social groups

## Attitudes to drinking among pupils, by gender and age, 2004<sup>10</sup>

England	Percentages					
	All ages	11	12	13	14	15
<b>All pupils</b>						
OK to try drinking alcohol to see what it's like	62	29	47	65	80	84
OK to try getting drunk to see what it's like	24	3	9	19	36	48
OK to drink alcohol once a week	39	13	23	36	54	64
OK to get drunk once a week	14	2	5	9	21	32
<b>Boys</b>						
OK to try drinking alcohol to see what it's like	62	34	47	62	78	82
OK to try getting drunk to see what it's like	24	4	9	18	37	47
OK to drink alcohol once a week	40	16	26	36	55	64
OK to get drunk once a week	14	3	4	8	22	32
<b>Girls</b>						
OK to try drinking alcohol to see what it's like	63	24	46	69	81	86
OK to try getting drunk to see what it's like	24	2	9	21	34	49
OK to drink alcohol once a week	38	11	21	36	53	63
OK to get drunk once a week	14	2	5	11	20	31
<i>Bases</i>						
<i>All pupils</i>	<i>1,684</i>	<i>1,945</i>	<i>1,938</i>	<i>1,893</i>	<i>2,096</i>	<i>9,556</i>
<i>Boys</i>	<i>861</i>	<i>1,023</i>	<i>1,003</i>	<i>974</i>	<i>1,073</i>	<i>4,934</i>
<i>Girls</i>	<i>823</i>	<i>922</i>	<i>935</i>	<i>919</i>	<i>1,023</i>	<i>4,622</i>

1. Children in secondary school years 7 to 11, mostly aged 11-15

Source: Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2004. The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2007

A study of 14-17 year-old binge drinkers<sup>18</sup> found the great majority reported harmful outcomes:

### **Health**

- regretted sexual experience (eg 'unsafe sex')
- injury through accidents and fighting
- instances of intoxication and drug taking

### **Safety**

- walking home alone
- 'daring' behaviour
- involvement in dangerous drinking

### **Legal**

- trouble with the police

A British study of the personal and social correlates of adolescent drinking found that more frequent drinking was correlated with being male, perceiving that parents encouraged drinking, drinking without parental knowledge, drinking to alter mood, buying alcoholic beverages, spending more time with friends who drink, perceiving social pressure to drink, and being excluded from school and truanting. Drinking more intensively was associated with the use of cannabis, parental encouragement to drink, spending more time with friends who drink, school exclusion, and being in trouble with teachers.<sup>19</sup>

### **Key characteristics and circumstances of the young people who are most at risk of alcohol and drug problems<sup>20</sup>**

- A wide range of factors have a bearing on whether and when young people engage in hazardous tobacco, alcohol or other drug use, and whether this then results in serious problems. It is nevertheless difficult to predict which individuals will develop serious problems and who will not.
- Use of tobacco and alcohol is first seen among a small number of children under 13, many of whom have other pre-existing disadvantages such as early family adversity, parental drug use and low mental ability or poor academic performance.
- The typical picture of a teenager at risk of hazardous drug use is someone with a relatively problematic family background associating with other risk-taking peers. All forms of drug use among teenagers are more common among (but by no means restricted to) individuals for whom one or more of the following factors are present:
  - Drug use by parents or older siblings
  - Family conflict or poor and inconsistent parenting
  - Truancy and other forms of delinquency
  - Pre-existing behavioural problems
  - Low parental supervision
  - Living with a single or step-parent
- There are some variations between ethnic groups: among 13- and 15-year-olds, white and mixed ethnicity boys and girls are, at present, more likely than others to report hazardous drug use. Among 16-30-year-olds, there are significant variations in levels of hazardous drug use among different ethnic groups, but there are insufficient data to reflect the increasing diversity of this age group in contemporary Britain.
- Although much variation exists, initiation of drug use often begins with one or more of the following in the early teens: tobacco, volatile substances, alcohol or cannabis. Ecstasy and other dance drugs are often tried in the late teens, while initiation of

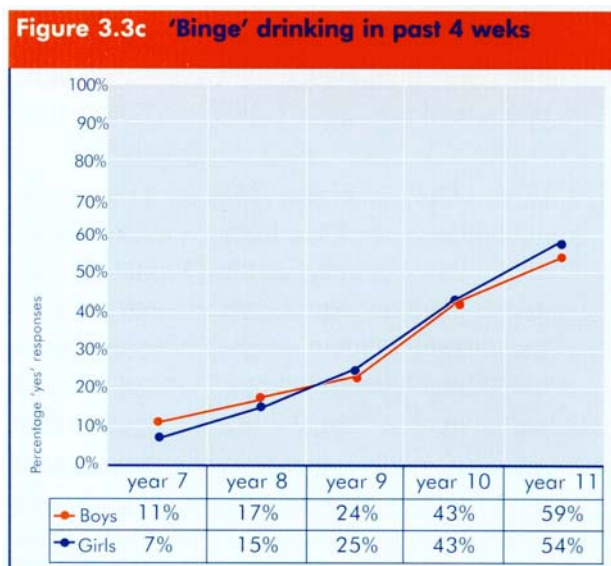
opiates or cocaine typically occurs in the early twenties. However, the great majority of young people do not progress beyond the use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis.

- Many young people use drugs intermittently at different stages of their lives. In the mid-twenties, reducing use or stopping becomes more common than starting. This is usually without professional help and is often associated with marriage and stable employment.
- In their mid-teens, girls – but not boys – from the least affluent families are more likely to be regular smokers or drinkers or use other drugs. All forms of hazardous and seriously problematic drug use become increasingly related to socio-economic disadvantage with increasing age. This is especially so with drug injecting and the use of heroin, crack cocaine, amphetamines and benzodiazepines. In some areas, problem drug use has become an inescapable part of community life.

### Heavy Drinking

A large English survey<sup>21</sup> found that over 5% of 14-15 year olds, and just under 10% of 15-16 year olds reported exceeding the maximum limits of regular consumption recommended for adults (21 drinks per week for men, 14 per week for women).

Among 18-24 year olds, around 42% of men and 22% of women exceed these limits.



A major survey in the North West of England<sup>22</sup> found:

- Almost 90% of schoolchildren (aged 15 and 16) surveyed in the North West drink alcohol at least occasionally
- Of those that drink, 38.0% usually binge drink (5+ drinks in one session), 24.4% are frequent drinkers (drinking two or more times a week) and 49.8% drink in public settings (such as bars, clubs, streets and parks)
- Parental provision of alcohol to children is associated with less binge drinking and drinking in public places
- Binge drinking, frequent drinking and drinking in public places are strongly related to the amount of weekly spending money children have available

- Children who purchase their own alcohol are almost six times more likely to drink in public places, nearly three times more likely to drink frequently and almost twice as likely to binge drink than those who drink but do not buy their own alcohol
- Older siblings and friends, and adults contacted outside of shops, are frequent sources of alcohol for schoolchildren. All such access methods are related to increased binge, frequent and public drinking

### **Age of Onset**

A report from America found that the younger the age of drinking onset, the greater the chance that an individual at some point in life developed an alcohol related problem. Young people who began drinking before the age of 15 were four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who began drinking at the age of 21.<sup>23</sup>

A subsequent American study identified the pre-adolescent years from age 10 to 12 as a particularly vulnerable period for the development of alcohol problems, including alcohol-related violence, injuries, driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs, and alcohol and drug-related absenteeism from school or work. It could be that early alcohol consumption is merely a marker for later alcohol problems but it is also possible that the relationship between early onset and later problems is causal.<sup>24</sup>

A Finnish study<sup>25</sup> suggests that the relationship is indeed causal. A long-term follow-up of children until middle age found that for both males and females, early onset of drinking ie. at or before the age of 14 was a significant risk factor for heavier drinking, for binge drinking and for experiencing symptoms of alcohol dependence in adulthood. The authors conclude that delaying the initiation of drinking from early to late adolescence is therefore an important goal for prevention efforts.

### **The Influence of the Family**

Parents are the main source of alcohol for younger children. Two-thirds of 12-15 year olds get most of their alcohol from parents. Parents are likely to give alcohol in the home and for drinking elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. A survey in Wales found that parents were regularly giving alcohol, especially alcopops, to children for consumption at family parties and barbeques.<sup>26</sup> By and large, children tend to follow their parents' example: for example, heavy drinking parents tend to produce children who become heavy drinkers. Among parents who have never drunk, 10% have children who drink regularly. Among parents who drink three or more times a week, 31% have children who drink frequently.<sup>6</sup>

Some studies have concluded that deviant or excessive alcohol consumption in adolescents may be related to low levels of parental support and control. Inadequate support and lax parental control, it is suggested, can result not only in deviant drinking behaviour in adolescents and also in lower levels of self-confidence and personal autonomy and poorer social skills.<sup>27</sup>

A recent UK study linked problematic alcohol consumption in teenagers, together with other problem behaviour such as drug abuse and stealing, with a range of factors including poor parental supervision and discipline; family conflict; a family history of problem behaviour and parental attitudes condoning problem behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

Another UK survey<sup>22</sup> found that parental provision of alcohol to 15/16 year olds was associated with less binge drinking and drinking in public places (see above). However, the proportion of binge drinking was still high in the children whose parents provided the alcohol, albeit less high than those who obtained it from other sources (the figures were 34.5% and 41.3% respectively). It is also possible that it was not provision of drink per se that made the difference, but rather that provision served as a proxy for higher levels of parental supervision and control.

A recent Dutch study<sup>28</sup> found that parental imposition of strict rules on drinking prevented adolescents from starting to consume alcohol heavily and frequently. However, a British study found that while parental discouragement appeared to be associated with reduced drinking frequency in boys, it was related to more frequent drinking in girls.<sup>19</sup>

A major international survey<sup>5</sup> found that living with a single parent, lack of parental control, skipping school and having an older brother or sister who used a particular substance were almost universally associated with increased use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis.

In contrast, the relationships between substance use and socio-economic status were complex and inconsistent within and between countries. For alcohol, there was no clear pattern; for cigarettes, there was either no relationship with socio-economic status or smoking was more common in poorer groups; for cannabis, there was either no relationship or it was more common in the more affluent groups.

### **Institute of Alcohol Studies** **26 January 2009**

*Note 1: for information on Alcohol, Young People and The Law, see IAS Fact Sheet 'Alcohol and the Law'*  
*Note 2: for information on International Comparisons, see IAS Fact Sheet 'Young People, Alcohol & Other Drugs - International Comparisons'*

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