



## Binge Drinking – Nature, prevalence and causes

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# IAS Factsheet

Produced by the Institute of Alcohol Studies,  
1 The Quay,  
St Ives,  
Cams.,  
PE27 5AR

Tel: 01480 466766  
Fax: 01480 497583  
Email: [info@ias.org.uk](mailto:info@ias.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.ias.org.uk>

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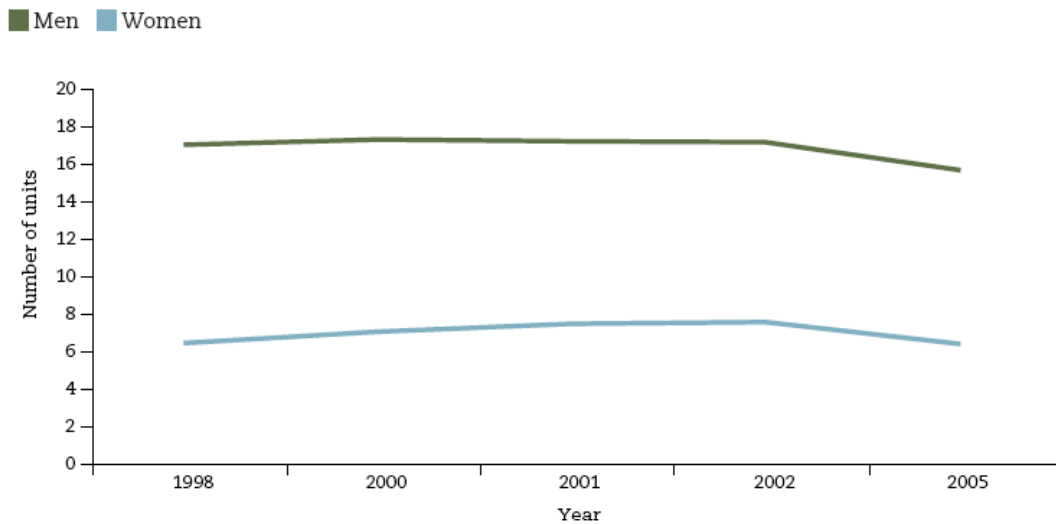
Originally, the term 'binge' was used in its clinical sense to refer to a periodic bout of continual drinking, perhaps over a period of days, by someone who was alcohol dependent, and ending only when the drinker was unable to continue.

In recent years, however, the term has gained currency as referring to a high intake of alcohol in a single drinking occasion. For research purposes, binge drinking is often defined as the consumption of more than a certain number of drinks over a short period of time, - a single drinking session, or at least during a single day.

There is no internationally agreed definition of binge drinking, but in the UK, drinking surveys normally define binge drinkers as men consuming at least eight, and women at least six standard units of alcohol in a single day, that is, double the maximum recommended 'safe limit' for men and women respectively.

On the basis of this definition, as can be seen from the graph below, the prevalence of binge drinking, having reached a peak around 2002, began to decline from 2003.

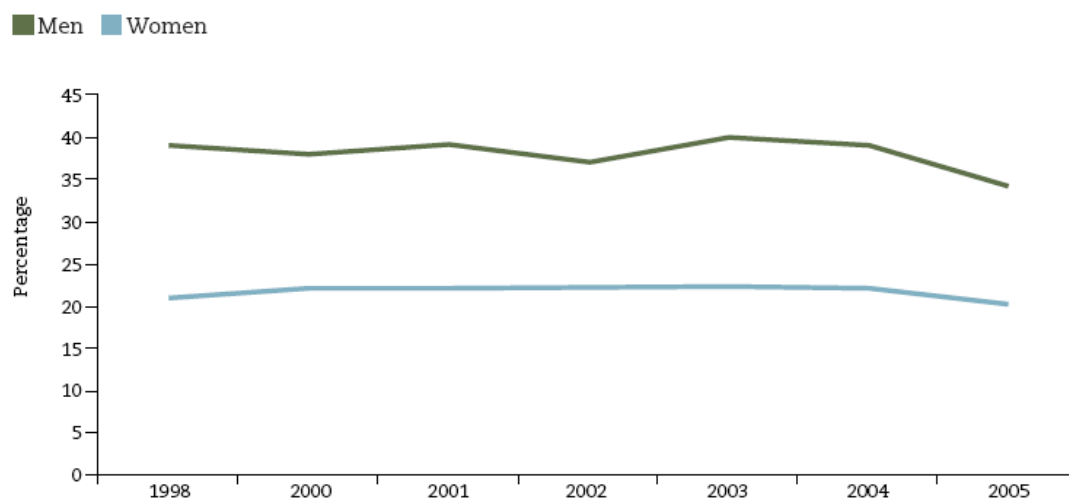
### Average weekly alcohol units by gender<sup>1</sup>



Note: Adult consumption, based on self-reported GHS data. Based on the self-reported data, the majority of people aged 16 and over in the UK drink at least once a week (64%). This figure is higher among men (72%) than women (57%).

Source: GHS 2005; ONS 2006

## Percentage drinking more than the recommended daily number of units of alcohol<sup>1</sup>



Note: In 2005, fewer people aged between 16 and 24 said they drank more than the recommended daily alcohol levels compared with 2002.

Source: GHS 2005; (2006) Goddard, E Office for National Statistics

The problem with this as a definition is that it is too broad, encompassing various patterns of consumption having very different motivations and consequences. Eight units consumed over the course of a whole day and as an accompaniment to meals will not have the same effects as eight units consumed over a couple of hours on an empty stomach.

As the term has come to be used, it is more the latter type of consumption that is normally regarded as 'binge drinking'. However, because of individual variations in, for example, body weight and alcohol tolerance, as well as factors such as speed of consumption, there is not a simple, consistent correlation between the number of units consumed, their resulting blood alcohol level and the subjective effects on the drinker.

For these reasons, some have suggested that a subjective rather than a unit-based definition should be employed, binge drinking being defined as drinking which results in the drinker feeling at least partially drunk. Often, getting drunk is the purpose of the exercise, though of course not all drunkenness is pre-planned.

Some researchers have criticised the term 'binge drinking' as unclear, politically charged and therefore, unhelpful in that many (young) people do not identify themselves as binge drinkers because, despite exceeding the number of drinks officially used to define bingeing, they drink at a slow enough pace to avoid getting seriously drunk.<sup>2</sup> The different definitions employed need to be taken into account in understanding surveys of drinking behaviour and calculations of how many binge drinkers there are in the population.

See Also:

**Fact Sheet:** *Binge Drinking – Medical & Social Consequences*

**Occasional Paper:** *Binge Drinking, Crime & Disorder & the Licensing Bill*

## Historical and Cultural Context

Binge drinking is far from being either new or an exclusively British phenomenon. As a northern European country, heavy sessional intake and drinking to get drunk have been an integral part of British drinking culture for generations, and are reported at least as far back as the Vikings<sup>3</sup>

While most concern and attention in Britain is focused on binge drinking in young people, in whom it is indeed most prevalent, it is not restricted to them, but continues on a diminishing scale through adult life. Those who binge drink in their early 20s are more likely to binge drink in their 40s: the risk is doubled for men and increased by half for women. 16 year old males who drink more than 7 units per week are one-and-a-half times more likely than lighter drinkers to binge drink in their 30s and 40s. Females who rarely or never drink at age 16 are less likely even than light drinkers to be binge drinkers later in life.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of drinking cultures, the major contrast is between Mediterranean drinking culture, in which the dominant beverage is wine, and northern European and Anglo-Saxon cultures in which traditionally, beer and spirits predominated.

In Mediterranean culture, wine is regarded as part of the diet and is thus typically consumed on a regular, daily basis as part of meals and in family settings, and there are strong informal sanctions against public drunkenness. In contrast, Northern culture tends to be characterised by a more 'explosive' drinking pattern, in which drinking is less frequent but heavier when it does occur, typically around weekends, and often taking place away from the table and the family setting and as an end in itself. With this sort of drinking pattern, public drunkenness is hardly unexpected, and in some groups and occasions it is socially acceptable or indeed expected.

Despite the partial convergence in Europe of the Mediterranean and the Northern drinking cultures, significant differences remain. Whereas regular, daily, drinking is most common in Southern Europe, the quantity consumed per drinking occasion remains highest in the UK and Northern Europe. Binge drinking (defined in this case as consumption of 5 or more standard drinks in a single drinking occasion) accounts for a higher proportion of drinking occasions in the UK than in numerous other countries. A recent survey<sup>5</sup> found binge drinking to be particularly prevalent in UK women:

### Age-adjusted alcohol-consumption prevalence – Europe and US:

Country	Male heavy drinkers - %	Female heavy drinkers %
Belgium	48	25
Bulgaria	12	6
England	26	33
France	10	7
Germany	2	3
Greece	4	4
Hungary	9	7
Iceland	37	30
Ireland	49	57
Italy	6	3
Netherlands	42	34
Poland	47	27
Portugal	18	9
Romania	7	1
Slovakia	44	29
Spain	21	17
US	43	27

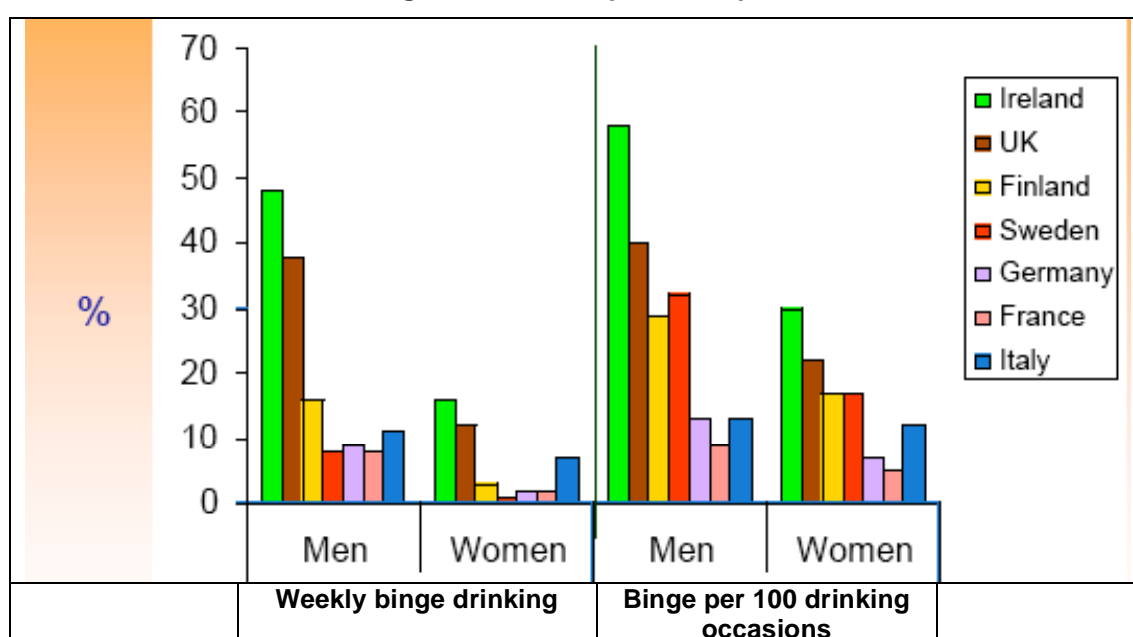
'Heavy drinking' defined as 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more drinks for women on at least 1 occasion over the past 2 weeks

**Proportion (%) of binge drinking to total number of drinking occasions<sup>6</sup>:**

**Country Percentage binge drinking occasions of all drinking occasions(occasions past 12 months)**

	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>
Finland	29	Finland	17
France	9	France	5
Germany	14	Germany	7
Italy	13	Italy	11
Sweden	33	Sweden	18
UK	40	UK	22

**Drinking Patterns: European Comparison<sup>7</sup>**



In Britain, the pattern developed of drinking being very pub-centred – pubs being places where predominantly men went to drink beer as an activity in its own right, often away from their families and with pub visiting and hence drinking tending to be concentrated around evenings and weekends. This bingeing style of consumption was further reinforced by the practice of buying in rounds which, naturally, tends to encourage everyone in the group to drink at the speed of the fastest, and often to drink more than they would otherwise do.

In recent years, in Britain, probably more than most other European countries [see *chart Page 4*], binge drinking has been given additional encouragement in young people by the growth of a `culture of intoxication' which has become fashionable and which involves the consumption of a range of psychoactive substances to achieve an altered state of consciousness.

In this culture, young people have adopted a hedonistic approach with drinking and drug taking representing an individualised search for `time out' requiring lack of inhibition and control.<sup>8</sup>

The main ways in which the alcohol industry has adapted to this new market are:

- Producing a whole new range of alcohol products, designer drinks, aimed at a new generation of young consumers and sold in a new range of cafe bars, theme pubs and club bars designed to attract young people.
- An increase in the strength of alcoholic drinks in a direct attempt to compete in the 'psychoactive market'
- Alcohol products being marketed explicitly as psychoactive drugs and as lifestyle markers.

Currently, one of the fastest growing segments in the alcohol market are 'shots' and 'shooters', 'short' drinks packaged and sold as a means of facilitating rapid intoxication. An expanding type of drinking venue is the 'speed-drinking bar', offering unlimited alcohol on payment of an entrance fee. There are also a range of promotions such as 'happy hours' likely to encourage rapid or heavy consumption.

### Regional variations in the UK

A recent survey<sup>9</sup> found substantial proportions of drinkers reporting that they sometimes drink 'with the sole intention of getting drunk':

Northern England – 28%  
Midlands 19%  
South East 24%  
Scotland 18%  
Wales & South West 33%

These proportions increased markedly to 59% of 18-24 year olds and 43% of 25-34 year olds.

### Prevalence of Binge Drinking<sup>10</sup>

As can be seen from the figures below, binge drinking is a normal mode of consumption among 18-24 year old men and women, bingeing here being defined subjectively in terms of experience of being drunk. Only a quarter of women of this age, and around 1 in 6 men report never binge drinking.

Age	Feeling very drunk in last year <sup>11</sup>	
	Males	Females
12-13 years	8	7
14-15 years	38	35
16-17 years	68	57
18-21 years	80	75

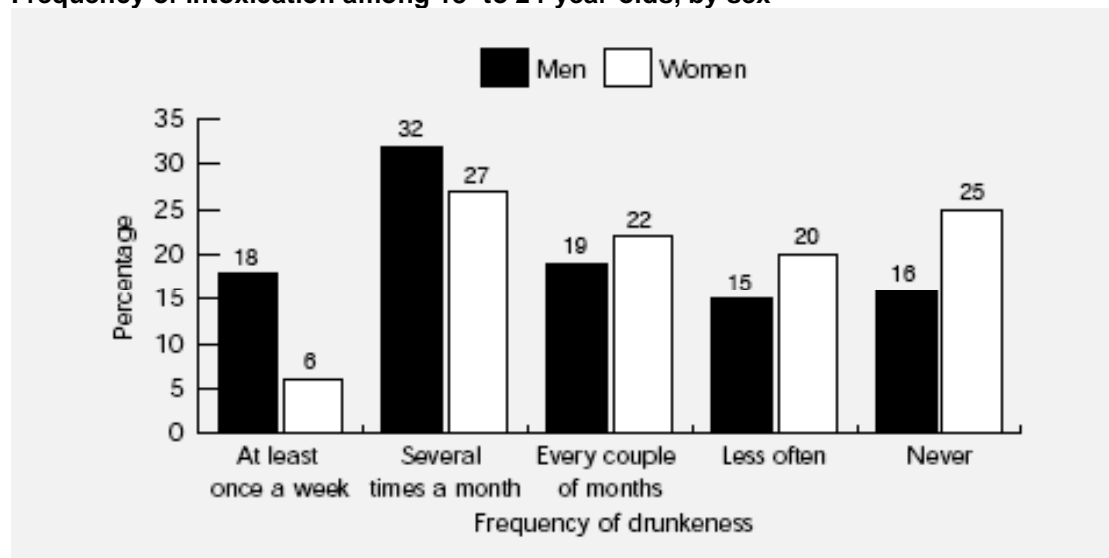
### Social Class and education

A UK study found different patterns in relation to class and binge drinking in men and women. In men, the less educated and those in unskilled manual occupations were substantially (up to 3 times) more likely than those with higher qualifications to binge drink up to early middle age. In contrast, in women it was those with higher educational qualifications who were more likely to binge drink in their early twenties, but during their thirties the pattern reversed and it was the less educated and those in unskilled manual occupations who were more likely

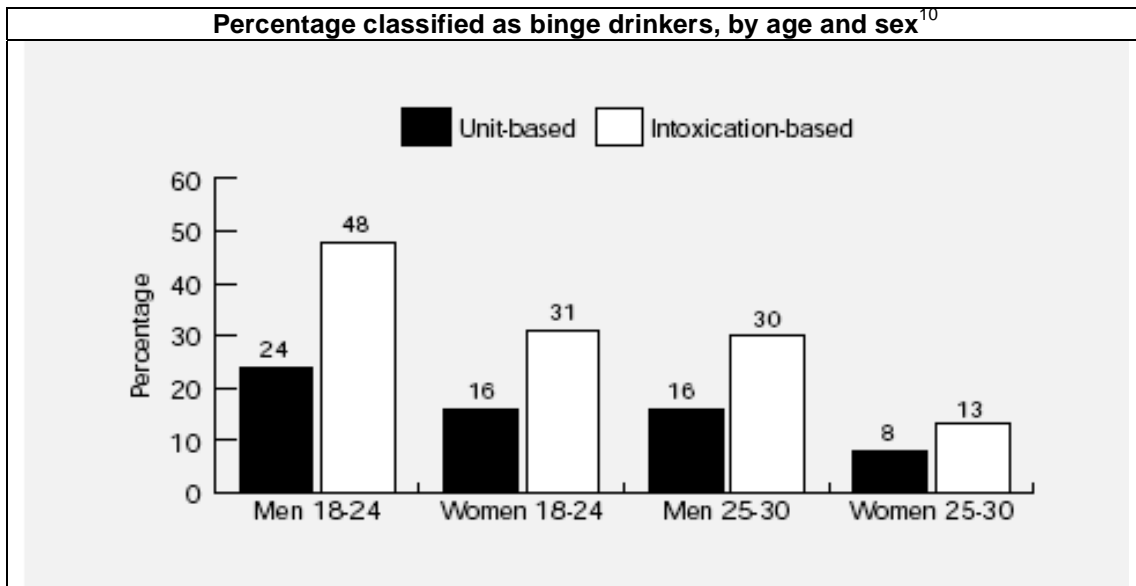
to binge drink. In this study, binge drinking was defined as consumption of 10 or more and 7 or more units of alcohol per occasion for men and women respectively.

In this study, in men the percentages of binge drinkers were 36.2% at age 23, 27.8% at age 33 and 30.8% at age 42. In women, the respective percentages were 17.8, 12.8 and 13.7.<sup>12</sup>

**Frequency of intoxication among 18- to 24-year-olds, by sex<sup>10</sup>**



**Percentage classified as binge drinkers, by age and sex<sup>10</sup>**

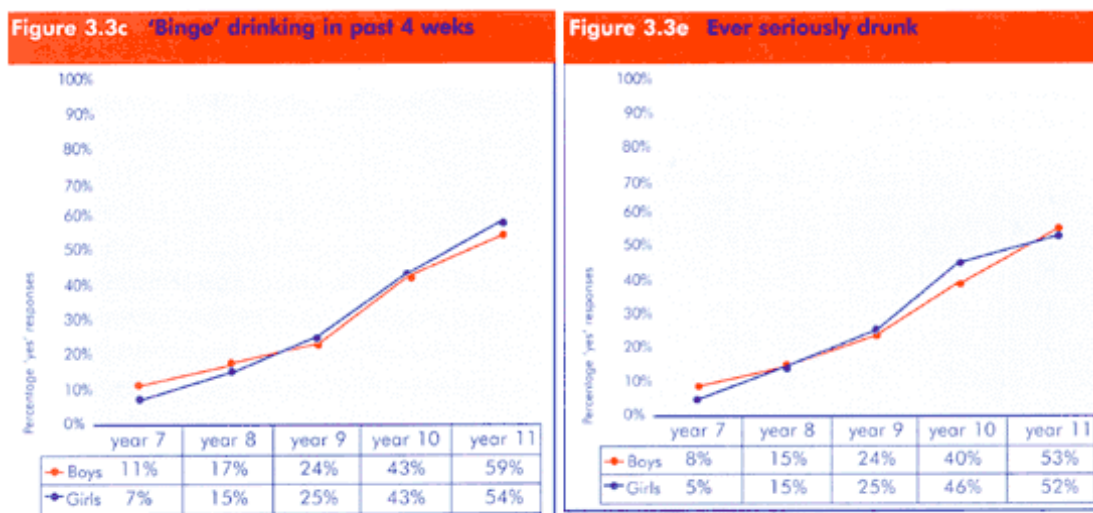


In this figure, the unit-based definition was men who had drunk more than eight, and women more than six units of alcohol on average per drinking day in the previous week.

The intoxication-based definition was based on self-reported frequency of having felt 'very drunk' a minimum of once or twice a month in the last twelve months.

Another Home Office Survey<sup>13</sup> found 44% of 18-24 year-olds (49% men, 39% women) to be binge drinkers, (using in this case an intoxication-based definition).

Binge drinking does not begin out of the blue at the age of 18. It is also common in children of school age<sup>14</sup>



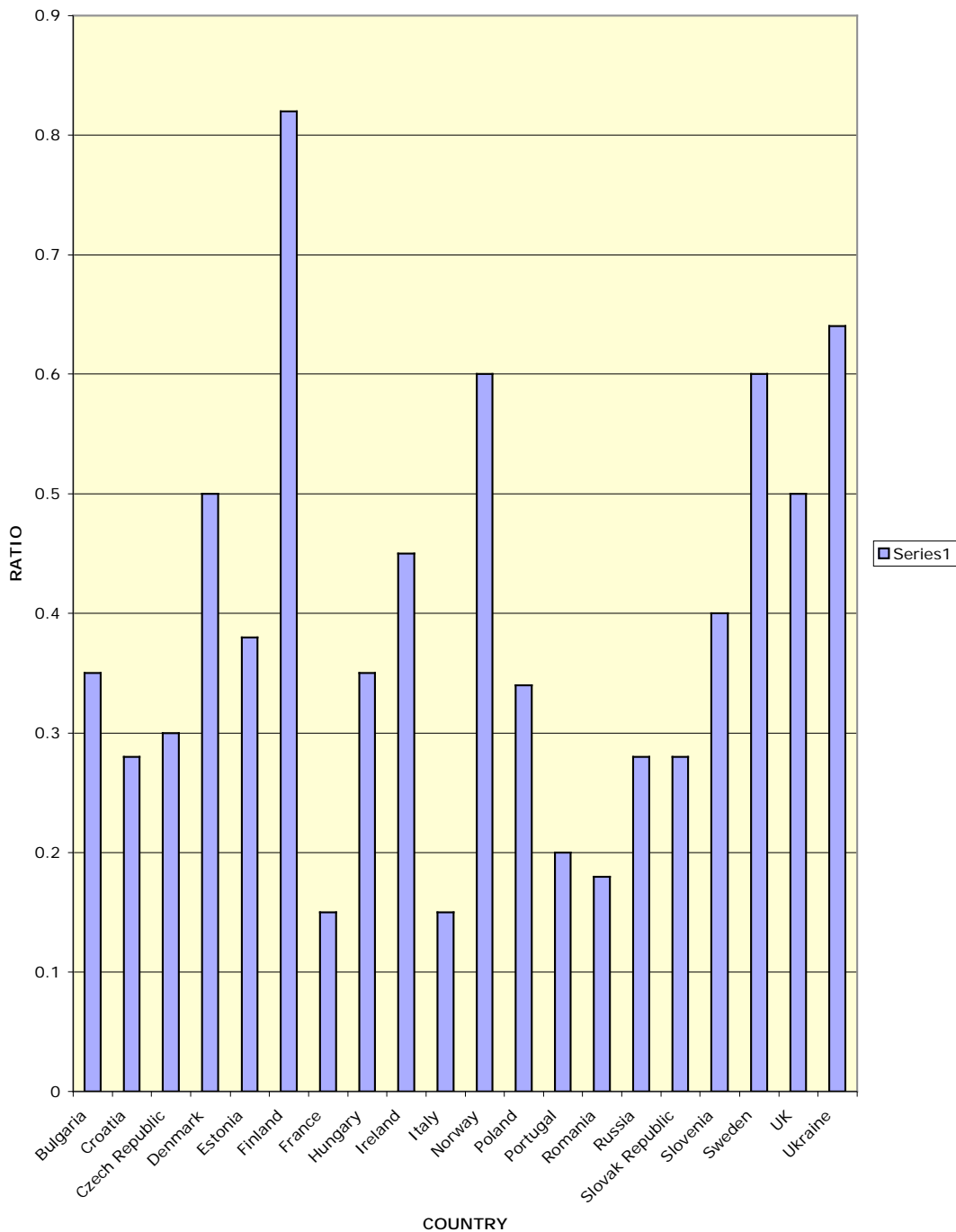
In this study, binge drinking was defined as consuming five or more alcoholic drinks in a single session. However, the likelihood of getting drunk increases with age. Compared to their underage drinking counterparts, nearly double the proportion of young adult males who drank at least once a month report being very drunk once a month or more.

**Frequency of feeling very drunk in previous 12 months amongst 10 to 25 year olds who drank at least once a month, by sex and age<sup>15</sup>**

	10-15 years		16-17 years		18-25 years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Once a month or more	28	32	34	38	62	47
Less often	23	23	34	36	25	34
Not in the past 12 months	49	45	32	27	13	19
Base n	247	261	299	296	822	824

Notes: 1. Source: 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, weighted data. 2. Results are based on all those who have had an alcoholic drink at least once a month in the past year. Those who reported drinking alcohol less than once a month and those who had never drunk alcohol were not asked any questions relating to drunkenness.

**Ratio of intoxication frequency to drinking frequency  
among 15-16 year olds in Europe (1999)<sup>16</sup>**



In the South, meal times account for 80 per cent of drinking occasions compared with 50 per cent in the UK, where relatively high proportions of drinking occasions occur at home (rather than eg restaurants) and not in connection with meals.

Binge drinking is more widespread among teenagers in the UK than in most other western countries<sup>17</sup>

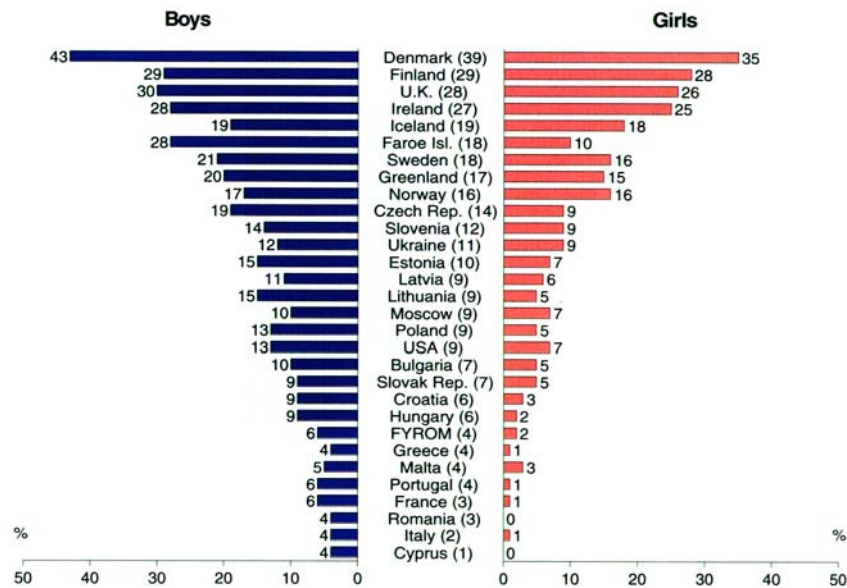


Figure 42b. Proportion of boys and girls who have been drunk 10 times or more during last 12 months. 1999.

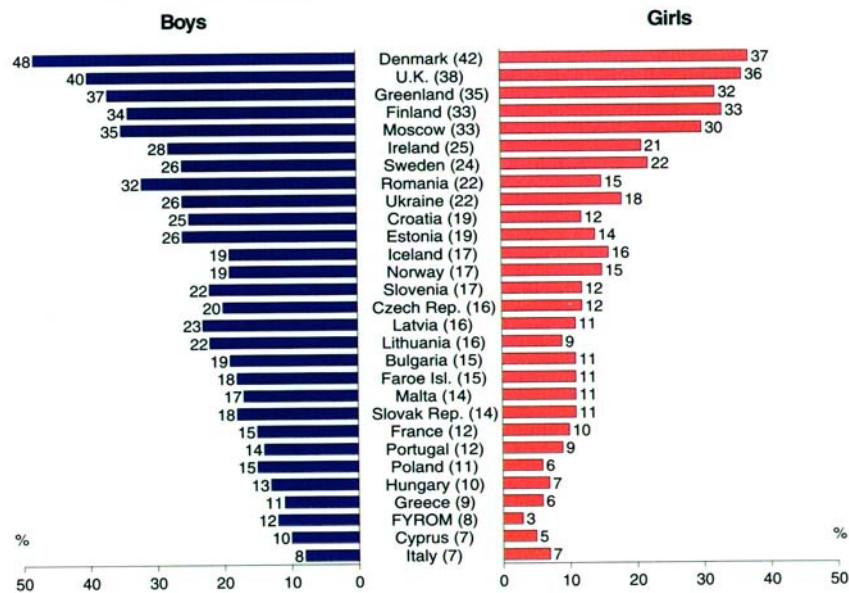


Figure 45b. Proportion of boys and girls who have been drunk at the age of 13 or younger. 1999.

### Causes of Binge Drinking

Recent UK research on the subject<sup>18</sup> concludes that 'binge drinking is now so routine that young people find it difficult to explain why they do it.' Typical statements by young binge drinkers included:

***You don't have to know the reason for it. You just do it anyway. Everybody does it, it is the way the world is.*** (Male, 18-20)

***We are a culture that goes out and gets drunk, and we don't go out to drink, we go out to get drunk.*** (Female, 21-24)

Based on stated reasons given by young binge drinkers themselves, the principal explanation of bingeing is that it is an integral part of their social scene, one that they enjoy and do not consider to be a problem in itself. Episodes of risk and disorder that accompany binge drinking are often seen as part of the excitement of getting drunk with friends.

Getting drunk can be an unplanned consequence of a night out, but often binge drinkers go out with the intention of getting drunk. They report various strategies for accelerating the process such as having a few drinks before leaving home, mixing drinks and deliberately drinking quickly.

Stated motives for binge drinking and getting drunk include:

- Having fun
- Conformity to peer group norms – being one of the lads
- Escaping the everyday – letting themselves go and forgetting the frustrations of the working day
- Dutch courage – finding the self-confidence to deal with social situations

The main environmental factors facilitating binge drinking are seen as the institution of the drinking circuit around the array of available pubs, bars and nightclubs in a small area.<sup>5</sup>



### Individual Factors

Because binge drinking has become part of the leisure routines of young people in general, there is no specific profile of binge drinkers as a distinct group. However, some features that recur in the research literature<sup>19</sup> are:

- Youth, particularly 17 – 23
- Family history of substance abuse
- Impulsive personality traits
- Depression or anxiety

- Positive expectancies about the effects of alcohol

A recent international survey<sup>5</sup> of university students aged 17-30 found binge drinking in both men and women to be linked to living away from home and to greater affluence. It was also found that beliefs in the health benefits of limiting consumption were negatively correlated with binge drinking. The likelihood of binge drinking was substantially greater in individuals who had weak health beliefs.

### **Licensing Law and Binge Drinking**

In relation to its reform of the licensing law in England and Wales, the Government claims that fixed, 'artificially early' pub closing times are a principal cause of binge drinking as people try to 'beat the clock'. The Government argues that abolishing fixed closing times will thus reduce binge drinking and drunkenness by slowing the pace of consumption.

There is little if any good evidence to support this proposition. About the only relevant evidence that has ever been produced are figures suggesting a decline in the '10 o'clock swill' in Scotland following extensions of opening hours beginning in 1976. The figures suggest that there was an increase in the amount consumed by Scottish drinkers but that as this consumption occurred over more drinking occasions and a greater amount of time drinking per week, there was a decline in the average rate of consumption on licensed premises in units per hour - in men from 4.4 in 1976 to 3.8 in 1984, and in women from 2.0 to 1.9.<sup>20</sup>

However, it seems unlikely that the factor of closing times is particularly significant compared with the cultural and psychological factors described above, and, in any case, even if these figures are taken at face value, the rate of consumption does not necessarily indicate how drunk people become. Given the fixed rate at which alcohol is metabolised, a reduction in the rate of consumption to any level that remains above one unit per hour inevitably results in people getting drunker, and the more time they spend drinking, the drunker they will get.

It is notable that in Australia, with a similar drinking culture to the British, extended drinking hours resulted in increased binge drinking and drunkenness<sup>21</sup>.

### **Legal Drinking Age and Age of Onset of Drinking**

In New Zealand, lowering the legal drinking age from 20 to 18 is reported to have resulted in a sharp increase in binge drinking among teenagers and young adults.<sup>22</sup>

There is evidence from various countries that early initiation of drinking ie beginning to drink in early/late adolescence rather than late adolescence/early adulthood, increases the likelihood of binge drinking in later life. (See IAS Fact Sheet 'Young People and Alcohol')

### **Institute of Alcohol Studies**

14 June 2007

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