

Young people and alcohol Factsheet

Institute of Alcohol Studies
Alliance House
12 Caxton Street
London
SW1H 0QS

Tel: 020 7222 4001
Email: info@ias.org.uk

Institute of Alcohol Studies
Elmgren House
1 The Quay
St Ives
Cambridgeshire
PE27 5AR

Tel: 01480 466766
Email: info@ias.org.uk

Website: www.ias.org.uk

Table of contents

Young people and alcohol: Introduction	3
Changing trends in young people’s drinking	4
The phenomenon of drinking among young people	9

Young people and alcohol: Introduction

Today, young people's drinking habits differ from older generations. Recent trends suggest that they drink less often during the week, but that they are more prone to heavy episodic or binge drinking when they do. This may be down to a culture of drinking in which excessive consumption is encouraged as part of facilitating group belonging in young adulthood.

This series of factsheets focuses on the drinking habits of young people, from late adolescence (15 to 17 years) through young adulthood (at 18) to 24 years. There will be some overlap with adolescents, as many statistical publications collect data on people from the age of 16 years of age. Because of the early onset of drinking in British culture, it is assumed that some of what applies to young adults also applies to adolescents.

Changing trends in young people's drinking

Trend data for young people appears to indicate a slight fall in the proportion of young people consuming alcohol during the past decade.

Office for National Statistics [ONS] figures show that in 2010, 16 to 24 year-olds consumed 11.1 units of alcohol per week, 0.4 units below the overall weekly average 11.5 units (see Figure 1). This is the first time the level of consumption among young people has fallen under that of the total average since a series of revisions to the figures were first made in 2005.

Figure 1: Average weekly alcohol consumption (units), by age: 2005–2010

<i>Persons aged 16 and over</i>		<i>Great Britain</i>				
Age		2005 ^{1,2}	2006 ^{2,3}	2008 ⁴	2009 ⁴	2010 ⁴
All persons						
16-24		16.9	14.6	13.1	12.5	11.1
25-44		15.1	14.6	12.9	12.3	12.2
45-64		16.0	15.0	13.6	13.6	13.1
65 and over		8.7	8.7	8.5	8.2	8.1
Total		14.3	13.5	12.2	11.9	11.5

1 2005 data includes last quarter of 2004/5 data due to survey change from financial year to calendar year

2 Figures produced using the updated methodology for converting volumes of alcohol to units assuming an average wine glass size

3 Results from 2006 onwards include longitudinal data (see Appendix B - Sample design and Response)

4 Figures produced using the updated methodology including data on wine glass size

Source: Office for National Statistics [ONS] (March 2012), [Drinking Tables](#), in 'General Lifestyle Survey, 2010', Table 2.1

Longer term trends indicate a convergence between the consumption levels of younger generations and that of their older counterparts. Average consumption among 16 to 24 year-olds peaked in 2001 at 19.4 units per week, 7.3 units more than the overall average of 12.1 units.¹ This tells us that the proportion of young people consuming alcohol to hazardous levels has also declined in recent years, as well as the frequency with which they drink.

Proportion of young people drinking in the last week

From 2005 to 2011, the percentage of young people [16 to 24 years] who claimed to have consumed alcohol in the last week has been consistently below the UK average (see Figure 2). Fewer men aged 16 to 24 years consumed alcohol in the last week than any other age group in recent years, although at least half still do [52%]. The proportion of women aged 16 to 24 years who reported drinking at least once in the last week stood at 50% in 2011, compared to 56% in 2005. Only women aged 65 and over recorded lower figures year-on-year in comparison.

Figure 2: Drinking in the last week (%), by age and sex: 2005–2011

<i>Persons aged 16 and over</i>								<i>Great Britain</i>
Drinking in the last week		2005 ¹	2006 ²	2007 ²	2008 ²	2009 ²	2010 ²	2011 ²
Percentages								
Men								
Drank last week								
16-24		64	60	64	63	55	49	52
25-44		74	73	74	72	70	69	67
45-64		77	76	76	74	72	73	72
65 and over		66	67	67	66	66	65	63
Total		72	71	72	70	68	67	66
Women								
Drank last week								
16-24		56	53	54	52	51	46	50
25-44		62	60	61	59	59	56	56
45-64		61	61	61	60	59	60	60
65 and over		43	44	45	43	43	43	42
Total		57	56	57	55	54	53	54

1 2005 data includes last quarter of 2004/5 data due to survey change from financial year to calendar year.

2 Results from 2006 onwards include longitudinal data (see Appendix B - Sample design and Response).

Source: ONS (March 2013), [Drinking \[Chapter 2\]](#), in 'General Lifestyle Survey, 2011', Table 2.1

Frequency of youth drinking

Between 2005 and 2011 (see Figure 3), the proportion of young people who consumed alcohol on 5 or more days in the last week remained consistently below the overall average for adults. The percentage of 16 to 24 year-old males who drank on 5 or more days in the last week is 5%, 11 percentage points below the average for all age groups; the percentage of 16 to 24 year-old females who drank on 5 or more days in the last week is 3%, 6 percentage points below the average for all female age groups [9%].

Figure 3: Drinking 5 or more days in the last week (%), by age and sex: 2005–2011

Persons aged 16 and over		Great Britain						
Drinking in the last week		2005 ¹	2006 ²	2007 ²	2008 ²	2009 ²	2010 ²	2011 ²
Percentages								
Men								
Drank on 5 or more days last week								
16-24		10	8	9	6	7	5	5
25-44		18	17	18	14	13	12	11
45-64		28	26	27	24	23	20	22
65 and over		26	27	29	27	27	26	24
Total		22	21	22	19	18	17	16
Women								
Drank on 5 or more days last week								
16-24		5	3	4	2	2	2	3
25-44		11	9	11	9	7	7	6
45-64		17	15	15	15	14	13	12
65 and over		14	15	15	15	14	14	13
Total		13	11	12	11	10	10	9

1 2005 data includes last quarter of 2004/5 data due to survey change from financial year to calendar year.

2 Results from 2006 onwards include longitudinal data (see Appendix B - Sample design and Response).

Source: ONS, Drinking [Chapter 2], in 'GLS, 2011', Table 2.3

Drinking above the recommended guidelines

Between 2005 and 2011, the proportion of 16 to 24 year-old males and females drinking above recommended low-risk guidelines fell from 46% to 32% and 41% to 31% respectively. The proportion of 16 to 24 year-old men drinking above recommended guidelines at least 1 day in the last week was slightly below the overall average for all male adults [32% compared to 34% total]. A higher proportion of 16 to 24 year-old women reported drinking more than the guidelines on at least 1 day in the previous week compared with the national average for all female age groups [31% compared to 28% total] in 2011.

Figure 4: Maximum daily amount above the recommended daily guidelines, 2005–2011

<i>Persons aged 16 and over</i>				<i>Great Britain</i>			
Maximum daily amount	2005 ¹	2006 ³	2007	2008 ⁴	2009 ⁴	2010 ⁴	2011 ⁴
Percentages							
Men							
Drank more than 4 units on at least one day (<i>above guidelines limit</i>)							
16-24	46	42	44	42	36	34	32
25-44	48	48	48	42	44	41	39
45-64	43	42	44	41	41	40	38
65 and over	21	21	23	21	20	22	20
Total	41	40	41	37	37	36	34
Drank more than 8 units on at least one day (<i>heavy episodic drinking</i>)							
16-24	32	30	32	30	24	24	22
25-44	30	31	31	27	27	25	24
45-64	22	21	24	21	21	20	19
65 and over	6	7	8	7	5	7	6
Total	23	23	24	21	20	19	18
Women							
Drank more than 3 units on at least one day (<i>above guidelines limit</i>)							
16-24	41	39	40	36	37	31	31
25-44	42	40	43	37	36	35	34
45-64	37	35	36	32	32	32	33
65 and over	12	14	14	10	11	11	12
Total	34	33	34	29	29	28	28
Drank more than 6 units on at least one day (<i>heavy episodic drinking</i>)							
16-24	27	25	24	24	24	17	18
25-44	20	21	22	20	19	19	16
45-64	12	12	13	13	11	11	12
65 and over	2	2	3	2	2	2	2
Total	15	15	15	14	13	13	13

1 2005 data includes last quarter of 2004/5 data due to survey change from financial year to calendar year.

2 Figures produced using the updated methodology for converting volumes of alcohol to units assuming an average wine glass size

3 Results from 2006 onwards include longitudinal data (see Appendix B - Sample design and Response).

4 Figures produced using the updated methodology including data on wine glass size
Bases for earlier years can be found in GLF/GHS reports for each year.

Source: ONS, Drinking [Chapter 2], in 'GLS, 2011', Table 2.2

The proportion of young people drinking at least twice the recommended number of units in a session (heavy episodic drinking) at least once a week fell from 32% to 22% for men and 27% to 18% for women between 2005 and 2011, but remained above the total averages for both sexes. The 18% of 16 to 24 year-old women who drank at least twice the recommended number of units in a session in the last week represented the highest proportion of binge drinkers of any female age group.

What do young people drink?

ONS figures for Great Britain show that in 2009, 16 to 24 year-old males are most likely to drink beers/lagers/ciders and spirits, consuming 7.9 (normal strength), 4.1 (high strength), and 3.3 units per capita per week. Females are most likely to drink spirits and wine (4.0 and 2.5 units respectively).

Figure 5: Average weekly consumption of different types of drink, by gender and age, 2009

Great Britain	Numbers / Percentages			
	Men		Women	
	All ages ¹	16-24	All ages ¹	16-24
Total units²	15.6	17.5	9.5	11.0
Strong beer, lager, cider	2.0	4.1	0.4	1.2
Normal strength beer, lager, cider	7.3	7.9	1.5	1.3
Spirits	1.8	3.3	1.6	4.0
Fortified Wine	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3
Wine	4.0	0.7	5.4	2.5
Alcopops	0.3	1.4	0.4	1.7
Percentages				
Strong beer, lager, cider	13	23	4	11
Normal strength beer, lager, cider	47	45	15	12
Spirits	12	19	16	37
Fortified Wine	1	0	2	2
Wine	25	4	57	22
Alcopops	2	8	4	16

1. Aged 16 and over.

2. Includes 'other' drinks such as cocktails.

Shaded figures indicate the estimates are unreliable and any analysis using these figures may be invalid. Any use of shaded figures must be accompanied by this disclaimer.

Source: ONS, Drinking: Adults' behaviour and knowledge in 2009, Table 2.9, in [Statistics on Alcohol 2012](#) (May 2012)

1 Office for National Statistics [ONS] (March 2012), '[General Lifestyle Survey, 2010](#)'

The phenomenon of drinking among young people

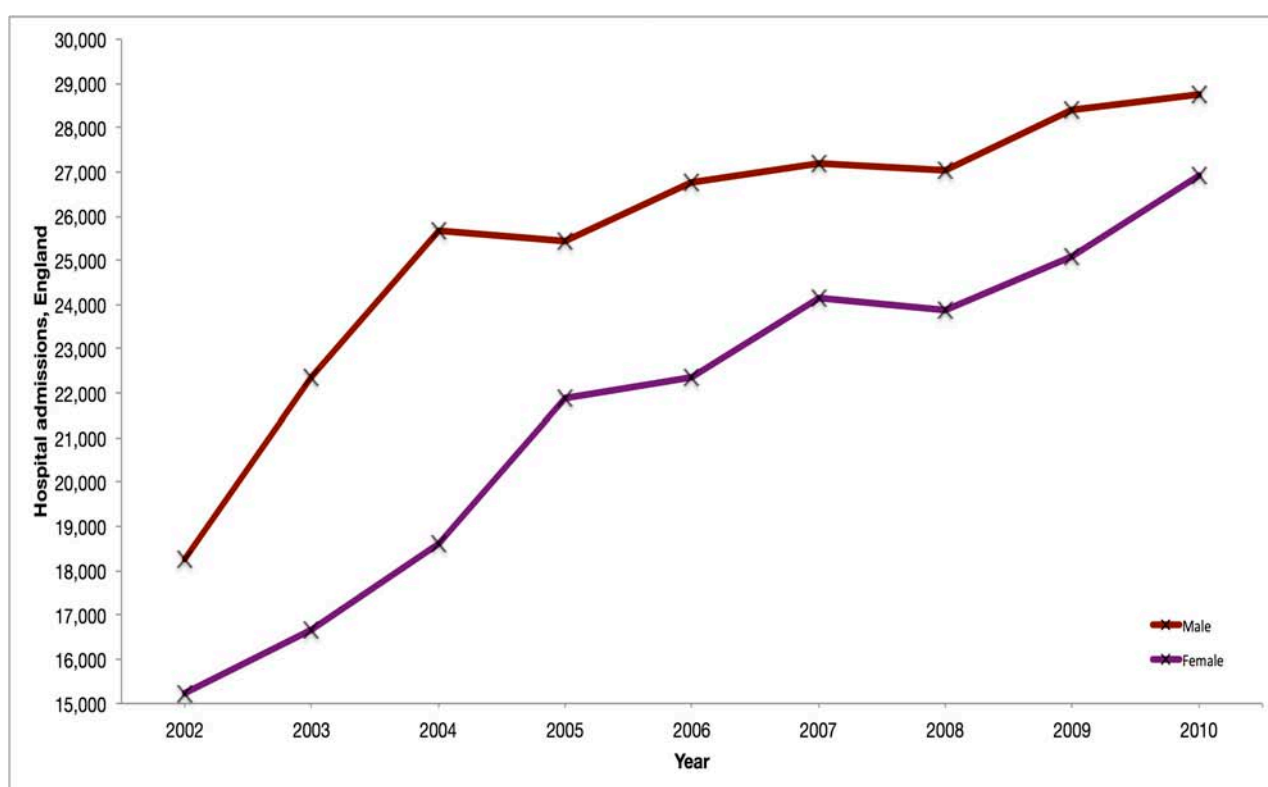
At first glance, official figures on drinking habits indicate that in recent years, while young people have been drinking above the average unit consumption per week, they now drink less than the UK average. Young people also drink fewer times during the week than most other age groups. But when they do drink, a significant proportion engage in heavy episodic or 'binge' drinking. The most notable example of this is among young women; the highest age-specific proportion of female binge drinkers are in the 16 to 24 year-old age bracket.

These current trends are at odds with the wider historical overview of young persons' alcohol consumption in the UK. In the interwar period, they 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, young people had become the heaviest drinkers in the population, and the group least likely to abstain. This has resulted in continuous rises in the number of admissions to hospitals over the past decade, and in the case of females aged between 15 and 34, a doubling in the rate of alcohol-related deaths in the last 20 years.

Health impacts: Hospital admissions

Figure 6 shows an upward trend in admissions to hospitals in England from 2002 to 2010 among young adults. The number of admissions of 15 to 24 year-old male patients over the period increased by 57%, from 18,265 in 2002 to 28,747 in 2010. The number of admissions of 15 to 24 year-old female patients over the period increased at faster rate [76%], from 15,233 in 2002 to 26,908 in 2010.

Figure 6: Number of alcohol-related hospital admissions in England, 15 to 24 years of age, 2002–2010



Source: North West Public Health Observatory [NWPHO]

Alongside admissions, there are thousands of young adults in England who receive treatment for problems caused by alcohol. The number of new cases of treatment for alcohol misuse among young adults in England in 2011/12 stands at 5,521, 7% of the total number of new cases presented [74,353]. This is lower than last year [5,819], although the number of 18 to 24 year-old female cases in 2011/12 rose slightly over the 12 month period [1,882 in 2010/11 to 1,949 in 2011/12].¹

Statistics for Scotland focus on the number of alcohol-related discharges rather than admissions (**for information on why this is the case, please read the How alcohol mortality and morbidity rates are calculated in the UK section of the Health impacts factsheet**). The number of alcohol-related hospital discharges of patients aged between 15 and 24 years in Scotland was lower in 2010/11 [3,312] than in 2006/07 [3,657], peaking at 4,278 in 2007/08 (see Figure 7). There has also been a slight decline in the proportion of discharges in that age group, from a high of 9.9% in 2007/08 to 8.5% 2010/11.

Figure 7: Alcohol-related hospital discharges in Scotland, 15 to 24 years of age, 2006/07 – 2010/11

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
15 to 24 years	3,657	4,278	3,788	3,400	3,312
Total	40,180	43,054	41,980	39,344	38,825
As a share of the total number of discharges (%)	9	9.9	9	8.6	8.5

Source: Alcohol Statistics Scotland, 2007 to 2011

Health impacts: Mortality rates

A significant proportion of avoidable deaths and hospital admissions are attributable to alcohol consumption each year, particularly in young people.² A government white paper on public health published in 2010 emphasised the danger of alcohol misuse to young people's lives, stating that accidents due to alcohol (including drink-driving accidents) are the leading cause of death among 16–24 year-olds.³

For both sexes, age-specific alcohol-related death rates in the UK were lowest among those younger than 30 years of age. Alcohol-related mortality rates for males and females aged 20 to 24 years were 0.4/0.3 per 100,000 UK population in 2011, and 2.5/1.5 for those aged between 25 and 29 years.

Trend data for the number of alcohol-related deaths in the UK is split by broader age groups than can be strictly described as 'young adults'. The 15 to 34 year-old cohort is the nearest approximation of this.

193 males and 121 females between 15 and 34 years of age died from alcohol-related causes in 2011 in the UK. The number of alcohol-related deaths among females in this age group was at its highest point for at least 20 years in 2011. The mortality rate also increased between 1991 and 2011 for 15 to 34 year-olds, from 1.3 to 2.3/100,000 for males (in line with overall trends), and from 0.7 to 1.4/100,000 for females (double the 1991 figure and above overall trends).⁴

Social impacts

The quantitative data on alcohol-related morbidity and mortality is matched by the literature on young adult drinking habits. This has tended to point to an association between consumption and future increases in alcohol-related harm, with considerable social and financial costs.

Cost of alcohol shapes the frame of reference through which alcohol is consumed. The evidence suggests that cheap alcohol is viewed as a second-rate commodity drunk primarily for its intoxicating effects.⁵ One study cited peers and price as the main factors of excessive drinking among 18 to 25 year-olds. Respondents admitted that intoxication was encouraged as the typical mode of alcohol consumption and while rational individual

decision-making concerning the short and long-term health and social effects of heavy drinking were actively downplayed, financial considerations were found to have a significant influence on consumption levels. One female student was reported to have said:

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.⁶

Many young adults today share this view, as alcohol is perceived as integral to a fun night out. Thus the socialising of young adults has increasingly developed a culture that reinforces the need for drinking to participate and belong.⁷ This view is said to develop from an early age, as long-term studies of adolescents' consumption habits into adulthood have established a link between on the onset of drinking and risky patterns of alcohol consumption in later life **(for more information on the onset of drinking, please view the Underage drinking in children and adolescents section of the Population groups factsheet).**⁸

In contrast, abstainers displayed a high degree of individuality and could often gain a sense of pride from their own resistance to cultural and group norms. To an extent, abstainers were able to continue not drinking, precisely because others chose to. Ultimately, their views support the finding that excessive alcohol use serves an important integrative function within peer groups.⁹

A recent report on young people and drinking made some recommendations for tackling the culture of drinking for drunkenness's sake.¹⁰ These included introducing a minimum price per unit to directly alter the price-sensitive attitude of young people who often drink to excess because alcohol is cheap.

Beyond price, the report's authors identified a list of cultural factors to be addressed in order to change young people's drinking habits (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Beyond price and availability – changing culture

- Alcohol's cultural place was in opposition to the rationalised spaces of work and study. This is reflected in the times heavy alcohol use can be sustained normatively – at weekends and before full integration into the labour market during young adulthood. There is also a group element to alcohol consumption where, to a degree, individuality is suppressed in favour of group membership.
- What opportunities are there in work, communities and educational establishments for facilitating meaningful interactions and group belonging? Is there an element of 'play' missing from young adults' lives that means it is crammed into drinking occasions, facilitated and accelerated by industry-created drinking environments shaped to meet underlying intentions cheaply and efficiently? Changing culture in general, and not just relationships to alcohol, is difficult for policy-makers. However, given the needs that are met for young people by heavy episodic drinking perhaps we can consider what alternatives are possible.
- The separation of young adults' drinking sites from those of other generations means that multiple standards and different ways of drinking are witnessed less in drinking places. It can also reinforce the belief that they will grow out of current behaviours as older people are a minority in youthful pubs, clubs or in street-drinking locales. Encouraging intergenerational drinking in city and town centres therefore may reduce consumption and binge intentions through the establishment of informal controls and through witnessing more moderated forms of consumption.
- Moderate parental drinking is another means of establishing alternatives to binge drinking for young people through offering a diversity of standards by which to compare excessive drinking witnessed in young adulthood. Establishing norms of alcohol use within the bounds of safe levels should be part of parenting and early years' interventions. It is the example set which appears important rather than the 'inoculation' of young people to alcohol-related harm through the introduction of small amounts of alcohol.
- A cultural climate of celebration and exuberance characterised the UK from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Potentially, a more straitened financial climate may lead to changes in how young adults relate to alcohol. However, a risk to be aware of is that of a tightened youth labour market accentuating the transition to adulthood for more young people with implications for continued substance use.
- Alcohol education messages, like much health promotion, can be recited by young people even when they are ignored. Deficit of knowledge is not the problem but a failure to connect with knowledge as relevant to their experiences. The researchers were struck by how engagement with young drinkers through diaries stimulated respondents' reflection and concern for the amounts they self-reported. This suggests that deeper forms of engagement around the place of alcohol within people's own lives (already a component of brief interventions) could prove effective in establishing a need for individual behavioural change.

Source: Seaman, Pete, Ikegwuonu, Theresa (December 2010), [Drinking to belong](#), in 'Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink', Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF], p. 42

- 1 National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse (October 2012), '[Alcohol Statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System \(NDTMS\), 1st April 2011 – 31st March 2012](#)', p. 20, Table 5.2.1
- 2 Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Dedman, D., et al (June 2008), 'Alcohol-attributable Fractions for England: Alcohol-attributable Mortality and Hospital Admissions', Centre for Public Health Faculty of Health and Applied Social Sciences Liverpool John Moores University, page viii
- 3 The Secretary of State for Health (November 2010), '[Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for](#)

-
- [public health in England](#)', p. 19
- 4 ONS (January 2013), '[Alcohol-related deaths in the United Kingdom, 2011](#)', p. 18
 - 5 Seaman, Pete, Ikegwuonu, Theresa (December 2010), [Drinking to belong](#), in 'Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink', Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF], p. 41
 - 6 Seaman, Pete, Ikegwuonu, Theresa, '[Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink](#)', JRF
 - 7 Seaman, Ikegwuonu, 'Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink', JRF
 - 8 Jefferis, B. J. M. H., Power, C., Manor, O (April 2005)., 'Adolescent drinking level and adult binge drinking in a national birth cohort', *Addiction*, 100: 4, pp. 543–549
 - 9 Seaman, Ikegwuonu, [Drinking to belong](#), in 'Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink', pp. 21–22, 40
 - 10 Seaman, Ikegwuonu, 'Young people and alcohol: influences on how they drink'