

Briefing – Youthful Abandon: why are young people drinking less?

Summary

- Underage drinking is falling, and the causes of this decline are poorly understood
- The most plausible theories emphasise economic factors reducing the affordability of alcohol and improvements in parenting
- There is little evidence for a number of popular hypotheses – that it is driven by stricter enforcement of ID laws, immigration, or the rise of social media – explaining more than a small amount of this change
- More research is needed to robustly test these theories

A new report from the Institute of Alcohol Studies – *Youthful Abandon: why are young people drinking less?* – sheds light on why underage drinking has fallen in recent years. **In 2003, 61% of 11-15 year olds in England had tried alcohol; by 2014, this had fallen to 38%.** The trend appears to apply to both boys and girls, across all ethnic groups, regions and socioeconomic levels. Moreover, in addition to more young people choosing not to drink at all, those children that do drink alcohol appear to be drinking less.

This is undoubtedly welcome news, but is certainly no cause for complacency: **two-fifths of children continue to drink alcohol.** To maintain or accelerate this welcome progress, and to take action to support further reductions in underage drinking, we need to understand what has driven this significant change. *Youthful Abandon* reviews the arguments and evidence to collate and evaluate the main competing theories.

Affordability of alcohol and better parenting are most plausible explanations

While recognising the lack of robust evidence around all the hypotheses, **two in particular seem particularly plausible:**

- **Lower affordability of alcohol** has consistently been associated with falling consumption, and increases in alcohol duty between 2008 and 2012, alongside a squeeze on income means that alcohol has become less affordable.
- **Better parenting** means that parents are less likely to drink in front of their children, less likely to approve of their children drinking, more likely to know their children's whereabouts and activities, and on some indicators have warmer and closer relationships with them. Each of these make underage drinking less likely.

ID policies, new technologies and immigration are likely to have made only a modest contribution to the decline

The report also demonstrates the limitations of certain commonly held theories:

- **Enforcement of ID policies has only played a minor role** in curbing underage drinking, since few children (around 6% at its peak) ever purchased their own alcohol from shops – they are more likely to be supplied by friends or parents.
- There is **little evidence (as yet) that young people are spending time online or on social media, instead of drinking**. Indeed, those who spend longer on the internet appear more likely to drink.
- **Immigration is unlikely to be a major contributor** to the fall in underage drinking, which has been greater among white children than other ethnic groups.

Unlikely that children are rejecting parents' behaviour; mixed evidence on the influence of children's education and welfare

Two further groups of theories have the potential to explain the decline, but at present suffer from a lack of compelling evidence:

- None of the explanations for a shift in social norms away from underage drinking are persuasive. For example, the idea that young people are deliberately rejecting the example of older generations does not account for the fact that children of heavier drinking parents are more likely to drink themselves.
- There are some grounds to believe that children's welfare and educational performance has improved – both trends which are associated with lower drinking.

In response to the findings, the Institute of Alcohol Studies recommends the following:

- **Further research** to evaluate the theories explaining the fall in underage drinking, and how these fit together.
- **Reversing the rising affordability of alcohol** by raising alcohol duty above inflation.

Youthful Abandon: why are young people drinking less? can be downloaded from the Institute of Alcohol Studies website here bit.ly/youthfulabandon from Friday 1st July.

About the Institute of Alcohol Studies

The core aim of the Institute is to serve the public interest on public policy issues linked to alcohol, by advocating for the use of scientific evidence in policy-making to reduce alcohol-related harm. The IAS is a company limited by guarantee, No 05661538 and registered charity, No 1112671. For more information visit www.ias.org.uk.

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