

FINDINGS

A POSITIVE CHOICE: YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DRINK LITTLE OR NO ALCOHOL

This study examines the lives and choices of young people (aged 16–25) who drink little or no alcohol. It explores the influences that shape their decisions and how their choices and patterns of consumption affect their lives.

Key points

- Drinking and getting drunk is not an automatic rite of passage for young people in the UK. The findings of this study reflect that it is commonplace for young people to choose to drink little or no alcohol.
- Choosing to drink little or no alcohol is a positive choice made for many reasons. For some young people the decision not to drink is central to their identity, for others it is 'no big deal', just one of many life choices.
- Major influences stem from observing people around them. Good parental role models play a part, as does witnessing the negative effects of alcohol on others.
- Young people who choose to drink little or no alcohol do not fall into easy stereotypes; their lives are busy and varied. As alcohol does not feature in their lives they tend to prefer activities where drinking alcohol rarely plays a role.
- Young people develop responses and strategies to help them manage not drinking alcohol. While some avoid drinking environments, many are content to socialise with those who drink.
- The immediate effects of drinking alcohol (i.e. hangovers, loss of control) concern young people more than longer-term health effects.
- Young people feel that alcohol education and alcohol messages are based on the assumption that young people will drink. They emphasise the importance of presenting not drinking as a legitimate option to young people, parents and society more broadly.

The research

By Rachel Herring,
Mariana Bayley and Rachel
Hurcombe, the Drug and
Alcohol Research Centre,
Middlesex University

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BACKGROUND

Young people's drinking is a matter of social, media and political concern. Despite a policy focus on drinking, one-fifth of young people aged 16-24 do not drink alcohol and 11 per cent drink less than one unit a week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012).

Knowledge and understanding of choices and how young people manage their choices is limited. Nor has much consideration been given to the usefulness of the insights of young non- and light drinkers in how the prevailing drinking culture might be changed. This study used in-depth interviews with young people aged 16-25 who drink little or no alcohol to further understanding of their choices, learn from them and identify ways to support their choices.

Young people's current attitudes and behaviours

The researchers interviewed 52 young people (26 women and 26 men). The sample consisted of 22 people who currently do not drink alcohol (9 women and 13 men) and 30 current light drinkers (17 women and 13 men) who reported drinking small amounts infrequently. Experimenting with cigarettes or drugs was rare. The majority of young people did not see drinking alcohol as a bad thing and were not anti-alcohol. Most young people stressed that they see drinking as a personal and not a moral choice. The prevailing view was that drinking in moderation is okay, but that it is important for people to know their limits.

Five drinking types were identified from the data, which encapsulate young people's drinking habits in terms of both their current and previous use (see Table 1). For many young people, current drinking (or non-drinking) represents a shift over time, with some having drunk more in the past.

Table 1: Drinking types

Drinking type	Young women	Young men	Total
Former drinker, no longer drinks	5	4	9
Non drinker	4	9	13
Light drinker but used to drink heavily	1	4	5
Light drinker with past episodic drunkenness	11	3	14
Light drinker who has never been drunk	5	6	11
Total	26	26	52

Choosing to drink little or no alcohol

This study found that choosing not to drink or to drink lightly is a positive choice young people make for varied reasons. The strongest messages and influences come from real life observations. They include good parental models; seeing the negative or harmful effects of alcohol on others; not liking the taste of alcohol; the high cost; drinking not fitting in with their other commitments (e.g. sporting, academic) and their own negative past experiences of drinking. For some young people the decision not to drink is central to their identity, for others it is 'no big deal'.

Becoming a non- or light drinker

In order to understand how young people arrived at their current drinking attitudes and behaviours it is necessary to consider the range of influences and experiences they described during the interviews. These were captured in young people's narratives; the stories and recollections they related to help explain their current attitudes and behaviours. From the data three narratives were identified which capture these journeys:

- **'Consistent'** – young people fitting this narrative were consistent in their decisions regarding alcohol use during their lives. Many influences help explain why these young people do not drink or drink lightly, and they often seemed to reinforce existing attitudes to and beliefs about drinking. People in this group are non-drinkers and light drinkers who have never been drunk.
- **'Transitional'** – these narratives involved shifts and fluctuations in drinking over time, eventually leading to a reduction in consumption. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific experience or belief about alcohol that explains these changes in drinking. A large number of these young people formed their decisions in part through personal experiences of drinking. Fluctuations in how these young people drink are sometimes evident and they may still occasionally get drunk or have more to drink than planned.
- **'Turning point'** – young people fitting these narratives have experienced a turning point during their life that led to a change in behaviour and/or a change in attitude towards alcohol. This group were often former heavy drinkers, or had a particularly negative experience with alcohol that put them off drinking. Two young people in this group had always been non-drinkers, making conscious decisions at a young age not to drink. Turning points commonly involved religion, health or a drunken experience.

A total of 16 young people described a narrative with a 'turning point', 17 reported transitional narratives, and 19 revealed consistent decisions and attitudes towards alcohol over their lifetimes.

Being a non- or light drinker

These young people live busy and varied lives. Most are in full-time study, often combined with paid or voluntary work. They engage in a range of leisure interests (e.g. playing sport, photography, dancing) and enjoy doing the 'usual things' (i.e. spending time with friends, watching films). Their lives often involved activities where alcohol rarely plays a role.

Although some of these young people avoid drinking environments, many are content to socialise with those who drink. Young people develop their own responses and strategies for managing not drinking within drinking situations. These include a firm but polite 'no thank you' to offers of drinks, mirroring drinks so that people think they are drinking alcohol, buying their own drinks, disposing of unwanted drinks or having a legitimate excuse such as driving. Light drinkers report nursing their drinks to make them last longer, avoiding buying in rounds and going only for a short time to events where the focus is on drinking. The approach taken depends on the context (e.g. whether with old friends, or in a new social situation), and also on how open young people are about their drinking behaviour, with some being 'up front' about their drinking preferences, and others striving to blend in and not reveal what they are drinking.

“But no one told me it's ok not to drink...”

Young people felt there was a widespread assumption that drinking heavily was part of growing up. Messages about alcohol from school, education and the media were felt by some young people to reinforce stereotypes and norms around drinking behaviour. Young people were angered by the lack of support for their choice and thought that health messages place too strong an emphasis on the longer-term health effects of alcohol use. For them, the immediate impacts of drinking were of greater concern, such as having a hangover or not being able to study effectively.

Young people challenged what they saw as distorted and negative portrayals of young people as heavy binge drinkers in the media.

Recommendations

Alcohol education and advice aimed at young people and their parents should present the option of not drinking as a valid choice. Choosing to drink little or no alcohol needs to be highlighted as commonplace and information on strategies used successfully by young people who do not drink or drink lightly needs to be available.

There should be more opportunities for young people to socialise without alcohol, or without it being the focus of the event. Further and higher education institutions can play a role in providing such opportunities and ensure that bars stock a wide array of soft drinks that are attractively priced and actively promoted.

Such steps would help support individuals who choose not to drink and foster a culture where heavy drinking is not seen as essential to a good night out. For such changes to be effective, they would need to be replicated widely and be part of broader efforts to shift social and cultural attitudes and perceptions.

References

NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care (2012) *Statistics on alcohol: England 2012* London: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care. Available at www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/alcohol/statistics-on-alcohol-england-2012-%5Bns%5D (accessed 12 June 2012)

About the project

To be included in the study the participants either had to be non-drinkers or drinking 2 units or less for women and 3 units or less for men a day, i.e. below recommended levels, although most were consuming well below these levels. The vast majority (48) of participants were living in London. Data was collected between summer 2010 and spring 2011.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This *Findings* is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF. See www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/alcohol For more information, please contact Nancy Kelley, email: Nancy.Kelley@jrf.org.uk

The main report, **A positive choice: young people who drink little or no alcohol** by Rachel Herring, Mariana Bayley and Rachel Hurcombe, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP

Tel: 01904 615905
email: publications@jrf.org.uk
www.jrf.org.uk
Ref: 2780