

# Youthful Abandon



**Why are young people  
drinking less?**

**July 2016**

**IAS** Institute of Alcohol Studies



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## Why are young people drinking less?

**An Institute of Alcohol Studies report  
written by Aveek Bhattacharya**

### **About the Institute of Alcohol Studies**

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### **Credits**

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Trends</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The Theories</b>	<b>18</b>
1. Better Legal Enforcement	18
2. Rise of New Technology	21
3. Changing Social Norms	23
4. Happier and more conscientious children	27
5. Better parenting	28
6. Demographic Shifts	33
7. Lower affordability and economic confidence	36
<b>Questions for the future</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>42</b>



# Executive Summary

## Key points

- 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

Underage drinking in the UK is in long-term decline, though it remains high:

- 38% of 11-15 year olds in England had tried alcohol in 2014, down from 61% in 2003, with similar drops in Scotland
- This trend has accelerated since 2009
- The fall has occurred at all levels of consumption, across boys and girls, and all socio-demographic groups

In order to maintain this progress, and take action to further curb underage drinking, it is important to understand the factors behind this trend.

There are seven prominent types of theory in the academic literature and popular media to explain falling underage drinking:

1. **Better legal enforcement** of minimum purchase ages e.g. through ID schemes
  - Though there is some evidence that children are less able to purchase alcohol than before, this can only explain a small proportion of the decline, since relatively few underage drinkers buy their own alcohol – they are more likely to be supplied by parents or friends
2. **Rise of new technology** such as online gaming and social networks, diverting children from drinking with alternative means of socialisation
  - There is limited evidence suggesting heavier internet use reduces drinking – and indeed, there is competing evidence suggesting the reverse may be true
3. **Changing social norms** mean that drinking is seen as less acceptable than before. It has been suggested that this is due to a 'backlash' against the heavier drinking of previous generations, greater health awareness and health consciousness or changing gender norms
  - Children of heavier drinking parents are more likely to drink themselves, suggesting there is limited backlash within families

- It is plausible that young people are more aware of the harms associated with alcohol and that they have been influenced by negative media portrayals of it. There is less evidence that they are more health conscious or less exposed to marketing
- 4. **Happier and more conscientious children** are less likely to drink than those in previous cohorts
  - Subjective wellbeing and academic achievement are associated with lower drinking, and both appear to have increased in recent years, though the evidence is not conclusive
- 5. **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 metrics have warmer and closer relationships with them
  - Each of these parenting indicators appears to have improved (though it is less clear in the case of relationship quality)
- 6. **Demographic shifts** mean that there are more ethnic minority children than before, and these groups are less likely to drink
  - Ethnic minorities can directly explain only a small proportion of the fall in underage drinking, which was greater among white children
  - There is some evidence that minority students can influence their peers: non-Muslim children in schools with a high Muslim population are less likely to drink
- 7. **Lower affordability and economic confidence** due to tax increases, the recession and rising tuition fees may have discouraged drinking
  - Alcohol prices rose above wages from 2008 to 2014, though these trends are starting to reverse

Of these theories, declining affordability and better parenting seem most likely to have substantially reduced underage drinking. By contrast, stricter ID policies and immigration have only made a modest contribution to the fall.

There is a substantial need for further research, both to robustly test these theories, but also to understand how they fit together and influence one another.

## Introduction

Underage drinking has fallen in recent years. We do not fully understand why. Yet if we are to maintain this welcome progress and to take effective action to support further reductions, it would be useful to understand its underlying causes. This report sifts the evidence on the topic to summarise what we do know, and to scope out promising areas for future research. It is split into three sections.

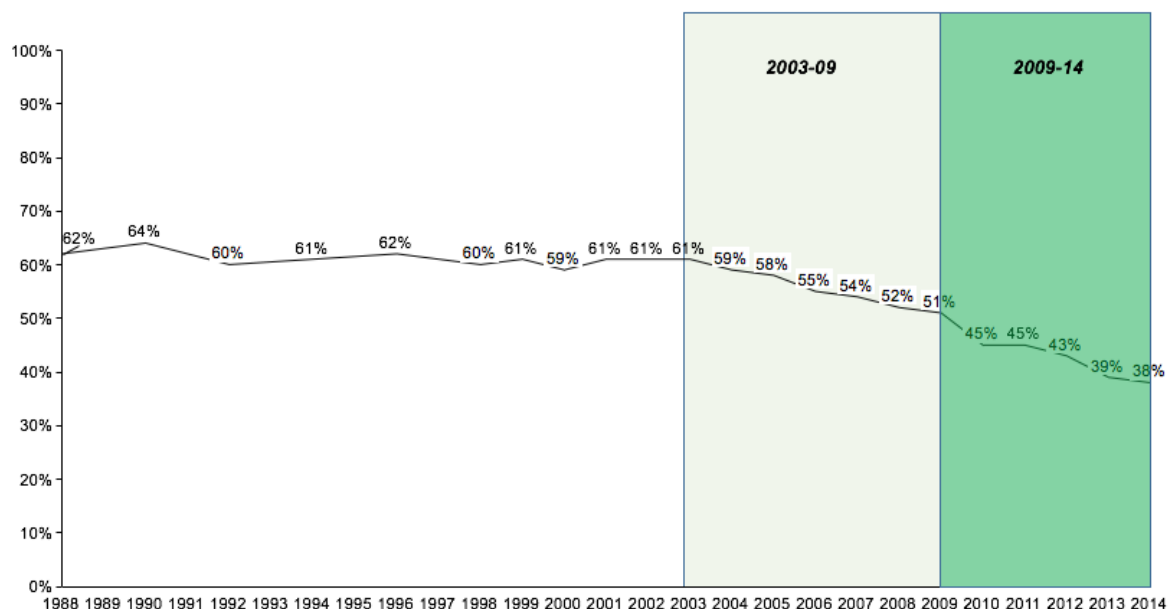
The first section draws on national statistics to provide an overview of the key numbers behind the trend. The second section surveys the academic literature and popular press and collates the full range of explanations that have been offered as to why young people are drinking less. Rather than just presenting these theories uncritically, we make a preliminary assessment of their plausibility based on the available information. These are relatively quick judgements, based on limited evidence. Therefore, even where we are sceptical of a particular theory, this should not be read as a complete rejection, but merely a remark on the lack of existing support (as we see it) for the hypothesis. The third section then highlights a number of unresolved questions that we think would be fruitful for further research in order to be more confident in our assessment of the trend.

## The Trends

### The proportion of children that have tried alcohol is in long-term decline

The most reliable source of data on underage drinking is the Health and Social Care Information Centre's *Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England* (SDD) survey. This is a large nationally representative survey administered to 11-15 year olds through schools. The SDD shows that the proportion of children in England that have ever had an alcohol drink has been in decline since 2003. Having been fairly steady at around 60% for many years, the proportion had fallen to 38% by 2014, the lowest level in over 25 years. However, it should be noted that in absolute terms, the number of children to have tried drinking remains high – two-fifths of 11-15 year olds have consumed alcohol despite being at least three years below the minimum purchasing age.

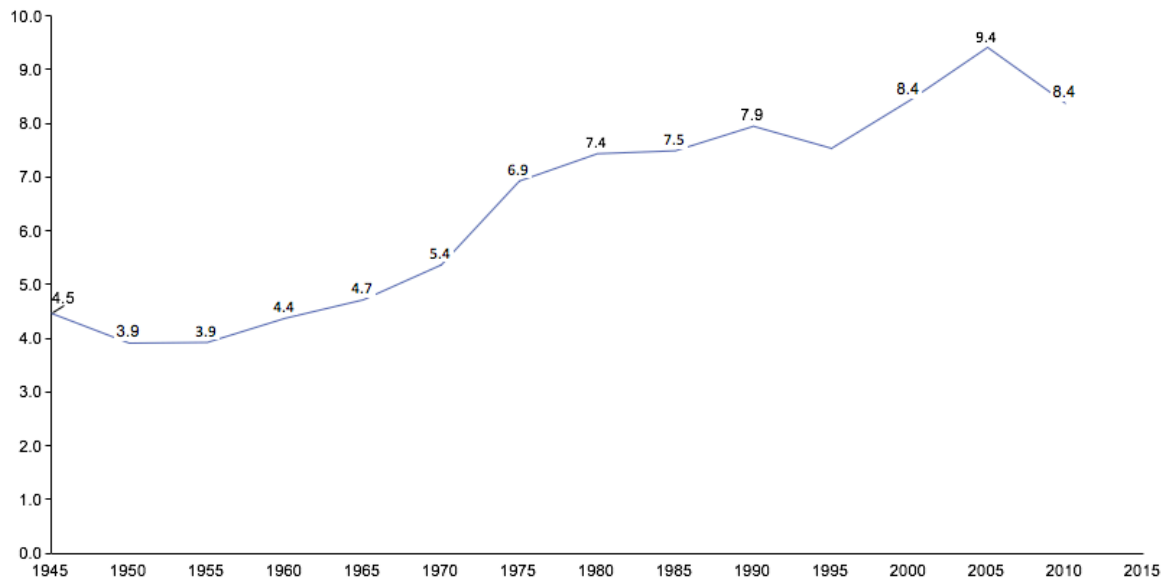
Figure 1: Proportion of 11-15 year olds in England ever to have had an alcoholic drink<sup>1</sup>



Indeed, it is important to place current levels of alcohol consumption in historic context. While long-term figures are not readily available for underage consumption, it is likely that youth drinking has to some extent followed the same trajectory as total population consumption. If this is the case, then the peak of the early 2000s reflects a post-war high, well above the levels of drinking in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>1</sup> HSCIC (2015), *Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England – 2014*, Table 5.1

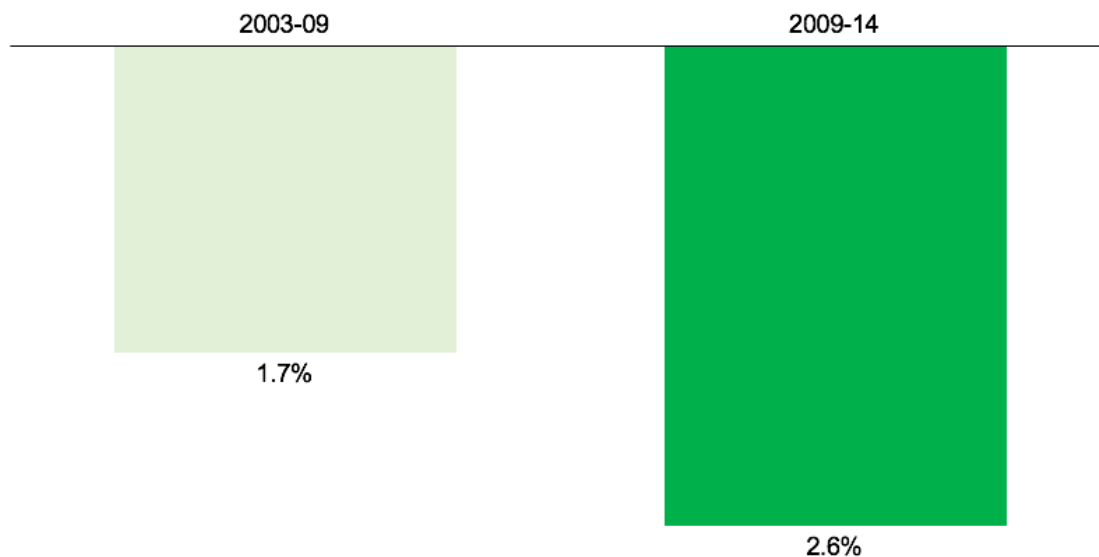
Figure 2: Litres of pure alcohol consumed per capita in the UK, 1945-2014<sup>2</sup>



### This decline has accelerated since 2009

Notably, the SDD data also shows the declining trend appears to be accelerating, with a step change around 2009. Between 2003 and 2009, the proportion of children to have tried alcohol fell by 1.7% a year. Between 2009 and 2014, it fell by 2.6% per year.

Figure 3: Average annual fall in proportion of 11-15 year olds in England ever to have had an alcoholic drink<sup>3</sup>

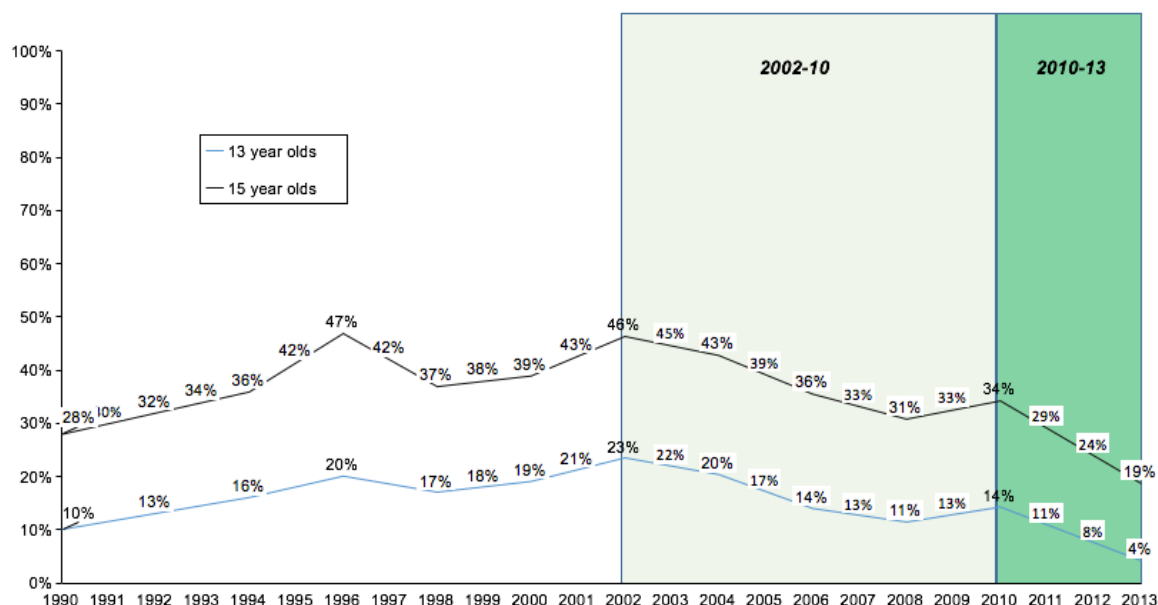


<sup>2</sup> British Beer & Pub Association (2001), *Statistical Handbook 2001*; British Beer & Pub Association (2015), *Statistical Handbook 2015*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

These trends in England are corroborated by Scottish evidence. The Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey (SALSUS) mirrors the SDD findings, with drinking among 13 and 15 year olds peaking in 2002, and the decline accelerating between 2010 and 2013.

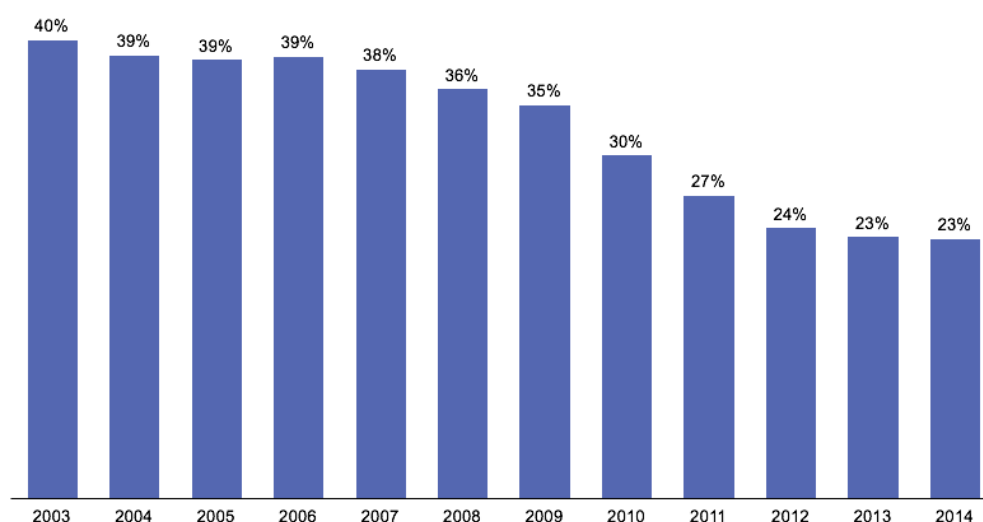
Figure 4: Proportion of children who drank in the last week, Scotland<sup>4</sup>



## Those children that do drink are drinking less frequently

The evidence is less clear when it comes to children who do drink, particularly the heaviest drinkers. However, it appears that even among these groups, consumption is falling. Both the SDD and SALSUS suggest that underage drinkers are drinking less frequently – the proportion of drinkers who drank in the last week or the last month have both fallen.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 5: Proportion of 11-15 year olds who have ever drunk that drank in the last week<sup>6</sup>



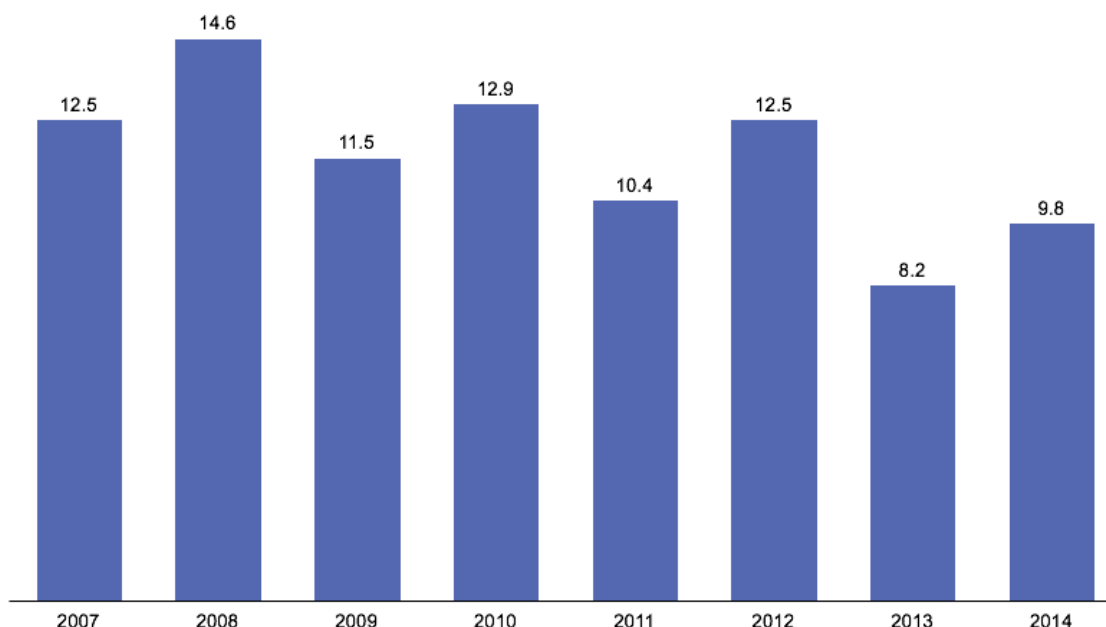
<sup>4</sup> ISD Scotland (2014), Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey, Table A3a.

<sup>5</sup> ISD Scotland (2014), Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey, Table A3a.

<sup>6</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 5.3b

The data is more ambiguous on volume consumption. The average number of units consumed by those children who drank in the last week seems to have fallen. However, this indicator is volatile, and so it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from it. This *might* indicate that consumption may not be declining as clearly and quickly among heavier drinkers.

Figure 6: Average units per week consumed by 11-15 year olds who drank in the last week<sup>7</sup>



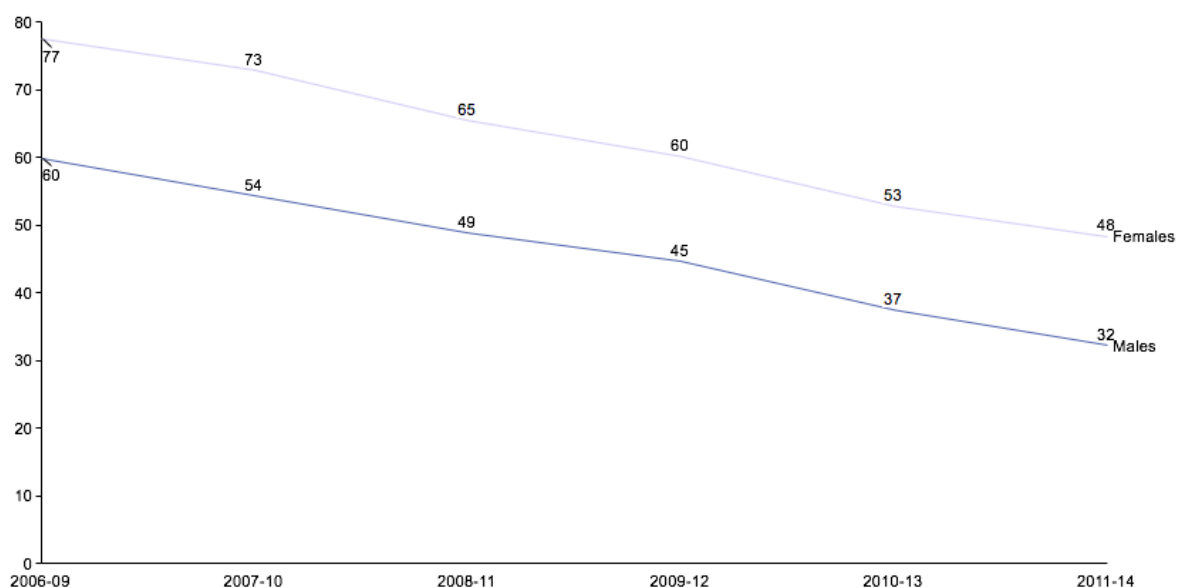
However, hospital admissions data offers a contrasting picture. The rate of alcohol-specific admissions<sup>8</sup> of under 18s has fallen dramatically since 2009: by 46% among boys, and 38% among girls. This suggests that the heaviest drinkers (or at least those with the most harmful consumption patterns) are drinking less. However, as with consumption, it is worth emphasising that current levels are not low in absolute terms, as they are rebounding from historic highs in the 2000s.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 5.3b

<sup>8</sup> That is, admissions for conditions in which alcohol is causally implicated in all cases, such as alcohol-related liver cirrhosis.

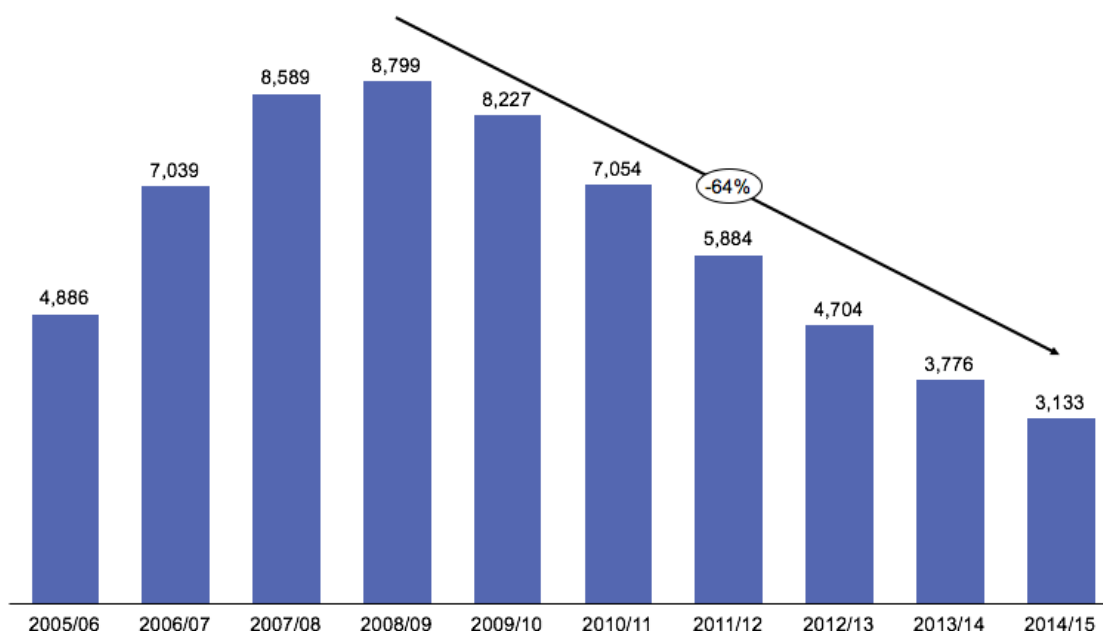
<sup>9</sup> HSCIC (2008), *Statistics on Alcohol England, 2008*, Table 4.7; HSCIC (2015), *Statistics on Alcohol England, 2015*, Table 4.4

Figure 7: Alcohol-Specific Hospital Admissions per 100,000 population – under 18s, England<sup>10</sup>



Another indicator that harmful drinking is in decline is the fact that far fewer under 18s are in specialist treatment for alcohol misuse – down 64% from the recent peak, which was 2009. Of course, these statistics do not prove anything by themselves, as they may reflect trends in access to treatment. However, the fact that they match and corroborate the evidence above suggests that underage drinking is falling across all levels of consumption.

Figure 8: Number of Under 18s in Specialist Alcohol Treatment, England<sup>11</sup>



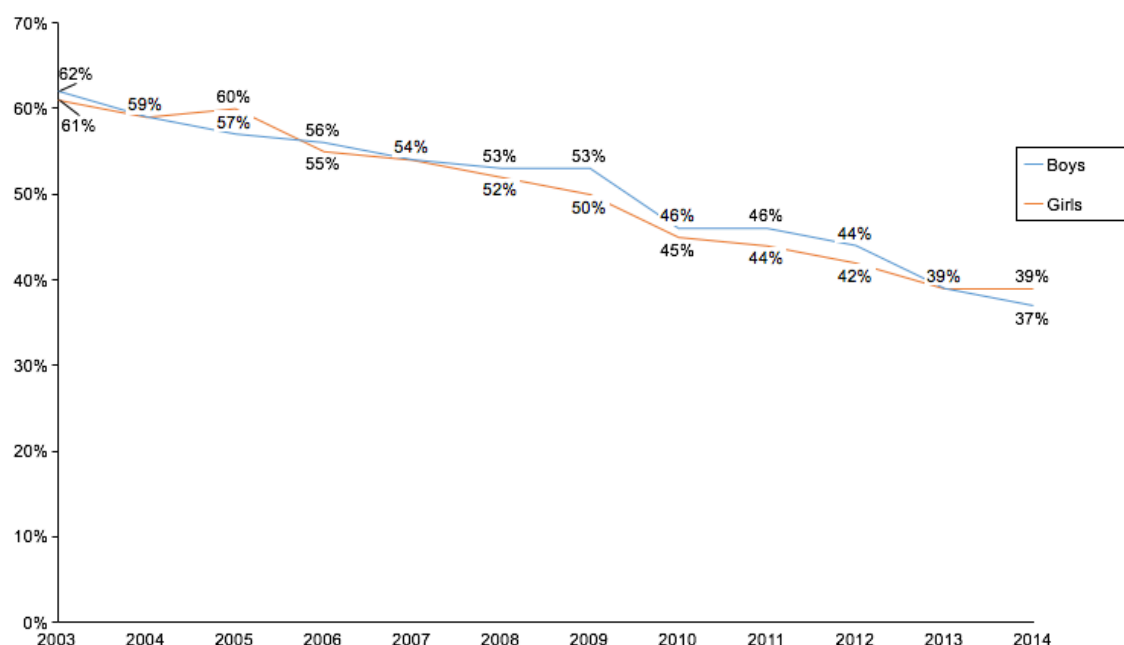
<sup>10</sup> Public Health England (2015), Local Alcohol Profiles for England, June 2015

<sup>11</sup> Public Health England (2015), Young people's substance misuse statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, Table 5.2.1

## Children of all demographic groups are drinking less frequently

The decline in underage alcohol consumption appears to be a broad-based phenomenon, occurring across demographic groups. It is clear that both boys and girls are drinking less: across both sexes the fall in those ever to have drunk has moved in lock step for the past decade.

Figure 9: Proportion of 11-15 year olds in England ever to have had an alcoholic drink<sup>12</sup>

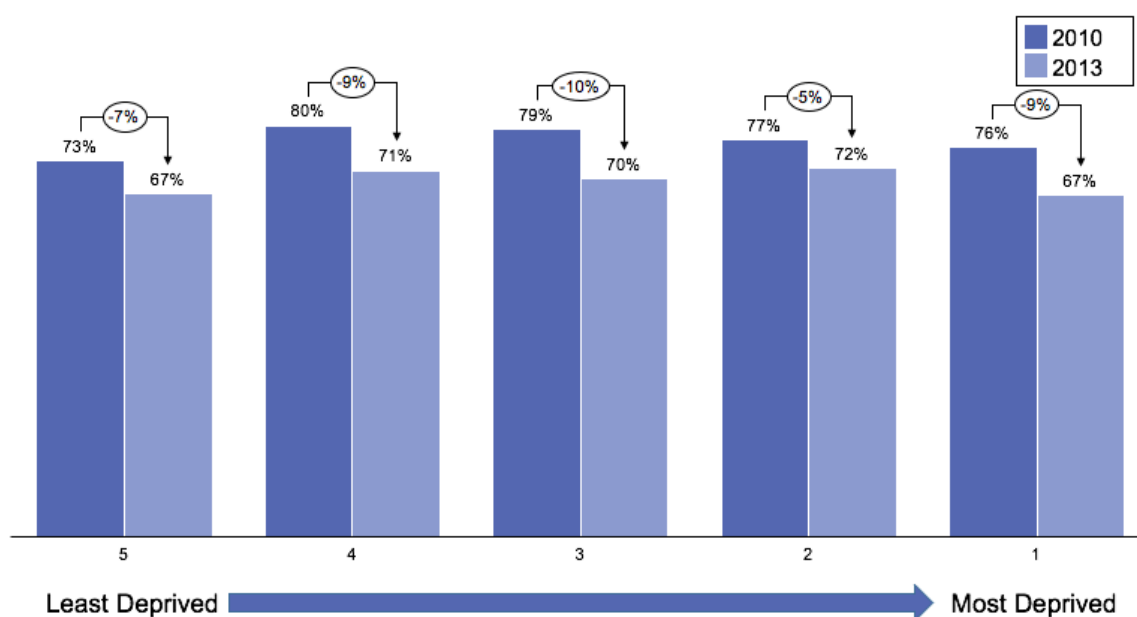


The SDD also shows that drinking has fallen across all ethnic groups (*figure 21*). Moreover, it finds no statistically significant difference in levels of drinking between different regions.<sup>13</sup> Further, the Scottish SALSUS survey indicates that children of all levels of deprivation were less likely to drink in 2013 than in 2010.

<sup>12</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 5.1.

<sup>13</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 5.21.

Figure 10: Proportion of 15 year olds in Scotland ever to have had an alcoholic drink, by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>14</sup>



## A number of other countries are experiencing similar declines

The UK is not the only country to be experiencing a rapid fall in youth drinking. Many, though not all, other developed countries have seen similar trends. A recent article reported a decline in 15 of 17 studied countries in Western Europe and North America between 2002 and 2010.<sup>15</sup>

In the USA, the proportion of 14-18 year olds to have ever drunk has been in decline since 1997, falling from 69% then to 45% in 2015.<sup>16</sup> Canadian surveys also show that people are waiting longer before their first drink, with the average age of initiation rising from 17.9 to 18.3 between 2004 and 2012.<sup>17</sup> Australia has also seen abstinence rising among young people. For example, the number of 12-17 year olds ever to have consumed alcohol in South Australia fell from 92% in 2002 to 68% in 2014.<sup>18</sup> More detailed analysis has shown that it has fallen across all regions, income and social groups in Australia.<sup>19</sup>

The data from Europe is more ambiguous. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has found that between 2007-2011, the proportion of 15-16 year olds who had drunk alcohol in the last 12 months had fallen in Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Czech Republic, Portugal and Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> The drop has been particularly dramatic and sustained in Russia and the Nordic countries.

<sup>14</sup> ISD Scotland (2014), op. cit., Table A43.

<sup>15</sup> De Looze, M. (2015), Decreases in adolescent weekly alcohol use in Europe and North America: evidence from 28 countries from 2002 to 2010, *European Journal of Public Health* 25 supp. 2, pp69-72.

<sup>16</sup> Johnston, L.D. et al (2016), *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2015: Overview, key findings on adolescent drug use*. Ann Arbor Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, p54.

<sup>17</sup> Health Canada (2013), Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey. Available from: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/drugs-droques/stat/2012/tables-tableaux-eng.php#t10> [Accessed 4 May 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (2015), *DASSA Statistical Bulletin Number 9 – October 2015*

<sup>19</sup> Livingston, M. (2014), Trends in non-drinking among Australian adolescents, *Addiction* 109:6, pp922-9.

<sup>20</sup> Hibell, B. et al (2012), *The 2011 ESPAD Report: Substance Use Among Students in 36 European Countries*. Stockholm: Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, p124.

However, for many other countries there has been no systematic trend, and indeed in some cases – notably France – underage drinking has increased.

*Underage drinking in the UK is falling, though it remains high. It appears to have fallen across both genders and all social groups and levels of consumption.*

# The Theories

While much of the general public appears to be unaware of the fall in underage drinking,<sup>1</sup> the trend has nonetheless attracted the attention of both academics and journalists. Inevitably, their discussion has involved some attempt at explanation. This section catalogues the range of theories we encountered in reviewing this literature.

Unfortunately, there has been little so far in the way of empirical research directly assessing these theories. We have nevertheless attempted to summarise what evidence there is in support of or against each hypothesis, though some of the more speculative are not easily testable. This report does not seek to advance an argument about which of the various theories are correct, but does attempt to provide the basic information to start making such evaluations.

There were a number of recurring themes in our review, and we find that the theories for why underage drinking is declining fall broadly into the following seven groups:

1. Better Legal Enforcement
2. Rise of New Technology
3. Changing Social Norms
4. Happier and more conscientious children
5. Better parenting
6. Demographic Shifts
7. Lower affordability and economic confidence

Below, we summarise each of these arguments in turn, providing an overview of the evidence for and against their central claims.

## 1. Better Legal Enforcement

Legal explanations hold that underage drinking has fallen because government, retailer and police activity have made it harder for underage children to access and consume alcohol.

### *Enforcement of Minimum Purchase Age*

Most such theories claim that there has been an improvement in the enforcement of the minimum purchase age for alcohol.<sup>2</sup> According to research carried out by YouGov for the industry-funded Portman Group, shops and pubs being stricter was cited by parents as by far and away the leading reason for young people drinking less, with 57% agreeing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harrington, J. (2014), Study shows parents unaware of underage drinking decline, *The Publican's Morning Advertiser* (28 July). Available from: <<http://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk/Legal/Property-law/Study-shows-parents-unaware-of-underage-drinking-decline>>. [Accessed 9 June 2016].

<sup>2</sup> Birdwell, J. & Wybron, I. (2015), *Character and Moderation: Encouraging the next generation of responsible drinkers*, London: Demos; Pennay et al (2015), Young people are drinking less: It is time to find out why, *Drug and Alcohol Review* 34:2; Cabinet Office (2015), Children and young people's risk behaviours: discussion paper; Nye, C. & Chadha, H. (2014), The rise of the young non-drinkers, *BBC News* (9 January), Available from: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25652991>> [Accessed 4 May 2016]; Wigmore, T. (2016), How the middle-aged became the hedonists, *New Statesman* (8 February). Available from: <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/02/how-middle-aged-became-hedonists>>. [Accessed 4 May 2016].

Harrington, J. (2014), op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Portman Group (2015), Alcohol and ethnicity in Britain, *Portman Group website* (20 July). Available from: <<http://www.portmangroup.org.uk/media/news-details/2015/07/20/alcohol-and-ethnicity-in-britain>>. [Accessed 4 May 2016].

Voluntary industry schemes such as Challenge 21 (launched in 2005)<sup>4</sup> and Challenge 25 (launched in 2009)<sup>5</sup> have attracted a lot of attention. These initiatives encourage retailers to request identification from anybody who appears under the age of 21 or 25 respectively (though they refuse service only if the purchaser cannot show they are over 18). However, previous IAS research suggests that industry schemes are not the only relevant activities in this area: changes to licensing laws have encouraged closer collaboration between police services and local governments to crack down on retailers selling to minors.<sup>6</sup>

Structural market factors may also have played a role – independent retailers have declined and large national chains have an increasingly prominent position in the sale of alcohol. It is plausible that these larger chains are more motivated to curb underage sales (for example, because their prominence means they are more likely to be held accountable by government, and also because they face greater reputational risk). It may also be that they are more capable of coordinating and implementing standardised ID procedures across retail staff.

There are no national independent data sources on underage sales. The best available information comes from Serve Legal, a private company which sells test purchasing services to retailers. Serve Legal's figures suggest that fewer vendors are serving minors: the proportion failing a test purchase declined from 45% in 2007 to 24% in 2010.<sup>7</sup> Since 2010, supermarkets and convenience stores have continued to show improvements, with 13% and 17% failure rate respectively in 2015.<sup>8</sup> However, pubs have gone backwards, with a 30% failure rate in 2015, 4% higher than 2010.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, online alcohol sales have an ever-growing share of the market, and have very poor ID policies: 56% of online retailers failed a test purchase in 2015.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the overall picture suggests minimum age of purchase restrictions are more consistently enforced than a decade ago.

The Portman Group cite the fact that only a small proportion (less than 4% in the last four weeks) of 11-15 year olds attempt to buy alcohol for themselves as evidence that stricter ID policies are responsible for the decline in underage drinking.<sup>11</sup> However, the inference does not follow. Even before the step up in enforcement, self-purchasing was uncommon – 6% of children bought alcohol from shops, and 5% from pubs, in 2004. Consequently, stricter purchasing restrictions cannot explain the full 21% drop in the proportion of children who obtained alcohol over the period.<sup>12</sup> Parents and relatives have long been a more significant source of alcohol for underage drinkers.

<sup>4</sup> British Beer & Pub Association, Challenge 21. Available from: <<http://www.beerandpub.com/industry-briefings/challenge-21>> [Accessed 4 May 2016].

<sup>5</sup> Wine & Spirit Trade Association, Challenge 25. Available from: <<http://www.wsta.co.uk/challenge-25>>. [Accessed 4 May 2016].

<sup>6</sup> Foster, J. & Charalambides, L. (2016), *The Licensing Act (2003): its uses and abuses 10 years on*, London: Institute of Alcohol Studies, p98.

<sup>7</sup> Birdwell, J. et al (2013), *Sobering Up*, London: Demos.

<sup>8</sup> Institute of Alcohol Studies (2016), Majority of web alcohol purchases fail age check tests, *Alert*. Available from: <<http://www.ias.org.uk/What-we-do/Alcohol-Alert/January-2016.aspx>>. [Accessed 4 May 2016].

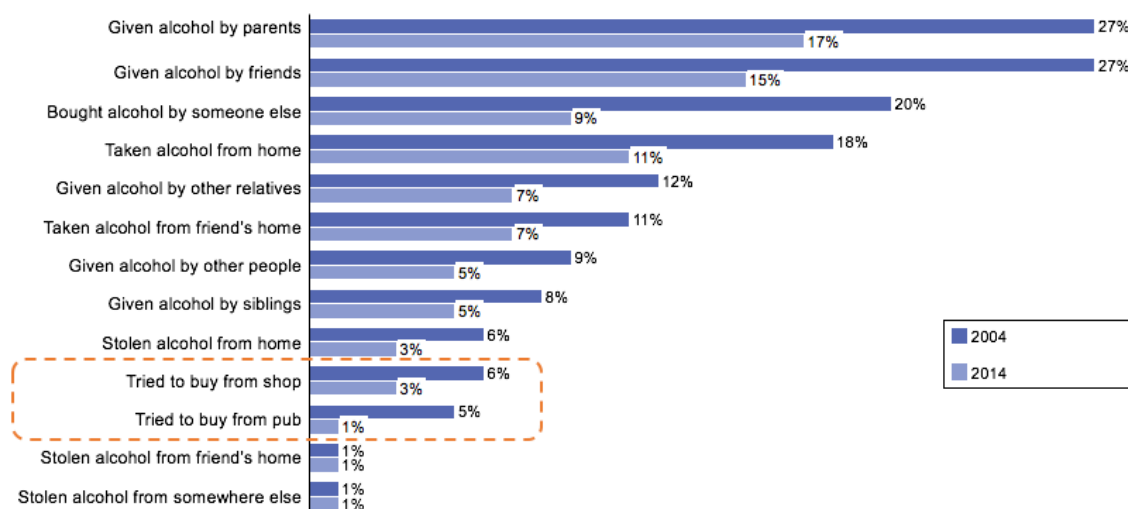
<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; Alcohol Policy UK (2014), What's the picture with underage sales? 'Challenge 25' claims big impact but concerns over pubs, online and proxy sales. Available from: <<http://www.alcoholpolicy.net/2014/07/whats-the-picture-with-underage-sales-.html>>. [Accessed 4 May 2016].

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Alcohol Studies (2016), op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Portman Group (2015), op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 6.1

Figure 11: Proportion of 11-15 year olds in England who obtained alcohol from source in the past four weeks<sup>13</sup>



### Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Another legal change which has been linked, less frequently, to falling underage drinking is the increased use of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs).<sup>14</sup> Introduced in 1998, ASBOs are civil orders issued by magistrates' courts, and used to restrict anti-social behaviours that fall short of full criminality. For example, underage drinkers have been forbidden from associating with other drinkers, and kept out of areas where they have been known to drink.<sup>15</sup> However, there is no clear evidence linking the use of ASBOs to consumption levels.

*While there is some evidence that legal enforcement – particularly of minimum purchase ages – has been stricter, this can only have had a minor impact as only a small proportion of underage drinkers buy their own alcohol.*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Economist (2014), Oh! You pretty things, *Economist* (12 July). Available from: <<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21606795-todays-young-people-are-held-be-alienated-unhappy-violent-failures-they-are-proving>>. [Accessed 5 May 2016].

<sup>15</sup> Martin, A. (2012), Leaders of Bolton underage binge drinking gang get Asbos, *Mirror* (12 February). Available from: <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/leaders-of-bolton-underage-binge-drinking-293125>>. [Accessed 5 May 2016].

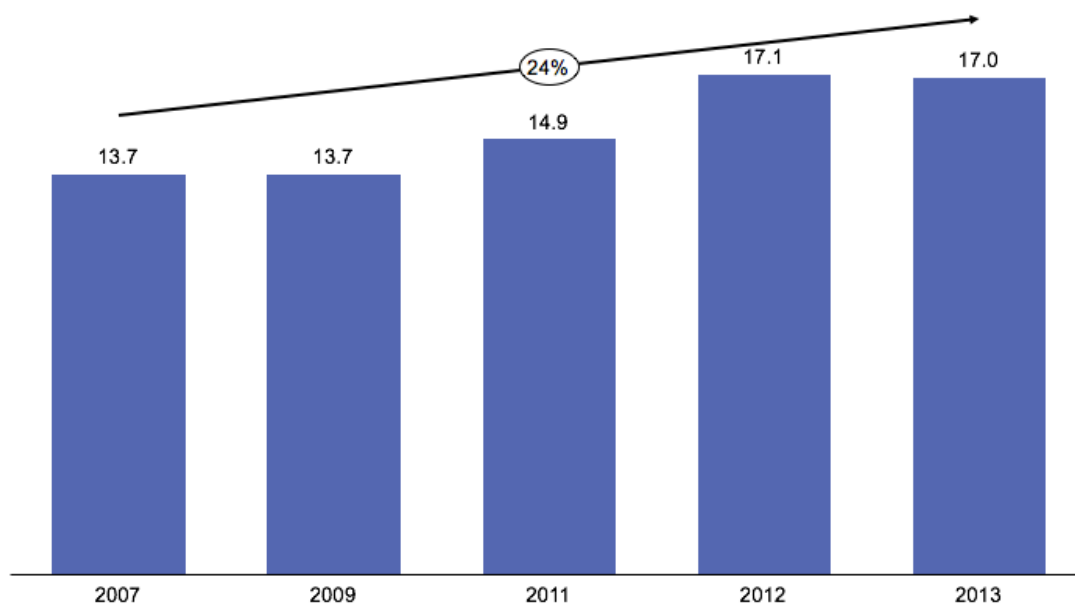
## 2. Rise of New Technology

One of the most popular explanations for the decline in underage drinking is the influence of new technology, in particular the spread of internet access and the growth of social media.<sup>16</sup> This theory typically emphasises the significance of these media as a *diversion* – offering a new set of activities more entertaining and enjoyable than drinking. However, it can also describe the importance of different modes of *socialising*: social media provides an alternative way of keeping up with friends to loitering on the stereotypical park bench. A further dimension is that the internet, and social media in particular, may alter the *long term consequences* of drinking. As Tim Wigmore puts it, “social media has given debauchery an online afterlife”.<sup>17</sup> This can range from the embarrassment of having unflattering pictures shared amongst peers to the risk of creating an unfavourable impression with future employers.

On the other hand, some have suggested that greater internet usage may lead to *higher* levels of consumption.<sup>18</sup> Online, young people may be exposed to pro-drinking messages and pressure, from corporate marketing to glamourised accounts of peers’ drinking.

It is certainly clear that young people are spending increasing amounts of time online. Ofcom data shows that between 2007 and 2013 12-15 year olds’ internet consumption increased by 24% to 17 hours a week.

Figure 12: Estimated weekly hours of internet consumption, 12-15 year olds<sup>19</sup>



<sup>16</sup> Cabinet Office (2015), op. cit.; Drury, I. (2015), Young people shun booze to avoid drunken Facebook photos: Many aged between 16 and 24 choosing not to drink as they fear being ‘cyber shamed’, *Daily Mail* (13 June). Available from: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3122342/Young-shun-booze-avoid-drunken-Facebook-photos.html>>. [Accessed 9 June 2016]. Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.; Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit., p22; Pennay et al (2015), op. cit.; Wigmore (2016), op. cit.; Livingston (2014), op. cit.; Quine, O. (2016), Generation Abstemious: More and more young people are shunning alcohol, *Independent* (15 January). Available from: <<http://ind.pn/1n6k0jX>>. [Accessed 5 May 2016]. Crone, J. (2014), Generation sensible: How today’s teenagers are less likely to drink, smoke or take drugs ‘because of rise in the number of young Muslims’, *Daily Mail* (14 September). Available from: <<http://dailym.ai/1BLqLkz>> [Accessed 9 June 2016].

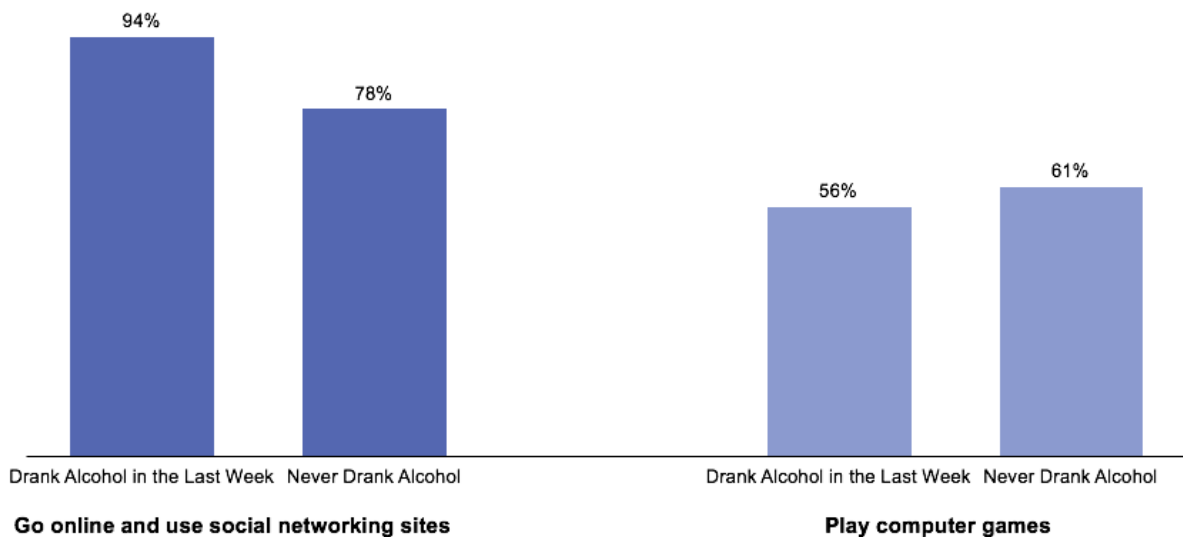
<sup>17</sup> Wigmore (2016), op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, J.A. (2011), Adolescent computer use and alcohol use: What are the role of quantity and content of computer use?, *Addictive Behaviors* 36:5, pp520-2.

<sup>19</sup> Ofcom (2013), Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report. London: Ofcom, p55.

However, it is less clear what the impact of this shift has been on drinking behaviour. One unpublished study reports that children who regularly play computer games are less likely to have ever drunk alcohol – though this finding only holds in three of the six countries examined, including the UK.<sup>20</sup> However, there is more evidence that internet usage is associated with *higher* drinking. The Scottish SALSUS data shows that children who drink are more likely to ‘go online and use social networking sites’ on a weekly basis (although they are slightly less likely to play computer games).

*Figure 13: Proportion of Scottish 13 and 15 year old drinkers/non-drinkers engaging in stated leisure activities on a weekly basis<sup>21</sup>*



This finding is supported by international evidence. Surveys of American university students indicate that they are more likely to drink if they spend more time online for a range of non-educational purposes (including social networking, downloading music, playing video games, shopping and watching pornography).<sup>22</sup> Further, a number of studies show that internet or gaming ‘addictions’ are associated with other types of addictive behaviours, including heavy drinking.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, these findings are far from conclusive on the question of whether greater internet use leads to lower drinking among young people. Most of the results are merely correlations, which may disappear when controlling for confounding factors.<sup>24</sup> In other words, higher internet usage may not be causing underage drinking – it may just be that the sort of children who spend more time online are more prone to drinking, perhaps because they are less engaged in school or have less strict parents. Further to this point, most of the studies cited above are cross-sectional, whereas longitudinal studies would be able to explore whether internet usage precedes drinking, and provide a clearer idea of whether this is likely to be a causal relationship. One longitudinal study using data from Taiwan in 2000-04 suggests that internet users at the age of 16 are more likely to drink at the age of

<sup>20</sup> Svensson, J. (2013), Alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm among young people: studies of the recent experience in Sweden, PhD Thesis, Karolinska Institutet.

<sup>21</sup> ISD Scotland (2014), op. cit., Table A33a.

<sup>22</sup> Epstein (2011), op. cit.; Padilla-Walker, L.M. et al (2010), More Than Just a Game: Video Game and Internet Use During Emerging Adulthood, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 39:2, pp103-13.

<sup>23</sup> Sik Lee, Y. et al (2013), Substance abuse precedes internet addiction, *Addictive Behaviors* 38:4, pp2022-25 Van Rooij, A. et al (2014), *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 3:3, pp157-65; Rucker, J. et al (2015), *Acta Paediatrica* 104:5, pp504-7.

<sup>24</sup> Sik Lee et al (2013), op. cit.; Chiao, C. et al (2014), Adolescent internet use and its relationship to cigarette smoking and alcohol use: a prospective cohort study, *Addictive Behaviors* 39:1, pp7-12.

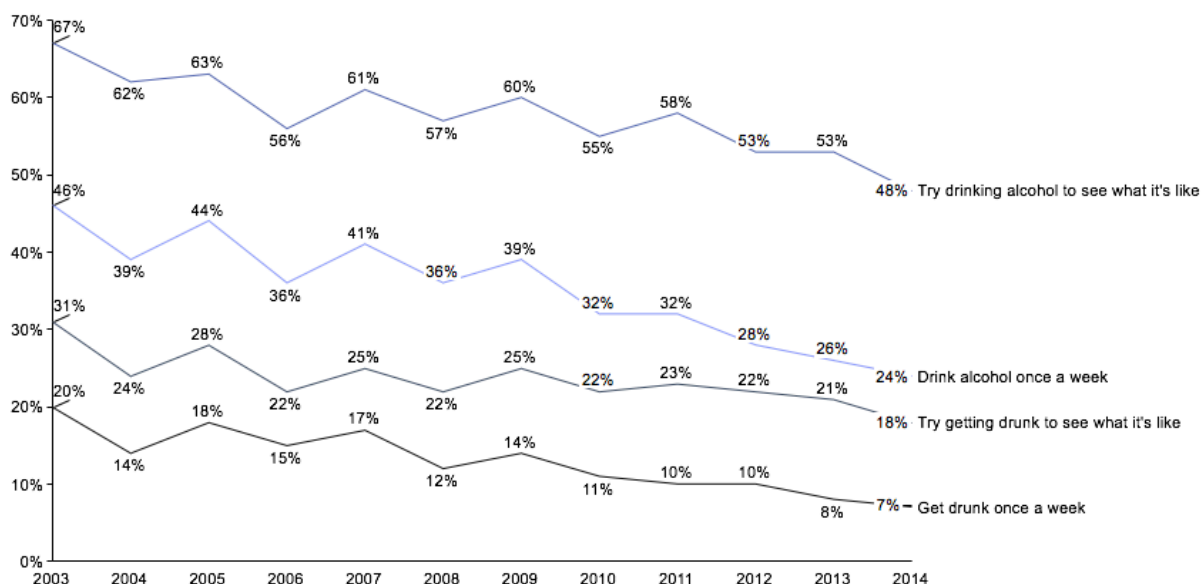
20, but it is not clear how generalisable this is to the UK, given the obvious differences in cultural context.<sup>25</sup>

*There is little evidence that new technologies have reduced underage drinking, and indeed children who spend more time online and on social media may be more likely to drink.*

### 3. Changing Social Norms

A third set of theories focus on socio-cultural cultural factors, in particular how perceptions of and attitudes towards alcohol and young people's drinking have shifted. It is clear that underage drinking carries less social approval than before. Fewer children believe it is acceptable to try alcohol or to drink regularly. However, there is debate over what is causing this trend.

Figure 14: Proportion of 11-15 year olds in England that believe it is acceptable of someone of their age to...<sup>26</sup>



#### a. A 'backlash' against previous generations

Among the most popular explanations is the idea that young people's falling consumption is a *reaction* to the heavier drinking of previous generations. The journalist Fraser Nelson has coined the phrase 'Ab Fab Britain', referencing the TV comedy about a "hedonistic 'modern' mother (Eddy) and her appalled, straight-laced daughter (Saffy)".<sup>27</sup> Along similar lines, James Nicholls of Alcohol Research UK suggests that "People just don't want to look like their parents. It happened in the 1930s, it happened in the 1980s and it's possibly happening again now".<sup>28</sup> One recent report tells the story of the teetotal 18 year old Liam Brooks: "One

<sup>25</sup> Chiao et al (2014), op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 7.9.

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, F. (2013), Boozy, druggy adults. Sober, serious kids. Welcome to Ab Fab Britain, *The Spectator* (9 November). Available from: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/11/ab-fab-britain/>. [Accessed 5 May 2016].

<sup>28</sup> Quine (2016), op. cit.

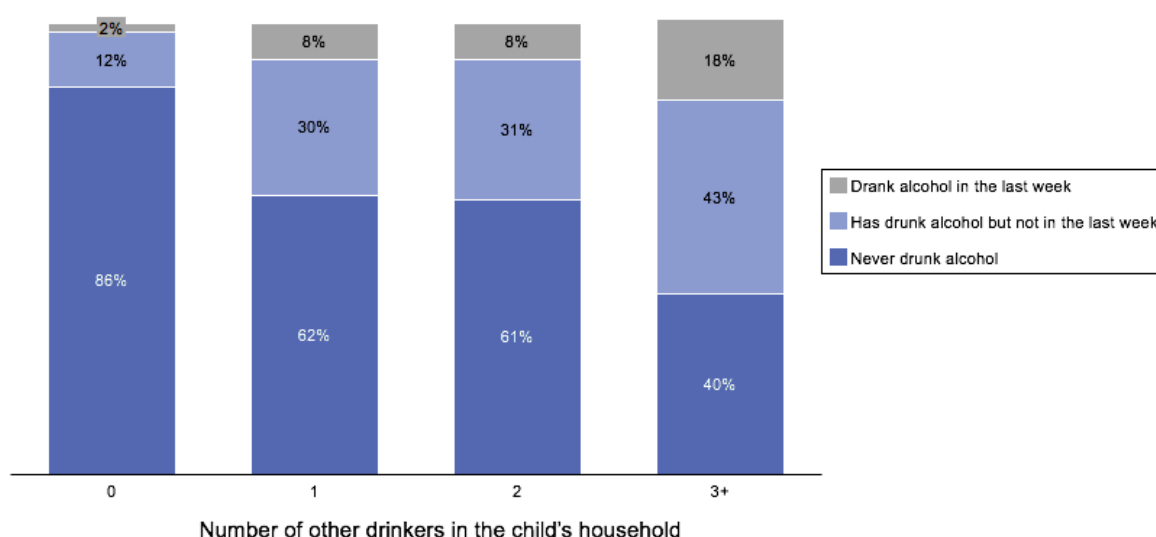
occasion when he had to put his parents' inebriated friends to bed convinced him that 'there is no pretty drunk'".<sup>29</sup>

Nicholls' comments reflect a long-standing theory that the social position of alcohol ebbs and flows in 'long waves'.<sup>30</sup> On this view, above a certain level of alcohol consumption society reaches 'saturation'. At this point, the harms resulting from alcohol, such as ill health and crime, lead to greater concern about alcohol at both individual and societal level. This leads to a decline in consumption. In turn, these cultural shifts bring about increasingly restrictive government policies, which further suppress consumption to the point where previous concern seems exaggerated. This leads to a relaxation of social and political attitudes, and increase in drinking, and so the cycle continues. In line with this theory, it has been suggested that the fall in underage drinking reflects the tipping point into a new 'wave' of attitudes turning against alcohol consumption.<sup>31</sup>

Cutting against these 'backlash' theories is the "fairly large and consistent literature demonstrating that more parental drinking is associated with more drinking in offspring" identified by one recent systematic review.<sup>32</sup> The SDD shows that the more people in a young person's household that drink, the more likely they are to drink themselves. This suggests that children are more likely to emulate their parents' drinking habits than to reject them.

There are a number of possible explanations for this trend. It could be the result of children modelling their behaviour on their parents (see page 28-29). It could also be driven by the greater availability of alcohol in households with heavier drinkers, or possibly because drinkers are more likely to supply their children with alcohol. In any case, it undermines the argument that witnessing heavier drinking in older generations leads to less drinking among the young.

Figure 15: Drinking habits of 11-15 year olds in England by Household Drinkers<sup>33</sup>



<sup>29</sup> Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Skog, O-J. (1986), The long waves of alcohol consumption: A social network perspective on cultural change, *Social Networks* 8:1, pp1-32; Room, R. et al (2009), Explaining change and stasis in alcohol consumption, *Addiction Research & Theory* 17:6, pp562-76.

<sup>31</sup> Livingston (2014), op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Rossow, I. et al (2016), Does parental drinking influence children's drinking? A systematic review of prospective cohort studies?, *Addiction* 111:2, pp204-17.

<sup>33</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 7.1

On a family level, then, there does not appear to be much evidence of a generational backlash. However, this does not necessarily mean that such an effect cannot occur on a societal level. What it does mean is that proponents of such a theory need to be clearer as to the mechanisms which drive it, if it is not transmitted within households.

*b. Greater awareness of alcohol harms*

Another explanation posited for the falling social acceptability of underage drinking is that children today are more aware of the harms associated with alcohol.<sup>34</sup> Among other things, this has been attributed to education campaigns, improved labelling and more negative portrayals of alcohol in the media. An industry-funded survey finds that awareness of the health consequences of drinking was the most frequently cited explanation among 16-24 year olds for falling drinking, with 66% mentioning it.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no direct measure of children's awareness of the effects of alcohol. However, it does not appear as though adults are any more aware of alcohol harms than before. Though they are not directly comparable, there is little change in the knowledge demonstrated in a 2008 Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey and a 2015 Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA) survey, both of which tested public understanding of the health effects of alcohol.<sup>36</sup> For example, in the ONS survey 96% said that alcohol increases the risk of liver disease, compared to 75% who 'associated' alcohol with the condition in the AHA survey. For depression, it was 82% in the ONS survey, but 72% in the AHA survey.

Nevertheless, some of the underlying accounts of how children's awareness might have increased are plausible. There is evidence that labelling of alcohol containers has improved. Between 2008 and 2014, the proportion of drinks carrying information about the Government's drinking guidelines has risen from 6% to 83% and the proportion stating unit content has risen from 56% to 87%.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted, though, that the size and legibility of this information has been criticised.<sup>38</sup>

Some research indicates that media reporting of alcohol is more negative in tone than before. Comparing studies from 2003 and 2009, Nicholls claims that more recent news reports have "less casual references to drinking, less depictions of drinking as a non-problematic everyday activity, less appeal to popular ideas and less use of drinking locations for vox pops".<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Portman Group (2015), op. cit.; Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit; BBC News (2015), Binge-drinking continues to fall in young adults, *BBC News* (13 February). Available from: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-31452735>>. [Accessed 6 May 2016].

<sup>35</sup> Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit, p6.

<sup>36</sup> Office for National Statistics (2010), Drinking: adults' behaviour and knowledge in 2009. Opinion Survey Report No. 42, p100; Alcohol Health Alliance (unpublished), 2015 UK Alcohol Behaviour & Attitudes Survey.

<sup>37</sup> Campden BRI (2014) Audit of compliance of alcohol beverage labels available from the off-trade with the Public Health Responsibility Deal Labelling Pledge, p23.

<sup>38</sup> Petticrew, M. et al (2016), Health information on alcoholic beverage containers: has the alcohol industry's pledge in England to improve labelling been met?, *Addiction* 111:1, pp51-5.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholls, J. (2011), UK news reporting of alcohol: An analysis of television and newspaper coverage, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 18:3, pp200-06.

### c. Trend towards health consciousness

A further hypothesis, linked to the one above, is that young people today are more health conscious than their predecessors.<sup>40</sup> On this view, it is not just that they are more aware of alcohol's damaging effect on their body, but they are more likely to worry about it. Reporting on a non-alcohol bar founded by 18-year-old Grace Beverley and inspired by the 'clean eating movement', the *Independent's* Oscar Quine writes: "The body is now a temple that must be kept in tip-top condition at all times. Who knows when it might be papped, snapped and shared with the world? And the record of what you put in is just as important as how it looks. We are now, more than ever, what we eat – and drink".<sup>41</sup>

Yet there is limited evidence that such a shift in attitudes has occurred across the population as a whole, rather than small niches. For example, such a supposed increase in health consciousness is hard to square with the rise in childhood obesity and falling levels of physical activity.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the average portions of fruit and vegetables eaten per child have also been fairly constant for the past 15 years.<sup>43</sup>

### d. Marketing

Another socio-cultural factor which is surprisingly absent from discussions is the impact of marketing. Exposure to alcohol marketing is often cited as one of the main drivers of underage drinking.<sup>44</sup> Any fall in this exposure could therefore help explain the fall in consumption.

UK alcohol marketing is overseen by a mixture of co- and self-regulatory codes. In 2005, these regulations were tightened to try and ensure that alcohol marketing is not targeted at under 18s, for example by ensuring models and actors are over 25 and do not behave in a juvenile way.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Portman Group's 2014 sponsorship code forbids sponsoring events where most participants are underage, or promoting merchandise that is aimed at minors.<sup>46</sup>

However, the data on children's exposure to alcohol marketing is ambiguous. Ofcom have recorded the number of TV advertising 'impacts' (one member of the audience watching on one commercial spot). Between 2002 and 2006 the number of alcohol impacts seen by 10-15 year olds declined from 1.3 billion to 0.8 billion.<sup>47</sup> However, this trend appears to have been reversed between 2007 and 2011: over this period the number of impacts seen by 4-15 year olds rose to 1.4 billion.<sup>48</sup> This initial decline in alcohol advertising, followed by a post-2007 rise, is reflected in the 16-24 age group as well.

<sup>40</sup> Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.; BBC News (2015), op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Quine (2016), op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> HSCIC (2015), Health Survey for England 2014 Trend Tables.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Institute of Alcohol Studies (2013), *Marketing and alcohol Factsheet*. London: Institute of Alcohol Studies.; Velleman, R. (2009), *Influences on how children and young people learn about and behave towards alcohol*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>45</sup> Committee of Advertising Practice, Alcohol: General. Available from: <<https://www.cap.org.uk/Advice-Training-on-the-rules/Advice-Online-Database/Alcohol-General.aspx#.Vyyq7RUgtEI>>. [Accessed 6 May 2016].

<sup>46</sup> Portman Group (2014), *Code of Practice on Alcohol Sponsorship*. London: Portman Group.

<sup>47</sup> Ofcom (2007), *Young People and Alcohol Advertising: An investigation of alcohol advertising following changes to the Advertising Code*. London: Ofcom, p43.

<sup>48</sup> Ofcom (2013), *Children's and young people's exposure to alcohol advertising 2007 to 2011*. London: Ofcom, p41.

#### e. Gender Norms

A more speculative account suggests that changes in drinking habits are the result of shifting perceptions of masculinity and femininity. *The Economist* suggests that gender equality initially led to 'ladette' culture, defined by Concise Oxford Dictionary in 2001 as "young women who behave in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engage in heavy drinking sessions".<sup>49</sup> However, it claims that the pendulum has now swung in the other direction and that "A generation that enjoys greater gender equality than any before may as a result be putting less value on anti-social teenage machismo".<sup>50</sup>

*Underage drinking is clearly less socially acceptable than before. However, there is little clear evidence as to what is behind this broad cultural change. There does not appear to be a direct 'backlash' against the drinking of older generations. Nor is it clear that perceptions or concerns around the harmfulness of alcohol to health are the root cause.*

### 4. Happier and more conscientious children

Another set of factors known to influence underage drinking are children's personality or behavioural traits. In a review of the literature, Donovan finds that being less conventional, suffering from more negative emotions (including depression and anxiety) and impulsivity are all associated with taking up drinking.<sup>51</sup> It is also established that greater educational commitment is correlated with lower drinking: those with higher grades and higher expectations for their achievement are less likely to drink.<sup>52</sup> More religious children are also less likely to drink.<sup>53</sup>

Given the relationship between these factors, it is at least plausible that systematic changes in personalities and behaviour have contributed to the fall in drinking. For example, a recent BBC report refers to young people's growing tendency to spend more time "doing their homework and less time down the pub or hanging around the bus shelter with their mates".<sup>54</sup> However, such views elicit scepticism from those who doubt that such traits can shift so dramatically in a relatively short period of time.<sup>55</sup>

There is some evidence that children's subjective wellbeing improved between the mid 1990s and 2007, although it appears to have fallen back since 2007.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, these trends are contested – teenage anxiety, depression and mental illness have all risen in recent years.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>49</sup> BBC News (2001), Ladettes enter dictionary, *BBC News* (12 July). Available from: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1434906.stm>>. [Accessed 21 June 2016].

<sup>50</sup> *Economist* (2014), op. cit. See also Channel 4 News (2014), Is Britain saying goodbye to bingeing culture?, *Channel 4 News* (23 April). Available from: <<http://www.channel4.com/news/binge-drinking-violence-booze-beer-lads-culture>>. [Accessed 9 June 2016].

<sup>51</sup> Donovan, J.E. (2004), Adolescent alcohol initiation: A review of psychosocial risk factors, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 35:6, pp529.e7-529.e18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*; Velleman (2009), op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> BBC News (2015), op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> Livingston (2014), op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Pople, L. et al (2015), *The Good Childhood Report 2015*. London: The Children's Society, pp21-3.

<sup>57</sup> Bedell, G. (2016), Teenage mental-health crisis: Rates of depression have soared in the past 25 years, *Independent* (27 February). Available from: <<http://ind.pn/211Bj2M>>. [Accessed 21 June 2016].

Increases in children's satisfaction with school are more striking over the period.<sup>58</sup> There have been consistent improvements in educational attainment in England over the period of declining underage drinking: 57% of students achieved 5 or more A\*-C grades in their GCSEs in 2004/05, rising to 82% 2012/13<sup>59</sup> (though these have been attributed to 'grade inflation', resulting from easier exams<sup>60</sup>).

All of these trends would be expected to reduce alcohol consumption. However, these may be counterbalanced by declining religiosity: the proportion of people in England and Wales reporting no religion in the census rose from 15% in 2001 to 25% in 2011.<sup>61</sup>

*Though it is not conclusive, there is some evidence that child welfare has improved, and this is associated with lower underage drinking.*

## 5. Better parenting

Children's family environments are known to have a significant impact on their likelihood of drinking. Consequently, some have suggested that changes in parenting behaviour and efficacy are the cause of the decline in underage consumption.<sup>62</sup> According to *The Economist*, "perhaps the best explanation" is that "A combination of government initiatives, technology, social pressure and reaction against the follies of the past has improved parenting dramatically".<sup>63</sup> Parents are older, have fewer children<sup>64</sup>, devote more time to childcare and face more exacting social expectations of their parenting.

A number of parental characteristics have consistently been associated with underage drinking: (a) modelling; (b) approval; (c) monitoring; (d) warmth and openness of relationships; and (e) family structure.

### a. Modelling

'Modelling' refers to the example that parents set for children by their own drinking. As described above (page 16), there is substantial evidence that children whose parents drink more heavily are more likely to drink themselves. Consequently, the fall in adult drinking is likely to have influenced the fall in children's drinking. As figure 16 shows, 25-44 year olds – that is, people of the age most likely to have dependent children – drink less frequently than they did 10 years ago. Moreover, those that do drink, drink less on a typical occasion.<sup>65</sup> However, the trend is less clear among older age groups (and so older parents).

Of course, this does not demonstrate a causal connection – it could be that the same underlying trends are driving a decline in both adult and children's consumption. Moreover,

<sup>58</sup> Pople, L. et al (2015), op. cit, pp21-3.

<sup>59</sup> Department for Education (2015), GCSE and equivalent results: 2014 to 2015 (provisional) National tables: SFR37/2015. Available from: <<http://bit.ly/293Q5Ew>>. [Accessed 9 May 2016].

<sup>60</sup> Paton, G. (2013), GCSEs 'devalued by grade inflation' over the last decade, *The Telegraph* (16 August). Available from: <<http://bit.ly/294DL6w>>. [Accessed 21 June 2016].

<sup>61</sup> White, E. (2012), Religion in England and Wales 2011. Office for National Statistics. Available from: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-gcse-and-equivalent-results-in-england-2014-to-2015>>. [Accessed 9 May 2016].

<sup>62</sup> Cabinet Office (2015), op. cit.; Wigmore (2016), op. cit.

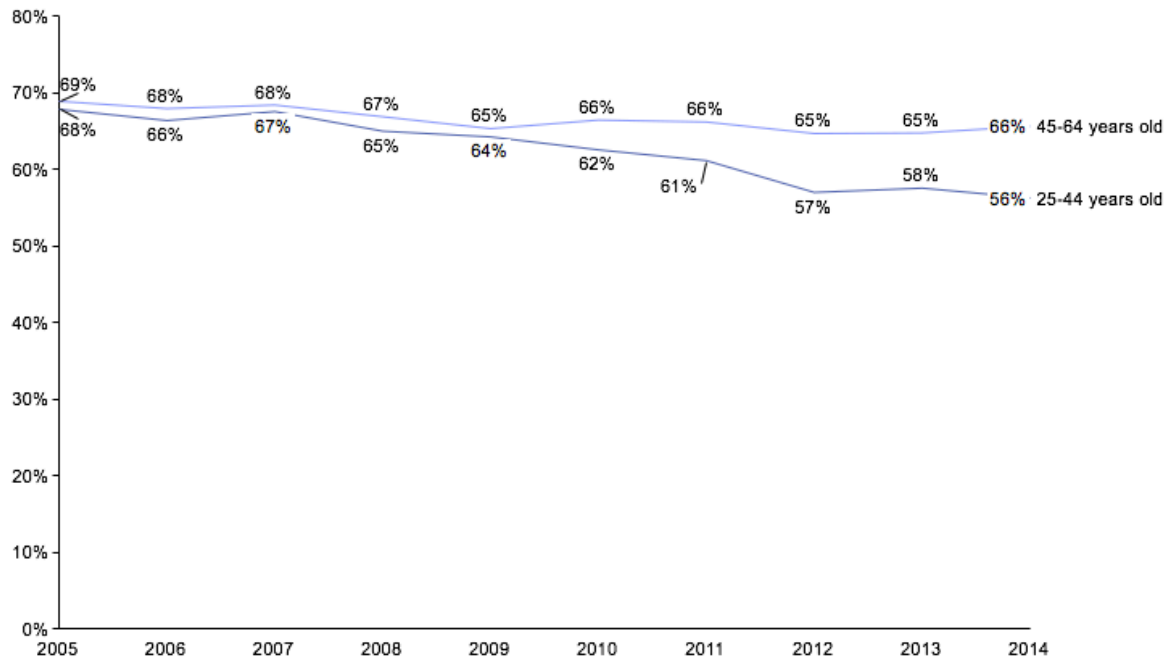
<sup>63</sup> Economist (2014), op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> The total fertility rate in England and Wales has been rising in recent years, but hit its lowest point in 2001 – children born in this period will be reaching their teenage years now. See Office for National Statistics (2015), Birth Summary Tables – England and Wales

<sup>65</sup> Caul, S. (2016), Adult drinking habits in Great Britain. Office for National Statistics. Available from: <<http://bit.ly/295p311>>. [Accessed 9 May 2016].

it is worth noting that the drop in adult drinking is not as sharp as the fall among children and indeed appears to lag behind it: children's drinking peaked in 2002/03, while adult drinking did not begin to decline until around 2009.

Figure 16: *Proportion in Age Group Drinking in the Last Week, Great Britain*<sup>66</sup>



#### *b. Approval*

Children's propensity to drink is greatly influenced by their parents' attitudes. Unsurprisingly, if parents take a more relaxed approach or indeed are willing to supply their children with alcohol, that increases the likelihood of underage drinking.<sup>67</sup> The SDD confirms this, showing that only 11% children whose parents would disapprove of their drinking have ever tried alcohol, compared to 67% of those whose parents 'wouldn't mind' it.<sup>68</sup>

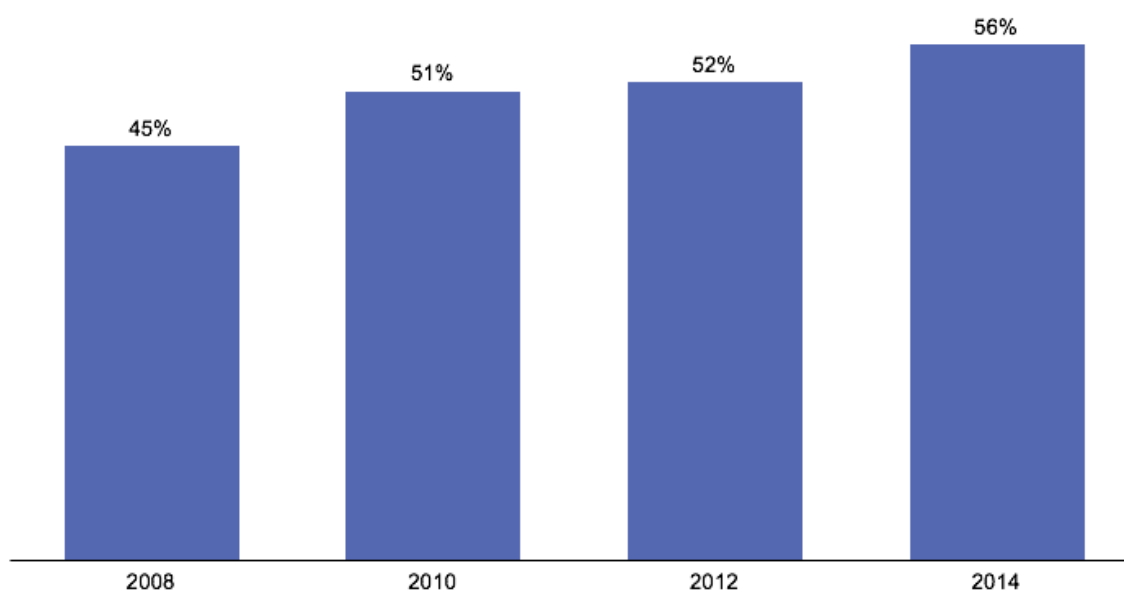
There is some evidence that parents are becoming less willing to condone their children's drinking, a trend that might contribute to the overall decline in consumption. The proportion of children who believe their parents would not approve of them drinking has risen from 45% in 2008 to 56% in 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Donovan (2004), op. cit.; Velleman (2009), op. cit.; Ryan, M. et al (2010), Parenting factors associated with reduced adolescent alcohol use: a systematic review of longitudinal studies.

<sup>68</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 7.5

Figure 17: Proportion of 11-15 year olds who believe their parents wouldn't like them drinking<sup>69</sup>



### c. Monitoring

Of course, parents are more likely to be successful in preventing children from drinking underage if they are aware of their activities and whereabouts – what is called ‘monitoring’. This is both common sense and borne out by research. Ledoux et al reflect the wider literature in their finding that children whose parents do not usually know where they are on a Saturday night are over twice as likely to drink regularly as those whose parents always know.<sup>70</sup>

There has been a consistent long-term increase in the level of parental monitoring in the UK since the 1980s. The proportion of parents who regularly asked their teenage who they were with rose from 67% to 77% between 1986 and 2006, while the proportion who told their parents rose from 78% to 86%.<sup>71</sup> Particularly in recent years, fewer children are likely to be out late without their parents’ knowledge (*figure 18*). Moreover, detailed analysis shows that there has been greater convergence in parental monitoring between social groups: lone parents and poorer parents are no longer significantly more likely to be unaware of their children’s whereabouts, as they were in the mid 1990s.<sup>72</sup> These changes may be partly linked to technological change – both in terms of new leisure activities encouraging children to stay at home, where they can be easily monitored, and also because of the increased ease of monitoring children with mobile phones.

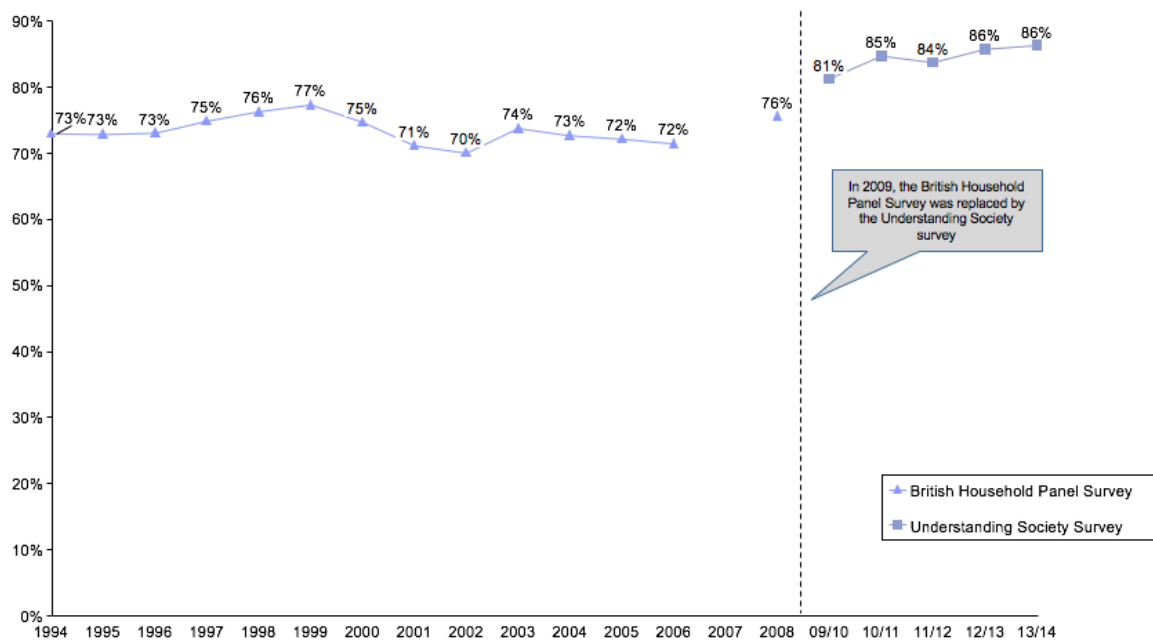
<sup>69</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 7.2

<sup>70</sup> Ledoux, S. et al (2002), Family structure, parent-child relationships, and alcohol and other drug use among teenagers in France and the United Kingdom, *Alcohol and Alcoholism* 37:1, pp52-60. See also Ryan et al (2010), op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2009), *Time trends in parenting and outcomes for young people*. London: Nuffield Foundation.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Figure 18: Proportion of 11-15 year olds who have not been out after 9pm without their parents knowing where they are<sup>73</sup>



#### d. Warmth and Openness of Relationships

A final parenting factor which has consistently been associated with lower underage drinking is the warmth and openness of parents' relationships with their children. Greater family cohesion – in particular children liking their parents and wanting to emulate them – makes it more likely they will resist alcohol. In one influential paper, Foxcroft and Lowe emphasise the importance of parental 'support' – creating a sense of comfort and belonging, ensuring that the child feels accepted.<sup>74</sup> Better communication between parents and their children makes it easier to set clear expectations and boundaries around alcohol, and for these to be respected.<sup>75</sup> For example, McCann et al find that younger children who are more secretive with their parents are more likely to drink as they grow older.<sup>76</sup>

Given the increased time and attention given to parenting, we might expect the quality of relationship developed with children to improve. This, in turn, could help explain the fall in underage drinking. There is some evidence for this: in particular, children are far less likely to quarrel with their fathers than before (*figure 19*). However, there has not been a clear discernible improvement in the proportion of children who reported talking to their parents about the things that matter to them.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> University of Essex, Institute of Social and Economic Research (2010), *British Household Panel Survey: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009*. Available from: <<https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps/documentation/volb/wave4/dyouth1.html#DYPLATE>>.

[Accessed 11 May 2016]; University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research and NatCen Social Research (2015), *Understanding Society: Waves 1-5, 2009-2014*. Available from: <<http://bit.ly/295p311>> [Accessed 11 May 2016].

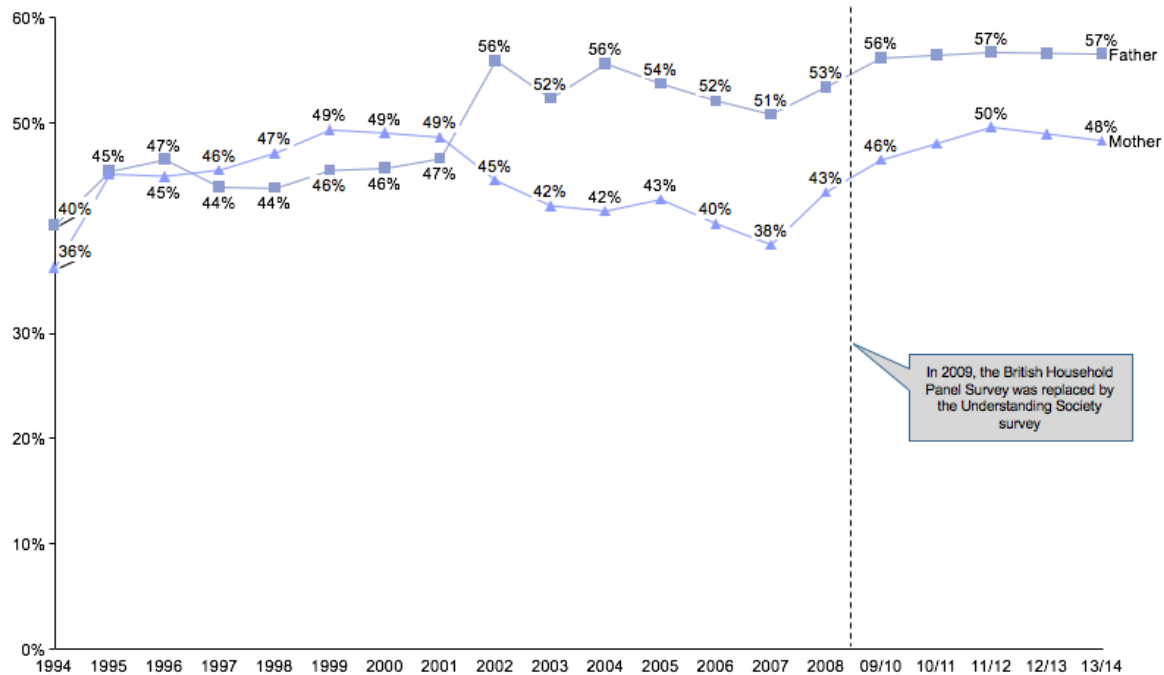
<sup>74</sup> Foxcroft, D. & Lowe, G. (1991), Adolescent drinking behaviour and family socialization factors: a meta-analysis, *Journal of Adolescence* 14:3, pp255-73.

<sup>75</sup> Velleman (2009), op. cit.; Ryan et al (2010), op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> McCann, M. et al (2016), Assessing elements of a family approach to reduce adolescent drinking frequency: parent-adolescent relationship, knowledge management and keeping secrets, *Addiction* 111:5, pp843-53.

<sup>77</sup> University of Essex, Institute of Social and Economic Research (2010), op. cit; University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research and NatCen Social Research (2015), op. cit.

Figure 19: Proportion of 11-15 year olds that 'hardly ever' quarrel with their parents<sup>78</sup>



#### e. Family Structure

Discussions of family influence on underage drinking typically look at family structure, as well as parenting style. In particular, studies have shown that children from 'intact' families (i.e. living with both natural parents) are less likely to try alcohol.<sup>79</sup> However, the prevalence of such families has not changed much: lone parent families accounted for 22.1% of households with dependent children in 1996, rising to 25.0% in 2005, and falling slightly to 24.8% in 2015.<sup>80</sup> Thus family structure is unlikely to have had a significant impact on underage drinking trends.

*There is suggestive evidence that parenting has improved that in ways likely to reduce underage drinking by personally modelling lower levels of consumption, by showing greater disapproval of their children's drinking, through closer monitoring of children and through warmer and more open relationships.*

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ledoux et al (2002), op. cit.; Foxcroft & Lowe (1991), op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> Knipe, E. (2015), Families and Household: 2015. Office for National Statistics. Available from: <<http://bit.ly/28ZN3Pr>>. [Accessed 11 May 2016].

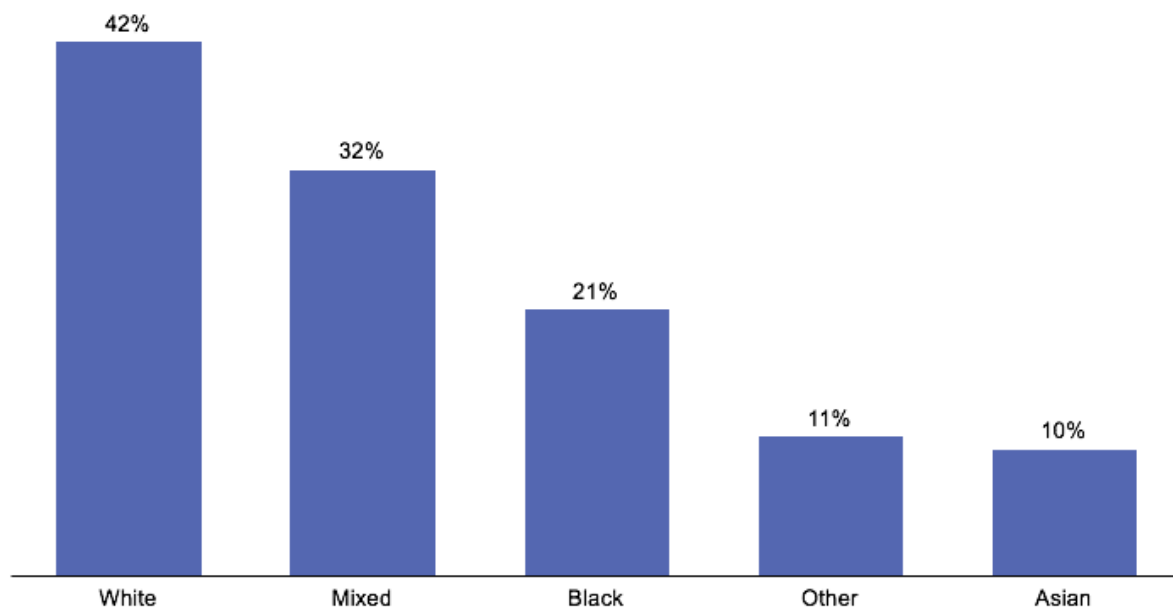
## 6. Demographic Shifts

### *Influence of Ethnic Minorities*

One of the most commonly cited explanations for the decline in underage drinking is demographic change, and in particular, the growth in ethnic and religious minorities that are less likely to drink.<sup>81</sup> For example, in 2015, then shadow public health minister Diane Abbott cautioned against reading too much into declining average consumption numbers because “Muslims have the lowest average age out of all the major religious groups in the United Kingdom, which is probably the main reason the ONS found such a fall in rates of young people drinking in London”.<sup>82</sup>

Ethnic diversity does appear to have made some contribution to the fall in young people drinking. Minority groups are less likely to drink than white children: 42% of white 11-15 year olds have ever tried alcohol, compared to 21% of black and 10% of Asian children.

*Figure 20: Proportion of English 11-15 year olds to have ever tried alcohol by ethnicity, 2014*<sup>83</sup>



These lower-drinking minority groups account for a growing share of the population. In 1991, 93% of people in England and Wales were white; by 2011, this had fallen to 86%. Asians, the lightest drinkers, grew from 3.8% to 7.5% of the population over the same period.<sup>84</sup>

However, this shift can directly explain only a small proportion of the decline in underage drinking. Drinking has been falling among all ethnic groups, and in fact the decline has been greater among white children (who accounted for a disproportionate share of consumption to begin with).

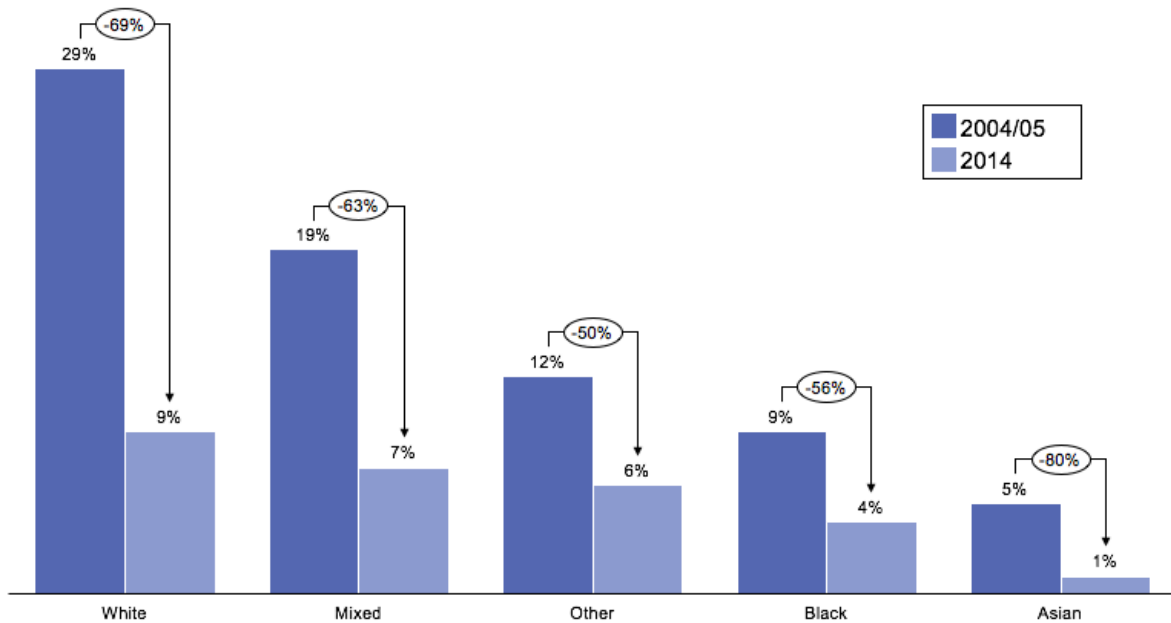
<sup>81</sup> Crone (2014), op. cit.; Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.; BBC News (2015), op. cit.; Economist (2014), op. cit.; Quine (2016), op. cit.; Wigmore (2016), op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> Hill, A. (2015), Teetotaller numbers rise in UK with one in five adults not drinking, *The Guardian* (13 February). Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/13/teetotallers-on-rise-in-uk-one-in-five-dont-drink>>. [Accessed 11 May 2016].

<sup>83</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 10.10

<sup>84</sup> Jiraj, S. (2012), *How has ethnic diversity grown 1991-2001-2011?*, Manchester: Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity.

Figure 21: Proportion of English 11-15 year olds to have drunk alcohol in the past week by ethnicity<sup>85</sup>



However, greater diversity may be indirectly responsible for falling consumption among the white population as well. It is well established that children with friends who do not drink are less likely to drink themselves.<sup>86</sup> If the rising number of ethnic minorities means that white children are more likely to be surrounded by abstinent peers, this may explain why they are less likely to try alcohol.<sup>87</sup>

Studies from Norway and the Netherlands provide some support for this theory. Though the proportion of ethnic minority students in Dutch schools was found only to influence drinking among other ethnic minorities, stronger relationships have been found with religious background.<sup>88</sup> Schools with a higher concentration of children with parents from majority-Muslim countries have lower levels of drinking among both 'native' and immigrant children.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> HSCIC (2015), Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use, Table 10A

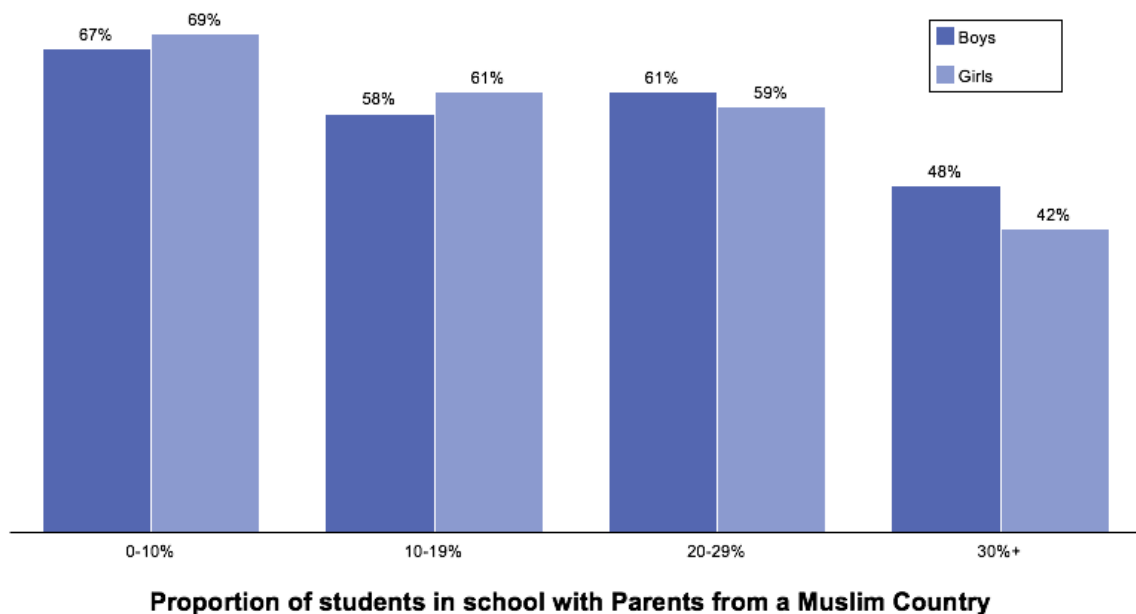
<sup>86</sup> Bremner, P. et al (2011), *Young people, alcohol and influences*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Donovan (2004), op. cit.; Velleman (2009), op. cit.

<sup>87</sup> Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.

<sup>88</sup> Monshouwer, K. et al (2007), Ethnic composition of schools affects episodic heavy drinking only in ethnic-minority students, *Addiction* 102:5, pp722-29.

<sup>89</sup> Amundsen, E.J. et al (2005), Drinking pattern among adolescents with immigrant and Norwegian backgrounds: A two-way influence, *Addiction* 100:1, pp1453-63; van Tubergen, F. & Poortman, A-R. (2010), Adolescent alcohol use in the Netherlands: the role of ethnicity, ethnic intermarriage, and ethnic school composition, *Ethnicity & Health* 15:1, pp1-13.

Figure 22: Proportion of 15-16 year olds with Norwegian parents to have drunk alcohol twice in the past week by proportion of Muslim students in school<sup>90</sup>



### Ageing Society

Another theory emphasises the demographic shift towards an older society. The UK median age has risen from 36.3 in 1994 to 40.0 in 2014.<sup>91</sup> *The Economist* suggests that this loss of numerical weight weakens the cultural influence of young people, and so undermines transgressive and hedonistic behaviour: “The generations known for rebellion and rule-breaking were large in comparison to the populations of the time, thanks to the post-war baby boom and its “echo” boom in the 1970s and 1980s. They grew up in young societies. Today’s youth by contrast are few in number and are growing up in ever older societies”.<sup>92</sup>

This theory implicitly assumes that drinking alcohol is a young person’s pursuit. Yet in British society, people of all ages drink. Indeed, the evidence shows that 45-64 year olds are the most frequent drinkers, with 66% of them drinking in the last week, compared to 48% of 16-24 year olds.<sup>93</sup> So it is unclear why an older society should automatically be assumed to be one where alcohol is less prominent.

*Immigration may have contributed to lower underage drinking, but the size of the effect is likely to be small. Minorities still account for a relatively small share of the population, and the decline in drinking has been larger in the ‘native’ white population – though this may be influenced by peers from abstinent cultural background, it is unlikely to be a major explanation of the fall in consumption.*

<sup>90</sup> Amundsen et al (2005), op. cit., p1458.

<sup>91</sup> Office for National Statistics (2015), Ageing of the UK population. Available from: <<http://bit.ly/1THDEvK>>. [Accessed 12 May 2016].

<sup>92</sup> Economist (2014), op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> Caul (2016), op. cit.

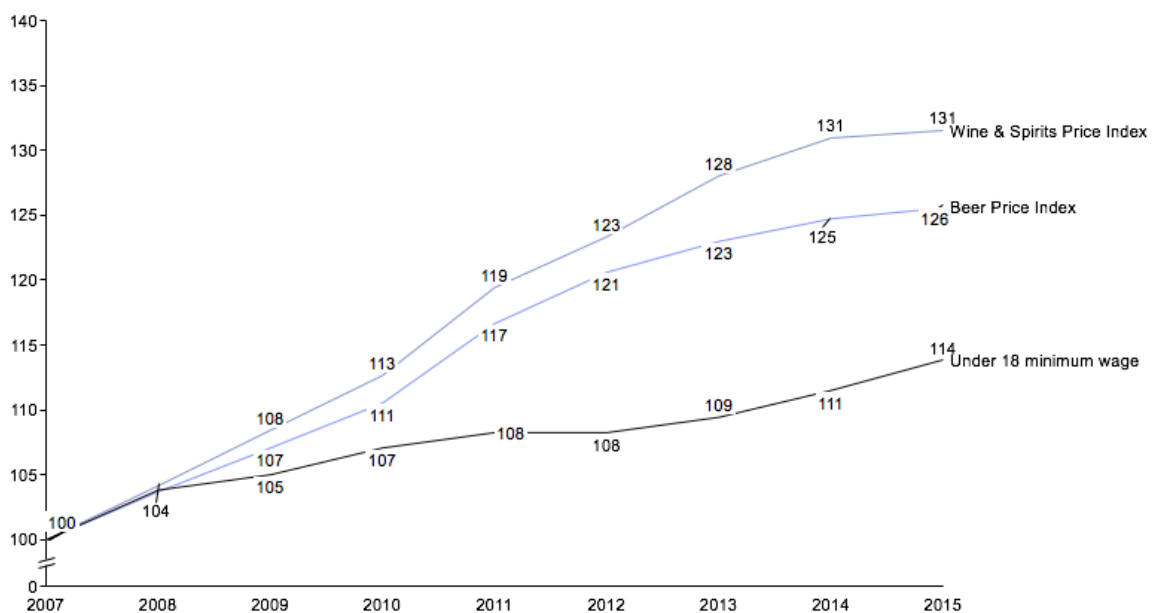
## 7. Lower affordability and economic confidence

A final set of theories have focused on the economic context of the decline in underage drinking.<sup>94</sup> In particular, the financial crisis and recession have had three effects: to reduce spending power, to encourage the government to raise taxes on alcohol and to reduce economic confidence.

It is well established that alcohol consumption is strongly influenced by affordability.<sup>95</sup> The recession clearly reduced household incomes, which may have filtered through to children's pocket money. Slow wage growth will also have reduced children's independent earning potential in paid work. At the same time, the Government took steps to make alcohol more expensive. In response to the financial crisis (as well as rising affordability of alcohol), the 2008 Budget introduced the alcohol duty escalator, which ensured that alcohol taxes rose by 2% above inflation each year until its repeal in 2013.

Cumulatively, these developments have significantly reduced the affordability of alcohol for under 18s. The chart below shows that beer is 26% and wine and spirits 31% more expensive than in 2007. By comparison the national minimum wage for under 18s has risen by only 14% over the period. Demos reports that declining affordability was cited by 16-24 year olds as the second most likely explanation for the fall in underage drinking (referenced by 55% of respondents).<sup>96</sup>

Figure 23: Under 18 minimum wage and alcohol price inflation – Indexed, 2007=100<sup>97</sup>



<sup>94</sup> Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit.; Quine (2016), op. cit.; Wigmore (2016), op. cit.

<sup>95</sup> Sassi, F. et al (2013), The Role of Fiscal Policies in Health Promotion, *OECD Health Working Papers No66*, p10.

<sup>96</sup> Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit.

<sup>97</sup> GOV.UK (2016), National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage Rate. Available from:

<<https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>>. [Accessed 12 May 2016]; Gooding, P. (2016), RPI: alcohol drink: beer (Jan 1987=100). Office for National Statistics. Available from:

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/dobh>>. [Accessed 12 May 2016]; Gooding, P. (2016), RPI: alcohol drink: wines & spirits (Jan 1987=100). Office for National Statistics. Available from:

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/dobk>>. [Accessed 12 May 2016].

Moreover, the same affordability trends have reduced alcohol consumption among adults, too. This is likely to have fed through to lower drinking among children, who, as we have seen, are heavily influenced by family members in their drinking habits.

It is not just the direct financial impact of the recession that is suspected to have reduced underage drinking, but also the psychological impact of growing up in a difficult economic climate. According to Tim Wigmore, heavy drinking is seen as an impediment in an increasingly competitive job market.<sup>98</sup> This growing conscientiousness has also been linked to the increase in university tuition fees, which rose to a maximum of £9,000 from 2012 (though the legislation was proposed in 2010).<sup>99</sup>

Note that these economic developments began to take hold around 2008-09, so these clearly cannot fully explain the fall which dates back to 2003 (see *figure 1*). However, they may help account for the acceleration of the trend from 2009 onwards (see *figure 3*).

Moreover, it is worth noting how fragile improvements in underage drinking may prove to be if these economic factors are the primary cause. With repeated cuts to alcohol duty in recent Budgets, and an improving economy, these theories suggest that young people's drinking may soon be on the rise once more.

*Alcohol affordability is one of the main drivers of consumption, and has declined in recent years with prices rising and disposable incomes falling. This is likely to have significantly influenced underage drinking.*

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<sup>98</sup> Wigmore (2016), op. cit.

<sup>99</sup> Nye & Chadha (2014), op. cit.; Economist (2014), op. cit.; Birdwell & Wybron (2015), op. cit.; Wigmore (2016), op. cit.; Williams, Z. (2016), The party's over for young people, debt laden and risk averse, *The Guardian* (13 March). Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/13/party-young-people-debt-jogging-drinking-fitness>> [Accessed 9 June 2016].

## Questions for future research

As should be clear from the discussion above, there are a number of unanswered questions over the decline in underage drinking, and consequently substantial scope for future research. In particular, while there are numerous hypotheses around the trends, there is a definite lack of direct evidence on them. Thus there is a clear need to further test the theories outlined above. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding of the relative contribution of these trends to the decline in underage drinking, and how they fit together with broader social and health trends. This section outlines some of the questions that we hope future researchers will investigate in greater depth. These are, of course, not exhaustive, but merely the questions that occur to us to be most pressing.

### Testing the Theories

#### 1. Better Legal Enforcement

*Has underage purchasing really declined? How much?*

While Serve Legal's data does suggest that it has become more difficult for minors to purchase alcohol, it is not entirely reliable, since it is collected for commercial purposes and does not come from a random sample. More rigorous studies, or collation of supportive evidence from a range of sources would be helpful to confirm this picture.

*Can the impact of stricter enforcement of age restrictions be isolated from other trends?*

Even if it can be demonstrated that underage sales policies have been toughened, the magnitude of the impact of such a change is unclear, since purchased alcohol accounts for a relatively small fraction of underage consumption. Therefore, research which isolates the impact of stricter ID policies – for example, by comparing areas with different levels of enforcement – would be extremely welcome.

#### 2. Rise of New Technology

*Is there a robust association between use of new technology and underage drinking, controlling for confounding factors?*

As described above, relatively few studies have directly investigated the relationship between time spent online, playing games and on social media and drinking.

*Is there evidence (e.g. from time series data) that new technology has 'crowded out' underage drinking?*

Research so far has been cross-sectional – however, this does not directly address the question of how leisure use has changed over time. Time series data would be better suited to analysing the relationship between the decline in drinking and the rise of new technology.

*Is there a macro-micro paradox in technology use and underage drinking?*

As described above, there is evidence that the types of young people who spend more time with technology are more likely to drink. Yet, many continue to believe that at a societal

level, more time spent gaming and online is associated with less drinking. Is this the case, and if so, how can we explain different relationships at different levels of analysis?

### 3. Changing Social Norms

*Can the 'generational backlash' theory be spelled out and made testable?*

While a number of commentators have suggested that this generation's reluctance to drink may in some way be a response to the heavier consumption of their elders, relatively few have spelled out the mechanisms by which such an effect might occur. This makes it difficult to empirically prove or disprove – further work developing and testing the thesis would be worthwhile.

*How have children's knowledge and sources of information regarding alcohol changed?*

There is relatively little detail on how children's perceptions and knowledge of alcohol has changed. In particular, whether exposure and effectiveness of marketing has increased or declined, whether labelling and public awareness campaigns are noticed and understood and the impact of media and social media in shaping these perceptions.

*Can we isolate the different factors contributing to cultural change?*

It appears to be the case that young people increasingly feel it is unacceptable for themselves and their peers to drink. However, there is little understanding of what the ultimate causes are of this trend – public awareness campaigns, changes in attitudes to health, or differences in how the media presents alcohol.

### 4. Happier and more conscientious children

*How clear is the evidence that the traits associated with underage drinking are less prevalent, and can these be linked with the decline?*

As described above, there is some evidence that children's wellbeing and conscientiousness is increasing. However, more evidence on related characteristics such as impulsivity would be welcome, as would analysis linking trends in these indicators with drinking over time.

### 5. Better parenting

*Can improvements in parenting be linked to lower underage drinking?*

There is some evidence that parents are more involved, engaged and warm than in previous generations, and that these behaviours protect against underage drinking – however, these phenomena have not been robustly linked to one another.

*Have parents' attitudes and strategies to deal with underage drinking changed?*

While some research has investigated general trends in parenting, there has been little study of whether parents' approaches to their children's drinking specifically have changed. In 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families carried out a survey of parents to

“Provide baseline data for KPIs [key performance indicators] in terms of attitudes and behavior for future tracking”, though this does not appear to have been followed up.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Demographic Shifts

*Are there peer effects associated with higher numbers of ethnic minorities, and how significant are these?*

As described above, there is evidence from the Netherlands and Norway that children who go to schools with more Muslim students are less likely to drink. It would be useful to know whether such associations can be found in the UK, and how strong they are.

## 7. Lower affordability and economic confidence

*How has the declining affordability of alcohol influenced underage drinking?*

Affordability is one of the main drivers of alcohol consumption across all age groups. In order to quantify the impact of the recent falls in the affordability of alcohol on young people's drinking, we need to understand how their price sensitivity differs from average adult consumers.

*Is there a link between economic confidence and underage drinking?*

A commonly propounded theory is that falling youth consumption is linked to tough economic conditions, and in particular the competitiveness of the future job market. However, there is a lack of robust evidence to support this claim.

## How different trends fit together

*What is the relative contribution of different factors to falling drinking?*

It should be clear from the discussion so far that there is no single cause for the fall in underage drinking. Indeed, even from this limited review, it seems highly likely that both falling affordability and the increase in ethnic minority populations have contributed to the trend. However, that is not to say that they have contributed equally. More analysis is needed to identify how significant different factors are – for example, whether the duty escalator is responsible for half, a quarter or a tenth of the decline influences how we should view it.

*What is the causal relationship between different factors?*

A confusing aspect of this discussion is that different theories can operate at different levels of explanation. So, for example, parental approval of alcohol may be influenced by socio-cultural norms, which may, in turn be affected by the media. However, the relationship between media portrayal of alcohol and socio-cultural norms could be reciprocal – the media could be reflecting general perceptions as well as shaping them. Attempting to disentangle this knot of relationships is another important step for future studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, B. et al (2010), *Children, Young People and Alcohol*. London: GfK NOP Social Research

*Why has underage drinking fallen in spite of trends that we would expect to encourage it?*

A few of the trends described above would be expected to increase drinking, such as declining religiosity and greater exposure to marketing. These should not be neglected. It may be that the impact of these has simply been swamped by forces pushing in the other direction, but, more interestingly, it could be that the relationships have been weakened in recent years. Either way, they merit investigation.

*How does the decline in underage drinking relate to the decline in adult drinking?*

As mentioned above, adult consumption has fallen in recent years too, albeit less sharply and lagging behind children's drinking (page 28-29). This may influence children's drinking – for instance, through parental modelling. It may also be subject to the same socio-economic forces, such as the recession. Greater exploration is needed of the relationship between the two trends.

*How does the decline in underage drinking relate to trends in other countries?*

As page 16 explains, a number of other countries have seen similar declines in underage drinking, though there are some that have not. This suggests there is significant scope for cross-national research, to determine what the countries where drinking has fallen have in common and how they are different from those where it has risen.

## Conclusion

The trend towards lower underage drinking is clear – it began around 2003, accelerated around 2009, and appears to be occurring across children of all backgrounds and levels of consumption. The UK is not alone in this, but is one of a number of countries experiencing similar declines.

There has been significant speculation over the causes of this fall, but little in the way of clear, robust research and evidence. This report has surveyed seven families of theories and evaluated their plausibility based on what we do know:

- *Better Legal Enforcement*: While there is some evidence that legal enforcement - particularly of minimum purchase ages - has been stricter, this can only have had a minor impact as only a small proportion of underage drinkers buy their own alcohol.
- *Rise of New Technology*: There is little evidence that new technologies have reduced underage drinking, and indeed children who spend more time online and on social media may be more likely to drink.
- *Changing Social Norms*: Underage drinking is clearly less socially acceptable than before. However, there is little clear evidence as to what is behind this broad cultural change. There does not appear to be a direct 'backlash' against the drinking of older generations. Nor is it clear that perceptions or concerns around the harmfulness of alcohol to health are the root cause.
- *Happier and more conscientious children*: Though it is not conclusive, there is some evidence that child welfare has improved, and this is associated with lower underage drinking.
- *Better parenting*: There is suggestive evidence that parenting has improved in ways likely to reduce underage drinking by personally modelling lower levels of consumption, by showing greater disapproval of their children's drinking, through closer monitoring of children and through warmer and more open relationships
- *Demographic Shifts*: Immigration may have contributed to lower underage drinking, but the size of the effect is likely to be small. Minorities still account for a relatively small share of the population, and the decline in drinking has been larger in the 'native' white population – though this may be influenced by peers from abstinent cultural background, it is unlikely to be a major explanation of the fall in consumption.
- *Lower affordability and economic confidence*: Alcohol affordability is one of the main drivers of consumption, and has declined in recent years with prices rising and disposable incomes falling. This is likely to have significantly influenced underage drinking.

In sum, despite an array of hypotheses, we are still far off fully understanding the fall in underage drinking. Nevertheless, on the basis of the available evidence, some theories appear more plausible than others. In particular, the declining affordability of alcohol and improvements in parenting seem to us most likely to have made a substantial contribution to the decline. Changing social norms have clearly had an impact, but we are yet to find a persuasive account of why these have shifted. Improvements in child welfare and greater time spent online and on social media are other plausible explanations, but suffer from a lack of robust evidence. By contrast, stricter ID policies and immigration may have reduced drinking, but the impact of these can only be small. What is clear is that there is a need for more research and analysis – for which we hope that this report helps lay the groundwork.



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