

# Teenage drinking and interethnic friendships

Findings  
Informing change

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Although concerns are growing about young people's drinking habits in the UK, recent studies suggest that having peers from minority ethnic backgrounds is related to lower drinking rates. However, little is known about how young people in multicultural societies experience interethnic contact within friendship groups or the potential effect of this on drinking attitudes and behaviours.

## Key points

- Young people's friendship groups tended to be homogenous by ethnicity, although two-thirds of young people reported having at least one friend from a different ethnic background.
- Young people from white backgrounds were most likely to drink and to drink more than other groups, although differences between ethnic groups were not as marked as found in previous studies.
- Few Muslims reported having ever drunk, but those who did drank more than young people from other religions and most closely resembled those with no religion.
- Young non-drinkers cited concerns around health informed by education and media campaigns as reasons for not drinking. For some, these reasons are more important than cultural and religious influences.
- Young people were more likely to drink and to drink more if their friends drink. However, this does not mean young people are influenced to drink by their friends; qualitative data suggest that young people seek friends similar to them.
- Surprisingly, young people in friendship groups categorised as 'mostly white' were less likely to report drinking alcohol than young people in friendship groups categorised as 'diverse'. The reasons for this are unclear.
- Some young people reported attempting to moderate alcohol consumption among their friends.

## The research

By Anthony Goodman, Rachel Hurcombe, Jane Healy, Sue Goodman and Emma Ball of Middlesex University.

## Background

Concerns about young people's drinking habits are growing in the UK, with high alcohol consumption levels compared with other European countries and increases in the number of young people admitted to hospital for alcohol-related harm. However, the amount drunk varies by ethnicity, gender and age, and less is known about if or why there is an increase in drinking among communities where alcohol use is not considered normal. During the adolescent years, young people's alcohol consumption is often similar to their peers, and recent studies suggest that young people with peers or friends from minority ethnic backgrounds report lower levels of drinking. Using a diverse sample from the London and Berkshire regions in England this study explores the interethnic nature of young people's friendship groups; their drinking patterns; and links between the ethnic composition of friendship groups and drinking behaviours.

### Intra- and interethnic friendship groups

Young people were asked to describe the ethnic mix of their friendship groups in a questionnaire and during interviews. Questionnaire data showed that friendship groups were homogenous by ethnicity insofar as young people reported a higher percentage of friends from their own ethnic background. However, two-thirds of young people from all ethnic groups had at least one friend from a different ethnic background to their own, with boys and girls being equally likely to have interethnic friendships.

During interviews the majority of young people reported that they 'don't mind' what background their friends come from. White British young people in particular were more likely to say they do not mind, and less likely to reflect on the importance of different cultural backgrounds within friendship groups. Young people who felt that ethnic and religious diversity is a good thing in friendships tended to speak positively about the opportunities interethnic friendships create for learning about other cultures:

**It's always good to have a mix of friends like from different backgrounds, so like, you can like communicate well with other people from other cultures and stuff. (Male, Pakistani)**

Young people who prefer friendships with people from their own ethnic group tended to frame their reasons in terms of solidarity and support rather than actively avoiding contact with other ethnic groups. However, most young people said that background, ethnicity and religion are not primary considerations when forming friendships, as sharing interests and hobbies are more important.

### Ethnicity and drinking

Young people from white backgrounds were most likely to have consumed alcohol, to drink frequently and to binge drink. There were also relatively high rates of alcohol use among young people of mixed ethnicity compared with non-white ethnic groups, and black young people were most likely to drink heavily. Young Asian people were significantly less likely to have consumed alcohol than white young people even after controlling for a range of variables.

Discussions and interviews revealed that young people associate different drinking norms with different ethnicities and cultures, and many young people perceived drinking to be an inherent part of white British culture:

**I think mainly from this country, mainly white people drink alcohol and it's their culture. (Male, Indian)**

However, differences between ethnic groups were less marked than differences found in previous studies on ethnicity and alcohol, and some minority ethnic young people also described the drinking that takes place in their cultures.

### Religion and drinking

A very low number of Muslims said they had ever drunk. However, among drinkers, Muslims drank more heavily than other religions and most closely resembled young people with no religion. Although differences were not significant,

Muslims had heavier rates of frequent, recent and heavy drinking than other religious groups. Furthermore, young people with no religion, and Muslim young people, were significantly more likely than other religions to binge drink on a monthly basis.

During interviews and discussions some young people reported having Muslim friends, acquaintances and family members who do drink, and at times drink heavily: *“There’s a lot of Muslim girls in my friends ... they drink more than I do.”*

Young people were also significantly less likely to have ever drunk if they reported that religion is important to them compared with young people who reported that religion is not important. However, some religious young people who do not drink explained in interviews that religion is not their only, or even primary, reason for not drinking. Other reasons included concerns about the harmful effects of alcohol use, with knowledge about alcohol effects gained from the media and education:

*Even if I wasn’t in that religion, like if I had no religion, I don’t think I would drink ... cos, I know the effects of it and all that. (Female, Bangladeshi).*

## Friendships and drinking

Young people answering the questionnaire tended to resemble their friends in terms of drinking behaviours, with higher rates of drinking significantly associated with friends’ drinking and friends’ approval of drinking. However, qualitative data challenges the assumption that peer influence is the reason for these similarities. In interviews, few young people reported that they are pressured to drink by friends, although encouragement to drink was sometimes reported by young people (mainly drinkers).

Some non-drinkers spoke about how they seek friendships with those who are similar to themselves, prefer the company of other non-drinkers and may attempt to dissuade drinking friends from consuming alcohol. These factors, rather than influence, may help to explain why non-drinkers are similar to their friends:

*I pick friends randomly but I have to look at them, because I don’t want to hang around with people who I think are like bad for me, because I personally think I should be around friends who have a good influence on me. I don’t want to be around friends who tell me to go on alcohol and drugs. (Male, Indian).*

Furthermore, some young people who drink report that they sometimes attempt to moderate heavier drinking among friends. Influencing friends not to drink, or to drink less, is rarely considered in discussions of peer influence, where it is assumed that young people are influenced by their friends to consume alcohol:

*I have a friend and I’m trying to make him stop, trying to stop him drinking ... Yeah because they’re my friends, so obviously I care about them and because I care about them, I know alcohol is bad for them. (Male, Bangladeshi).*

The quantitative data showed that young people with diverse friendship groups were more likely to report that they have drunk alcohol than young people with mostly white friendship groups. Interethnic friendships were not related to frequent, recent, heavy or binge drinking. The finding is unexpected given the higher drinking rates found among white young people in this and previous studies, and the fact that white young people most commonly had mostly white friendship groups. However, in this regard the qualitative data did not support the quantitative data, as there was no indication in interviews that young people with white friends were less likely to drink, or alternatively that young people with ethnically diverse friendships were more likely to drink. In fact, young people often indicated that cultural differences in drinking behaviours and attitudes in friendship groups are not problematic as friends respect each other’s views.

*My friends ... you know, some people believe in my religion. Some people, even if they don’t, they don’t encourage me to do things that I don’t want to do. (Female, Bangladeshi)*

It should also be noted that the association between having mostly white friends and having drunk alcohol does not indicate causality, and it may be the case that the factors that lead to young people having more homogenous friendship groups may also lead to them being less likely to have drunk alcohol, such as family influences, local area and community, and willingness to mix with others with different beliefs.

## Conclusion

This study shows relatively low rates of having ever drunk, and frequent, heavy and binge drinking compared with other recent surveys with young people in England. Although these low rates are the result of a high proportion of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the sample, they do serve as a reminder of how ‘social norms’ around alcohol use vary considerably by ethnicity and culture. Although young people from the current study recognised differences in drinking behaviours between ethnic and religious groups, stereotypes were still prevalent for some groups. Education about how norms vary within, as well as between, groups can be useful for young people whose own behaviour goes against the grain, in particular non-drinkers from drinking cultures and young drinkers from cultures where alcohol use is not seen to be acceptable.

Young people from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds frequently cited concerns about health and risks associated with drinking, gained from education and advertising as important reasons for why they do not drink. These messages reinforce young people’s existing attitudes towards alcohol, and may become as important, or more important, than traditional views. Consequently, government campaigns and health warnings against alcohol use appear to be effective, particularly for young people from backgrounds that discourage alcohol use. Education around alcohol use is also important for minority ethnic and religious young people as the drinking patterns of young Muslims resembled young people with no religion more closely than other religious young people, and there is some indication that drinking may be hidden among Muslims. Teachers and youth workers should be aware that alcohol education is important for young people from religions and cultures where alcohol use is prohibited as rates may be higher than reported.

Rather than focusing on young people as perpetrators or victims of peer pressure, it is worth considering the different roles that young people attempt to fill within their friendship groups around alcohol use. One of these roles is as a moderator of alcohol consumption, or an advocate of abstinence, as reported by some young people in the study. The role that young people may adopt as moderators of consumption among their friends could be fed into peer support programmes, which are popular among young people, but for which there is currently little evidence around alcohol use. Peer supporters can also offer advice to young people who are not able to discuss their alcohol use with family or people within their community, particularly those from backgrounds where alcohol use is prohibited.

## About the project

The research used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods and consisted of three stages; focus groups, questionnaires and interviews. Young people aged 14 and 15 were recruited through schools in London and Berkshire for all three stages, and hard-to-reach young people were recruited for the questionnaire via a voluntary trust in East London. The samples reflect a diverse range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Twenty-seven focus groups were undertaken to involve young people in the design of a questionnaire, by discussing the pertinent issues around alcohol, friendships and culture. Questionnaires gathered information about young people’s backgrounds; leisure time; friends and relationships; alcohol, their own use and their friends’ use; parental attitudes to alcohol; and tobacco and drug use, resulting in 696 viable surveys. Forty-six in-depth interviews were undertaken to explore how individuals perceive and encounter different cultural attitudes to alcohol, particularly within their friendship groups.

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## For further information

The full report, **Teenage drinking and interethnic friendships** by Anthony Goodman, Rachel Hurcombe, Jane Healy, Sue Goodman and Emma Ball, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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