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UNDERAGE DRINKING: FINDINGS FROM THE 1998–99 YOUTH LIFESTYLES SURVEY

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The 1998–99 Youth Lifestyles Survey is the second sweep of a survey of young people living in private households in England and Wales. Its main purpose was to monitor self-reported offending, although it also looked, amongst other things, at smoking, illegal drug use and drinking alcohol. These findings draw on a sample of 1,790 young people aged 12–17 who were asked about their drinking behaviour. Respondents were interviewed at home and entered their answers directly into laptop computers.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Drinking increases with age: 14% of 12–13s, 33% of 14–15s and 62% of 16–17s had drunk alcohol in the last week.
- ▶ Most 12- to 17-year-olds (84%) have drunk at some point in their lives. For most of those aged 12–15, drinking is occasional – about one in ten reported drinking at least once a week on average. Half of those aged 16–17 drank at least once a week.
- ▶ Beer and lager were the most popular drinks among under-18s. Spirits, wine and alcopops were also popular.
- ▶ Ethnic minority teenagers were less likely to drink alcohol. One in 20 non-white 12- to 17-year-olds were frequent drinkers compared with one in four whites.
- ▶ Under-18-year-olds cannot legally buy alcohol themselves but 63% of those aged 16–17 and 10% aged 12–15 who had drunk in the last year said that they usually bought their alcohol themselves – most often in pubs, bars and nightclubs.
- ▶ 15% of all 12- to 17-year-olds had been involved in some form of antisocial behaviour during or after drinking – mostly getting into a heated argument. Frequent drinkers were more likely to have behaved antisocially.
- ▶ A higher proportion of offenders aged 12–17 were frequent drinkers (36%) than non-offenders (20%). The pattern held across the age range. However, it is not possible from the survey to suggest that offending and drinking are causally linked.
- ▶ Most under-18s viewed drinking positively. They saw it as a means of socialising with friends (62%). More than half said young people liked getting drunk. Increasing confidence was also important.

PREVALENCE OF UNDERAGE DRINKING

Most of those aged 12–17 (84%) had drunk alcohol at some point in their lives. Overall, a third (36%) had drunk alcohol in the last week. Drinking increases with age: 14% of those aged 12–13, 33% aged 14–15 and 62% aged 16–17 had drunk in the last week.

Most 12- to 15-year-olds drink only occasionally: only 4% aged 12–13 and a fifth of all those aged 14–15 said they drink at least once a week ('frequent drinkers'). After 15, frequent drinking becomes more common, with five in ten of those

aged 16–17 drinking this often, rising to seven in ten among 18- to 21-year-olds. Most of those who had drunk alcohol in the last week had only done so on one or two days (71%) with only a minority of both those aged 12–15 (5%) and 16–17 (10%) drinking on at least five days.

Among those aged 12–15, the drinking patterns of boys and girls were largely the same. Over the age of 16, men were more likely to be frequent drinkers than women (54% of men aged 16–17 drank at least once a week compared with 48% of women).

Ethnic minority teenagers were less likely than whites to say they drink alcohol, or drink frequently. The majority (64%) of non-whites aged 12–17 had either never drunk alcohol, or not in the last year, compared with 20% of whites. In addition, only one in 20 non-whites aged 12–17 were frequent drinkers in comparison with one in four whites.

Drunkenness

More than a fifth (22%) of all those aged 12–15 and nearly two-thirds (63%) aged 16–17 had felt very drunk in the last year. Smaller proportions reported having a 'hangover' (11% of all 12–15s and 41% of 16–17s). There was little difference between men and women, with only men aged 16–17 being significantly more likely to report feeling drunk than women of the same age (Table 1).

Table 1 Feeling very drunk in last year

Age	Males	Females
12–13 years	8	7
14–15 years	38	35
16–17 years	68	57
18–21 years	80	75

PREFERRED DRINKS

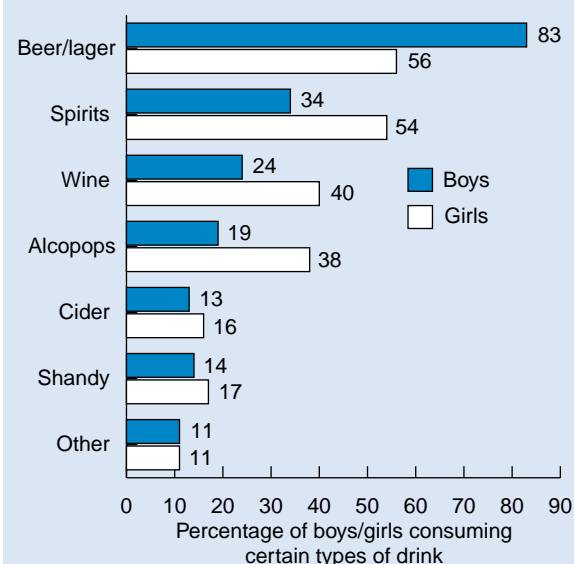
Beer and lager were the most popular alcoholic drinks among under-18s, but just over half those aged 16–17 and nearly a third aged 12–15 who had drunk in the last week had drunk spirits. The 12–15 age group was more likely to drink cider, wine and shandy, whereas 16- to 17-year-olds were more likely to drink beer/lager or spirits.

Boys and girls differed in their preferences (Figure 1). Girls were more likely to drink alcopops, wine or spirits. Boys preferred beer or lager. The same pattern was seen among both the 12–15 and 16–17 age groups, suggesting gender preferences emerge at an early age.

DRINKING LOCATIONS

Among those aged 12–15 who had drunk in the last year, most (60%) drank in their own home or the homes of relatives or friends. The same proportion of this age group also said they usually drank with their parents, though the figure fell to less than a third among those aged 16–17. For younger drinkers, it seems as if much of their drinking is supervised within the home, especially if they only drink occasionally. As they get older, young people are more likely to drink with friends or a boyfriend or girlfriend. Pubs are the most popular drinking venue for those aged 16–17.

Figure 1 Type of alcohol consumed by 12- to 17-year-old drinkers in the last week



There is concern about young peoples' drinking in the street, parks or other public places. The majority of teenagers who reported drinking in such places were aged 12–15: 11% who had drunk in the last year said that they usually drank in public places, compared with 4% of those aged 16–17.

ACCESS TO ALCOHOL

Parents provide much of the alcohol, especially for those aged 12–15: two-thirds (62%) of 12–15s who had drunk in the last year mostly got their alcohol from parents compared with a third (31%) of those aged 16–17. Parents are likely to give alcohol both in the home and for drinking elsewhere.

Although under-18-year-olds cannot buy alcohol legally, the Youth Lifestyles Survey (YLS) found that 63% of the 16–17 age group and 10% of the 12–15s who had drunk in the last year usually bought their alcohol themselves.

Only a third of under-18s who tried to buy alcohol reported that retailers had refused to sell to them on at least one occasion in the last year. Among 12- to 15-year-olds, similar proportions of boys and girls were refused. However, boys of 16–17 were more likely than girls to have had a retailer refuse to sell them alcohol (41% versus 27% respectively). It may be that girls in this age group appear more physically mature than boys. It also reflects the fact that girls are more likely than boys to socialise with friends and partners older than themselves (Honest et al., 2000).

The most popular places where underage drinkers try to buy alcohol are pubs, bars and nightclubs. They are generally successful: a fifth of those attempting to buy alcohol in pubs and bars were refused, while only 8% had been refused in nightclubs. They were less successful in supermarkets and off-licences: a quarter of those aged 12–17 who tried to buy alcohol from either were refused.

Table 2 Antisocial behaviour during or after drinking among all 12- to 17-year-olds

	12–15	16–17	12–17
Any form of antisocial behaviour	8	29	15
Got into a heated argument	5	22	10
Got into a fight	3	14	6
Broken, damaged or destroyed something	3	9	5
Taken something not belonging to you	1	3	1

ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND OFFENDING RELATED TO DRINKING

Young peoples' drinking is not necessarily a problem but it can be for some. 15% of all those aged 12–17 said they had been involved in antisocial behaviour during or after drinking. Getting into a heated argument was the most frequent antisocial behaviour, followed by getting into a fight (Table 2). Antisocial behaviour during or after drinking was much more common among the 16–17 age group than 12–15s.

Frequent drinkers were more likely to have been involved in antisocial behaviour. For example, 11% of frequent drinkers aged 12–15 and 23% aged 16–17 got into fights.

Offenders were more likely than non-offenders to be frequent drinkers (36% compared with 20% of non-offenders). Newcombe et al. (1995) also found regular drinkers were more likely to have a criminal record. However, there is no evidence from the YLS to suggest that offending and drinking are causally linked.

DRUG USE, SMOKING AND DRINKING

Drinkers were more likely than non-drinkers to smoke and also to use drugs. The most recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) study also found that drinkers aged 11–15 were more likely to smoke and that drug use was related to drinking frequency (see Goddard and Higgins, 1999). In the YLS, those aged 12–17 who smoked at least one

cigarette a week were three times as likely to be frequent drinkers as those who had smoked occasionally or never smoked, although the association was stronger among the younger age group (see Figure 2). Slightly more than half (52%) of those aged 12–17 who had used drugs at some time were frequent drinkers, compared with less than a fifth (15%) of non-users. The pattern held across the age range.

SCHOOL PROBLEMS AND DRINKING

Those aged 12–15 who had truanted, been excluded from school, or who disliked school were twice as likely to drink frequently. There is no way of saying which may be cause and which effect but it is likely that this group of young people exhibit a range of deviant behaviour (they were also more likely than others to be offenders and to use drugs). Those aged 16–17 who were disaffected from school were not significantly more likely to be frequent drinkers. By this age, it seems that frequent drinking is a fairly common feature of most young people's lifestyle.

PARENTS' INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S DRINKING

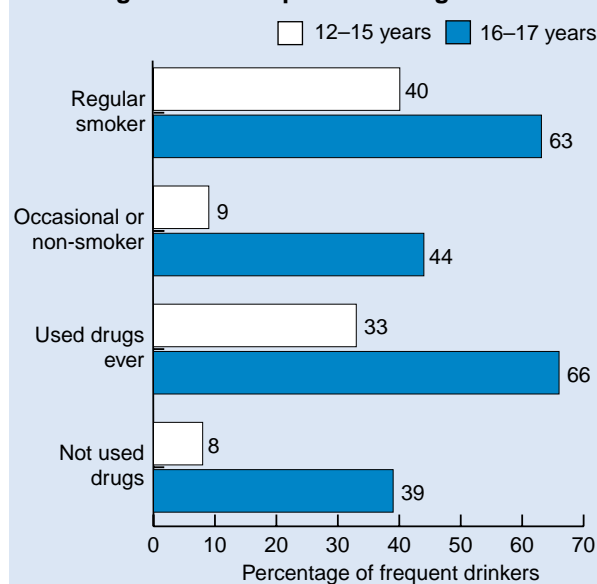
How much parents drink is associated with how much their children drink. This was true for young people who usually drank with their parents as well as those who did not, so general parental example seems relevant. Thus:

- among parents who had never drunk, only 10% had children who drank frequently
- of parents with the highest level of drinking (three or more times a week), 31% had children who drank frequently.

Analysis of a sub-group of young people who did not usually drink with their parents indicated a similar link. The heaviest drinking parents were more likely to have frequent drinking children even though they did not drink together.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ALCOHOL

Relatively little is known about why different groups of young people drink (Wright, 1999). Most under-18s viewed drinking positively. Young people saw drinking as a means of socialising with friends (62%) and more than half thought young people drank because they liked getting drunk (57%). Increasing confidence was also important (39%). These reasons were the same among the 12–15s and the 16–17s, although 12–15s generally offered fewer reasons for drinking – maybe because they can articulate them less well. One difference was

Figure 2 The relationship between smoking and drug use and frequent drinking

that the older group was much more likely to say also that people enjoyed going to pubs and clubs (80% versus 31% of the 12–15s). This reflects the different contexts in which they usually drink.

Boys and girls generally drank for the same reasons. But the opinions of drinkers and non-drinkers and frequent and occasional drinkers differed substantially. For instance, nearly three-quarters (70%) of frequent drinkers aged 12–15 thought people drank because they liked getting drunk compared with half of those who drank less often. Frequent drinkers in both age groups (12–15 and 16–17) were also more likely to drink to relax.

DISCUSSION

The YLS, in line with a number of other surveys, found that underage drinking is common. A comparison of the YLS findings with those from the latest ONS survey carried out in schools in England and Wales (Goddard and Higgins, 1999) identified similar proportions of young teenagers drinking alcohol in the last week.

Overall, a fairly small proportion of those aged 12–15 drank frequently, but these young teenagers were much more likely to engage in other types of

delinquent behaviour. Those who took drugs, smoked regularly, had problems with school attendance or disliked school were more likely to be frequent drinkers. Offenders were also more likely than non-offenders to be frequent drinkers. Currently the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales is supporting the development of new alcohol and drugs programmes for young offenders. Research is underway to find out which approaches work best in reducing offending, drinking and drug use among this group of young people.

The findings suggest that parental drinking may have a strong influence over their children's drinking. Children whose parents drank frequently were more likely to be frequent drinkers themselves. In addition, the majority of young teenagers in this study were drinking at home and with their parents. This emphasises the importance of parents as role models for their children to encourage sensible drinking. It also suggests that alcohol education could usefully be directed at parents as well as children.

NOTE

The 1998–99 YLS is a nationally representative sample of 4,848 young people aged 12–30. Three-quarters of the sample were drawn from households participating in the 1998 British Crime Survey (BCS). The remainder of the sample was made up of addresses next door to BCS households with at least one person aged 12–30. The survey took place between October 1998 and February 1999 and had an overall response rate of 69%. Parents of 1,091 of the 1,790 YLS respondents aged 12–17 were also interviewed in the BCS. We are grateful to the Portman Group for their financial contribution to the YLS questions on underage drinking.

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For a more detailed report on the YLS in general, see *Youth crime: findings from the 1998-99 Youth Lifestyles Survey* by Claire Flood-Page, Siobhan Campbell, Victoria Harrington and Joel Miller. Home Office Research Study No 209. London: Home Office. Copies are available from the Communications Development Unit (address below).

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