



## Research paper

## Harm from others' drinking: How problematic do people with and without experience of harm perceive it to be?



Ingunn Olea Lund\*, Inger Synnøve Moan, Elisabet E. Storvoll

Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The aims were (1) to map how problematic people perceive it to be that a person experiences different types of harm from others' drinking, (2) to describe how problematic victims of harm from others' drinking perceive the experience to be, and (3) to investigate how perceptions of harm from others' drinking vary according to demographic characteristics, own drinking and experience of harm.

**Methods:** 2182 persons in Norway aged 18–69 years participated in a panel web survey in 2013. They responded to questions about six types of harm from others' drinking.

**Results:** Both people with and without experience of harm from others' drinking perceived it as problematic that someone experiences such harm. Moreover, persons with experience of harm perceived their own experience of harm as less problematic than they perceived it that someone else should experience harm. While people with and without experience of harm from others' drinking perceive the same types of harm from others' drinking as least problematic, they differed with regards to which types of harms they perceived as most problematic. Perceptions of harm varied according to demographic characteristics, own drinking and experienced harm.

**Conclusion:** The fact that people both with and without experience of harm from others' drinking perceived it as problematic that someone experiences such harm may be used as an argument for implementing and/or retaining effective alcohol policy measures. The contrast in perception of experienced harm and how problematic it is that someone else experiences harm suggest that the questions used within this survey tradition may be too general to provide meaningful information about prevalence and severity of experienced harm from others' drinking. Future research should address this further.

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## Background

Alcohol contributes to a range of negative outcomes both for those who drink, and for people in their surroundings (Bellis et al., 2015; Casswell, Harding, You, & Huckle, 2011; Laslett et al., 2011; Moan et al., 2015; Nutt, King, & Phillips, 2010; Rehm et al., 2009; Rehm et al., 2010). The majority of research on harm from alcohol has focused on harm to drinkers, but there has been increased interest also in alcohol's harm to others. It is now well-documented that many experience harm from others' drinking (Moan et al., 2015), but knowledge about how problematic such harm is perceived to be, by people with and without experience of harm, is lacking. From a public health perspective, knowledge about this is important; if people perceive such harms as highly problematic;

this may be used as an additional argument for introducing and/or retaining the alcohol policies and interventions that are most effective in preventing such harms.

Harm from others' drinking is widespread. In a recent study reporting prevalence of harm from others' drinking during the past 12 months in the Nordic countries and Scotland, 25–53% had experienced one or more types of harm (Moan et al., 2015). In an Australian study, 70% were negatively affected by strangers' drinking and 30% by the drinking of someone close to them (Laslett et al., 2011). Moreover, in a study that included respondents from 21 countries, more than 40% had suffered at least one aggressive harm (physical, verbal or sexual assault), and nearly 60% had experienced some type of harm caused by someone drunk (Bellis et al., 2015).

Harm from others' drinking has been studied using different approaches, including surveys. While some surveys are dedicated to measuring harm from others' drinking (Bellis et al., 2015; Casswell et al., 2011; Laslett et al., 2011; Ramstedt et al., 2016), most include only a few questions on this topic as part of a larger

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Drug Policy, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, P.O. Box 4404, Nydalen, N-0403 Oslo, Norway.  
E-mail address: [IngunnOlea.Lund@fhi.no](mailto:IngunnOlea.Lund@fhi.no) (I.O. Lund).

survey that includes a wide range of questions on alcohol or substance use in general (Giesbrecht & West, 1997; Greenfield et al., 2009; Mäkelä et al., 1999). The current study is based on a combination of the two traditions. It covers the same types of harm typically covered in surveys with only a few questions on harm from others' drinking: being kept awake at night, receiving unwanted sexual attention, being afraid of, and being verbally or physically abused by, persons who have been drinking (Moan et al., 2015; Storvoll, Moan, & Lund, 2016). The current study adds to previous research by asking how problematic people with and without experience of harm perceive it that someone else may experience harm from others' drinking; and by asking respondents with experience of harm how problematic the experience was. The questions on harm to others used within this survey tradition are quite general (Rossow, 2015). Therefore, respondents may have different understandings of the harm in question when responding to how problematic they find it that someone else experiences such harm, and for those with experience of harm, how problematic the experience was. While it is outside the scope of the present study to examine people's understanding of the questions used within this survey tradition, responses from people both with and without experience may provide an indication of whether people with and without experience of harm understand the questions differently. For instance, while people without experience of harm may think of very severe examples such as drunken beatings, when responding to how problematic they find it that someone experiences physical harm, respondents with experience of physical harm may think of their own experiences, which may range from a small bruise after being pushed to more serious types of harm.

To our knowledge, no previous studies have addressed how problematic harms from others' drinking are perceived to be, or, in other words, how high or low tolerance people have for collateral damage from others' drinking. Accordingly, we also lack knowledge on how tolerance varies according to other factors. However, it seems plausible that factors associated with risk of experiencing such harm, e.g. age, gender, education, partner status and own drinking (Huhtanen & Tigerstedt, 2012; Moan et al., 2015; Rossow & Hauge, 2004; Storvoll et al., 2016), are also associated with tolerance for collateral damage from others' drinking.

It has been suggested that women experience a greater burden of the harm from others' drinking (Huhtanen & Tigerstedt, 2012; Ramstedt et al., 2016), and that women and men typically experience different types of harm from others' drinking (Bellis et al., 2015). Furthermore, younger persons are at greater risk of experiencing harm from others' drinking than older persons (Bellis et al., 2015; Laslett et al., 2011), and persons not living with a partner are at greater risk of experiencing harm than those who do live with a partner (Moan et al., 2015; Storvoll et al., 2016). With regard to education, findings are ambiguous; while some studies suggest that persons with lower education are at increased risk of experiencing harm from others' drinking (Storvoll et al., 2016), other studies report the opposite pattern: that persons with higher education are at increased risk (Rossow & Hauge, 2004). Frequent drinking, particularly drinking to intoxication, is also associated with increased risk of experiencing harm from others' drinking (Bellis et al., 2015; Rehm, Gmel, Room, & Frick, 2001; Rehm, Monteiro et al., 2001).

In the 2014 Global status report on alcohol and health, the WHO identifies harm to others from drinking as an important area of research (WHO, 2014). Knowledge about how problematic various harms from others' drinking are perceived to be will provide insight that can be used to prioritize which areas to focus on when designing harm-reduction interventions. Moreover, the study can provide insight into how suitable the general questions used

within this survey tradition are with regards to studying the prevalence and severity of harm from others' drinking.

## Aims

The aims of this study were to: (1) map how problematic people in general perceive it to be that a person experiences different types of harm from others' drinking, (2) describe how problematic victims of harm from others' drinking perceive the experience to be, and (3) investigate if these perceptions vary according to demographic characteristics, own drinking and experienced harm.

## Methods

### *Procedure and participants*

A web-survey was conducted in Norway in 2013 by TNS Gallup on behalf of the Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS). A sample of 4000 18–69 year olds was drawn from an online panel comprising about 55,000 citizens. The sample was stratified according to figures from Statistics Norway on gender, age (4 groups), education (2 groups) and geographic region (4 groups). 2182 (55%) participated. For a more detailed description of the web-survey, see Rise & Halkjelsvik (2015).

Of the study participants, 48.8% were women and the mean age was 43.3 years. For the majority (62.4%), high school was the highest level of completed education. The highest levels of completed education of the rest of the sample were university/college (29.8%) and primary school (7.8%).

### *Measures*

#### *Demographic variables*

The demographic variables included were gender, age, education and partner status. Education was coded (1) low education, comprising primary school or high school, and (2) high education comprising college or university education. Partner status was coded (1) living with a partner, comprising respondents who were married or living with a partner, and (2) not living with a partner, comprising persons who were not living with their boyfriend/girlfriend, or were single.

#### *Own drinking*

Respondents reported drinking frequency and frequency of drinking to intoxication in the past 12 months. For this study, drinking frequency was coded: have not consumed alcohol in the past 12 months (1), on a few days (2), monthly (3), weekly (4) and more than twice per week (5). Frequency of drinking to intoxication was coded: have not been drunk in the past 12 months (1), on a few days (2), monthly (3) and several times per month (4).

#### *How problematic is it that someone experiences harm from others' drinking?*

The respondents were asked to specify to what extent they thought that the situation described below was problematic or unproblematic: being kept awake at night by noise in the neighbourhood or in the street a few times (1) yearly, (2) monthly or (3) weekly. Further, (4) being exposed to unwanted sexual attention, (5) having their clothes or other belongings of value damaged, (6) being shouted at or insulted, (7) being in a situation where they have been afraid that someone would hurt them, and (8) being physically hurt. The response options were: (1) completely unproblematic, (2) quite unproblematic, (3) quite problematic and (4) very problematic. For details on the exact wording of the questions, please see Table 1.

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