



Research paper

Patterns of excess alcohol consumption among school children in two English comprehensive schools



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ABSTRACT

Background: The patterns of excess alcohol consumption among children aged 11–15 years are not routinely assessed in England and neither are the alcohol consumption patterns of adolescents aged 16–18 years. The aim of the present research was to examine patterns of excess alcohol consumption among English school children aged 11–18 years.

Methods: 1230 children and adolescents, aged 11–18 years were surveyed about their alcohol consumption, and specifically their hazardous drinking, binge drinking and problem drinking.

Results: Sixteen per cent of 11 year olds and 71% of 18 year olds reported having drunk any alcohol in the previous seven days. Thirty-two per cent ($n = 199$) of girls and 24% ($n = 142$) of boys gave an affirmative answer to at least one of the CAGE questions, indicating possible problem drinking. Hazardous drinking was associated with norms and age; binge drinking and problem drinking were associated with norms, age and gender.

Conclusions: The study provides further evidence to support the case that excessive alcohol consumption among girls now exceeds that of boys. It would be valuable to collect data on patterns of excess alcohol consumption routinely to enable policy makers to target information and resources appropriately.

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A report for the UK Cabinet Office entitled, “Alcohol misuse: How much does it cost?” (UK Cabinet Office, 2003) estimated that misuse of alcohol cost the UK economy between £18B and £20B, due to its impact on health (e.g., hospital admissions), the economy (e.g., absenteeism), and society (e.g., crime). The harm associated with excess alcohol consumption in the UK is greater than comparable nations. For example, according to the most recently-available figures (for 2010), the rate of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (conditions that are largely caused by excess alcohol consumption) in the UK was 10.97 per 100,000 but was 10.15 per 100,000 in nations who joined the European Union (EU) before 2004 (see WHO, 2012).

Consistent with the high rates of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis, UK adults (defined as people aged 15 years and older) are among the highest consumers of alcohol in Europe. Although the amount of alcohol consumed in the UK has fluctuated over the years, it has remained consistently higher than the broader European region. For example, according to the most recently-available figures, in 2009, UK adults were consuming 10.70 L of pure alcohol per year compared with 10.49 L of pure alcohol per

year in comparable European countries (those who joined the EU before 2004, see WHO, 2012).

Given that age of first alcohol consumption is a key predictor of subsequent use and misuse of alcohol (Hawkins et al., 1997), it would be valuable to try and estimate the prevalence of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems early. However, although the annual Smoking, Drinking and Drug use Among Young People in England surveys (NHS Information Centre, 2009) assess the lifetime and last 7 days prevalence of alcohol intake of children aged 11–15 years (see Table 1), problem drinking, hazardous drinking and binge drinking are typically not measured in studies of childhood alcohol consumption (e.g., NHS Information Centre, 2009; WHO, 2012; Wiles et al., 2007).

One exception to this pattern is the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, which examined reported drunkenness – a proxy measure of excess alcohol consumption – among 13–15 year olds across 43 countries and regions in the WHO European Region and North America during 2009–2010. Among English 13 year olds, 15% of girls and 15% of boys reported being drunk at least twice in their life, which far exceeded the HBSC averages of 8% for girls and 11% for boys (see Currie et al., 2012). Among English 15 year olds, 43% of girls and 38% of boys reported being drunk at least twice in their life (HBSC average = 29% and 34%, respectively, see Currie et al., 2012). Thus, not only were English 15 year olds more often drunk than their HBSC counterparts in 2009–2010, but English 15 year old girls were more

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Table 1
Characteristics of the sample.

Variable	Present Sample (N = 1230)	Population ^a (N = 49,138,831)	X ² for difference between sample and population
Gender (%)			0.03 (<i>p</i> = .86)
Male	48.9	48.7	
Female	51.1	51.3	
NS-SEC (%)			
Higher managerial and professional occupations	14.1	10.8	13.61 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Lower managerial and professional occupations	25.7	22.2	8.68 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Intermediate occupations	8.9	10.3	2.75 (<i>p</i> = .10)
Small employers and own account workers	6.9	7.7	1.08 (<i>p</i> = .33)
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	4.6	9.4	32.80 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Semi-routine occupations	8.3	13.3	26.74 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Routine occupations	7.6	9.8	6.98 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Long-term unemployed	17.6	16.5	1.00 (<i>p</i> = .32)
Unclassified	6.2	–	–
Ethnicity (%)			
White	92.1	90.9	2.19 (<i>p</i> = .15)
Asian	0.9	3.5	24.73 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Black	0.9	1.1	0.48 (<i>p</i> = .58)
Other	1.1	4.5	32.35 (<i>p</i> < .05)
Not reported	5.0	–	–
Ever drunk alcohol (%)			
11 years old	78.9	16.0	52.75 (<i>p</i> < .05)
12 years old	67.5	30.0	69.80 (<i>p</i> < .05)
13 years old	79.3	52.0	32.40 (<i>p</i> < .05)
14 years old	89.5	70.0	46.31 (<i>p</i> < .05)
15 years old	96.7	81.0	46.70 (<i>p</i> < .05)
16 years old	97.8	–	–
17 years old	99.3	–	–
18 years old	95.8	–	–
Drunk alcohol in the last 7 days (%)			
11 years old	15.8	3.0	9.89 (<i>p</i> < .05)
12 years old	23.1	5.0	60.68 (<i>p</i> < .05)
13 years old	31.0	14.0	24.25 (<i>p</i> < .05)
14 years old	45.3	24.0	54.65 (<i>p</i> < .05)
15 years old	56.0	38.0	35.04 (<i>p</i> < .05)
16 years old	61.2	–	–
17 years old	75.6	–	–
18 years old	70.8	–	–

^a Demographic data are from the most recent (2001) census for England obtained from the National Statistics website: www.ons.gov.uk. Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO. Note that these data are derived from the population as a whole as opposed to children and adolescents specifically. Alcohol consumption data are from “Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England 2008” (NHS Information Centre, 2009), which surveyed children aged 11–15.

often drunk than English boys in contrast with most of the rest of the HBSC.

At first glance, these findings contrast with the Smoking, Drinking and Drug use Among Young People in England surveys (NHS Information Centre, 2009), which show that girls and boys report drinking alcohol in the last week with similar frequency. However, it is plausible that girls are engaging in higher-risk drinking (e.g., bingeing) than boys. Further evidence for this proposal can be found in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD), which included a measure of binge drinking (Hibell, Andersson, & Bjarnasson, 2004). According to this survey, 15–16 year olds from the UK and Isle of Man were the third-highest binge drinkers in Europe, with 27% reporting that they had consumed five or more drinks in a session on at least three occasions in the previous month. Interestingly, Hibell et al. (2004) also reported that binge drinking in 15–16 year old boys decreased between 1999 and 2003, but that 15–16 year old girls' binge drinking had increased – and overtaken that of boys – during the same time period. However, it is notable that HBSC and ESPAD do not assess hazardous and problem drinking, nor do they assess all age ranges from 11 to 18 years.

Consistent with the gaps in knowledge about the drinking habits of 11–15 year olds, the alcohol consumption of 16–18 year olds is typically included in figures for “young adults,” or those people aged 16–24 years (e.g., WHO, 2012). Given that 18 years is the point at which it becomes legal for people to purchase alcohol in England,

a lack of knowledge about what happens among 16–18 year olds is likely to hamper health promotion efforts among this age group.

The present study had two main aims: (a) to examine the patterns of excess alcohol consumption in English school children, and (b) to see how patterns of alcohol consumption in English school children vary according to gender and other key demographic variables.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from the pupils of two comprehensive schools in England. According to government figures, in 2007, almost 80% of all pupils in England attended comprehensive schools. Both schools were in the North of England, but were in different towns/cities. Pupils were asked to participate in a study concerning their beliefs about alcohol in September–October 2008. The University of Sheffield ethics committee gave approval for the research and informed consent was obtained from both the children themselves and appropriately authorized adults. It was made clear that participants could remove themselves or their data from the study at any point with no adverse consequences.

Out of 2415 potential participants, 1230 agreed to take part in the study and completed brief questionnaires. Thus, the response rate was 50.9%; the majority of nonrespondents reported exercising

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