
Young people's alcohol consumption and its relationship to other outcomes and behaviour

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Background

The study explores alcohol consumption among young people aged 14-17 using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). It is well known that alcohol consumption among young people is linked to a range of negative outcomes, both contemporary (such as lower educational attainment, smoking and criminal behaviour) and later in life (such as increased risk of drug and alcohol dependency and poorer mental and physical health). This research builds on knowledge of these relationships by exploring which factors are the most important drivers of alcohol consumption, as well as examining how drinking is related to other behaviours and what the causal links between these behaviours might be. The study also explores relationships between alcohol consumption and educational outcomes among young people at the age of 16/17.

Key findings

- We found that around 55% of young people had tried alcohol at age 14, rising to around 85% by the age of 17. Young people were more likely to have tried alcohol if they were female or if they had been bullied in the last year (the latter being particularly associated with frequent drinking). However, characteristics such as having an ethnic minority background and being religious were protective against trying alcohol.
- There was some evidence of a “drinking culture” in certain schools, with pupils more likely to drink in schools where there was a higher proportion of white pupils or pupils who were not eligible for free school meals (FSM), regardless of their own ethnicity or eligibility for FSM.
- Among young people who had not previously tried alcohol at ages 14 or 15, playing truant, shoplifting, going to parties or pubs and hanging around near home or in town, smoking and trying cannabis were all predictive of trying alcohol in the following year. None of these behaviours predicted increased frequency of drinking among those who had already tried alcohol, however.
- These relationships tended to be stronger in reverse, so that trying alcohol was strongly predictive of increased truancy, smoking, trying cannabis, and particularly criminal behaviour.
- Drinking was associated with a number of negative educational outcomes, including being not in employment, education or training (NEET), lower GCSE scores, and not remaining in full-time education beyond the age of 16. However, this was largely explained by links between drinking and other risky behaviours (in the case of being NEET and not remaining in full-time education) and more negative attitudes to education and aspirations for post-compulsory education (in the case of GCSE scores).

Methodology

The study uses data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). LSYPE began in 2004, interviewing over 15,500 young people aged 14 sampled from schools in England, as well as their main and secondary parents if these were available. The same young people have been re-interviewed every year, allowing us to follow their progress up to age 17.

LSYPE contains information on the young person's family characteristics, theirs and their parents' attitudes and aspirations and their experiences of school. The data have also been linked to the National Pupil Database (NPD), which allows us to assess these pupils' attainment at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, and also provides information on school-level factors such as ethnic composition and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals.

We used multilevel models to explore relationships between alcohol consumption and other individual and school-level factors. This is a common approach used with educational data where pupils are sampled within schools. Any two pupils from within the same school are likely to be more similar to each other than if they attended different schools, because of shared school-level factors such as teachers, class sizes, catchment area and school management etc. Our analyses take this structure into account.

Within this multilevel framework, data were analysed using multiple regression models, in order to look at relationships between alcohol consumption and other factors while controlling for the effect of a complete list of background characteristics.

Results

Characteristics of young people who have tried alcohol

We found that girls were slightly more likely to have tried alcohol than boys up until the age of 17. We also found that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and those who were religious were much less likely to have tried alcohol, and were particularly unlikely to drink frequently. Finally, we found a strong link between being bullied and frequent drinking, which bears further investigation as it has not been emphasised in previous studies.

Other factors found to be related to young people's chances of having tried alcohol were having a special educational need or a disability, having unemployed parents and having a mother with no UK qualifications (all of these young people were less likely than others to have tried alcohol). However, in general, social class factors were less important drivers of trying alcohol than expected.

We also found some evidence of a "drinking culture" in certain types of school, with pupils more likely to drink in schools where there was a higher proportion of white pupils or pupils who did not receive free school meals (FSM), regardless of their own ethnicity or eligibility for FSM.

The analyses identified a number of characteristics of young people who were more likely to have tried alcohol, and therefore policy initiatives designed to reduce alcohol consumption among young people would benefit from focusing on these groups. School-level initiatives are also likely to be important, since we have identified evidence of possible 'drinking cultures' with young people more likely to try alcohol in certain kinds of school. We have also shown a strong link between bullying and frequent drinking, and therefore anti-bullying initiatives could have the added benefit of reducing levels of drinking among some young people.

Relationships between alcohol consumption and other behaviours

We found that young people who drank alcohol were more likely to take part in risky behaviours (e.g. smoking, trying cannabis, shoplifting and graffiti) and were also more likely to take part in socialising activities (e.g. hanging around with groups of friends, playing sport and going to parties). They also tended to have more negative attitudes to education (as did their parents) and lower aspirations, and were more likely to have been bullied in the last year.

These characteristics were relevant to most young people who drank alcohol, but young people who drank on most days tended to engage in slightly different behaviours. This group of young people was less likely to take part in socialising activities but still engaged in some of the more damaging activities such as smoking, fighting and graffitiing.

We also found little relationship between drinking and self-developmental activities (those that were

recorded in LSYPE), except that young people who drank on most days were less likely to take part in community work. We found no relationship between drinking and attending youth clubs or reading for pleasure, and we found that young people who took part in sport or played a musical instrument were actually slightly more likely to drink than those who did not. It therefore appears that taking part in activities that might be considered to be self-developmental does not seem to deter young people from drinking. The single strongest relationship between drinking and other behaviours was between drinking on most days and having been involved in a fight or public disturbance. This indicates a powerful relationship between drinking and violent behaviour. Links with smoking and trying cannabis were also found to be particularly important.

Young people who drink on most days have a different range of associated behaviours compared to those who drink less frequently. They appear to be less closely linked with group activities such as hanging around and going to parties or pubs, and more strongly linked with violent behaviour and/or being bullied. Interventions designed to help this small proportion of young people may therefore benefit from focusing less on problems associated with group anti-social behaviour and more on the individual problems of these young people who are drinking on most days.

Causal relationships between drinking and other behaviours

We also used causal models to explore links between different behaviours, and found that a number of other behaviours predicted trying alcohol for the first time among the subgroup of young people who had not previously tried alcohol at ages 14 or 15 (45% at age 14 and 30% at age 15).

This included playing truant, shoplifting, going to parties or pubs and hanging around near home or in town, but especially smoking and trying cannabis. The relationship between smoking, trying cannabis and drinking alcohol was equally strong in reverse, suggesting that the relationship is reciprocal: the risk of trying one having tried the other is equally likely without any obvious direction of causality. Trying alcohol was a little more predictive of playing truant than the other way around, although again the relationship was fairly reciprocal, suggesting that

young people who skip school also have more unsupervised time to drink. However, drinking alcohol was a strong predictor of engaging in criminal activity with little to no evidence of a reverse causality, indicating that drinking is more likely to be the driver of increased criminal behaviour rather than the reverse. Unsurprisingly, we also found that young people who were going to parties or pubs or hanging around in groups were more likely to try alcohol, as these are settings where alcohol is likely to be available without the supervision of parents.

Several risky behaviours are causally linked with having tried alcohol, although none of these behaviours was found to lead to an increase in the *frequency* of drinking among young people who had already tried alcohol. Interventions to reduce young people's drinking may therefore also result in a reduction in prevalence of a number of other risky behaviours such as smoking, cannabis use, truancy and in particular youth crime.

Alcohol consumption and educational outcomes

We found that drinking was associated with a number of negative educational outcomes, such as the likelihood of being not in employment, education or training (NEET), lower GCSE scores, and not remaining in full-time education beyond the age of 16.

In the case of being NEET or leaving full-time education, this relationship was almost entirely explained by the link between drinking and other negative behaviours, particularly truancy and being suspended from school. As seen above, drinking is more likely to lead to these behaviours, which are then also associated with leaving full time education.

Reduction of alcohol consumption among young people may therefore help to reduce young people's risk of being NEET indirectly through a reduction in their risk of participating in other risky behaviours.

In the case of GCSE scores, it was mostly attitudes (including the young person's and their main parent's attitude to school) as well as parental involvement with the school, family cohesion and the young person's aspirations for post-compulsory education that explained most of the relationship between drinking and attainment. Other risky behaviours appear less important in this relationship than they are for the young person's post-16 destination, and instead it is

likely that there may be a cycle of lower aspirations/poor attitude to education and alcohol consumption that ultimately leads to lower attainment.

It may therefore be possible to reduce drinking among young people and ultimately raise their attainment by focusing on their educational aspirations and working to improve attitudes to school among young people and their parents.

Conclusions

These results provide evidence of the most vulnerable groups who should be the target of initiatives to reduce young people's drinking. These include girls (aged 14-16) and those who have experienced bullying in the previous year. We also identified a number of factors that appeared to be protective against trying alcohol, such as being in a minority ethnic group and being religious. In addition, our results show that school-level initiatives may be important in schools where elements of a 'drinking culture' may have developed (i.e. schools with a high proportion of white pupils and/or a low proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals).

We found that taking part in self-developmental activities did not protect young people from trying alcohol. Our results do suggest, however, that improving attitudes to education and raising post-16 aspirations, as well as increasing family cohesion, is likely to reduce the prevalence and frequency of drinking among young people. In addition, reducing the numbers of young people trying alcohol (and/or reducing the frequency of drinking among those who do drink) would almost certainly reduce the prevalence of a number of other risky behaviours (such as crime, truancy, smoking and cannabis use), which we found to be driven by alcohol consumption.

We found that drinking was strongly linked to leaving full-time education at 16 at particularly to becoming NEET, but that this relationship was largely explained by links between drinking and other behaviours such as truancy, being suspended from school, hanging around near home and smoking. Drinking was also linked to poorer GCSE results, but in this case the relationship was mainly explained by poorer attitudes towards education and lower aspirations for the future.

It therefore appears that attitudes and aspirations are the drivers of a number of negative outcomes including drinking, other risky behaviours and subsequent educational outcomes. If young people have positive attitudes towards their education and if they have high long-term aspirations, then they are less likely to become involved in risky behaviours while at school.

Since these attitudes and aspirations are likely to have crystallised relatively early in young people's lives, we would suggest earlier interventions to help raise the aspirations of young people and their parents, as well as encouraging more positive attitudes to education and greater family cohesion. Not only may this directly reduce drinking frequency among young people, but it may also be beneficial with regard to a host of other behaviours (such as truancy, smoking and violence) which this study has been shown to be strongly linked.

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF) can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research
Further information about this research can be obtained from John Doherty,
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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.