

# Drinking to belong

## Understanding young adults' alcohol use within social networks

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November 2010

**This report explores young adults' decision-making around alcohol against a cultural backdrop of historically high levels of consumption, affordability and availability in the UK.**

How young people drink alcohol underpins rates of harm, which have been rising steadily in recent decades. Understanding the meaning and motivation behind young adults' drinking habits will help predict future need. Policy-makers and health educationalists will be better informed to develop responses that make sense to younger drinkers. This report identifies the influence of both existing cultural attitudes around alcohol, and new and emergent attitudes that separate younger drinkers' consumption from that of other age groups.

The report highlights:

- a norm for excessive alcohol consumption in young adulthood;
- how today's young adults find it difficult to imagine alternatives to the excessive drinking that supports group socialising;
- how the commercial alcohol offer made to young people contributes to the narrowing of their options; and
- the influences of pricing on decision-making.



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# Executive summary

## Background

Recent years have seen the consumption of alcohol at population level reach an historical high, coupled with an increase in alcohol's availability and affordability. These trends indicate a more central place for alcohol in UK culture and, some argue, an increased ease with consumption above healthy levels across all age groups. Understanding how today's generation (of young adults 18–25 year olds) relates to the contemporary alcohol environment will help us anticipate current and future alcohol-related harms. It can also offer insight into how more moderate drinking can be promoted at this and other points in the life-course.

This study sought to understand how today's young adults perceive the role of alcohol in the process of growing up and establishing adult identities and responsibilities. The findings indicate that the pursuit of excessive alcohol consumption has become established as part of a 'normal' experience of young adulthood. The young adults in our study perceived excessive alcohol use as one of the few ways in which they could socialise with others of their age group. It was felt that the 'alcohol offer' made to young adults (through marketing and the provision of drinking spaces) excluded other, more moderate, relationships with alcohol. The belief that young adulthood was a temporary life-phase supported excessive forms of consumption that, also seen as temporary, felt disconnected from longer-term patterns of consumption.

## Research questions

Our aim was to discover how young adults make decisions around the when, where, with whom and (crucially) how much and how often they consume alcohol. We explored ideas of 'normal' alcohol consumption and whether there were differences between different groups of young people on different pathways to full adult status. We also explored the extent to which price and availability featured in decision-making about alcohol.

## Methods

We employed a mixed method, qualitative approach that included in-depth interviews with 35 young adults. These were followed by focus groups with key peers with whom they drank (80 individuals in total). Social network maps and drink diaries over a three-month period were produced by the 35 young adults we interviewed. These included young adults in higher education, further education, full-time employment and those not in training, education or employment.

## Findings

### Drinking with peers: drinking to get drunk

For many of our participants the consumption of alcohol had become synonymous with the pursuit of drunkenness. Existing, wider cultural attitudes towards the place of alcohol were partially responsible for

this. However, there was also a degree of new normative expectations being established. Drinks marketed at young people, and the atmosphere of the bars and clubs targeting them, supported and promoted excessive drinking.

Drinking to achieve drunkenness was seen as a 'default' choice for peer socialising. Many found it difficult to imagine realistic alternatives to alcohol consumption for getting groups of young adults together. On drinking occasions, young adults sought the effects of alcohol – particularly openness and the breaking down of barriers – on group interactions and individuals. This was perceived as improving group function.

Alcohol education focusing on unit intake per session and the promotion of 'sensible drinking' contrasts with how alcohol was used within our study peer groups. Therefore, it seems unlikely that it will influence behavioural change in young people in the short term.

Heavy episodic drinking was justified by the belief that it was a temporary behaviour associated with the freedom of young adulthood. So, young adults believed their current drinking styles did not represent long-term risk and therefore did not pose a threat to long-term health and wellbeing.

## **The influence of pricing and availability on consumption**

The price of alcohol made both a quantitative and a qualitative difference to the way young adults drank. It influenced both the amount consumed and the style in which it was consumed.

The cost of alcohol was an important metric by which young adults monitored their alcohol intake within a given drinking occasion. Decisions on how much to drink, based on health consequences, differed according to the sober and intoxicated states in which they were made. How much money people had in their pocket stayed the same. The availability of cheap alcohol, therefore, led to greater consumption per occasion. One strategy used by young people to moderate consumption was to take only a limited amount of money on a night out. Cheap alcohol offers could undermine this strategy by increasing the amount of alcohol they could buy within their self-imposed financial limit.

However, occasional intoxication was also seen as a 'treat', predicted to be resilient to price increases. Intoxication was established as the key facilitator of group bonding, and it was difficult for young adults to imagine different ways of creating opportunities for group recreation. For some, it was predicted that alternative forms of intoxication would compete with alcohol, should the price of it become too high. This view was expressed by those who already had access to or used illegal drugs and black-market alcohol rather than the wider sample of young adults in the study.

## **Differences between and within social networks**

Excessive alcohol consumption was seen as integral to the experience of young adulthood and the freedom of a time characterised by experimentation.

A 'normative pathway', in relation to alcohol, was described as including a period of peer group excess followed by moderation, as both the responsibilities of their working and family lives came to the fore. Young adults were also seen to 'move on' from the spaces and occasions where excessive consumption took place ('I don't think old people should go to clubs', female student).

However, as pathways to full adult status are differentiated by socio-economic background, so are opportunities to enact and move away from excessive drinking cultures associated with young adulthood. For those with fewer socio-economic resources, excessive youthful consumption was more likely to be in private homes or public spaces, such as streets or parks. An added risk to life chances included gang and alcohol-related violence and an increased likelihood of picking up fines or criminal records in these settings. These were likely to compound an already tenuous relationship with the labour market.

Other participants with fewer socio-economic resources achieved 'full' adult role identities through becoming parents. Early parenting is usually seen as a risk factor for longer-term life chances. However,

for the parents in this study it led to moderated consumption and offered protection against street-based cultures of intoxication.

Within social networks, it was found that having a number of drinking standards to observe and practise offered an alternative perspective on the styles of drinking promoted in young adulthood. This gave young adults a way of imagining different relationships to alcohol that could be put into practice. The influence of parents was key in establishing ideas of contextual appropriateness for different styles of drinking. Indeed, it appeared it was witnessing examples of moderation that was important to young people rather than whether or not parents introduced them to alcohol in the home.

## **Key messages**

The report concludes by highlighting the following key messages to policy-makers, practitioners and health education specialists.

### ***On price and availability***

When drinking with their peers, paying more for alcohol is likely to reduce the amount consumed per drinking occasion for young adults. The cost of alcohol represents a more effective brake on consumption than considerations about health.

### ***On wider culture and other drivers of over-consumption***

The peer-based pursuit of drunkenness has become an established part of the experience of young adulthood in the UK. Alcohol has found a monopoly position in facilitating group belonging, and forging and maintaining friendship groups in young adulthood. This is attributed to:

- the special nature of young adulthood within the life-course;
- the absence of group bonding opportunities in other areas of life; and
- the success of alcohol markets in filling the void.

An awareness of the risks of alcohol marketing strategies further shaping the normalised experience of young adulthood should be borne in mind. In particular, the separation of young adults' drinking experiences from those of other (older) adults should be addressed. Allowing more diverse drinking spaces, with diverse alcohol standards evident, may apply informal brakes on consumption.

This evidence suggests that the example set in parental homes is important to establishing diverse understandings of appropriate consumption. Moderate drinking in this sphere provides an alternative view of alcohol, in contrast to the excessive consumption promoted by the commercial alcohol offer targeting young adults.

## Understanding alcohol consumption within contemporary young adulthood

Current trends in both consumption and alcohol-related harm suggest today's young adults are emerging into a different alcohol environment than have previous generations. Given that the current patterns of drinking will shape future rates of alcohol-related harm, this study investigated how young adults are responding to changes in mainstream culture and behaviour around alcohol. We wanted to understand not only how much young adults are drinking but also what meanings they attach to alcohol and what forms of consumption are considered appropriate and normal.

Characteristics of the current alcohol environment include:

- high levels of consumption per person;
- relative affordability;
- availability through a greater number of outlets; and
- a broader culture in which alcohol consumption is considered appropriate on an increasing number of occasions

Consumption of alcohol in the United Kingdom (UK) has been increasing since the middle of the last century (BMA, 2008). The current plateau in consumption represents an historical high. The alcohol consumption of young adults should be understood against these broader changes in consumption – not only in terms of amounts consumed but also in how wider cultural norms around alcohol (also subject to shift) are interpreted and enacted. It is also important to be aware of how these cultural norms shape the alcohol offer made to young adults as they learn to incorporate alcohol consumption into their lives.

Before we began our research, we were aware of a number of trends and emergent issues that signified a shift in the alcohol environment of today's young adults.

- Decade upon decade increases in alcohol consumption per head have peaked in the early years of the millennium. This now appears to be finding a balance, albeit at a rate indicating continued harm and costs.
- When compared with other consumer goods, alcohol is now cheaper than ever before.
- Increasing complexity in the demographic trends around alcohol consumption shows a changing picture of how subgroups of the population drink. For example:
  - o men have recently moderated their alcohol consumption;
  - o women's drinking continues to increase (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009);
  - o the young are drinking less than older age groups but, even within younger groups, some drink more than others; a case of 'more alcohol down fewer throats' (Balding and Regis, 1996).

- 'Binge' drinking is being identified as the characteristic style of drinking for young adults in the UK (Martinic and Measham, 2008).
- A cultural change in the UK has made 'the alcohol offer' more diverse and market segmented. Opportunities for consumption are greater than a generation or so ago; spaces and products are tailored to encourage young adults to consume alcohol as an integral component of their social life.
- The increasing separation of young adulthood as a life stage distinct from full adulthood roles and responsibilities. This is reinforced by the places, media and marketing with which young people engage, and to which they are exposed.
- An economic downturn is anticipated to affect young people severely. Our broader cultural relationship with alcohol may, or may not, be affected by the downturn but different opportunities will undoubtedly be available to different groups of adults. In a time of lowered employment opportunities, understanding how young adults currently understand the place of alcohol will help us anticipate potentially harmful consequences stemming from its consumption.
- At the time of writing, a policy discussion around alcohol and associated harm is currently taking place in England and Scotland. A better understanding of the balance between personal responsibility and the influence of culture (mediated and shaped by alcohol industry activity such as pricing, availability and marketing) will enable strategy and policy development.

To explore the significance of these issues we conducted a mixed method qualitative study to address the following research questions:

- How have the wider cultural changes in and around alcohol consumption influenced the decision-making of young adults in relation to alcohol?
- How do price and availability shape young adults' attitudes towards consumption?
- How are different groups of young adults responding to the contemporary alcohol environment? Is there one culture or plural cultures, and what influences responses to it?
- How can our findings assist policy-makers, alcohol educators and practitioners?

## Trends in alcohol consumption and harm

Measuring the alcohol consumption of young adults, as with all groups, is a methodologically fraught exercise. Alcohol-related deaths, a standard measure for assessing population level consumption, are rare amongst younger age groups because of the cumulative effect of alcohol (ISD, 2009). Nevertheless, alcohol-related mortality rates can tell us something of the background alcohol environment and culture. The number of recorded deaths doubled between 1991 and 2004, indicating increasing societal costs and consumption (Breakwell, *et al.*, 2007; Coghill, *et al.*, 2009). There is also an upward trend for morbidity and hospital admissions related to alcohol. Liver cirrhosis, a strong proxy for the long-term health damage associated with alcohol, has increased in the UK over the last few decades. Scotland now has the highest age-standardised levels of cirrhosis in Europe, and rates for England and Wales are also escalating (Leon and McCambridge, 2006). The downward trend in this indicator for the rest of Europe suggests stark differences in trends characterising our national drinking when compared with our continental neighbours.

Social harms associated with alcohol are less easy to quantify but some social problems of young adulthood and alcohol are known to co-exist. These include violence and anti-social behaviour (McKinlay, *et al.*, 2009; DHS, 2008), unplanned sexual activity and the related problem of sexually transmitted infections (Rashad and Kaestner, 2004), suggesting that societal trends in alcohol consumption and social harm are likely to increase alongside one another.

An upward trend in consumption can also be discerned through sales data where the UK population as a whole increased the amount of alcohol purchased from 9.3–11.5 litres per capita between 1986 and 2007 (HMRC, 2008). Again, when compared with other European nations, which peaked at around 11 litres in the 1980s, the UK's increasing per capita consumption goes against the tide of falling consumption at a European level.

Sales and mortality data, however, tells us little of how young adults as a subgroup are responding to increased background consumption. Self-report is the most age-appropriate measure, but must be understood with the caution that actual consumption levels are likely to be higher than those reported (Catto and Gibbs, 2008). Existing self-report data indicates complexity beneath the population level trends. The General Household Survey (Goddard, 2006), for example, shows a divergent trend between young men and women. Figures for men display moderation, with those consuming more than eight units in the previous week (their definition of a binge) declining from 39 per cent in 1998 to 30 per cent in 2006. Yet rates for young women stayed roughly the same (24 per cent in 1998, 25 per cent in 2006). In terms of general alcohol consumption, young men (16–24 years old) have again displayed an apparent (but slight) decrease in consumption over the last 15 or so years (19.1 units per week in 1992 to 18.6 units in 2006), whilst young women have shown an increase (7.3 units per week in 1992 to 10.8 units per week in 2006) (Goddard, 2006).

When compared with older age ranges (particularly in the 25–44 years age group) both young men and women are showing moderated trends, compared with their older counterparts. However, the difference in trends between younger (18–25) and older (25–44) age groups requires caution in interpretation. Despite a general increase in drinking among middle and older age groups, focusing on the age group beneath today's young adults (secondary school children) reveals emerging complexity. At this age, although increases in abstinence from alcohol are evident, there are also increases in units consumed per session by those who do drink, particularly noticeable amongst 11–13 year olds (Measham, 2008). Measham suggests 'what we may be seeing is a polarisation of young people's drinking, with more abstainers and occasional drinkers [but] more heavy consumption amongst those who are regular drinkers' (Measham, 2008, pp. 210–11). Figures for Scotland indicate a similar pattern, where school-age children as a group have seen the most marked increases in consumption over the 1990s–2000s (McKenzie and Haw, 2006).

## An increase in binge drinking?

A broad cultural phenomenon evidenced in the population of young people, and identified in both research and media coverage, concerns an apparent growth of a culture of intoxication and public drunkenness (Plant and Plant, 2006; Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Martinic and Measham, 2008).

However, the concept of binge drinking should be understood within the context of a fluid definition. It may be that under its new calibration (as men consuming eight or more units and women six, in a single day [IAS, 2007]), the measure has expanded to capture a pre-existing and widespread style of drinking within the UK. However, using reported intoxication as a measure, within the 18–24-year-old cohort 80 per cent had drunk harmfully over the previous year (Richardson and Budd, 2003). Intoxication from alcohol consumption resulted in less than one-fifth of drinking occasions for European neighbours such as France, Italy, Portugal and Romania. Given that binge drinking at age 23 increases the odds of binge drinking at 42 years for both men and women (Jefferis, *et al.*, 2005) these trends indicate significant future harm for the UK.

## Price, availability and marketing

Running alongside trends in population level and subgroup consumption has been the increased affordability of alcohol. The price of alcohol has not risen as rapidly as household incomes over the last few decades (ONS, 2007) and evidence points to consumption rates and affordability being positively associated (Purshouse, *et al.*, 2009). The availability of alcohol has also increased, visible through the proliferation of licensed premises in urban areas in tandem with growth in promotions and deep discounting as the competition between venues selling alcohol (on- and off-licensed premises) has increased (IAS, 2007; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003).

Increases in consumption, affordability and availability suggest an increased sense of ease around alcohol in culture at large. They are also phenomena which potentially feed off and reinforce one another. The price of alcohol is but one tactical element of well-resourced and sophisticated alcohol marketing. Existing evidence suggests that alcohol marketing (the combined influence of advertising, promotion, sponsorship and product placement) maintains the place of alcohol in culture and helps establish it anew for each generation, as well as promoting particular brands (Hastings, *et al.*, 2005; Hastings and Angus, 2009). Marketing tends to emphasise alcohol's positive associations and presents consumption at least as normal, at best as glamorous and exciting (Amos, 1992; Baillie, 1996). So, alcohol advertising and promotion through price further sustain the idea of alcohol consumption as normal and unproblematic. The use of alcohol as a loss leader to tempt people in the supermarkets and the positive portrayal of alcohol use in film and television (Dal Cin, *et al.*, 2008; Ray and Chugh, 2008) highlight how much of this background promotion of alcohol is also free of cost to the alcohol industry.

## Culture – a changed alcohol environment?

To what extent do the historically high rates of consumption, affordability and availability suggest a qualitative change in the culture around alcohol in the UK? Are today's young adults being socialised into a qualitatively different culture around alcohol and to what extent does this store up problems for future alcohol-related harms for which society must bear the cost?

To some extent, it could be argued that the UK has always been characterised by an excessive drinking culture that current health promotion and alcohol awareness strategies have brought into focus. For example, some of the well-established but informal rules in the places alcohol is consumed promote a particular style of binge consumption such as those identified by Alcohol Focus Scotland when they conducted focus groups with drinkers in Scotland. Their research identified the buying of rounds or establishing a 'drinks kitty' to encourage drinkers to keep pace with the fastest in a group (Martinic and Measham, 2008). With such practices being familiar and well established throughout the UK as a whole they reveal the excessive consumption of alcohol to be encouraged culturally, despite knowledge of the negative outcomes associated with it (Dean, 1990; May, 1993). Further, the expectation to consume alcohol has become attached to increasing numbers and types of social occasions and, some argue, an acceptability of public drunkenness has emerged alongside the affordability of alcohol beverages suggesting a normalisation of heavy drinking (Plant and Plant, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Berridge, *et al.*, 2007).

Our cultural ease around alcohol has been given expression, not just through reduced price, but in the growth of opportunities and offers being made to partake in drinking. These are evidenced through the transformation of our city and town centres into night-time destinations for alcohol consumption (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007), our recently found comfort with eating out, the growth of drinking at home and the diversification of product choice available in supermarkets and bars. The growth in popular connoisseurship of wine, spirits and real ale, supported by specialist magazines, lifestyle sections of newspapers and television programmes, further underlines the change. In cultural terms, alcohol has become more obtainable, desirable and normalised.

Many of these changes have been broadly welcomed as indicative of a more cosmopolitan, celebratory and relaxed society. Until the recent economic downturn, it could easily be seen as an epiphenomenon of buoyant economic times: increased wealth being expressed through existing attitudes to alcohol within a booming consumer culture. However, some forms of drinking have retained the opprobrium associated with the anti-social drunkard. In particular, young people's role in the cultural relaxation around alcohol has come under the media and policy spotlight (Herring, *et al.*, 2008). Despite evidence of a societal alcohol problem with cultural antecedents, problematic drinking in some quarters remains a problem of youthful exuberance in city and town centres.

The relationship between how young adults drink and wider cultural norms around consumption should not be ignored. Steady increases in population level consumption and increased accessibility may have led to a cultural acceptance of intoxication within a wider range of circumstances. It is now not uncommon, nor considered problematic, to take a 'deserved' large glass of wine to unwind or to witness a sporting team inebriated in celebration on a news report. In relation to drinking in young adulthood, others identify the pursuit of a 'controlled loss of control' as increasingly characteristic of young people's leisure choices (Martinic and Measham, 2008). For young people wishing to 'lose control' there are normalised alcohol-related opportunities in mainstream culture to allow this. Unlike previous 'moral panics' (Cohen, 1973) associated with youthful exuberance, the behaviours and substances being used are those normatively indulged in by mainstream society. Indeed, the prominence in consumer culture given to youthfulness as a desirable quality has led to a further normalisation of such behaviour.

## Contemporary transitions to adulthood

This study seeks to understand how young adults are responding to the current culture around alcohol. In the contemporary life-course early adulthood has been identified as a time of relative autonomy and independence prior to the full adoption of adult roles (Arnett, 2004). Research with students has found the liminal nature of early adulthood (being in between childhood and maturity) allows for an increase in alcohol consumption (Banister and Piacentini, 2008). However, others have cautioned against over-generalising young adulthood as a universally similar life stage between subgroups of the population. They argue that experiences of the transition to adulthood are differentiated between subgroups by employment, housing and educational opportunities. Whereas some may be 'emerging adults', others may feel and enact the lives of 'full adults' or 'prevented adults' (Hendry and Kleop, 2010). So, understanding how young adults respond to the contemporary alcohol environment should involve understanding the differences in responses between subgroups of adults, as well as the similarities.

## Gender differences

Within the young adult cohort perhaps the most striking recent change has been the differences in consumption trends between young men and women. Cultural responses to the combined opportunities of young adulthood and increases in gender equality have been implicated when accounting for the continued increase in female consumption (Bloomfield, *et al.*, 2005).

Affluence and solo living (with related decreases in family responsibilities), changes in cultural norms around the acceptability of female drunkenness and the places women drink (more likely the home than men) have been highlighted. Others point to a growth in female risk-taking, more traditionally associated with young men (Sweeting and West, 2003). This hypothesis is supported by evidence that, in Scotland, 15-year-old girls are more likely to have experienced being 'really drunk' than their male counterparts (74 per cent, compared with 71 per cent) (SALSUS, 2008). Measurement issues have been highlighted too, with changes in unit amounts found in standard glasses of wine (more often consumed by women) affecting gender comparisons (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

## Cultural capital – the role of family background

In a recent, wide-ranging literature review, Velleman (2009) identifies a compelling number of studies that indicate the family as a key site of intervention for reducing harmful drinking in later life. Cultural capital refers to the different tastes, dispositions and preferences that are influential in determining life-course outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Family practices and parenting are primary channels of such values, representing the spaces in which many first learn about the societal and familial associations with alcohol. So health advantage is communicated across generations alongside other cultural dispositions for labour-market and life success. The key parenting strategies identified by Velleman (2009) were those that enable young people to make the right decisions about alcohol in later life in the absence of parental control. Components of parenting programmes that were successful in creating resilience to alcohol-related risks later in life included facets of parenting, such as:

- open communication;
- rule-setting;
- nurturing and supportive parenting;
- goal-setting;
- school involvement; and
- skills for dealing with peer pressure.

Other researchers have identified a strong correlation between parental and children's drinking behaviour over the life-course suggesting that children tend to model the drinking patterns and styles of their parents (White and Jackson, 2004; White, *et al.*, 2000). In contrast, other research illustrates an association between parents who abstain and children who become heavy drinkers in later life (Roche, 2001; Orford, 1990). This suggests that not only are the relationships between parental influences and children's outcomes complex but also that imitation of parents is not a sufficient explanation of how young people learn to drink. Interpreting the influence of family as a component of a young adult's cultural capital could better describe the process of intergenerational transmission.

## Social capital – the role of social networks

The peer group, rather than the family, moves into focus as the key site where practices around alcohol are adopted in young adulthood. Much research has attempted to define the relative weight of individual decision-making versus pressure to adopt peer norms when explaining how and why many young people come to drink like their peers. These approaches have been summarised as peer selection versus peer influence.

Peer selection arguments suggest that individuals with similar behaviours gravitate towards each other, while the peer influence position asserts that peers encourage one another to adopt similar behaviours and patterns (Pearson and West, 2003; Ennett, *et al.*, 2006; Bullers, *et al.*, 2001). However, more recent research recognises the influence of both selection and influence within peer groups. Identifying with one another begins an association leading to the reinforcing of subgroup values and practices (Kirke, 2004).

Differences can also be found within peer groups, explained by the different roles individuals adopt in friendship networks. However, despite a considerable amount of published work on the relationship between individual characteristics, peer characteristics and health-related behaviours (such as alcohol

and substance use) a precise, universally demonstrable pathway of influence has yet to be established (Velleman, 2009). Alcohol is an important substance for young people wishing to position themselves within a social network. Social norms theorists such as Linkenbach and Perkins (2003) suggest the prevalence of high alcohol use within youth peer groups is a result of incorrect estimations of peer norms. This finding rests on the belief that there is considerable importance attached to meeting normative standards about alcohol for young people.

The notions of bonding social capital (forging links with those 'like us' and already in our established network) and bridging capital (forging links with new people often different to us) (Halpern, 2007) may explain how individually navigating social networks relates to alcohol use in young adulthood. So-called 'bridgers' or 'liaisons' (individuals who link between different social networks) have been shown to be more experimental in their substance use (Henry, 2007). Interestingly, this runs contrary to the idea that high amounts of bridging capital are protective of health (Cattell, 2001; Kim, *et al.*, 2006; Sirven, 2006).

Research is needed to understand how opportunities for different network links are presented to different groups of young people, and the differences in how alcohol use supports such opportunities. The connection between alcohol and sociability in culture at large, and particularly during young adulthood, has produced landscapes of intertwined health risk and benefit. Further exploration is required into how interpretations and enactments of wider cultural drivers to consume alcohol can produce differential risk and benefit between subgroups.

## Policy context

Recently, the task of changing attitudes and practices around alcohol consumption has risen up the policy agenda. This has been the case in Scotland in particular, where this study was based and where devolution of health policy has been accompanied with political will to address the perceived national problem with alcohol. This has created the circumstances for bolder policy innovation. Policy proposals have emerged from both Holyrood and Westminster, however, looking to change national relationships with alcohol.

In England and Wales this has seen the promotion of the *Safe. Sensible. Social.* (DoH, 2007) approach to consumption, with health education and information to promote personal responsibility central. The Scottish Government's approach is significant in treating alcohol marketing as key to the problem in targeting advertising, sites of sale and an aspiration to introduce price controls on alcohol. In Scotland the relatively cheap price of alcohol is considered one of the most important factors driving excessive drinking among younger age groups (SHAAP, 2007). Increasing the price of alcohol per unit has been evidenced in the moderating impact on population-wide alcohol consumption levels (Purshouse, *et al.*, 2009; Edwards, 1997; Scottish Government, 2008; Babor, *et al.*, 2003). Other proposals, such as initiatives to make access to alcohol more difficult for drinkers under 21, have seen success in reducing levels of anti-social behaviour in pilot areas (Scottish Government, 2008).

Across the UK, policy options proposed in government publications such as *Changing Scotland's Relationship with Alcohol* (Scottish Government, 2009) and *Safe. Sensible. Social.* (DoH, 2008) include:

In Scotland

- ending irresponsible promotion and below-cost selling of alcoholic drinks;
- applying a minimum per-unit retail price to alcohol;
- offering better protection and identification of the children of parents with alcohol misuse problems;
- raising age of purchase in off-sales to 21 years of age;

- introducing a social responsibility fee applied to alcohol retailers to offset community costs of alcohol misuse;
- restricting promotional materials in licensed premises;
- making initial calls for separate checkouts for alcohol sales in supermarkets (later rejected after consultation).

In England and Wales

- ending poor retailing practice that leads to alcohol-related health and social harm;
- including health information in alcohol advertising;
- equipping the NHS to make sure advice on health and help are available for those who require it, particularly thorough brief interventions.

The findings from this project should inform policy-makers and practitioners in the various alcohol-related fields. The data presented here provides grounded, empirical evidence of the influences shaping young adults' decision-making. It is hoped that policy-makers and practitioners can make good use of this to develop strategy. An important emergent element is that some influences appear universal, stemming from broad cultural norms, whilst others stem from local enactments of cultural norms based on available opportunities. This highlights inequalities concerning the problematic consumption of alcohol.

## Research design and methods

### Aims

Our aim was to discover how young adults make decisions about when, where, with whom and – crucially – how much and how often alcohol is consumed. The following questions guided the data collection.

- How have changes in wider cultural patterns of alcohol consumption become integrated in peer group values of young adults?
- What is the role of social networks in young people's decision-making around alcohol consumption?
- What role does price and availability of alcohol play in young people's decision-making?
- Are there differences between social networks in terms of decision-making criteria and influences? Do they override other influences such as price and availability or individual values?
- What potential policy and practice implications follow from the findings?

### Methods

Below is a summary of the methods used within this study, which are described in more depth in the Appendix to this report. Methods included in-depth interviews, drink diaries, social network mapping and focus groups. The sample of 35 individuals aged between 18 and 25 years captured different pathways

to adulthood (at time of data collection in higher education, further education, working or neither) and how decisions around alcohol were made in the context of peer groups through focus groups. After including friends of the 35 main participants who took part in the focus groups, 80 individuals provided qualitative data in one form or another.

Included in the 35 were four individuals who defined themselves as abstainers. Including abstainers offered us a different perspective on the cultural and societal norms around alcohol which they too had to negotiate.

The first individual interviews focused on:

- descriptions of drinking occasions in terms of when, where, with whom and why;
- exploring priorities in decision-making around drinking occasions;
- the influence of price and availability;
- differences between alcohol consumption events and other social activities;
- meanings, association and motivations attached to alcohol consumption;
- the variety of behaviours and attitudes within social networks;
- understandings of sensible drinking and risk-taking; and
- potential influence of policy interventions.

The second interviews were primarily led by entries in participants' diaries. Using participants' estimated quantities of alcohol consumed, a rough graph would be drawn and shown to participants to stimulate discussion. The researcher encouraged reflections about the pattern of consumption and what influences had been at play at different times.

## Analysis

The data was collected and analysed by the authors. Verbatim transcripts and the other primary source materials were coded and emergent hypotheses and themes cross-checked between the authors. Early hypotheses could be explored further in subsequent interviews and focus groups. The ATLAS.ti software package was used to hold and code data.

## Research ethics

The study was granted Ethical Approval by the West of Scotland Research Ethics Committee (NHS). It was on their advice that we paid participants in vouchers (for stores that did not sell alcohol) rather than cash.

We have tried to protect the anonymity of the participants by using case codes for individuals and, where a name of a person or place is considered important to the flow of the text, using pseudonyms.

Within case codes the gender of a speaker can be ascertained by the inclusion of 'M' for male or 'F' for female.

# 1 Drinking with peers: a place for intoxication

## Overview

- This chapter situates the expectations and cultural norms associated with drinking within the context of contemporary young adulthood to show how the achievement of drunkenness has become a key expectation associated with alcohol consumption in this stage of the life-course.
- It also highlights limits and boundaries placed on drunkenness within this age group including an expectation that alcohol was to be consumed socially and not alone. Drinking in contexts outside the peer group did not have drunkenness as such a prominent intention.
- Exuberant heavy drinking as the primary ‘default’ choice for young adults is supported by the availability of venues where drunkenness is the most appropriate state. In part, this explains the phenomenon of pre-drinking to reach the necessary state of intoxication, but also to allow forms of peer interaction that are hard to achieve in commercial spaces.

## ‘Drinking to get drunk’ – a cultural norm

We asked study participants to describe recent drinking occasions and why they consumed alcohol in the ways they do. It was widely reported that the consumption of alcohol and socialising with peers went hand in hand with alcohol’s highly valued ability to act as a social lubricant. Alcohol, but in particular drunkenness, were seen to facilitate socialising, and the creation and maintenance of group bonds. These peer group needs are prominent during young adulthood.

The effects produced by alcohol, of creating relaxation and disinhibition, were of clear assistance to socialising. Alcohol had a symbolic importance too, with its presence indicating a change of pace and intentions. It signified time aside from everyday concerns, such as work or study. This idea is clearly alive in mainstream culture and long established. Reflecting this, alcohol was seen as appropriate at occasions such as birthdays, marking work and educational achievements, holidays and weekends. What emerged as distinct from this established cultural norm was how intoxication (and not just alcohol) had become central to both celebration and peer socialising. Once the idea of intoxication is established as a peer group norm, simply having one or two drinks runs contrary to the intention of achieving intoxication at peer drinking occasions. So ideas of drinking moderately begin to make less sense.

*I know what I do is bad for me, but I don't see the point of like just having one drink because if you are only going to have one drink you may as well have nothing at all.*

AS2FN29

*Before I would be like what is the point in drinking a pint? Like, I'm not going to get drunk, what's the point?*

AS1ML36

In exploring why drinking to get drunk characterised peer drinking, positive features were emphasised, such as drunkenness being vital to establishing a mindset and space where accelerated socialising could take place. A key outcome sought was the creation of shared stories that established a sense of commonality and group belonging. Exuberant drinking could provide a sense of group belonging by providing a focus for creating the shared histories that bond people together.

*If you've saved your money up and had a big blow out, the next morning you can hear all the tales of drunken antics, even if you can't remember them.*

AS1ML36

*Positives are ... having good laugh over stupid things and reminiscing the next day, everybody having a good time, especially when you are amongst friends.*

AS1FL15

*We had a rollercoaster ride of a friendship ... it's happened to me about 4 or 5 times in my life, where I meet these people within a month it feels like you've known them for your entire lives and almost always involves cataclysmic amounts of booze.*

AS6ML10

## The correct place for intoxication

A cultural boundary to the pursuit of drunkenness was the imperative to seek intoxication only in the company of others and, in particular, peers. Less likely was the pursuit of drunkenness with family members or more distant acquaintances. Another informal prohibition was that against drinking alone. Although respondents were aware of wider cultural ideas, 'handed down', that alcohol could be used to deal with problems and relieve stress, drinking for individual problem-solving was almost universally seen as indicative of problematic drinking. The reverse of this, that drinking alcohol with others within social networks is normal, is supported by this social prohibition. For those who were able to report lone drinking, not only was an element of shame attached, it was also reported as unsatisfactory in that it missed the point of alcohol being used to aid peer bonding.

*I don't know if I would drink if on my own. I'm trying to think of the last time I did and I really can't think. I guess it's not healthy to start drinking on your own so yeah it's almost entirely social.*

AS1MN09

*I used to drink on my own quite a lot, tragically!*

AS1FL15

*I guess if I am feeling life's a bit stressful, I want to go out and party, but my friends would have to be around, I can't go out clubbing on my own.*

AS5FL05

In family situations, alcohol consumption, whilst certainly not prohibited, was moderated with the pursuit of drunkenness being less of a central intention. The symbolic role alcohol occupied of signifying 'time aside' from the everyday made its presence an important marker of family time. However, the nature of relationships between young adults and their parents acted as a moderator of consumption. Whereas peer group drinking allowed and encouraged the transgression of boundaries and acceptable behaviour, in the family context there was widespread belief that these had to be upheld.

*With parents I guess as well, I don't know it's more civilized just drinking wine with your meal and things like that ... You just don't get too drunk with your parents, otherwise you are too open with them.*  
[LAUGHTER]

AS1FN30

*And then I met up with my family in the evening for dinner – that was nice. That was really nice, it wasn't out of control drunk, like I might get with my friends, I wouldn't get that drunk with my family.*

AS5FL05

More intimate occasions were another space in which consumption was characteristically different from the exuberance of the peer group: occasions such as drinking with a partner or catching up with an old friend. Here, drunkenness might occur but this would not be the intention of the drinking. Rather, alcohol's ability to relax and, again, indicate a different pace of time would be sought.

*It's just a chance to, you know, because we don't see each other so long, you know we just want to talk to each other I guess.*

AS1MN09

*Myself and Yvonne, my good friend, went out to the local pub to catch up as we had not seen each other for about 5 weeks ... I had a great night catching up with a good friend – I felt a little tipsy afterwards since I had not eaten since about 6pm, but not drunk as such.*

AS1FL15, diary entry

## **Contextual factors shaping exuberant drinking and 'drinking to get drunk': young adults' alcohol environments**

It was exclusively in relation to peer group drinking that the repeated phrase 'drinking to get drunk' occurred. This was explained as a celebration of youthful exuberance, not considered a permanent drinking style but one associated with a particular stage of life. A stage many said was characterised by inexperience around alcohol and the need to form new friendships. The idea of young adulthood as an in-between (or 'liminal') period identified in other research (e.g. Banister and Piacentini, 2008) was evident in people's accounts. Being young gave people permission to behave irresponsibly. Many identified and stressed that their relationship with alcohol had changed over time and that they anticipated it changing again in the future ('I don't think old people should go to clubs' AS1FN30). This was important in protecting self-identities against charges of being a problematic drinker in light of current excess.

Another factor was the place in which alcohol was consumed. It was clear that the 'alcohol offer' being made in many alcohol venues (such as age-segmented bars, and clubs that often hold promotional offers) was tailored to offer opportunities for achieving and enjoying drunkenness. Intoxication was thus required for full participation. This became clear in discussions about 'pre-loading', the phenomenon of drinking at home before going out. Previous research has established multiple reasons for pre-loading, including:

- economic calculations (alcohol cheaper when consumed at home);
- sociability (easier to 'catch up' and chat); and
- the ability to engage in multiple tasks (getting ready whilst drinking) (Forsyth, 2009).

All these were reflected in our study but, crucially, all were based on the belief that pre-loading allows people to 'get to the "right" level of drunkenness cheaply' (focus group statement).

*We drink before we go out so that we are not sober when we get there because everyone else will be quite drunk already.*

AS2FL27

'Pre-loading' therefore stemmed, in no small part, from the expected norm of exuberant intoxication in the venues that people would be visiting later in the evening. A brief period of sobriety when first entering such venues was considered intolerable, with a prior level of drunkenness required. Here, a relationship is evident between how young adults use alcohol in group situations and the 'alcohol offer' made by the places that grant access to alcohol and sociability. By providing opportunities and promotions to facilitate it, the market has responded to the norm of heavy, episodic drinking as a characteristic style of peer drinking in young adulthood but also rules out other ways of relating to alcohol in such places.

So the phenomenon of pre-loading is:

- preparation in achieving an appropriate level of intoxication for the venues that target young people; and
- a reaction, by controlling the alcohol environment to allow catching-up and reconnection – currently difficult in the context of noisy bars and clubs.

These issues should be borne in mind in understanding the decision-making implicit in drinking before going out: alongside the fact that off-sales alcohol consumed at home is cheaper than on-sales purchases, it is not solely an economic decision.

*Sometimes if you are going straight to a club it's like loud music so we are wanting to just chill out and chat to people beforehand.*

AS1FN30

*It's a girl thing as well I think when you get ready, you drink together as you are getting ready.*

AS2FL27

## Peer pressure?

The idea of peer pressure has a long association in accounts of young people's alcohol and substance use. The volume of research produced has not yet revealed the relative strengths of peer pressure against peer selection (Velleman, 2009). For the majority of those in our study, however, individual decision-making would not necessarily be eroded by peers. A combination of the intentions and motivations involved in alcohol consumption and the alcohol environment were also influential. Drinking socially involved a degree of 'letting go', and decisions about how much to drink were dictated by the momentum of the occasion, as much as by individual will. Even so, the cultural norm – that people are not forced to drink against their will – was upheld.

*I don't like being the only sober person, so if everybody else is drinking, I'll drink.*

ASFN29

*I guess I'm doing it because other people are doing it ... Even though they don't influence my decision sometimes I just feel like I want to join them.*

AS3MN23

*It is not like we'd force someone to drink if they don't want to.*

AS5FL05

Rather than being pressured to drink, many claimed that being sober when others were drinking could be intolerable and boring. In such circumstances, understanding decision-making as being driven by will-power and autonomy alone misses the point of social drinking. Getting 'carried along' was integral to the different nature of the rules and social space that alcohol engenders.

### **If not alcohol, what else?**

For many, alcohol had become a 'default' activity for socialising; even abstainers found that they established and negotiated their social lives within and around others' drinking occasions. So, it was as much the perceived absence of alternative forms of socialising in young adulthood as peer pressure or peer selection that eroded individual decision-making.

The experiences of alcohol abstainers offered a different perspective of the extent to which alcohol use pervades habits, practices and assumptions around socialising. Their evidence highlights the difficulties in choosing not to drink alcohol at a stage in the life-course where it is given prominence. The abstainers we spoke to did not attempt to separate themselves from their drinking peers (and would find it difficult to do so). They reported having to find ways of dealing with, and handling, being set apart from the cultural mainstream in social situations.

*The cultural rule is to drink and if you don't drink you have to explain yourself – it is like people are saying 'What is wrong with you?'*

AS7ALL FG, female focus group participant

*Britain does have a drinking culture. I think most people do think it's totally acceptable to be drunk on a Saturday night, or if they're having a party. Unfortunately the people that aren't drunk are generally the outcasts, or seen as the minority.*

AS7MN41

Abstainers developed strategies to justify not drinking and handle the awkward situations other people's drinking occasions inevitably became. Such strategies included:

- claiming to not like the taste of alcohol;
- being on medication; or
- casting themselves in the role of designated driver or another position of responsibility, where sobriety would be an advantage.

If they did find drunkenness in others a problem, they did not communicate this to their group.

A sense of individuality and confidence in their own difference was a characteristic of the abstainers. A sense of pride gleaned from going against the grain of the peer group perhaps undermines the idea of alcohol education that encourages similar mindsets amongst a wider group of young people. To an extent, abstainers were able to continue not drinking, precisely because others chose to.

*I think it makes me really unique to say I don't drink ... I think it just shows I've got an awful lot of confidence to do that.*

AS7FL40

*I'm quite proud of the fact that I don't drink so if I'm proud of it then you know I don't really care what they say, cos I'm quite proud and happy about it.*

AS7FN38

## **Are there diminishing alternatives to alcohol and intoxication in young adulthood?**

Alcohol was described as an important facilitator of social interaction and peer affiliation for young adults. This stemmed from the combination of the individual effects of alcohol consumption and what its presence signified culturally, indicating a change of context, pace and priorities.

So, alcohol has become well placed to allow and facilitate peer group interaction, particularly during young adulthood, at a time in the life-course where peer group belonging is highly prized.

The data shows that alcohol's individual effects (particularly increased confidence and reduced inhibition) in facilitating peer group activity have led to a strong association between peer group experiences and intoxication. Not just alcohol, but drunkenness, emerged as the key activity that gave young adults an opportunity to bond. So, in many instances, the group experience was an intoxicated experience.

Although alternative standards of consumption were evident in contexts other than the peer group, the growth in opportunities for young adults to consume alcohol exuberantly has led to a perception of limited alternatives. Quite often peers drank, and drank heavily together, simply because it was difficult to imagine doing anything else. This apparent inevitability of exuberant heavy drinking suggests consideration should be given as to why alcohol appears to be the sole occupant of this cultural space.

The alcohol industry and its marketers appear ahead of health promoters in recognising the link between alcohol consumption and the profound need, during young adulthood, to feel part of a network of individuals. Lager commercials in recent years adopting the strap-lines 'Belong' and 'You know who your mates are' (both used to promote Carling) could be applied equally to the selling of mobile phones or social networking applications. These examples recognise that the allure of alcohol in culture lies beyond taste and possibly even intoxication for its own sake, but in facilitating and demonstrating group membership. Currently, alcohol appears to offer the most appropriate vehicle for this need. However, the segmentation of alcohol markets to produce youthful drinking contexts and experiences, separated from the multiple standards witnessed in mixed-age contexts (such as family gatherings or the local pub), can accelerate the imperative for intoxication in such contexts.

## **Summary**

The cultural norm for alcohol use, as a means of bonding groups together, makes it hard for today's young adults to imagine alternatives to alcohol consumption as a facilitator of group recreation. So, heavy sessional drinking was reportedly more likely to occur when peers drank together. When drinking outside a friendship or peer group, more moderated forms of consumption were likely to be observed. Other limits to the social acceptability of drunkenness reported included lone drunkenness and drinking heavily beyond the transitional stage of young adulthood. The abstainers who took part in the study displayed a high degree of individuality and could often gain a sense of pride from their own resistance to cultural and group norms.

# 2 Price and availability as components of young adults' alcohol environment

## Overview

- In this section we further explore elements of the alcohol offer being made to young adults, as we focus on the components of price and availability.
- The availability of cheap alcohol was reported to increase the frequency and intensity of heavy drinking, notably through removing the ability to monitor intake through cost.
- Low cost changed the frame of reference through which alcohol was consumed. The intoxicating qualities of drinking and drinking occasions over other considerations such as taste and sociability came to the fore.
- Drunkenness or intoxication is established as key means through which young adults socialise, recreate and bond (see previous chapter). Yet some subgroups might consider other intoxicating, legally purchasable alternatives to alcohol, should its access and availability be made more difficult.

## Price and availability – a key determinant of consumption?

Manipulating price is seen by policy-makers as a potential lever for reducing population level alcohol-related harm, an option that has considerable empirical support (Purshouse, *et al.*, 2009). What we know less about is how manipulating price and availability would play out across specific subgroups of the population including the 18–25-year-old subgroup. Young adulthood is a time when the consumption of alcohol becomes central to peer activity. Although the motivation to drink heavily in peer contexts has not been created by the cheap availability of alcohol, across our data it certainly facilitated it, making it an easier option to drink to excess. Alcohol's cost also sends a cultural message about the appropriateness of alcohol and drunkenness in our society.

The money paid for alcohol was a key determinant of how much, and how often, people drank. However, it is important to recognise price as one factor amongst others in shaping the likelihood of heavy drinking. The perceived appropriateness of drunkenness within a given situation was another key determining factor. However, the price paid for alcohol within a given venue could also indicate what forms of behaviour were contextually appropriate.

## Price as a means of monitoring intake

*Sometimes I go out and get really drunk, especially when it is pound a drink night, because you don't realise how much you are drinking because you are not spending much money, but if you are in a more expensive place, you notice what you drink, because it costs you more.*

AS2FN29

People rarely referred to units of alcohol when talking about how much they consumed. They were more likely to measure over-consumption on the basis of effects (how drunk or hung over it made them feel) and how much money they spent. Rather than setting a unit limit of consumption before a night out, many would consider:

- how much money they felt comfortable with spending;
- what level of drunkenness (and resulting hangover) could be sustained, given the other things they had to do (such as working the next day);
- the appropriateness of drunkenness within a given context – such as not wishing to appear drunk at a family party.

In the peer context, however, restrictions on the appropriateness of intoxication were largely absent. This made the cost of alcohol a key factor in moderating intake.

*It depends on like how much money I've got out with me. I don't take my bank card out with me because I always spend a fortune. So I just have whatever money I have in my purse ... like the price of drinks as well, like you get a drink here for a pound: back home [north-east England] you can't. I think that is why I always get more drunk here than back home.*

AS2FN29

*I don't like to spend more than £10 a night unless I go to a big party or something, but not more than £10 in the pub.*

AS4FM08

*I think the most I spent was £40 and I think I cried the day after. I don't think went out for the rest of the month I was so upset. If it was expensive to go out at the weekend then people wouldn't go.*

Female friend of AS1MN09

## Cheap alcohol in the context of young adulthood

Young adults tend to have limited disposable incomes for spending on alcohol, be they students, in the early stages of their careers or economically inactive. In such circumstances, it is understandable that people choose the cheapest option. This choice is not without its costs in terms of taste and quality of the beverage being consumed. Many reported that drinking at 'the low end' of the market changed the nature of the alcohol experience.

*Interviewer: So how do you decide what you want to drink?*

*Liam: Generally price. Like if we're going to a place and there's like a £1 pint or a vodka mix, I go for that, but if it is normal prices for everything, I'd probably just go for what tastes best.*

*Ian: You'd probably drink higher quality alcohol if it was cheaper, like some of this stuff you get at clubs, the cheap vodka like Vodkat – this can't be good for me. Doesn't feel natural, it doesn't feel good.*

Leon: *I think price is important because we go to A-club where the drinks are more expensive and at like V-club, it doesn't cost as much to get drunk.*

Focus group AS1MN09

When priced out of considerations of quality and taste, other attitudes came to the fore, such as 'will this get me drunk?' (AS2MN28). Cheap alcohol was not seen to possess the sophisticated, adult qualities of the 'high end' purchases made glamorous in films and advertising. When considering the implications of paying more for alcohol, being able to obtain some of the sophistication and full adult identity associated with more expensive alcohol would be raised.

*I think if I had more money I would drink less, but drink good stuff. Some nice cider rather than White Lightning. More nice stuff, but less of it.*

Female friend of AS1MN09

Drinking more expensive alcohol predicted moderation. When an alcohol purchase becomes devoid of qualities other than intoxication, drinking in moderation is at odds with the experience. One respondent described the consumption of cheap alcohol as 'like putting petrol in a car': there was very little to be gained from the product itself other than a single outcome – 'making your car move forward' (or achieving intoxication). In such circumstances, having one or two drinks had limited appeal.

Cheaper alcohol, therefore, certainly encouraged greater consumption. Promotions, in supermarkets, as well as bars, could be a great temptation to cash-conscious young people, yet they could feel indecisive towards them.

Chloe: *Even yesterday when we were having a pint after our race, there was a poster on the wall that said '£10 for two pitchers of cocktails'. We were there for a pint but I was like 'should we ...?' Just because it was there?*

Thomas: *In Germany we don't really have that Buy One, Get One Free thing. And that's the problem. Because if I want to buy four beers and I can get eight for that price, I end up getting eight. I'd drink four and then probably feel like drinking more. If it wasn't Buy One, Get One Free, I'd only buy four and drink four, but if I've got another four in the fridge I'm more likely to drink another one, two, three, four.*

Focus group of AS1MN09

Such remarks establish how the more critical consumers felt manipulated to drink excessively by promotions. In contexts in which a decision had already been made to drink to drunkenness, such promotions could prove economical and efficient. However, there was also unease that such promotions push for a greater number of drinking occasions to become binge drinking opportunities than would necessarily be pursued in the absence of promotions.

## **Drinkers in a consumer culture – the different markets for intoxication**

The current, relative affordability of alcohol and related promotions was often interpreted as democratising the drinking experience and extending choice. So, it was common to hear appeals against raising the cost of alcohol, which was interpreted as punishment through removing choice. This position was defended by people highlighting their 'controlled' use of such drinking opportunities. Other drinkers were often seen as the problem, so a distinction could often be drawn between their opinion of price controls as individual consumer (often resistant) and how they viewed it from a public health perspective (recognising its potential efficacy in reducing harmful consumption). Many distanced themselves from the problematic drinkers by

appealing to the idea of a segmented market for both alcohol and intoxication: problematic drinkers drank differently, in different contexts and with different results from themselves.

For 'sensible drinkers' alcohol was expected to do more than get them drunk. As with all consumer goods it was hoped it would communicate outwardly and inwardly key information about who they were and what they aspired to be. A process was identified by which paying more for alcohol would change the frame through which alcohol consumption is understood. Self-described binge drinkers recognised that an increased cost per unit would reduce the amount they could drink, but it would also lead to a qualitatively different type of drinking experience. This alternative experience they often couched in more positive terms.

*If one drink is more expensive you make it last rather than buying three ... you'd be more sensible.*

Jade, friend of AS1MN09

The idea of expensive drinking involving more than the intoxicating effects is also apparent in the idea of venue and atmosphere being something included within a premium price. Below, a regular street drinker reveals that if cost were increased, he would choose to drink in a pub.

*Interviewer: If prices were more expensive, would you go for a different drink?*

*Garry: I would just go for beers. A cold pint of TL [Tennent's Lager] out of a pub, but not in a can because cans just bloat you up ... Normally the cheap drinks are pish ... it's a waste of money and a waste of a night.*

Support for the idea of a minimum floor price (a higher cost per unit of alcohol) was underpinned by a belief that current, cheap alcohol markets were often made up of younger drinkers. One respondent told us how a popular brand of tonic wine had risen in price to seven pounds from five (which he believed was a response to its reputed role in anti-social behaviour in his community). In the wake of this price change followed a rise in popularity of imitation brands selling at lower price points. Raising the floor price would have prevented other brands filling the low-end market in this instance.

However, a problem for policy-makers and law enforcers is that the supply routes for forms of intoxication will not always be controllable. For some young people, legally purchased alcohol will be in competition with other forms of intoxication, such as black-market alcohol or other recreational substances. This seems particularly the case if the young adult is already in contact with such markets.

*They are not going to stop them by putting the prices up. They are just going to resort to taking drugs. Government is not going to win really ... I can get, instead of me going to the shop, one of my mates sells Vodka, £6.50 for a bottle of Vodka, or I can buy a rose wine, a dinner wine and that, she sells cases of that. Six bottles for £15. I don't drink that, but.*

AS5ML42

The comparison between alcohol and other drugs could reveal that it was not alcohol experiences young adults sought, but intoxication experiences.

*But I do think if they put the price of alcohol up more people would turn to ecstasy ... you need to have fun on a night out!*

AS1FN30

However, others considered how paying more for alcohol promoted different expectations of behaviour and norms around the acceptability or unacceptability of drunkenness. For example, different expectations

operated between informal drinking spaces (such as the street or people's homes) and formal spaces such as a pub.

*I was thinking that it would be safer if lowering at all, to lower only in pubs. Because buying from pubs. I mean my experience was whenever I bought alcohol from a shop I'd be pretty much always drinking to excess. When you're just experiencing alcohol for the first time because you buy the bottle and you've got the whole bottle. Whereas if you're in a pub, you're with your mates, the pub's closing but you don't drink really quickly. And you've got to pay by the shot. It's more expensive. So going to the pub always just resulted in a more comfortable level of drinking than buying from shops. So I'd say it's more dangerous to have cheaper alcohol for younger people in shops than it is in pubs.*

AS4FM08

Alongside price, there is clearly a suggestion that the nature of the pub itself limits consumption ('the pub's closing but you don't drink really quickly'; 'more dangerous to have cheaper alcohol ... in shops than ... in pubs'). Not all on-trade venues will have the same behavioural expectations of course; the student below distinguishes between the regular haunt of his student friends and more aspirational establishments. He believes that the student bar attracts people who want to drink in a certain manner, fulfilling an expectation indicated by cost.

*If I went to a sophisticated bar I would feel ashamed to be getting really drunk, if you are in an environment where like you feel almost embarrassed to be seen to drink too much, certainly for me that would work. I would not get drunk but like every club you go to is like a mad rush, a cycle of people going to the bar, it's encouraged really.*

AS1MN09

## The limits of price as a control mechanism

Despite evidence for beliefs that minimum pricing would be effective in limiting the amount people consume, there remained views that price increases would not end heavy episodic drinking for themselves or others. Some felt time and money would still be found for drinking heavily. This was on account of the fact many did not drink over and above health education guidelines simply because they could afford to. Heavy episodic or binge drinking was considered a special event or a treat and worth paying extra for or saving up to achieve. It is already predicted that the introduction of minimum pricing will not significantly alter the drinking patterns of moderate drinkers. However, it also appears that occasional heavy drinking during young adulthood is viewed as entirely consistent with the idea of being a moderate drinker – justified and sustained through being temporary and contained within an idea of youthfulness.

*Money is not going to stop you from getting drunk. And if everything is expensive that is not going to stop you drinking. Basically, if you want to get drunk you will always get drunk. If you want to there is always a way.*

AS1MN09

Some were strongly resistant to the idea of their heavy drinking being shaped by price. Before the relative low cost of alcohol could figure in consumption decisions, many criteria had to be met. These included style and self-identity (such as the venue), type of music played (or its absence) and whether drinkers felt themselves to be part of a venue's particular crowd. Such drinkers often saw the pursuit of drunkenness through cheap alcohol as an activity associated with their younger years. As they left teenage years behind and entered young adulthood they looked for drinking experiences that reflected their emergent adult identities. This was considered worth paying the extra for.

*I wouldn't change my drinking habits to accommodate cheap, cheap alcohol ... although I have to say most times I do go out it is with the intention of getting drunk ... because when I do go out it's kind of an event and I don't really pay attention to like how much things cost.*

AS1FL15

*I'd rather pay like 50p more or maybe 75p more, whatever, for a beer or something like that and sit somewhere nice and comfortable, nice surroundings and than sit somewhere and drink this pint because 'oh yeah it's cheap', but it's really dodgy inside and it's really shitty, you know. So the situation is more important to me than price.*

AS2ML03

## Pricing within the wider alcohol environment

Price acted as an efficient means of monitoring and regulating alcohol intake, in comparison with more distant considerations, such as long-term health consequences or strategies such as counting units of alcohol. Evidence also suggested that cheap-price alcohol framed the experience of consumption, emphasising intoxication over other product characteristics.

Removing the availability of pocket money or cheap alcohol appeared to have the potential to reduce the frequency of heavy drinking. However, it can also be regarded as a short-sighted option, which failed to remove the cultural drivers of intoxication now embedded in ideas about young adulthood.

The alcohol environments that encouraged exuberant intoxication for young adults in this study were shaped by price-related elements but also other compositional factors. The context and frame of reference for drinking cheap alcohol were also important. The reason certain drinking environments (such as pubs) served as moderators of consumption was not only due to price but also to the diversity of drinking standards witnessed and expected there. Cheap alcohol can create environments in which values and practices around alcohol tend towards excess and thrill-seeking, by virtue of the types of drinkers absent, as well as present. Other research currently explores how the segmentation of the alcohol market has produced styles and venues of consumption aimed at attracting younger drinkers. Through structural and economic processes (such as difficulty entering the housing market), young drinkers have an arrested experience of the transition to adulthood (Smith, 2010). Such 'infantlised' drinking environments promote intoxication and irresponsibility through a combination of marketing strategies, of which pricing is one. As such, they feed off an elongated and delayed transition to adulthood established by society.

## Summary

The cost of alcohol is a measure by which young adults monitor their alcohol consumption. So, cheaper alcohol can lead to greater consumption within a single drinking occasion. Paying a greater price per drink can also change the frame of reference through which alcohol is viewed, bringing to the fore qualities other than its intoxicating effects. The reverse is also true for cheaper drinks. Manipulating price, however, may not be sufficient to remove the motivation for heavy episodic drinking within peer groups during young adulthood. Some are already willing to pay an increased price to achieve drunkenness. Further, some reported that decision-making around alcohol involved comparison with other, illegal, forms of intoxication through black-market alcohol or recreational drugs.

# 3 How social networks influence behaviours and attitudes around alcohol

## Overview

- The last chapter explored the influence of pricing and availability of alcohol in young adults' decision-making. In this section we explore the influence of social networks. There was evidence of a network influence at play in shaping attitudes and behaviours around alcohol. Having a greater variety of standards around alcohol consumption to model and aspire to (provided through parents, work colleagues and relationships, etc.) appeared to offer resilience to, and potential pathways out of, harmful styles of youthful drinking.
- An 'alcohol transition' intertwined with other realms of transition to adulthood (work, housing and family) was clearly identifiable. Exuberant, heavy episodic drinking within young adults' peer groups can be understood as a drinking arc, peaking in early adulthood and projected to decrease as adult status is achieved in other areas.
- Alcohol transitions were identifiable across all groups in the study but with different risk and resilience factors present between pathways to adulthood. For example, meeting certain markers of adult status earlier (such as becoming a parent) could offer an alternative to street-based drinking cultures, as priorities and day-to-day social contacts changed.

## Why look at social networks?

Asking respondents to draw and map their social networks proved to be a useful means of focusing on the biographies and different life histories of young adults. It could be seen how these differences created different opportunities to experience and enact varied standards and practices around drinking. Generally, the more social and geographic mobility participants had experienced, the more complex the social network maps they drew, and the greater the variety of drinking styles and values they had to negotiate. The two social network maps shown later illustrate extremes of this mobility and subsequent diversity.

As forms of embedded biography, social networks were intricately linked to personal life histories and life-course transitions. Elements of life histories incorporated into background alcohol influences (including attitudes, values and practices) were the influence of parents, employment histories, having periods of extended study, histories of street drinking and early parenting). How each shaped the alcohol-related behaviours of young adults in our study is discussed in more depth in this chapter.

## An alcohol transition as a component of trajectories to adulthood

In current UK law, 18 represents the legal purchasing age for alcohol. So alcohol use, or at least its purchasing, is a key legal and cultural marker of social maturation. For other markers of achieved adult status (such as employment, independent living, or partnering and parenting) processes of social maturation have not only become lengthened but also potentially differentiated between groups of young adults (e.g. between those who go to university and those who enter the labour market at school-leaving

age (MacDonald, *et al.*, 2001; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This has knock-on effects for other markers of adult status such as family formation and the process of leaving home (Irwin, 1995; Hill, 2009). An alcohol transition (Maggs and Schulenberg, 2004; O'Malley, 2004) was also described as being linked to a normative transition to adulthood, allowing for experimentation in young adulthood, identity formation and risk-taking. However, our data highlights different experiences and anticipations across individual cases, suggesting alcohol transitions are as differentiated, with distinct risks attached, as other elements of transitions to full adult identity.

## The influence of parents: early drinking experiences

All participants first learned of alcohol and examples of its appropriate use in their childhood home. A broad range of parental styles and attitudes towards drink were received and cited as an early, primary network influence. Across the entirety of the data however, the relationship between parental standards and young adult drinking was not universally described in terms of direct cause and effect. A norm of heavy peer drinking in young adulthood was sustained, despite a variety of reported parental drinking styles and educative approaches. Parental influences included both liberal and permissive approaches, and examples of problematic parental drinking. Received and observed parental standards, however, were believed to change the attitude that mediated opportunities for heavy drinking in young adulthood: not preventing it but offering a perspective on it.

*Well my mum didn't make it like it was a terrible thing to drink, she would always give me a little sip of her beer or whatever and I think she probably was quite laid back ... when I reached 18 like I just went crazy but some of my friends they just went insane when they were 18 because they could finally drink but like to me it was just a normal thing but I wouldn't say that was a bad thing. I think it is better that I was more acclimatised to drinking when I was younger, but not to excessive levels.*

AS1FN30

There was no clear pathway of cause and effect identified between parental standards and alcohol behaviours within young adulthood by respondents. Whereas more liberal parental attitudes to alcohol were seen to produce more relaxed attitudes to alcohol consumption in young adulthood, it was also suggested that experiences of problematic parental drinking encouraged cautionary attitudes towards alcohol. This complexity is highlighted below, where a respondent identifies three possible forms of adult drinking style stemming from having a parent who is a problematic drinker.

*I think that the older generation's attitude is just not that good, it's all hush-hush. I mean the thing that I did to get my mum off the alcohol was I took all her money away from her. At age 19 I was controlling the household. I was hiding all drink from her, I was pouring it down the sink while she was physically attacking me trying to get it back ... Usually people of an alcoholic parent go one of two ways – they either go totally teetotal or they drink and become an alcoholic. I feel that I came out middle of the line. I don't feel I've gone to any extreme.*

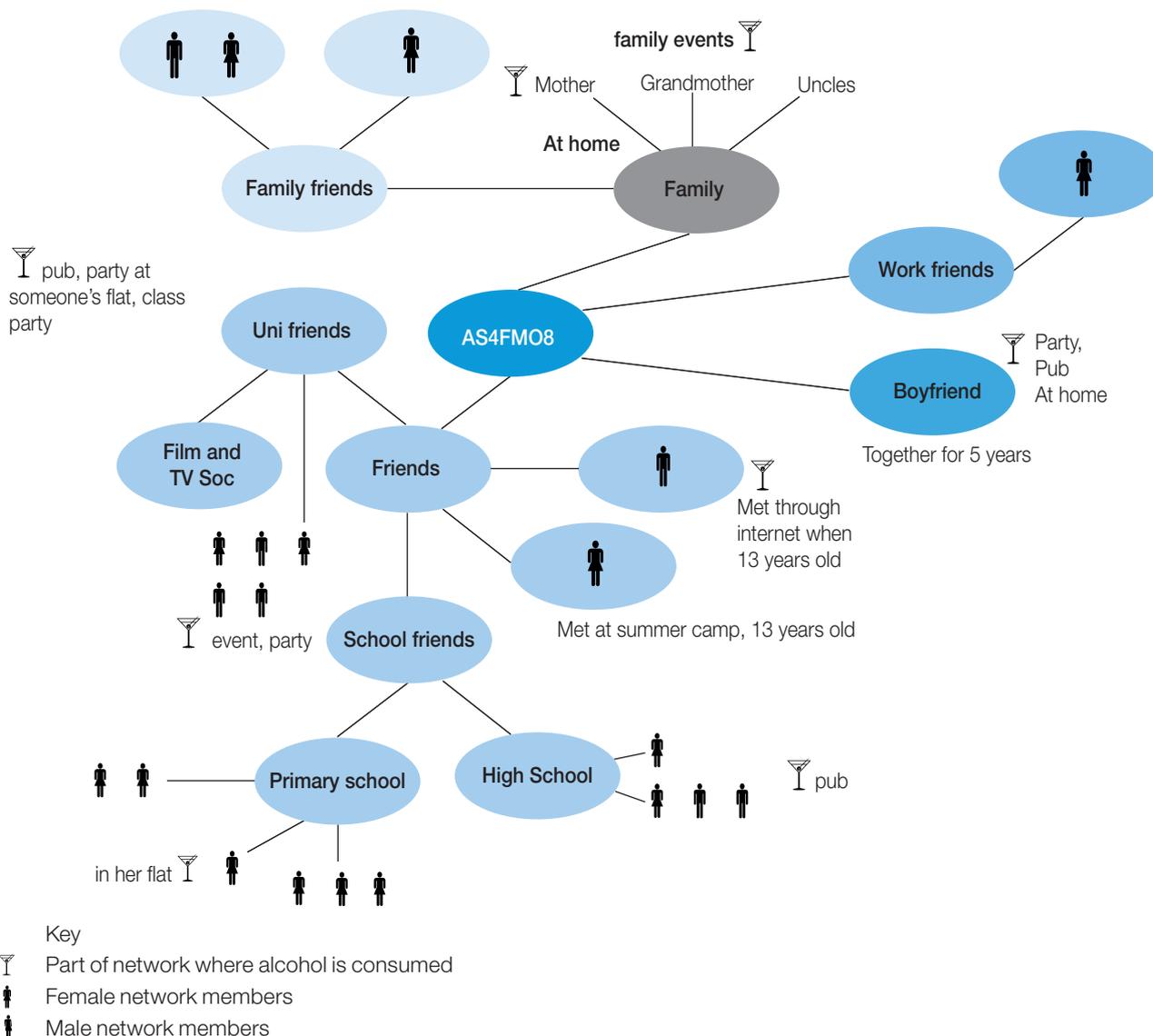
AS3FL25

*I try and stay away from them, the house, when I'm drinking because my mum doesn't like it. She doesn't like it at all because she has seen the way my dad is and I go mental on the drink and that's why my mum doesn't drink because that is who I take it off. She cracks up.*

AS5ML42

Parental standards being just one influence amongst many may explain why it was difficult to identify a direct link between parental standards and actual drinking style for children in young adulthood. Taking a

**Figure 1: Social network map of AS4FM08**



network approach allowed participants to represent and explore multiple influences across different spaces and life stages in the creation of their personalised orientation towards alcohol.

The layered nature of values and practices meant that, from personal perspectives, the standards and practices experienced in one area of a young adult's life should not be viewed in isolation from other areas of influence. This is illustrated in Figure 1, the map of a female student from Poland studying in Glasgow. Her map shows multiple clusters of people in her social network with varying degrees of alcohol consumption and styles attached. At some parts of her network she indicates no alcohol is consumed, notably with those she met through work and some friends from primary school. Even at the network clusters where alcohol is consumed, there are different standards attached. The most consistent style of drinking, resembling the exuberant style of young adulthood, centred on her university friends, and her involvement in the university film and television society. Although alcohol is consumed with her family, the frame within which it is entered into is qualitatively different.

*When I'm back home I will drink a little amount with my mother, while watching TV, just something for the taste ... My mum says 'I don't care what you do in Glasgow, but when you are home you have to stay in more' ... I would not go to a family party and drink a lot because I would not feel comfortable with my family seeing me drink a lot. With my friends I can drink more, but even at the pub I don't drink a lot, because first money, but second, it is a public place and I don't know the majority of people there,*

*you never know who someone might be, so I prefer to be sober. When I am at a party in somebody's house I can drink much more because I know my friends I know I am in my place and nothing bad can happen.*

AS4FM08

Alone with her boyfriend, alcohol consumption was moderated and focused on the creation of cocktails they felt unable to afford in bars. When with her boyfriend in the peer group, however, the peer intention of exuberant drinking would come to the fore.

Such variety of standards can temper the experience of the exuberant phase of alcohol consumption in young adulthood. Diversity offers not only different standards by which to put current drinking into overall perspective, but also offers consumption styles to aspire to and mature into. Her map shows higher levels of what social capital theorists would call 'bridging capital' (Halpern, 2007) – that is, links to people with different values. So she has a variety of alcohol-related standards and practices to which she has to adapt and negotiate across different contexts. Whilst not preventing the pursuit of heavy drinking in the right circumstances and, crucially, with the right people (her University peers), the variety of standards within a social network put such behaviours into broader perspective, as one form of consumption amongst many.

Figure 2 shows a more limited network characterised by higher degrees of similar standards experienced around alcohol (reflecting greater amounts of 'bonding' capital – similarity of shared values). The creator of this map has chosen to represent his social network in a far simpler manner than the previous example, focusing on two primary clusters within his network ('family' and 'friends'). He has drawn crosses to indicate the amount of alcohol consumed at each section of his network showing that drinking with peers is significantly heavier and more frequent than with family. His peer drinking he describes as his normal style of consumption.

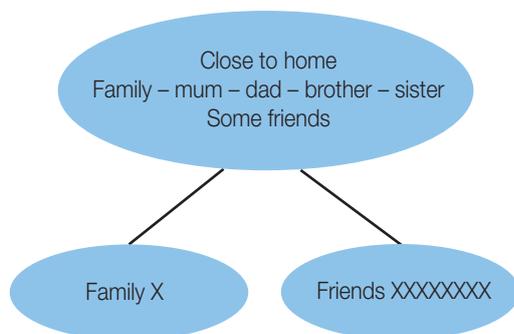
*AS5ML42: [of his family] now and again, they don't normally drink. [my sister's] not much of a drinker. I am the drinker out of them all. So she goes out she drinks with all of her pals, she is a sensible drinker so, she just drinks like table wine and that.*

*Researcher: Uh huh, okay. What about your friends?*

*AS5ML42: They are all just alkies! They are just like me! I drink at least four days a week. It's just boredom.*

The cultural and social capital within which alcohol standards, practices and understandings of appropriateness sit are established across multiple contexts. Although family background and the

**Figure 2: Social network map of AS5ML42**



Key

X Indicates level of consumption at network point

standards learned there are key influences, the other places where alcohol standards are encountered reinforce or modify prior understandings. So opportunities presented through the life-course bear significant influence in presenting standards to be negotiated. Key events that influenced the alcohol trajectory included experiences of further and higher education, starting work (or failing to find it), establishing intimate relationships and becoming a parent.

## Further and higher education: student lifestyles

Being a student typifies the socially open nature of young adulthood: living in an absence of parental supervision, with loans and part-time work as income, and with new contacts and friendships made. However, being a student also underlines how incomplete the transition to full independence is. Part-time paid work is a means to an end rather than a career: the need to complete a course of study still being required to gain full labour-market potential. In terms of personal networks, many of the associations made turn out to be fleeting and lack the depth of longer, more established relationships. Alcohol takes on a central role in enabling the formation and maintenance of relationships, and in providing the occasions for socialising in these circumstances.

*When I first came to university the attitude was a bit different: it was the volume of alcohol – just because you're leaving home there's no one to stop you and it's liberating.*

AS1MN09

*Then I came to Uni and I drank a lot. I lived in halls and there was always somebody drinking so like I just joined in but like I definitely drank too much in first year.*

AS1FN30

The centrality of alcohol consumption to student lifestyles was recognised by all those who had experienced it and, to some, came as a shock when first encountered. Although separate enough from full adult roles and identities to allow the pursuit of determined drunkenness, involvement in education offers a connecting thread to full integration into labour markets. It is an experience of being separate without being marginalised. Therefore, as a student, excessive drinking can be sustained without challenging identities.

## Starting work: adapting to a new set of expectations

For those engaged in paid employment comes both greater disposable income and responsibility. The need to turn up to work on time and in a fit state to perform duties reportedly moderated consumption, despite greater disposable income. 'Having work the next day' – even in relatively low-paid jobs with less responsibility – could be acceptable justification to peers when moderating alcohol consumption on a night out, and would reduce opportunities for binge drinking. For those in education, involvement in work-based cultures could be a corrective to student drinking cultures.

*I would say that I'm definitely not drinking as much as I was then because I'm all stressed and I need to get up in the mornings. I just haven't got time for it.*

AS2FN19

*At Uni I'm on placement quite a lot. So that stops me from drinking during the week. And if I'm out it'll be weekends, and weekends I start work 7 in the morning so that kind of stops me, it just depends what is going on.*

AS2FL27

Therefore, having greater access to disposable income did not necessarily translate into greater alcohol consumption. This fact should be considered when seeking to understand the mechanism by which price controls can influence alcohol decision-making. Working for money, however, could change the relationship people had with their disposable income.

*I probably drank less when I was working. Obviously I could afford to buy more drink if I wanted it. But, like that way because I knew that I had to go to work, and I'd worked all month for the wages I didn't want to go and spend it all on drink. But because when I wasn't working I was only getting money off the Job Centre, like, all I had to do was pay my dig money to Davie's ma and then the rest was mine. So I used to just get drink at the weekend.*

AS5FL34

Work-based social networks would layer upon peer group and education-based ones, adding to the variety of standards and practices people operated within and negotiated. Whereas alcohol could still be central to team building or getting to know friends from work in a non-work context, the identities often adopted within work, and the facets people chose to reveal, could differ from those brought to the fore and used in the peer group. On drawing his social network map, one respondent chose not to give any of his work colleagues' names. This was in contrast to his peer group who were drawn bigger and named, with stories related about his friendship with each and their role within the larger group. The separation indicated how the intentions underlying peer drinking could be distinct from those of the workplace.

For friendships to flourish outside work, however, going for a drink was often key to enabling the deepening of relationships that workplaces often did not facilitate particularly well.

*I've made a really good friend with one of the receptionists and for the past four weeks we've done something on a Friday night. Just me and her. She waits behind and I finish work at 6 and she finishes work at 5. So she stays behind in the office and then we go out for a few drinks, like just around town. There was a night about two weeks ago where we neither of us has had anything to eat and we ended up having three bottles of wine. Just us and yeah the night ended with her feeling very ill and us getting the last train home. Just a bit of a mess, but it was fun.*

AS2FN19

## **Not finding work: limiting opportunities to move on**

There were examples of young people for whom trajectories towards full adult status appeared stalled through being outside education, training or work. Here the cultural imperative to 'act out' the openness of young adulthood through drink and intoxication remained but within a different network of opportunity and risk. Economic and cultural exclusion from bars, pubs and clubs, could leave street or private home drinking as the only opportunity. The location of alcohol consumption outside informally monitored spaces could lead to young people becoming victims, to anti-social behaviour and gang activity, as well as police and criminal justice responses to it.

*If somebody goes 'you want a drink?' Everybody is like 'aye right come on carry out!' I have got about ten fines from drinking on the street. I have been in the jail. I have done three sentences and every one of my charges are drink related.*

AS5ML35

Tight youth labour markets and the need for educational qualifications or work experience can produce static experiences in relation to 'moving on' from youthful activity. Criminal records obtained through drink-related activity can exacerbate issues of employability, engendering further disadvantage.

*It's very easy. It can just take a look, I mean it can just take somebody walking by you looking at you, or you're looking at somebody and a big fight breaks out. Somebody saying something and then it just all kicks off ... Cos if you walk by a team of people, five out of ten times they will say something to you, so aye it's worse when people are drinking ... The police don't, like, they don't always stick up for you. They try to split it up and that or they just nick everybody. I've seen the coppers nicking the people that have not started it, you know what I mean, and letting the ones that started it go.*

AS5ML35

With paid employment being the crux to the achievement of other independent role statuses, being out of work makes it difficult for young adults to visualise other ways of being. This would also have implications for the diversity of network contacts they encountered. In the case of one young man, he struggled to foresee a life different from his current one or to find different ways of relating to alcohol.

*I want a trade. I want to have a mortgage, family, wife and trade behind me. To be honest with you I don't want to be in [town name] in five or six years. I don't think I will be here, I want be somewhere else. [Round here] everybody drinks. All young ones, everybody drinks here. It is always on the front page of the paper. Police pulling young ones with drink and all the rest of it ... All my mates are all younger than me, so they are all between 17 and 21. So when they drink, I drink. I drink, they drink.*

AS5ML42

## Relationships and becoming a parent

Some of the participants in the study, who were neither in work nor in education, were also parents. This offered the potential to adopt an adult role status prior to getting steady, paid employment. It could also facilitate a change in social networks. For those who found it difficult to secure and maintain employment or education towards employment, having children offered a means of 'maturing out' of youthful styles of alcohol consumption. This could be by spending more time with those in a network who shared childcare interests and responsibilities, such as extended family members or other parents. For those in social housing it could be through being moved away from their neighbourhood of origin and the attendant networks they had developed, to take up residence in a larger house.

Changes in behaviour could be indicated by fathers as much as mothers.

*Before the baby arrived we were starting drinking on a Thursday and we were continuing through to Sunday. That was every week non-stop ... I've got responsibilities now, you know what I mean? I cannae just go and drink all the time, I need to go out and get a job and all that so I can support them 'cos that's more or less my job to do, so it's changed a lot. It's made me think different, and I don't think about always partying and all that and always buying a drink.*

AS5ML35

Childcare responsibilities led to a shift in priorities and reduced the time people had for socialising in settings where alcohol featured. Even for those without children, there was evidence of a cultural norm that drunkenness around young children was negatively interpreted.

*I definitely want kids and when I have kids I'm not going to be sitting there drinking in front of them every single night or anything like that. I don't ever want them to see me drunk, ever, at least until they're about 18 or so, no way because I just find that so totally wrong.*

AS3FL25

## Partnering and relationships

Even in the absence of forming families, the experience of partnering could engender different options for drinking. Previous research has suggested that marriage is the major transition affecting alcohol use (O'Malley, 2004). It claims marriage ushers in a change in social and recreational activities and a decline in the centrality of peer groups in socialising. In our data, partnering (rather than marriage) would co-exist with continued peer group activity, offering multiple standards associated with different, but overlapping, drinking networks. One did not simply replace the other but both remained as available forms and contexts of drinking. However, drinking with partners was about the establishment of longer-term patterns that would become the basis of future domestic and daily life. This is in contrast to the recognition of current peer activity as temporary and existing within the 'open space' of young adulthood. So, it was harder to frame determined drunkenness, in the realm of partner relationships, as transient and as unproblematic in the longer term.

*I've only been going out with my boyfriend for a couple of months and since then I've calmed down a lot because I hang out with him and we do other things together.*

AS2FN29

*You just don't drink as fast and as much when there's just the two of you because it's just different; you just drink differently with a partner than with friends. So living with a partner rather than with friends means you're going to drink less at home.*

AS2FN19

Whilst partners could be integral to friendship groups there were also examples of partners being separate from peer networks, offering different standards to adhere to between partner and network. This could be a useful strategy for maintaining an identity of being a sensible drinker, with heavy drinking in peer networks being offset by abstinence or moderation elsewhere in the network, for example at home.

*Well I think Reece influences me, because we go on holiday four times a year, and when we go on holiday we don't drink, which I'm quite happy about, whereas if I went on holiday with any of my friends I would have a drink, but it's quite nice going away with him, because he doesn't drink, then it makes it okay for me not to. When I drink I don't drink around him because it's not fair. People aren't fun when they are very drunk. It's not amusing, it's just irritating. So I avoid him when I am drinking.*

AS5FL43

## Cultural capital: limits and comfort zones

For those in our study, having multiple standards and values to adhere to did not appear to produce a problem of identity. None struggled too profoundly with multiple standards, suggesting they were 'easily led', subject to peer pressure or not sure of where their 'true' values lay. There would be limits to how flexible people were willing to be and to their own boundaries of acceptability. Often, this would be informed by class-based ideas of who they were and what was appropriate, guided by an intuitive sense of what felt comfortable or uncomfortable.

This is evident in the vignette below where we are told of a young woman's weekend away with some older work colleagues from her part-time job. She used the story to illustrate her friends' deviation from her own (class-based) ideas of appropriate standards.

*It's funny because I work beside them but obviously I don't particularly socialise a lot of the time ... but there was this one woman there and they're all from different parts of [town name] maybe like twenty minutes away. But they're all like, this sounds so bad and I don't mean it horribly, but they're all quite rough, like a lot rougher than I am and I don't know as soon as I got there and they were all talking, they were all quite drunk when I got down and we were all talking and I was just like 'oh I feel a wee bit out of my depth here' I mean I know them all and it's not that I felt awkward it's just once they'd all started drinking and just talking and stuff I was just like, 'oh God, I can't be bothered to be here at all,' but I think that was like all they talked about was, they were going down for the two nights and that's all they talked about was going down to get drunk.*

AS1FL15

Other indicators of value and taste-based boundaries included drink driving, 'sleaziness' and violence or aggression. In the next quotation, a key behavioural boundary is being broken by a friend of the speaker; their friend's behaviour is used to distinguish where their own limits of behaviour lie.

*I think they are all okay ... my friends, apart from Tim, I mean what he does when drunk is he becomes sleazy and annoying and loud but it is sort of ... I mean he is just an idiot about it, he is not pure ridiculously bad like ... he is an embarrassment but he is not like aggressive.*

AS1ML35

This was particularly so regarding violence associated with alcohol consumption. Whereas alcohol-related violence was seen as a key boundary for acceptable consumption for most, for others, whilst not condoned, it was hard to avoid or opt out of. Afterwards, it became an inevitable part of their drinking experience.

*Well I was brought up in [place name] and then I moved to [adjacent area] and the difference between the two areas, I mean they're only five minutes apart but they are kind of aggressive towards each other because of the gangs. When they drink there's a lot of like stabbings, murders and things like that through alcohol. If not alcohol, then drugs.*

AS5FL32

## Summary

Network influences around alcohol consumption were shown to be multiple and layered, the networks themselves reflecting life histories and the varieties of social and cultural capital (standards and practices) to which young adults had access. Decision-making, therefore, was not consistent across all contexts and places within a young person's network. In some contexts, moderation around alcohol was considered appropriate, whereas in others more excessive forms predominated. Decision-making therefore was often based on contextual criteria rather than being universal.

However, an inequalities issue emerged in differences between how young adults learned to drink moderately and safely across different socio-economic locations. Particular risks were identified for those who could not find safe places to drink or safe drinking practices to adapt to. Therefore, alcohol transitions, much like wider transitions to adulthood, show evidence of difference, both in character and in risk, which underpins wider health inequalities.

# Conclusion

## Summary of findings

- For many in young adulthood the consumption of alcohol has become synonymous with the pursuit of intoxication. Wider cultural norms are, in part, responsible for this but there is also an element stemming from the expectations young adults have established within their peer networks. These have been supported and promoted through the current availability, pricing and marketing of alcohol products.
- Heavy episodic drinking was justified by the belief that it was a temporary behaviour associated with the freedom of young adulthood. So, young adults believed their current drinking styles did not represent long-term risk and were not viewed as particularly damaging to health in the short term.
- Alcohol education focusing on the observance of unit intake per session and the promotion of ‘sensible drinking’ run counter to the way alcohol is used within peer groups during young adulthood, and therefore seems unlikely to affect behavioural change in the short term.
- The cost of alcohol operated as an important metric by which young adults monitored their alcohol intake within a given drinking occasion. The availability of cheap alcohol, therefore, can lead to greater consumption per occasion. Occasional intoxication was also seen as a ‘treat’, and predicted to be resilient to price increases.
- For those whose social networks brought them into contact with intoxicating substances other than legally purchased alcohol, alternative forms of intoxication would be considered should the availability of alcohol be reduced. The availability of black-market alcohol and other forms of intoxication should be considered when modelling the effects of price increases.
- A cultural norm of drinking to get drunk was observed as a component of all the young adults’ social networks (even abstainers encountered it). However, some young people had more diversity in drinking standards available (such as family, where moderation rather than excess was the norm or, in a few instances, friends who did not drink or drank little). In these cases, opportunities to drink in different ways were available. Having a diversity of alcohol-related standards could offer alternatives to damaging styles of consumption at large in mainstream youth culture.
- Some respondents achieved ‘full adulthood’ more rapidly than others through becoming parents. In the experiences presented, this was shown to moderate consumption and offer protection against street-based cultures of intoxication.
- Many found it difficult to imagine alternatives to alcohol use in their social lives. Alcohol has been granted a monopoly position in facilitating social activity in young adulthood.
- ‘Pre-loading’ – the idea of drinking alcohol before going out – had multiple reasons. It provided cheaper access to alcohol but also created an environment more convivial for chatting and catching up than destination bars and clubs.

## Decision-making around alcohol

Our primary aim at the study's inception was to better understand how young adults made decisions around alcohol. However, a great part of the data has made problematic the notion of decision-making as an individualised act. Focusing on individual decision-making can over-rationalise and over-personalise the processes that lead to the adoption of alcohol-related practices. Indeed, throughout the data, talk was as much about activities that could be justified through reference to societal expectations, norms and appropriate ways of acting around alcohol. 'Decision-making', therefore, takes place in a nexus of influences from the broadly societal and cultural to local elements of family and network influences. Differences in consumption and alcohol-related practices were as much about available opportunities to enact broader cultural norms as they were about individual choices. The influences on decision-making around alcohol relate to three spheres of influence – the cultural, the network-based and the individual. As a result, there is also a need for policy and practice to respond to each of these levels of influence.

## Culture – the creation of youthful binge drinking as a cultural norm?

The pursuit of deliberate drunkenness has become normalised within the mainstream experience of youthful adulthood. Unlike many other forms of recreational substance use, drinking, even to excess, did not appear to put an individual outside the mainstream or subject to any of the labels that might accompany the heavy user of an illegal drug (indeed, abstainers were the ones at odds with majority views). They did not consider themselves outsiders, alienated, as having lives more difficult than others or in need of help. It was because they considered themselves well integrated members of society and of their peer networks that they drank heavily in the ways they did.

Excessive alcohol consumption is sometimes understood as a response to underlying personal problems. However, in our study, rather than a coping mechanism (indeed this use of alcohol was seen as indicative of having a drink problem), excessive but normative alcohol consumption allowed integration into networks of peers, connection with others, and provided the spaces where this could happen. Its transformational role being in the creation of a temporary social order that allowed gregarious interaction. In this sense the suspension of rationality that accompanies intoxication through alcohol sits in opposition to the increasing rationality of other areas of life. Therefore addressing issues around alcohol without addressing the cultural drivers that lead to the desire for over-consumption (or intoxication) is likely to have at best short-term benefits.

## Alcohol's place in youth and young adulthood

Contemporary transitions to adulthood have contributed to the conditions that shape how young people currently drink. An elongated period of adulthood without full responsibilities combines with marketing pressure to behave and drink alcohol in certain ways. The life-course element to youthful binge drinking means many believe they will grow out of binge drinking as other responsibilities take over. Focusing on short-term harms therefore may have benefit at this life stage given the belief in 'maturing out' evidenced. We would expect information relating to long-term harms to be perceived as having little relevance to young people holding such a belief.

## The relationship of price and availability to culture

Within the study sample, the decision to drink to excess was culturally, rather than economically, motivated. However, the issue of price and availability is not a separate issue. Cheap alcohol and promotions allow and entrench the acceptability of binge drinking. Furthermore and crucially, paying a low price for alcohol appears to change the motivation for drinking, bringing to the fore the pursuit of drunkenness over other

characteristics such as taste, relaxation or atmosphere. Young people were not always happy with alcohol environments that encouraged excessive drinking (through price or other means). Pre-drinking (usually called pre-loading) was a manner in which young adults established drinking environments on their own terms.

The price of alcohol was also shown as a measure that ‘makes sense’ to young people within the situations in which drinking takes place. The relaxed and informal atmosphere associated with drinking means that strategies such as monitoring unit intake or considering distant consequences for health are less relevant and effective. Available money is a more robust brake on consumption at a time of life when finances are lower. So the setting of a minimum price for alcohol (in both on- and off-trade establishments) should be considered as a short-term action to reduce incidents and duration of heavy episodic drinking among young adults.

However, the potential consequences of tackling supply without addressing demand could be the growth of non-regulated forms of intoxication (drugs such as ecstasy and black-market alcohol) particularly for those already in contact with such markets. This should be borne in mind and information around how price controls play out across different groups of young people in actuality will become necessary. The contexts that shape access and opportunities to consume different forms of intoxication between different groups of young adults should be considered when modelling and predicting the effects of controls around pricing and availability.

## **Network influences – different enactments of a common cultural norm**

Binge drinking is a broad cultural phenomenon in young adulthood but one where different experiences and opportunities for its enactment produce different sets of risks and potential harms. For example, those on the margins of employment or education risked obtaining criminal records or becoming victims of violence whilst drinking in informal spaces.

In more positive circumstances networks offer resources through which to mediate pressures in the alcohol environment to consume heavily. Those with more diverse networks had opportunities to practise more moderate drinking styles and view heavy consumption through an understanding of age-specific preferences. Having access to a diversity of attitudes and practices (people who drank less or with a different intention than the pursuit of drunkenness) appeared to offer resilience to a wider cultural norm towards exuberant consumption. Making standards more diverse in alcohol consumption venues by encouraging mixed age groups can offer positive examples and informal controls.

Examples of moderate drinking within family environments also offered comparative perspective on youthful drivers to over-consume. Home backgrounds have been identified as the places where people learn to drink (Valentine, *et al.*, 2007). Our data extends the range of places where learning about alcohol takes place, with experiences layering on one another; wider culture and peer networks also teach people how to drink. Yet the influence of family remains a vital one where the current climate of excess in consumption witnessed in peer groups can be moderated through offering a different set of values and practices through which to contextualise current behaviours.

## **Individual negotiations of a ‘binge’ culture**

The inclusion of a small number of abstainers in the research sample gave some indication of the strengths and limits of self-determination as an influence in decision-making. The views of abstainers support the finding that excessive alcohol use serves an important integrative function within peer groups, that it facilitates and demonstrates belonging. Abstainers found it difficult to explain their choices to peers and valued their difference from their peers highly. It could be argued that the difference their teetotalism highlighted to those around them was as valued as the non-consumption of alcohol itself.

## Wider culture

On one level, young adults with high self-worth may be less likely to adopt risky forms of alcohol consumption considered normal by other young adults. However, the cultural norm of excessive drinking should not be understood solely in terms of individual capacities or deficits. As much of the data in this report highlights, practices around alcohol consumption are rationalised responses to the cultural and structural circumstances young adults find themselves within.

In shedding light on the cultural backdrop of contemporary society, and by extension the cultural backdrop of the young people in this study, a growing number of theorists and researchers have identified within consumer societies such as ours reduced opportunity and priority for community life. This has correlated with increases in psychological pressures (such as anxiety and social comparison) stemming from reduced social cohesion (James, 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Offer, 2006). Our findings around alcohol's cultural role indicate alcohol consumption is used in young adulthood to stimulate community experience between peers. Alcohol consumption has also the added benefit of allowing a display of integration within the consumer society. So, as well as individual-focused responses, creating circumstances in which integrative, community activity can happen for young adults beyond the sites of alcohol consumption should also be considered. The precursors of excessive alcohol consumption in young adulthood exist at the individual level, at the level of alcohol markets and, offering a distinct challenge, at the level of wider culture. Policy-makers and health strategists are perhaps better placed to tackle the first two of these realms. For the third, deeper reflection and action across all areas of policy-making and society would be required.

## Conclusions and messages for policy, practice and research

### On price and availability

Setting a per-unit minimum price for alcohol will contribute positively to the problem of harmful drinking amongst young people in three ways:

- It is a reliable metric by which young people can moderate their drinking that makes more sense in the context of their consumption than counting units or alcohol education messages.
- Cost of alcohol shapes the frame of reference through which alcohol is consumed. This evidence suggests that cheap alcohol is viewed as a second-rate commodity drunk primarily for its intoxicating effects. Paying more for alcohol was shown to bring to the fore other associated characteristics such as taste and the special nature of the occasion and location at which the alcohol was consumed.
- It can help re-establish alcohol as a commodity with a particular cultural place, not an everyday commodity but one with special conditions to safe use attached.

However, it is important to report the views of young people who predicted there would still be cultural and subgroup imperatives to pursue drunkenness for its own sake from time to time, especially during adolescence or early adulthood. Some predicted the use of other substances and black-market alcohol that cannot easily be regulated. This is an important aspect of population heterogeneity by which across the board policy actions can have different effects on different groups (Meier, *et al.*, 2009) and should be borne in mind when implementing price controls and measuring their effectiveness.

Tackling the cultural drivers of intoxication will require actions further and more difficult than manipulating price and availability.

## Beyond price and availability – changing culture

There is a tradition in the collective attempts to tackle alcohol and substance misuse of suggesting alternative forms of leisure, from the promotion of soft drinks to ‘diversionary activities’ such as youth clubs and sports teams. However, responses need not only to divert but also to provide and address what is currently missing and found through excessive alcohol consumption. Strategies aimed not just at individuals but also at peer groups may be effective. These are likely to have greater effect if done ‘with’ and not ‘to’ young people. Creativity in engagement and approach with recognition of situational circumstances will be required.

- Alcohol's cultural place was in opposition to the rationalised spaces of work and study. This is reflected in the times heavy alcohol use can be sustained normatively – at weekends and before full integration into the labour market during young adulthood. There is also a group element to alcohol consumption where, to a degree, individuality is suppressed in favour of group membership.
- What opportunities are there in work, communities and educational establishments for facilitating meaningful interactions and group belonging? Is there an element of ‘play’ missing from young adults’ lives that means it is crammed into drinking occasions, facilitated and accelerated by industry-created drinking environments shaped to meet underlying intentions cheaply and efficiently? Changing culture in general, and not just relationships to alcohol, is difficult for policy-makers. However, given the needs that are met for young people by heavy episodic drinking perhaps we can consider what alternatives are possible.
- The separation of young adults’ drinking sites from those of other generations means that multiple standards and different ways of drinking are witnessed less in drinking places. It can also reinforce the belief that they will grow out of current behaviours as older people are a minority in youthful pubs, clubs or in street-drinking locales. Encouraging intergenerational drinking in city and town centres therefore may reduce consumption and binge intentions through the establishment of informal controls and through witnessing more moderated forms of consumption.
- Moderate parental drinking is another means of establishing alternatives to binge drinking for young people through offering a diversity of standards by which to compare excessive drinking witnessed in young adulthood. Establishing norms of alcohol use within the bounds of safe levels should be part of parenting and early years’ interventions. It is the example set which appears important rather than the ‘inoculation’ of young people to alcohol-related harm through the introduction of small amounts of alcohol.
- A cultural climate of celebration and exuberance characterised the UK from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Potentially, a more straitened financial climate may lead to changes in how young adults relate to alcohol. However, a risk to be aware of is that of a tightened youth labour market accentuating the transition to adulthood for more young people with implications for continued substance use.
- Alcohol education messages, like much health promotion, can be recited by young people even when they are ignored. Deficit of knowledge is not the problem but a failure to connect with knowledge as relevant to their experiences. The researchers were struck by how engagement with young drinkers through diaries stimulated respondents’ reflection and concern for the amounts they self-reported. This suggests that deeper forms of engagement around the place of alcohol within people’s own lives (already a component of brief interventions) could prove effective in establishing a need for individual behavioural change.

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# Appendix

## Further information on methodology

### Approach and methods

We adopted methods designed to capture influence at three levels: individual decision-making, the group or social network and the influence of wider culture. Social network maps and focus groups are well suited to capturing group elements in decision-making and how individuals negotiate them. Interviews were used to explore how individual decision-making interacts with group and ever-present cultural influences.

We also sought descriptions of existing practices around alcohol: what happens on a night out. For this, all forms of data collection assisted but alcohol diaries helped respondents focus on how, where, with whom and how much they were drinking.

### Individual interviews with index individuals

Individuals aged 18–25 who currently drank alcohol were recruited into the study. We called these participants ‘index individuals’, the intention being to learn more about them, their drinking and their social networks. Members of their peer network would be invited to join the study in later focus groups.

Interviews with index individuals were conducted at two points during the data collection period, with at least three months in between (to allow completion of alcohol diaries). In reality, 35 first-round interviews and 16 second-round interviews were completed.

### Social network mapping

At the first interview people were asked to draw maps of their social networks. These maps were useful in showing the size and complexity of people’s networks and facilitated conversation about network influences on alcohol consumption.

### Alcohol consumption diaries

Participants were asked to keep diaries over a three-month period focused on alcohol consumption or other social activities, if they chose. Key information and reflections sought were intentions prior to the drinking event, amount of money spent, quantity of alcohol drunk, effects on individual and group behaviour, and reflections on all of it. We also asked study participants to keep a note of the date, duration and who participated in the drinking occasion.

We avoided asking for information about alcohol units consumed due to the potential for misreporting (Catto and Gibbs, 2008) and to discourage ‘public accounts’ that adapted estimations to match anticipated expectations of others. So, when reporting quantity, participants were asked to do so in their own terms (e.g. half a bottle of lager; two large glasses of wine).

### Focus groups

Focus groups explored group-based decision-making and priority setting around social activities. Groups covered the same themes as the interviews, and shed light on network-based norms and contextual influences on value formation (Kitzinger, 1995). It was anticipated that peer networks would be of different sizes; this was borne out empirically with groups ranging from three to ten people.

## The study sample

Eighty 18–25 year olds took part in the study. Thirty-five of these were interviewed at least once and also completed diaries as index individuals. The remaining 45 were friends of the original 35 and took part in focus groups consisting of existing friendship groups. The groups ranged from three to ten people.

The sample was designed to mirror the diversity of life-course transitions that young people might experience, and included participants of diverse cultural backgrounds and gender. The sample also included four abstainers.

## Life-course trajectories

We used current employment or educational status as an indicator of the socio-economic trajectories of index individuals, seeking representation from those in 'higher education', 'further education', 'in employment' and 'not in employment and education'. Although we collected data from individual representatives of each specified life-course trajectory, there were fewer focus groups and second-round interviews from the 'not in education or employment' group (see Limitations of the data below).

## Cultural background

The research took place in Glasgow, a city with statistically higher rates of alcohol-related harm than the rest of Scotland and the UK (Breakwell, *et al.*, 2007; ISD, 2009). It is 'the Glasgow effect' – an excess of mortality beyond that which can be explained by current indices of deprivation (Hanlon, *et al.*, 2005) – that is statistically demonstrable in terms of alcohol-related harm. However, it is not known if it has a cultural component and, if so, whether it is subject to change through assimilating other cultures. To be able to explore the idea of a local cultural influence at work on alcohol-related decision-making, we sampled on levels of 'localness'. We balanced the representation of locally raised index individuals against those born further afield. 'Local' participants were defined as those who had started secondary school whilst living within a 30-mile radius of Glasgow city centre and who still lived in that area. Secondary school starts at 12 years old in Scotland, which we believe would allow sufficient immersion in local values and cultural associations with alcohol.

The concept of being 'non-local' was conceived at two levels:

- 1 At the first level we sampled for those born outside the Glasgow area specified above, but still within the UK.
- 2 A second level sampled for those born and raised outside the UK but who had moved to Glasgow as an adult (to allow possible insight into and exploration of a potential 'Glasgow cultural effect').

## Gender

Balanced representation of gender was sought across all categories and the sample as a whole. Previous research has identified a change in norms of gender and identity in risk behaviours such as alcohol consumption in recent decades (Sweeting and West, 2003). Our sample allowed for emerging issues in this domain.

## Abstainers

We also included a subsample of abstainers. Four were included in this category (male and two female) and were represented by two full-time students and two full-time workers; one of the students was a

non-UK national and one was from outside Glasgow but from within the UK. Including abstainers in the study allowed us to explore cultural and societal norms, and personal values that underlie decisions not to drink. We did not include those whose abstinence was based on an explicitly religious basis but included those who cited it within a range of factors.

## Recruitment

An Internet-based bulletin board (*Gumtree*) was the primary source of recruitment, with an advertisement posted under the ‘voluntary work’ section of the site listing what involvement would entail (i.e. two interviews, a three-month diary and a focus group). Research participants staying with the study through all data collection stages would receive vouchers to the value of £110.

One hundred and eighty-six people replied to the Internet advertisement. Given the small sample, many of the categories on the sampling frame received more candidates than were needed. In such circumstances, people were offered a reserve place or it was agreed they would not be contacted again. However, for some categories, particularly those ‘not in education or employment’, we failed to generate sufficient interest via the Internet advertisement. To recruit further respondents we used word of mouth and posters in public sites, such as libraries and a young people’s sexual health resource centre.

The sample frame is displayed on Table 1. It should be noted that it was only the index individual who needed to fulfil sampling criteria; we added individuals’ social networks as they were provided.

For each cell of the table, one index individual (except where stated\*) was identified and access to their social network requested. The table illustrates the theoretical sample we aimed for, though in the constraints of an 18-month study we collected and analysed data from 35 individuals and their social networks. There were 35 index individuals rather than 28, as some withdrew early in the study and certain cells had to be re-recruited. The total number of study participants, including peer focus group attendees, was 80.

**Table 1: Target sample**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Female Local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course	Further education course		Not in education, training or employment	In full-time employment	Abstainer
Female Non-local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course	Further education course	Economic migrant (N=2)*	Not in education, training or employment	In full-time employment	Abstainer
Male Local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course	Further education course		Not in education, training or employment	In full-time employment	Abstainer
Male Non-local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course	Further education course	Economic migrant (N=2)*	Not in education, training or employment	In full-time employment	Abstainer

## Research contacts completed

- thirty-one, first-round interviews (16 female, 15 male participants);
- four abstainer interviews (two female, two male participants);
- sixteen, second-round interviews (eleven female, five male participants);
- ten focus groups (five set up by female participants, four by male participants and one abstainer group) were conducted;
- twenty-three study participants returned diary entries with numbers of entries ranging from 4 to 39 per participant.

**Table 2: Archived sample**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Female Local	University non-vocational course <i>(saturation)</i>	University vocational course	Further education course <i>(saturation)</i>		Not in education, training or employment <i>(lost contact)</i>	In full-time employment	Abstainer
Female Non-local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course	Further education course <i>(saturation)</i>	Economic migrant	Not in education, training or employment <i>(lost contact)</i>	In full-time employment <i>(saturation)</i>	Abstainer
				Economic migrant <i>(lost contact)</i>			
Male Local	University non-vocational course <i>(saturation)</i>	University vocational course <i>(saturation)</i>	Further education course		Not in education, training or employment	In full-time employment	Abstainer
Male Non-local	University non-vocational course	University vocational course <i>(saturation)</i>	Further education course	Economic migrant <i>(lost contact)</i>	Not in education, training or employment <i>(lost contact)</i>	In full-time employment <i>(saturation)</i>	Abstainer
				Economic migrant <i>(lost contact)</i>			

### Key

Dark blue: full data set collected, comprising first- and second-round interviews, peer focus group.

For abstainer group, full data set represents individual interview and focus group (consisting of all the abstainers rather than peers).

Light blue: two interviews complete (first- and second-round). Indicates data set does not include peer focus group due to lost contact or decision made about saturation (stated).

White: first-round interview only completed.

- Overall, 456 diary entries were collected and 35 social network maps produced during first-round interviews.

Table 2 illustrates the spread of collected data across our study sample. It can be noted that female participants generally had a lower drop-out rate than male participants. Also, commitment to stay in the study was lowest among the ‘not in employment, education or training’ group. After initial interviews, only two female participants wrote diary entries in the group and none took part in a focus group. One second-round interview was conducted with a female who ‘left’ this category (to start a course at college).

In the course of conducting the fieldwork, it became clear that there was fluidity between work and education categories, with data collected from these participants displaying a high degree of similarity in themes. This is perhaps to be expected as the categories ‘in work’ and ‘in education’ are not mutually exclusive. So, it was felt that saturation had been reached for these categories; a decision was made to re-balance recruitment of, and data collection from those not in education or employment. This group was more difficult to recruit and suffered greater attrition (loss of contact). We did not reach saturation with this group and feel they were under-represented in the final sample, despite changes in recruitment avenues (e.g. personal links, projects working with unemployed young people). However, the data we did obtain from this group was sufficiently striking in its difference from the rest of the sample as to influence the final analysis substantially.

## Recruiting and sustaining the ‘hard to reach’

We recognise that whether the ‘not in work or education’ group is defined as hard to reach depends upon how they are engaged with. Our reflections on the difficulty in recruitment and retention of this group have prompted the following suggestions for future studies:

- less formal recruitment strategies may be required, such as contacting young drinkers in the spaces where they socialise and drink. We recognise that, with Research Ethics Committees and cultures of organisational risk aversion, this form of recruitment might be discouraged due to potential dangers to fieldworkers. However, voices may be missed unless different approaches are adopted;
- high street and Internet vouchers were used to encourage participation. We feel this worked well for those who chose to opt in to the study. However, it was clearly not a major incentive for those not in employment or education. We considered whether this may have been due to a perception that involvement in the study would affect benefits. Further, vouchers could only be given out to a limited number of shops, which could make them inflexible and unattractive for some people;
- diaries, by definition, require a degree of comfort about reporting in a written form. We tried to minimise the effort involved in the diary exercise (SMS text updates were encouraged), but acknowledge that diaries may present a barrier to participants lacking confidence in their literacy. Conversely, for participants who did write their diaries, it was a valuable tool for reflection and further in-depth discussion during the second-round interview.

## Social network site

We established a private *Facebook* page for keeping in contact with study participants and to collect further insights into drinking cultures.

Although many study participants made use of social networking sites privately, they did not use this platform to share ‘post-study’ reflections and further insights. We conclude that artificially established

network sites, disconnected from the networks young people have already established, are inefficient for collecting data. However, they have potential as one way of keeping in touch with participants.

## Limitations of the data

Because some groups were easier to recruit than others, the 'not in education or employment' sample was, proportionately, less well represented than anticipated. However, we consider that the data collected from this group (consisting of four, in-depth interviews) was still important to the overall analysis.

The recruitment of peer group members to focus groups also showed mixed success. It worked well for more confident participants, who felt able to encourage peer network members to join the study. It worked less well for those on the edge of social networks or with less confidence. This reflects the roles people adopt within networks, with some members acting as 'bridgers' or 'liaisons' (Henry, 2007).

# Acknowledgements

A project advisory group, consisting of Professor Betsy Thom, Sonnda Catto, Dr Alasdair Forsyth, Professor Gerard Hastings, Jack Law, Professor Moira Plant, Daniela Sime and Andrew Brown provided guidance, support and constructive criticism at all stages. Jackie Hale and Kelda Maclean provided administrative support. Valerie McNeice and Professor Carol Tannahill worked with the first author in developing the original proposal. Andrew Lyon, Arun Sondhi and Nancy Kelley provided feedback on drafts, and support from JRF was provided by Charlie Lloyd and Claire Turner. This study would not have been possible without the honesty and openness of the study participants

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author[s] and not necessarily those of JRF.

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First published 2010 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

ISBN: 978-1-85935-769-9

Original design by Draught Associates  
Project managed and typeset by Cambridge Publishing Management Limited

Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead  
40 Water End  
York YO30 6WP  
[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

