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Drinking, crime and disorder

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Alcohol-related crime is a problem in many cities and towns. This report presents the main findings from two Home Office studies that explored the relationship between alcohol consumption and offending among 18- to 24-year-olds. The first study examined the 1999/1998 Youth Lifestyles Survey to quantify the association between binge drinking and offending behaviour (Richardson and Budd, 2003). The second study involved focus groups with young people to explore the social context of binge drinking (Engineer et al., 2003).

Key points

Findings from the Youth Lifestyles Survey

- 39% of 18- to 24-year-olds were classified as 'binge drinkers' (those who got very drunk at least once a month). Men were more likely to binge drink (48%) than women (31%).
- Binge drinkers were more likely to offend than other young adults. 39% reported committing an offence in the 12 months prior to interview, compared with 14% of regular drinkers. Young male binge drinkers were particularly likely to offend (49%).
- 60% of binge drinkers admitted involvement in criminal and/or disorderly behaviour during or after drinking, compared with 25% of regular drinkers. Again young males were most likely to report such behaviour (69%).
- The link between drinking and offending was particularly strong for violent crimes.
- Even after other factors were taken into account, frequency of drunkenness remained strongly associated with both general offending and criminal and disorderly behaviour during or after drinking.

Findings from the focus groups

- Qualitative research found that most of the young adults had experienced or witnessed assaults or fighting while out drinking. They identified an array of factors that they felt contributed to the link between alcohol and crime and disorder. There were four broad groups: effects of binge drinking, attitudes and motivations, social and peer group norms and the drinking environment.

Findings from the Youth Lifestyles Survey

The 1998/1999 Youth Lifestyles Survey (YLS) interviewed a representative sample of 4,848 12- to 30-year-olds living in private households in England and Wales. The survey measured the extent and frequency of offending behaviour. It also measured a range of factors that previous

research had indicated to be associated with offending, including drug use and drinking patterns (see Stratford and Roth, 1999).

The findings presented here focus on young adults aged 18 to 24 (n=1,376) and examine the links between patterns of drinking and offending behaviour.

Table 1 Prevalence of offending in last 12 months for those aged 18 to 24, by sex and drinking status

Percentages	Binge drinker			Other regular drinker		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
Any offence in last 12 months	49	22	39	21	8	14
Violent crime	25	3	17	7	1	4
Taken part in a group fight in a public place	22	2	15	6	1	3
Theft	16	4	11	10	3	6
Criminal damage	7	<1	4	1	0	0
Base no.	212	143	355	176	205	381

Patterns of drinking

The YLS collected information on the frequency of drinking and frequency of drunkenness during the previous 12 months. These two measures were used to construct a typology of drinking behaviour:

- binge drinkers - those who felt very drunk at least once a month
- regular drinkers - those who drank at least once a month but felt very drunk less often
- occasional/non-drinkers - those who drank alcohol less than once a month or not at all.

Using this measure, 39% of those aged 18 to 24 were classified as binge drinkers, 42% as regular drinkers and 18% as occasional or non-drinkers. Males were more likely to binge drink (48%) than females (31%). Binge drinkers were more likely to drink at least once a week, go to night clubs and consume several types of drinks.

Drinking patterns and general offending

The YLS asked respondents if they had ever committed various offences in the previous 12 months. The offences were grouped for this analysis as:

- violent crime (assaults, fights and robbery). Fights were also examined separately
- criminal damage (criminal damage and arson)
- theft (thefts off/from vehicles, shoplifting, pick-pocketing, burglary and other thefts)
- any offence (comprising all of the above plus fraud and forgery and handling stolen goods).

Overall, binge drinkers were almost three times more likely to admit to committing an offence in the previous 12 months than regular drinkers. The difference was particularly marked for fights, with binge drinkers five times more likely to admit to an incident. Only 8% of occasional/non-drinkers admitted an offence. Offending

behaviour was most prevalent among male binge drinkers. A quarter of binge drinking males reported being involved in a violent incident, compared with 7% of young men who often drank but were rarely drunk. Among young women, there was no significant relationship between drinking and involvement in individual offence groups (Table 1).

Multivariate analysis (logistic regression) was undertaken to establish if binge drinking remained predictive of offending when taking into account other factors associated with offending behaviour. Criminal damage was not examined as very few respondents admitted to the offence. Frequency of drunkenness was strongly associated with violent crime and fighting, even after other factors were taken into account. Those who got drunk at least once a week were more than five times as likely to be involved in a violent crime or a fight, but were no more likely to commit theft than those who got drunk less than once a month. Conversely, using an illegal drug was predictive of theft but not violence. These findings support the perception that alcohol use is linked to violent crime and drug use to theft. Frequency of drinking was not associated with any offence, suggesting it is binge drinking rather than frequent drinking *per se* which is important (Table 2).

Offending and disorderly behaviour during or after drinking alcohol

The results presented in the previous section suggest a strong association between binge drinking and violent crime. However, the preceding analysis does not link drinking and offending behaviour in time. The YLS findings in relation to criminal and disorderly acts committed during or after drinking are examined here (Table 3).

Binge drinkers were more likely to admit to each of the acts than regular drinkers. They were almost four times as likely to take part in a fight than regular drinkers, over five times as likely to admit to criminal damage and eight times as likely to

Table 2 Offending in the last 12 months - predictive factors among those aged 18 to 24

	Any offence	Violent crime	Fighting	Theft
Frequency of drunkenness (base: less than once a month)				
At least once a week	✓	✓	✓	✗
Once or twice a month	✓	✓	✓	✗
Other factors				
Male	✓	✓	✓	✓
Delinquent acquaintance(s)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Has been expelled/excluded from school	✗	✓	✗	✗
Used any drug in the last 12 months	✓	✗	✗	✓

Notes: 1. Employment status, ethnicity, children, marital status, educational qualifications, amount of spending money, frequency of drinking and going to pubs or clubs were also tested but did not come out in the model. 2. ✓ indicates factor significantly increased odds, ✗ indicates factor not in model or not significant.

Table 3 Crime and disorder while drinking among those aged 18 to 24, by sex and drinking status

Percentages In the past 12 months has during or after drinking	Binge drinker			Other regular drinker		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
... got into a heated argument	56	41	50	30	18	23
... got into a fight	35	11	26	12	2	7
... broken, destroyed or damaged something	23	7	17	6	2	3
... taken something belonging to someone else	12	2	8	1	1	1
... done any of the above	69	45	60	34	18	25
Base no. (those who had drunk in last 12 months)	301	207	508	246	305	551

admit to theft. 69% of male binge drinkers and 45% of female binge drinkers reported at least one of the incidents. Among both men and women, binge drinkers were significantly more likely to admit to an incident than their regular drinking counterparts, with the exception of theft amongst women.

The proportion of young adults admitting to fights or theft during or after drinking alcohol was higher than the proportion reporting such offences at the general offending questions stage. This may be because young people are more willing to admit to incidents if they can 'excuse' themselves through alcohol. It may also be that they are prompted to remember incidents that happened in the context of alcohol that they either did not recall at the earlier general offending question stage or chose not to disclose because they did not consider the incidents as fitting into the 'crime' context.

The relationship between criminal and disorderly behaviour during or after drinking was further tested by logistic regression. Theft during or after drinking was not examined, due to the low number of respondents admitting such behaviour. Again, frequency of drunkenness remained strongly associated with criminal and disorderly behaviour, even after allowing for other factors. 18- to 24- year-olds who got drunk at least once a week were seven times as

likely to admit to criminal damage, five times as likely to admit to fighting, and four times as likely to admit to becoming involved in an argument than those who got drunk less than once a month. Frequency of drinking also proved predictive but only in the 'any consequence' category, with those who drank at least once a week having double the odds of admitting to at least one of the specified acts relative to those who drank less than once a month. Drug use proved predictive of all types of disorder (Table 4).

Results from the focus groups

In early 2002, 16 focus groups were carried out in eight locations. In total, 123 young people aged 18 to 24 took part. The groups discussed participants' experiences of crime, disorder and risk taking related to drinking.

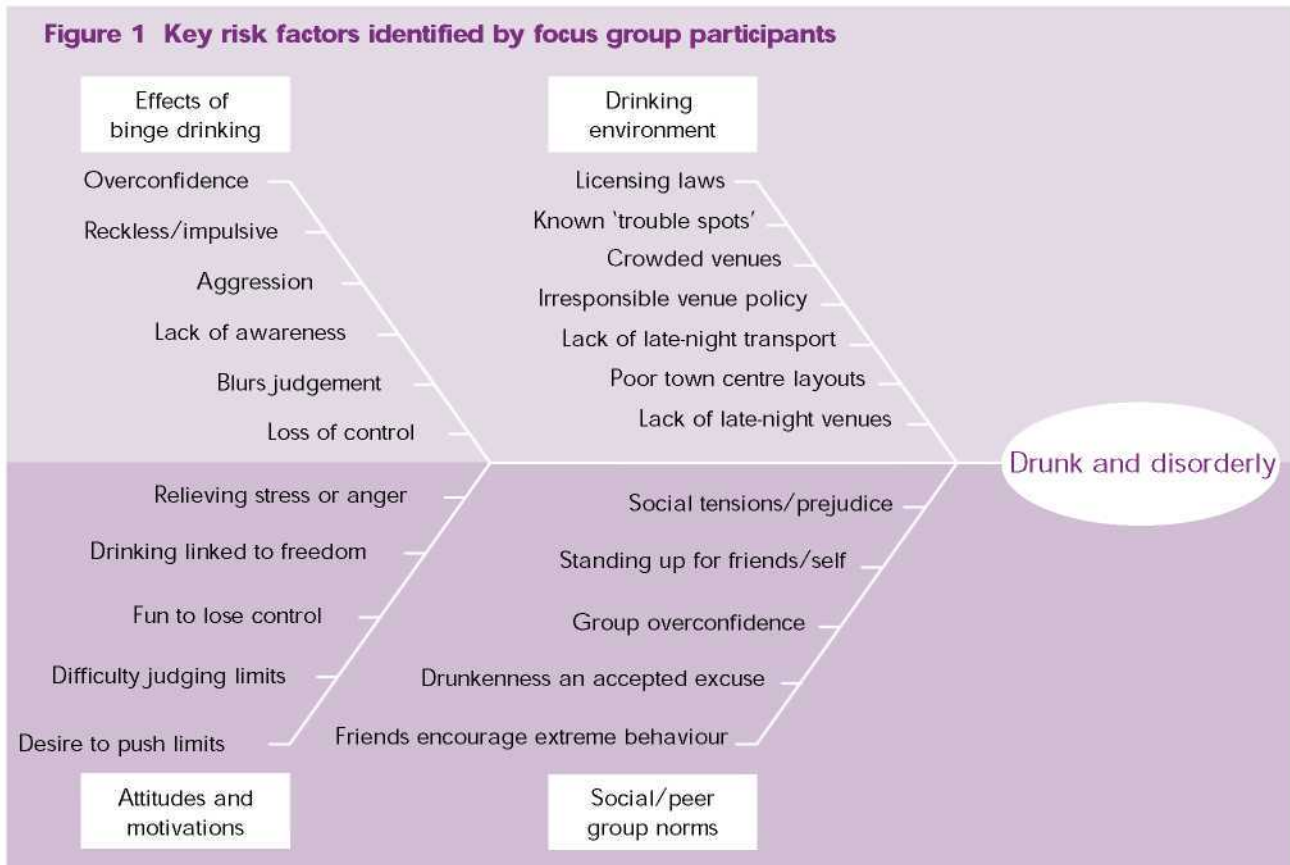
Perceptions of alcohol-related crime and disorder

Participants were very aware of drunk and disorderly behaviour in the town and city centres. Many had done something they later regretted or had been involved in or witnessed criminal or disorderly incidents while out drinking. Key risk factors were identified by the participants as contributing to the incidence of alcohol-related crime and

Table 4 Crime and disorder while drinking - predictive factors for those aged 18 to 24

	Any consequence	Heated argument	Got into a fight	Criminal damage
Frequency of drunkenness (base: less than once a month)				
At least once a week	✓	✓	✓	✓
Once or twice a month	✓	✓	✓	✓
Frequency of drinking (base: less than once a month)				
At least once a week	✓	✗	✗	✗
Once or twice a month	✗	✗	✗	✗
Qualifications (base: degree/higher)				
Other - unspecified	✗	✗	✓	✗
None	✗	✗	✓	✗
GCSE	✗	✗	✗	✗
A levels	✗	✗	✗	✗
Age at first drink (base: 15 to 24)				
1-12 years	✓	✓	✗	✗
13-14 years	✓	✓	✗	✗
Other factors				
Male	✓	✓	✓	✓
Aged 18-20	✗	✗	✓	✗
Used a drug in the last 12 months	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: 1. Employment status, ethnicity, children, marital status, educational qualifications, amount of spending money, frequency of drinking and going to pubs or clubs were also tested but did not come out in the model. 2. The 'other' unspecified category includes all qualifications mentioned by respondents that did not fit in one of the qualification categories. 3. ✓ indicates factor significantly increased odds, ✗ indicates factor not in model or not significant.

Figure 1 Key risk factors identified by focus group participants

disorder (Figure 1). These factors fell under four broad groupings: effects of binge drinking, drinking environment, attitudes and motivation and social/peer group norms.

Reducing alcohol-related crime and disorder

Young people were asked to suggest approaches that they felt might be effective in reducing alcohol-related crime and disorder. There were mixed views about many of the suggestions, with many young people being particularly sceptical about the possibility of reducing alcohol consumption and the effectiveness of advertising. However, they did suggest a range of interventions including:

- better training for bar and door staff so that they can manage the drinking environment effectively
- stricter vetting procedures for door staff
- plastic glasses/bottles to lessen the risk of injury in fights
- changes to the licensing laws to extend drinking hours
- increased visible police presence outside venues

- better public transport in and out of entertainment districts
- hard hitting, effective advertising campaigns
- more alcohol education in schools from an early age.

Conclusions

The results from the YLS demonstrate that binge drinking is strongly associated with offending behaviour, particularly violent incidents, even when other factors are taken into account. This does not necessarily mean that excessive alcohol consumption in itself is causally linked to offending. The physical effects of alcohol alone are unlikely to account for the relationship. The young people identified a range of factors that influenced the link between alcohol and criminal and disorderly behaviour. These related both to the individual and the social and cultural environment. They also suggested many practical measures which could reduce the problem of alcohol-related crime and disorder.

The government is committed to developing a comprehensive National Alcohol Strategy by 2004. In advance of this the Home Office has produced an Alcohol Action Plan (www.homeoffice.gov.uk). The plan identifies objectives and priorities for taking forward the programme of work to address the problem of alcohol-related crime and disorder. The findings reported here will inform further policy development.

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