



# The turning tides of intoxication: young people's drinking in Britain in the 2000s

Young people's  
drinking in  
Britain

207

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of recent changes in young people's consumption of alcohol in Britain before then charting emerging academic perspectives and some of the recent regulatory and legislative changes.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach takes the form of a selective narrative review of young people's alcohol consumption in the last ten years through an analysis of key British and European secondary schools surveys, alongside select qualitative studies of relevance.

**Findings** – There has been increased heavy drinking per session by some young people in the UK from the early 1990s, with a perceived growing public tolerance of drunkenness by many more. In recent years there is evidence that this heavy sessional consumption by youth and young adults is starting to level off. However, there are also growing numbers of occasional drinkers and abstainers, suggesting a polarisation of drinking patterns amongst young people since 2000.

**Originality/value** – Early indications that alcohol consumption has levelled off by youth, as well as young adults, since the turn of the century suggests that some of the most highly publicised excesses of 1990s alcohol-frenzied leisure may have run their course. Possible reasons for both the 1990s increase and the 2000s levelling-off are explored, including shifts in reporting patterns and tastes, interventions to address underage drinking and binge drinking, alongside broader legislative, socio-economic and cultural changes in the drinks industry, the night time economy and the regulation and policing of public space.

**Keywords** Social trends, United Kingdom

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Young people are drinking alcohol at a younger age and those who do so are drinking in greater quantities than ever before (HM Government, 2007, p. 61).

In 2007 the British government announced a new National Alcohol Strategy. This reviews the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England (2004) and sets out the next steps in alcohol policy including a £10 million campaign to target underage drinking which, together with the promotion of its “sensible drinking message” for over 18s, has an ambitious overall aim to change British drinking culture and to “challenge the attitudes and practices that underlie cultural attitudes towards alcohol” (HM Government, 2007, p. 58). After a couple of decades of alcohol taking a back seat in the public debate surrounding drug and alcohol policy in the UK, within the last ten years alcohol has risen to the top of the political and media agendas again, mobilised around concerns about “binge” drinking by youth and young adults. This paper will consider changing patterns of consumption by British young people at the turn of the century



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before then charting emerging academic perspectives and some of the recent regulatory and legislative changes in what is such a rapidly changing field.

*Changing patterns of alcohol consumption by young people*

The first question to consider is whether young people's alcohol consumption has significantly changed in recent years, which leads to the related questions of where to draw the line both in terms of historical perspective and in terms of defining "young" people. Alongside the recent barrage of media coverage of the alleged binge drinking problem in Britain, there has been a more cautious commentary reflecting the cyclical nature of such political and media concerns, which tend to draw together the topical favourites of young people, alcohol and disorderly behaviour in public places (the "youth-drugs-crime-danger media mix" discussed in Parker *et al.*, 1998, pp. 4-7, see also May, 1992, Murji, 1998; Forsyth, 2001). This relates to the broader academic debate surrounding the "problem" of youth (e.g. Muncie, 2004); the "problem" of unproductive working class leisure (e.g. Clarke and Critcher, 1995); and the relationship between "deviant" youth, the media and the notion of "moral panic" (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Pearson, 1983).

Depending on one's historical perspective, alcohol consumption can be increasing, decreasing or stable. For example, a cut-off point of the 1950s would suggest that alcohol consumption has increased steadily for the last 50 years or so[1]. However, a cut-off point back in the nineteenth century would suggest that the increases since the 1950s are only a return to pre-twentieth century levels following a decline in consumption in the first half of the twentieth century with the impact of two world wars and their aftermath (British Beer and Pub Association, 2006; Plant and Plant, 2006). A more recent cut-off point of the early 1990s would indicate an increase in consumption by some socio-demographic groups. Otherwise a cut-off point of 2000 would reflect a picture of greater stability than in the preceding decade, with minor peaks and troughs in young people's alcohol consumption in Britain

This paper will focus predominantly on young people aged 11-17, an age range during which time experimentation with alcohol usually starts and for whom we have most data through secondary school surveys, yet for whom the purchase of alcohol is illegal in Britain. Given that many young people will engage in underage drinking in licensed premises on at least an occasional basis before they are 18, however, the discussion also includes changes in the drinks industry and licensed leisure which will affect not only those over 18 but also under 18s too. Furthermore, in order to contextualise these changes and identify possible future trends, data are also provided on young adults aged 18-25.

Despite such enduring concerns about the alleged "British disease" of a binge-and-brawl drinking culture[2], overall alcohol consumption per capita for the UK is both average for the European Union and also has remained stable over the last fifteen years or so. For example alcohol consumption per capita by those aged 15 and over was 10.39 litres of pure alcohol in 1991 and 10.39 litres again in 2001 (World Health Organization Statistical Information System (WHOSIS), 2001), and was 11.3 in 2005 according to national HMRC figures (HM Government, 2007, p. 14). Recent national surveys confirm this apparent stability in alcohol consumption by adults, with the General Household Survey showing that the proportion of adults who are weekly drinkers and frequent drinkers (five or more times per week) remaining stable in the

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early years of the twenty first century (Goddard, 2006). Immoderate consumption (above the daily benchmarks of 4/3 units for men/women) and binge drinking (more than double these daily benchmarks, i.e. 8/6 units) by British adults peaked around 2001 and in more recent years has declined slightly (Goddard, 2006). Amongst 16-24 year olds, the four key indicators of weekly drinking, frequent drinking, immoderate drinking and binge drinking have all fallen for both women and men since 1998. Of note, given the publicity surrounding binge drinking by youth and young adults, is that the proportion of young men drinking more than 21 units of alcohol a week fell significantly from 41 per cent in 2000 to 27 per cent in 2005, and the proportion of young women drinking more than 14 units of alcohol a week fell from 33 to 24 per cent (Goddard, 2006, p. 54). Single adults continue to drink more heavily, however, although not more frequently than peers who are living with a partner.

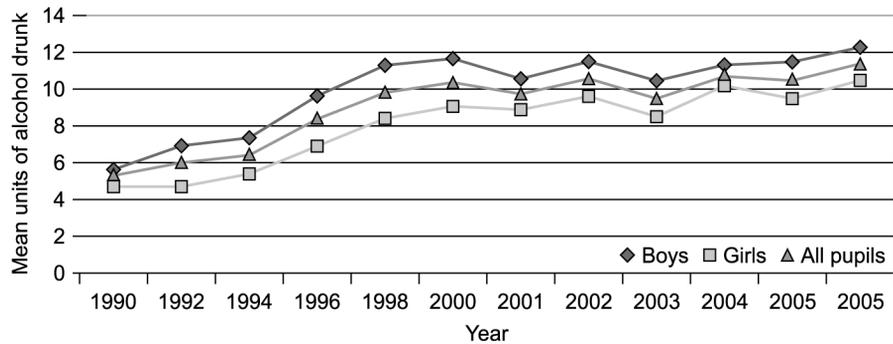
Underlying this apparent overall stability and in some cases decrease in alcohol consumption in recent years in Britain, there are various undercurrents of change which have fed into concerns about young people's drinking and their relationship to changes in the drinks industry, young people's lives and wider society. Two key concerns within the last ten years or so are reflected in the headline media coverage of young people's drinking. These relate to first, the quantity of alcohol consumed in an individual drinking session and second, attitudes to drunkenness.

### **Sessional consumption**

One of the most efficient ways of capturing representative samples of young people for surveys is through educational institutions. Given that almost all young people in Britain start drinking alcohol after the age of 11 and almost all attend school to receive their compulsory education up to the age of 16, most surveys of young people's drinking behaviour utilise samples of pupils during their five years of secondary schooling. According to The Information Centre (2007) the proportion of young people reporting drinking alcohol has tended to increase sharply from the early teens with only 3 per cent of pupils aged 11 reporting having had an alcoholic drink in the week prior to interview in 2006 compared with 41 per cent of those aged 15, with no gender differences. These figures come from one of the largest ongoing national school surveys of drinking, as well as smoking and drug use (SDD), which provides comparative data from 1982 onwards, most recently surveying 8,200 secondary school pupils from Year 7 (aged 11-12) to Year 11 (15-16) in 290 schools in England in the autumn term of 2006 (The Information Centre, 2007). The key findings from this show that self reported weekly consumption of alcohol by secondary school pupils doubled throughout the 1990s, from 5.3 units in 1990 to 10.4 units in 2000. Since 2000, weekly consumption by secondary school pupils appears to have stabilised with small fluctuations around this upper level, most recently at 11.4 units in 2006 (see Figure 1)[3]. Whilst this levelling off is clear in 14-15 year olds, of concern is the continued increase in past week consumption by 11-13 year olds which has nearly doubled in the last five years, from an average of 5.6 units consumed in the past week by 11-13 year olds in 2001 up to 10.1 units in 2006 (The Information Centre, 2007).

However, it may be more appropriate to consider consumption per session rather than per week, given that the majority of young people will not have established patterns of weekly consumption, will not be able to purchase alcohol legitimately nor drink in licensed leisure venues with their friends. Also it is these possibly sporadic but heavy

**Figure 1.**  
Mean alcohol consumption  
(units) of secondary school  
pupils who drank in the  
last week by sex,  
1990-2006



**Source:** The Information Centre (2007)

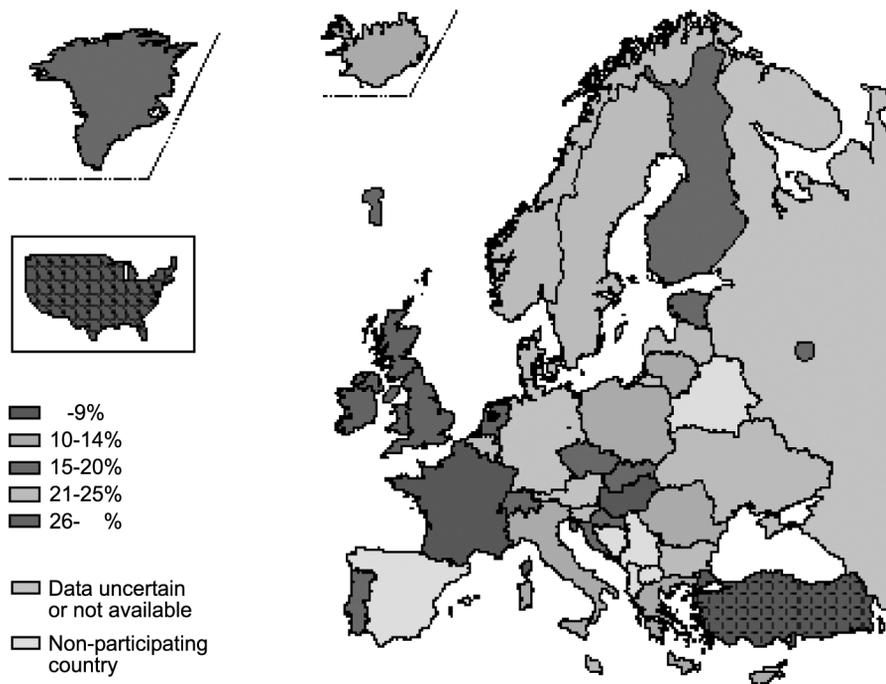
individual drinking sessions which are more likely to lead to negative outcomes, regarding health and safety, as well as incidents of disorderly, antisocial or possibly criminal behaviour. An increase in sessional consumption of alcohol by secondary school pupils has been noted in regional school surveys from the early 1990s onwards (McKeganey *et al.*, 1996; Measham, 2006; Balding, 1997; see also Coleman and Cater, 2003).

Such concerns about the increased quantity of alcohol consumed by young people materialised into the alleged British binge drinking epidemic discussed above, given wide coverage in the press in both Britain and overseas (e.g. Hayward and Hobbs, 2007). Varying definitions and measurements of 'binge' drinking (International Centre for Alcohol Policies, 1997; Plant and Plant, 2006) have led to problems of comparative research with a narrow focus on total units consumed unrelated to the duration of consumption, leading to the technical possibility of a sober binge drinker! For example, it would be possible for someone to have about one unit of alcohol per hour over the course of an extended social engagement, alongside food and soft drinks, who could be classified as a binge drinker by the unit-based definition yet maintain a low blood alcohol concentration and feel minimal effects of intoxication (Midanik, 1999). This has led to a recent policy shift away from an exclusive focus on unit-based definitions of binge drinking to broader notions of "harmful drinking" (HM Government, 2007), "extreme drinking" (Martinic and Measham, 2008) and the potential negative outcomes for the individual drinker, those around them and wider society.

Whilst the amount of alcohol consumed by past week drinkers increased in the 1990s and has stabilised at this higher level, there is evidence that the number of occasional (non weekly) teenage drinkers and abstaining teenagers has also increased in the early twenty first century. For example, the percentage of young people who reported drinking alcohol in the previous week increased from 1990 to 2001 in each of the year groups from 11 to 15 then reduced back to 1990 levels, with 40 per cent of 15 year olds reporting drinking alcohol in the previous week in 1990, increasing to 52 per cent in 2001 then falling back to 41 per cent in 2006 (The Information Centre, 2007). Secondary school abstainers have steadily risen from 36 per cent of pupils in 1990 to 46 per cent in 2006. What we may be seeing is a polarisation of young people's drinking, with more abstainers and occasional drinkers, alongside more heavy consumption

amongst those young people who are regular drinkers, summed up by Balding and Regis (1996), as “more alcohol down fewer throats”.

Such trends are also supported by internationally comparable data from three waves of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). The secondary school surveys are conducted at four yearly intervals with three data collections published to date, in 1995, 1999, and 2003. The first study was conducted in 26 countries in 1995 and expanded to over 100,000 pupils in 35 countries by the third study in 2003. These surveys provide detailed comparative analysis of drinking, smoking and drug use for 15-16 year olds in their last year of compulsory schooling in Britain, using randomly selected classes from a nationally representative sample. Self reported frequent drinking, drunkenness and binge drinking were more common in the western parts of Europe including the UK, Ireland, Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands (see Figure 2). The ongoing ESPAD surveys confirm the findings from British secondary school surveys discussed above that whilst self reported experiences of frequent drinking, drunkenness and binge drinking remain amongst the highest in Europe (along with Denmark), there is evidence of a recent decrease in Britain and Denmark. Beer consumption has fallen although wine, spirits and alcopops[4] consumption has increased in recent years by British 15 year olds. Changes in types of drinks will be affected by price, access, availability and fashion, as indicated in the consumption of alcopops on last drinking occasion which doubled between the second



**Figure 2.**  
Proportion of all students  
who reported “binge  
drinking” three times or  
more during the last 30  
days, 2003

**Notes:** Turkey: Limited geographical coverage. USA: Limited comparability  
**Source:** ESPAD, Hibell *et al.* (2004)

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ESPAD survey in 1999 and the third survey in 2003, from 16 to 31 per cent of 15 year old girls and from 9 to 17 per cent of 15 year old boys in Britain. Whilst in some countries the gender distribution was more even than others, it is noteworthy in no country did young women's frequent drinking, drunkenness or binge drinking surpass young men's (Hibell *et al.*, 2004).

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### **Drunkenness**

Second, it is apparent that attitudes towards intoxication are distinctly favourable amongst British youth compared with other countries in Europe and elsewhere (Martinic and Measham, 2008). Indeed stated aims in the new National Alcohol Strategy are to challenge public tolerance of drunkenness, to make drunkenness unacceptable, and to "challenge the belief that drunkenness and antisocial behaviour are an accepted part of an English "drinking culture" " (HM Government, 2007, p. 47). The early teens appear to be a key age for young people's socialisation into normative drinking behaviour with a significant shift from a predominantly hostile view of drinking and drunkenness at primary school to a more favourable one during the course of secondary school (e.g. Fossey, 1994; Talbot and Crabbe, 2008). This is evident in recent secondary schools surveys. For example, although only 3 per cent of 11 year olds think it is okay to try getting drunk to see what it is like and only 2 per cent think it is okay to get drunk once a week, this rises to nearly half of 15 year olds (48 per cent) thinking it is okay to try getting drunk to see what it is like and nearly a third (32 per cent) thinking it is okay to get drunk once a week (The Information Centre, 2005). This is supported by research with an older age group of young adult bar drinkers. When interviewed earlier in the evening the majority of young women and men reported a desire to get drunk that evening, suggesting "determined drunkenness" was an integral part of their weekend socialising with friends (Measham, 2006). Such is this desire to not just drink but get drunk that in some alcohol research (e.g. Engineer *et al.*, 2003), there is a preference to measure binge drinking using a subjective personal assessment of drunkenness rather than the more usual unit-based measure.

A recent study addressed this issue by interviewing 64 14-17 year old "risky" drinkers (defined as underage excessive drinking in unsupervised, unlicensed, often outdoor locations) to explore why young people get drunk and what the consequences are. The study confirmed previous research on the perceived positive motivations for drinking and drunkenness with this age group (e.g. Newcombe *et al.*, 1995; Parker *et al.*, 1998) and found that most young people reported a range of positive reasons for wanting to get drunk confirming that this age group see getting drunk as a normal and unproblematic thing to do. Three broad clusters of positive motivations were identified: first, social facilitation such as increasing confidence and enjoyment in social situations; second, perceived individual benefits such as getting a "buzz", having something to do or forgetting one's problems; and third, social norms and influences including peer influence, gaining respect and enhanced image. In particular "the perceived acceptance and normality of young people getting drunk was considered an important motivating factor" (Coleman and Cater, 2005, p. 23). The three groups of outcomes – health, safety and legal – suggested that "the youngest of drinkers and those drinking in unsupervised locations are the groups most at risk from serious harm" (p. 50). In line with a harm minimisation rather than abstentionist policy response, the authors called for the establishment of safer, supervised venues for

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underage drinkers within which they could learn about sensible drinking and basic first aid alongside a greater variety of alternative leisure pursuits for teenagers.

The risky drinkers study discussed above is further supported by Home Office (2007) research. A recently published survey (Talbot and Crabbe, 2008) commissioned by Positive Futures[5], covers a wider age range but finds similar positive attitudes to both drinking and drunkenness amongst British youth and young adults. Of 1,250 respondents aged ten to 19 living in deprived communities who completed the anonymous survey, the age of 13 was identified as a “tipping point” with 42 per cent of respondents beginning to drink alcohol by 13 (Talbot and Crabbe, 2008, p. 2). In terms of the pleasures of drinking and drunkenness, 69 per cent of those surveyed said that they enjoyed drinking alcohol, 29 per cent said the best thing about drinking was “socialising with friends and having fun”, and a further 29 per cent said that the reason they drank alcohol was “purely and simply as a means of getting drunk and getting a ‘buzz’ ” (Talbot and Crabbe, 2008, p. 6).

This association between drunkenness and positive attitudes towards drinking by teenagers is also supported by international surveys such as the ESPAD study. Those countries with the highest levels of drinking and drunkenness were also those whose pupils reported overall more positive and less negative attitudes to alcohol (e.g. Finland, Ireland, Denmark and Britain). In those countries most often associated with low prevalence rates of alcohol consumption and drunkenness such as Romania, Italy, Portugal and Turkey, pupils tended to anticipate more negative and less positive consequences of their alcohol consumption (Hibell *et al.*, 2004, p. 161). However, as noted in the previous section, ESPAD surveys suggest that whilst British young people report amongst the highest experiences of drunkenness in Europe, there is evidence of a recent decrease. What is not yet clear from post millennial research is whether the amenable British attitude towards drunkenness which was increasingly evident in the 1990s and early 2000s, at least amongst young people, is tailing off along with frequency of drunkenness, or whether a culture of intoxication is altering, adapting and reformulating which withstands individual trends in the consumption of specific psychoactive drugs, discussed further below.

#### *Explanations and policy responses*

Young people's drinking increased throughout the 1990s to a peak around the turn of this century and appears to have stabilised or declined slightly since then. There are two main clusters of potential explanations for these apparent changes in young people's drinking which focus on first, developments in the drinks industry and the night time economy and second, the broader socio-economic, legal and cultural context to such changes.

Undoubtedly changes in patterns of consumption can be seen at least in part as having been facilitated by developments in the drinks and leisure industries since the early 1990s. There have been four main developments: the manufacture and marketing of a growing range of higher strength alcoholic beverages, the diversification of licensed leisure venues, related changes in the customer base and in the increasingly sophisticated and targeted retail and promotional practices to sell these new products (Measham, 2008). Of particular concern in relation to under 18 year olds is the alcopops debate and the extent to which such drinks might appeal to younger drinkers through their packaging, promotion and broader associations, particularly given that “younger

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members of society [are] exposed to the most aggressive forms of so-called ‘lifestyle advertising’” (Hayward, 2004, p. 175). The debate surrounding this idea of the recommodification of alcohol has been comprehensively discussed elsewhere (e.g. Brain and Parker, 1997; Barnard and Forsyth, 1998; Measham and Brain, 2005), with some researchers suggesting that the timing and motivation for such changes can be linked to the rise of illicit drug use associated with the dance club culture of the late 1980s onwards and the perceived threat to alcohol-based leisure, evident in declining alcohol sales amongst young people and pub closures (Saunders, 1995; Collin and Godfrey, 1997; Hadfield, 2006). It could be argued that these initial developments in alcoholic beverages did not necessarily primarily affect under 18 year olds because of their limited access to licensed leisure venues and the higher cost of the new alcoholic beverages, confirming the enduring appeal of cheap traditional lagers and ciders for many underage drinkers (Brain and Parker, 1997) with beer the most popular drink in the Positive Futures study for 35 per cent of ten to 19 year olds (Talbot and Crabbe, 2008). Nevertheless the market share of alcopops increased throughout the late 1990s, including amongst under 18 year olds, as supported by the findings from ESPAD and the national SDD schools survey (The Information Centre, 2005), discussed above.

Alongside this recommodification of alcohol in the “recreational drugs war”, we have seen the expansion of the night time economy which is worth over £30 billion and employs over one million people (Hobbs *et al.*, 2000, 2003; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Whilst this urban regeneration and development of the “24-hour city” has been targeted primarily at young adults aged 17-25 in the evenings and at weekends (Hadfield, 2006), both older and younger demographic groups have been discouraged from using city centre facilities at night. For underage drinkers a range of measures included in the Licensing Act 2003, Police and Justice Act 2006, local bye-laws, as well as growing use of proof of age schemes such as Challenge 21, and increased penalties for individual serving staff have resulted in local authorities and the police having greater powers to prosecute staff and close premises which persistently sell alcohol to under 18s. From 2004-2006, the national test-purchase failure rate fell from around 50 per cent to around 20 per cent (HM Government, 2007, p. 55). Consequently young people are less able to purchase alcohol in off-licenses or purchase and consume alcohol in licensed venues and are subject to increased regulation and surveillance on the street through CCTV, on the spot fines, alcohol ASBOs[6], alcohol confiscation zones, group dispersal, and so forth. This further restricts the possibilities of young people drinking in public parks and other public space previously favoured by teenagers (e.g. Brain and Parker, 1997). There is evidence that these changes may have impacted on young people’s consumption: for example, the SDD schools survey found that the proportion of young people purchasing alcohol from off licences fell from 27 per cent in 1996 to 17 per cent in 2000 and has since remained at this level whereas buying alcohol from friends and relatives increased from 9 per cent in 1998 to 17 per cent in 2000, and has since remained stable (The Information Centre, 2005).

Furthermore, it has been suggested by alcohol and drug researchers that increased sessional consumption by young people since the early 1990s was part of a shift in attitudes to intoxication and evidence of a zeitgeist of pharmacological experimentation involving polydrug repertoires of legal and illicit drugs (Parker and Measham, 1994). Alongside the recognition of a longstanding carnivalesque British “binge and brawl” culture (Presdee, 2000; Plant and Plant, 2006), is the idea that we

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have seen not only the normalisation of adolescent recreational drug use but also the normalisation of drunkenness, an indicator of both continuity and change embraced by the government in the recent National Alcohol Strategy which suggests that the general public believe that “the root cause of the problems lay with the English ‘drinking culture’ and a willingness to tolerate drunkenness and antisocial behaviour as a ‘normal’ part of life” (2007, p. 57).

What reasons could there be for the plateau in young people’s alcohol consumption evident in national and European studies? Could it be that the increased corporate responsibility of the drinks industry in the 2000s is leading to this plateau just as the recommodification of alcohol facilitated increased sessional consumption in the 1990s? In response to public concerns the drinks industry has reined in some of the least reputable alcoholic products and retail practices through voluntary self regulation exemplified in the Portman Group (2002) Code of Practice [7], and the British Beer and Pub Association (2005) Code of Practice [8], combined in the *Social Responsibility Standards for the Production and Sale of Alcoholic Drinks in the UK* (2005). The Portman Group Code recommends that the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks should not be more likely to appeal to under 18s than adults through the use of “imagery or allusion to under 18s culture” (2002, p. 14). During its first ten years, the Code received over 150 complaints and approximately 70 products found to be in breach of the Code were either withdrawn from the market or modified to comply with the Code. This compliance with Panel decisions by the drinks industry, combined with a decline in complaints in recent years, led the Portman Group to claim this as proof that self regulation works due to “the effectiveness of the Code, the increase in pre-launch advice requests and the drinks industry adopting a more responsible attitude to packaging and marketing” (Poley, 2006). Others are more critical of the current model of self-regulation and have called for a legal ban of alcohol advertising, which appeals to under 18s (e.g. Coleman and Cater, 2005). In 2008 the government will be commissioning independent national reviews: a Department of Health review of evidence on the relationship between alcohol price, promotion and harm with a particular focus on whether the current advertising restrictions are sufficient to protect children and young people; alongside a Home Office review of the effectiveness of the current Social Responsibility Standards regarding the sale of alcohol in licensed and off license premises.

Alternatively, as Goddard points out, the self reported decrease in consumption levels could be the result of methodological issues at work here. “It is difficult to judge whether the fall in consumption reflects a real change in drinking habits, or an increased tendency to under-report consumption. Recent extensive publicity about the dangers of drinking, and in particular binge drinking, could have led people to moderate their behaviour, but might equally have made them less inclined to admit to how much they have drunk” (Goddard, 2006, p. 54). This suggests that attitudes to drunkenness may be changing before and without government intervention. If the late 1980s and early 1990s saw ecstasy as “the cultural signifier of a generation” (Shapiro, 1999, p. 23) and the mid 1990s saw the resurgence of licensed leisure, it is perhaps no surprise to see a diversification away from such predominantly alcohol-based leisure, as each generation attempts to distinguish itself pharmacologically as well as stylistically from the generation before. The irony is that whilst “binge drinking used to be a mostly Anglo-Saxon thing ... now it’s sweeping Europe from Malmo to

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Madrid” (McAllister, 2008), at a time when evidence is emerging that it may no longer be the “British disease”. This does not mean that British youth are approaching their late teens in a state of pharmacological Puritanism, however.

The reasons for growing numbers of twenty-first century abstainers may relate in part to the changing socio-demographic composition of British secondary school children with growing numbers from minority ethnic and religious groups who have significantly lower levels of alcohol use than the general population, particularly those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin (Goddard, 2006). This is reflected in longitudinal schools surveys which suggest that membership of certain minority ethnic and religious groups may act as a protective factor at least in the teenage years (Parker *et al.*, 1998). It is unlikely however that this would explain the magnitude of this polarisation of young people into heavy drinkers and abstainers.

Early indications of a downward turn in consumption by young people are evident in the national SDD schools survey, the General Household Survey and the European ESPAD schools survey, not only in Britain but also in other countries with previous high alcohol consumption such as Denmark. This suggests that the broader socio-economic and cultural context to changing patterns of consumption deserve detailed consideration (and certainly more than space here allows). What is evident is that we are seeing the development of cities based on consumption-oriented leisure (although not without some resistance, see Hadfield, 2006) focused on instant gratification and the right to pleasure, based on “a culture of terminal dissatisfaction” (Hayward, 2004, p. 174. See also Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Young people face limited access to private accommodation with growing numbers financially dependent on their parents into adulthood, resulting in limited private social space, whilst facing exclusion from licensed premises, greater surveillance on the streets and a host of restrictions in public space from playing ball games to wearing “hoodies”[9] and also drinking alcohol. The Positive Futures survey, for example, found that the streets and local parks was the most usual drinking place for 32 per cent of ten to 19 year olds (Talbot and Crabbe, 2008). Research with 98 street drinkers aged 16-25 found a general awareness and concern about the risks of such street drinking in terms of health, safety and victimisation, but it was the under 18s who felt excessively targeted by police intervention (Galloway *et al.*, 2007). This resulted in the displacement of underage drinking to less visible, more isolated and therefore potentially more dangerous outdoor locations. Given that most street drinkers saw outdoor drinking as “a forced choice resulting from exclusion from indoor drinking locations” (Galloway *et al.*, 2007, p. 104), some respondents called for the provision of indoor drinking locations, access to pubs through the reduction of the legal drinking age to 16 or even its complete abolition.

The evidence of effectiveness of school-based alcohol education programmes is at best marginal (e.g. Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2006; Foxcroft *et al.*, 1997) leading to a focus on environment-based harm minimisation strategies (Graham *et al.*, 2004; Homel *et al.*, 2004; Measham, 2006) alongside fiscal initiatives (Stockwell, 2006). Licensed premises were previously places where young people learnt sensible consumption under the watchful eye of elders and underage drinkers in particular were keenly aware that their presence in such premises was conditional on not attracting unwanted attention. Instead a key priority in terms of harm minimisation is the provision of safe social spaces for young people who are increasingly excluded from

licensed premises and who face increased regulation, criminalisation and public humiliation on the streets. This was recognised in the announcement by the incumbent Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, at his inaugural Labour Party conference speech (September 2007) of the introduction of a host of new youth centres.

### Conclusion

The 2000s could be characterised as the calm after the storm in terms of young people's drinking. By and large the millennium has seen the turning of the tide in terms of the practices and preferences of intoxication in the wake of enormous changes to the drinks and leisure industries, the night time economy, the regulation of leisure in the last 15 years and in the roles and realities of life for young people growing up in today's uncertain times. Concerns about young people's drinking arose out of certain changes in drinking attitudes and behaviours, in particular increased sessional consumption of alcohol and the pursuit of determined drunkenness. Whilst it appears that some of the most dramatic increases of the 1990s have now diminished, it is not yet clear whether the most recent figures represent the beginning of a significant downturn in consumption, nor why this might be occurring. Stricter serving practices in both on and off licensed premises, increased regulation of outdoor space and a reduction in promotional and retail practices which might appeal to under 18s might all have played a part, along with a cultural reaction against the worst excesses of the binge drinking phenomenon and a related reticence to report heavy consumption. However, indicators that young adult consumption is also levelling off suggest that the frenzied alcohol-oriented leisure of recent years has run its course. Whilst the government, public health and drinks industries may claim success for their ongoing anti binge drinking and anti drunkenness campaigns, the turning tide was evident before this.

Underlying this note of optimism, however, is a concern for the minority of young people whose sessional consumption remains at high levels and who are consequently exposed to greater risks in terms of not only their own health but also through their drinking environment. Young people's drinking has to be contextualised in the changing nature of their relationship to public space and their greater reliance on others for access to alcohol. With the privatisation of some public space and the increased regulation and criminalisation of young people's low level disorder, public drinking and "anti social behaviour" (Squires, 2008), there are fewer choices for young people to socialise together away from the parental home without surveillance. Thus whilst the spectacle of conspicuous consumption of alcohol by young people is becoming less apparent: whether young people retreat into their own and others' homes, or to more isolated and possibly more dangerous open spaces is not yet apparent. The irony is that government policy to reduce underage drinking may have the perverse effect of accelerating the aforementioned polarisation process and turning today's persistent young drinkers into tomorrow's furtive heavy drinkers.

### Notes

1. The impact of increased alcohol consumption since the post war years is evident in alcohol-related mortality statistics. For example, the number of deaths due to alcoholic liver disease has been steadily rising in the UK over the last 50 years at a time when deaths due to alcoholic liver disease have been falling elsewhere in Western Europe due to improved diagnosis and treatment. Whilst total recorded alcohol consumption has doubled in the UK

in the period 1960-2002, liver cirrhosis mortality rates rose by 69 per cent in England and Wales in 1987-2001 (Leon and McCambridge, 2006). More recently, according to the Office for National Statistics, in 2004, 4,037 adults died in England and Wales from alcohol liver disease, an increase of 37 per cent in five years when the number of deaths was 2,954 in 1999 (The Information Centre, 2006).

2. The “British disease” of alcohol-related disorder has been alluded to by numerous politicians and commentators including Tony Blair, ex British Prime Minister, in May 2004 when he warned that “as a society we have to make sure that this form of what we often call binge drinking, doesn’t become a British disease” (BBC, 2004. See also Morris, 2004).
3. This might be an underestimate of standard units of alcohol consumed for various methodological reasons. For example, a bottle of “alcopops” or ready-to-drink spirit mixer in the SDD is counted as only one standard unit of alcohol whereas the General Household Survey more accurately calculates it as 1.5 units (Goddard, 2006, pp. 88-89). Recently, it was deemed necessary to update the formula for the calculation of standard units of alcohol contained in alcoholic beverages in order to reflect the increased strength of many alcoholic beverages and also the greater variation in quantities sold in British licensed premises in recent years (Goddard, 2007). The application of this updated conversion factor to national alcohol consumption data results in an increased average weekly consumption of 26 per cent for men and 45 per cent for women, in part due to women’s greater consumption of wine and alcopops whose strength was most consistently underestimated previously. Consequently “much higher proportions of men and women will be perceived as drinking more than is recommended” (Goddard, 2007, p. 15). Other groups whose weekly consumption was previously underestimated using the outdated conversion factor are those aged over 25, the managerial and professional socio-economic class and high income households. However, it has been suggested that the calculation of units is a not “very accurate” approximation whose value lies more in assessing changing trends than calculating actual amounts (The Information Centre, 2007:5).
4. Whilst the term alcopops originally was used as shorthand for Australian alcoholic lemonades such as Two Dogs launched in the UK in 1995, the term is now used by alcohol researchers (e.g. Hibell *et al.*, 2004), as well as non statutory and public sector organisations (e.g. Alcohol Concern, 2001; Goddard, 2007), to denote a wide range of flavoured alcoholic beverages (FABs), ready to drink spirit mixers (RTDs) and other new alcoholic beverages which have developed since then. Given the negative press and implication that they were designed to tempt under 18s to drink alcoholic “pop” when they were first launched it is not surprising that the manufacturers and retailers of such drinks distance themselves from the term “alcopops” and prefer terms such as FABs and RTDs.
5. Positive Futures is a national social inclusion programme managed by Crime Concern on behalf of the Home Office which provides sports and leisure activities for young people living in deprived communities.
6. Anti Social Behaviour Orders were introduced as part of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and are court orders most usually instigated by Local Authorities or the police which prohibit people from engaging in certain named behaviours deemed to be problematic in some way, for a minimum of two years. Similar to a civil injunction, they are civil rather than criminal orders, however breach of an ASBO is a criminal offence.
7. The Portman Group, established in 1989, is an association whose members include UK alcoholic beverage producers which aims to promote social responsibility issues in the alcohol industry. It introduced a Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic Drinks in 1996. The 4th Edition of this Code of Practice came into effect in January 2008 following a consultation in 2006.

8. The British Beer and Pub Association represents the UK brewing companies and the licensed and off license retail sectors of the alcohol industry. There is some overlap in membership of the Portman Group and BBPA.
9. A "hoodie" is a sweatshirt with integral hood, popular with some young men. Given that it restricts visibility of the wearer's face, it has come to be associated with the wearer wishing to avoid identification (for example, if engaged in anti social or criminal behaviour) and thus has been seen as a symbol of the social exclusion of working class and minority ethnic young men. The anxiety surrounding the hoodie reached a peak with the banning of shoppers from wearing them at Bluewater shopping centre in 2005 and subsequently, the reintegration of socially excluded young men in the suggestion by Conservative Party leader David Cameron in his 2006 speech that the hoodie was worn as much for defensive as offensive reasons, later satorised by the Labour Party as the Conservative "hug a hoodie" campaign.

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