

Drinking patterns and violent behaviour amongst young people in England and Wales, secondary analysis of the Offending Crime and Justice Survey

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**SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar
Thursday 19th December 2013, The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to support the lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. All of the seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. These events provide the chance for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme for the seminars is "Alcohol and Young People". Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes of the presentations and discussions and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Context and purpose of the research

In her PhD research, Lightowlers had analysed data about alcohol and violence from the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), an annual Home Office survey conducted between 2003 and 2006 in England and Wales, which attempted to measure the prevalence of offending and drug use in the general

population. Lightowlers had focused on young people aged between 16 and 29. She explained that she had been particularly interested in the mediating role of social and cultural attitudes in drinking and violent behaviour.

Reasons for drinking

Lightowlers argued that young people learn about drinking behaviour from a range of influences, including the people around them. She suggested that we should consider how and why people adopt distinct attitudes, depending upon the context and with whom they are drinking.

Lightowlers categorised the survey respondents as 'social drinkers', 'positively motivated drinkers' or 'problematic drinkers', based on how they described why they drank by selecting from a series of pre-set answers. Although 'problematic drinkers' tended to indicate that they drank to get drunk, or to forget about problems, others indicated that they simply enjoyed drinking, because it made them feel relaxed.

The relationship between alcohol use and violent behaviour

From this study, the types of violence specifically associated with frequent drinkers seemed to be outdoors interpersonal assault, e.g. public violence between strangers, kicking,

punching and pushing, particularly in nightlife settings when alcohol had been consumed.

Several audience members suggested that attitudes valorising violent behaviour, for example, by young males are found outside drinking contexts. For example, there are pervasive messages in some magazines targeted at young men.

Lightowlers suggested that drinking per se does not necessarily make violence more likely to happen; rather, increased risks of violence and severity of incidents may be associated with drinking contexts and different drinking patterns, including 'binge' drinking. Factors influencing the alcohol-violence relationship also include social and cultural contexts, e.g. the influence of family, friends and peers. Lightowlers' research suggested that the more young respondents drank, the more likely they were to engage in violent behaviour. However, the young people who drank a lot and became involved in violent behaviour might also have done this at times other than when they had been drinking.

Lightowlers stressed that although she had found a concurrence between drinking and violent behaviour, this was a minority pursuit and caution must be taken in order not to demonise and stigmatise

certain groups, and in particular, young drinking males. There was a noticeable pattern that young men were more likely than young women to engage in violent behaviour around the age of 18. However, after this, the difference between males and females decreased with age.

It was also noted that young men are prone to becoming victims as well as perpetrators of violence.

Implications for policy and practice

It was argued that the concurrence between increased drinking and violent behaviours meant that prompt interventions were necessary. Appropriate responses needed to be framed within both public health and criminal justice contexts. A health intervention approach which simply told young people not to drink because of health harms, would be insufficient and in criminal justice settings, it was

felt that there was a need to raise the profile of alcohol interventions, just as there was already a focus on other drugs. It was also proposed that attitudes towards violence, as well as attitudes towards drinking alcohol should be the focus for interventions.

The theory of 'pluralistic ignorance', whereby a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but assume incorrectly that most others accept it, could help in structuring interventions. There are, for example, young males who are individually uncomfortable with certain behaviours (e.g. towards violence and / or drinking), but who think incorrectly that such behaviours are broadly accepted amongst their peers. Changing such perceptions might conceivably lead to changed behaviours.

The discussion highlighted that the relationship between alcohol use and

violent behaviour is multi-faceted and dynamic. The same young people who describe themselves as problematic drinkers also experience many of what they regard as benefits in drinking alcohol. However, we must avoid over-individualising problems. Some young people who indicated that they drank to forget about problems might actually experience daily struggles, linked, for example to social deprivation. Population level measures to reduce structural social and economic inequalities will also reduce heavier drinking in poorer youth populations.

Further research is needed to interrogate all of these complex areas. However, Lightowlers lamented the fact that the survey had been discontinued in 2007 and that, as far as she was aware, there were no other similar national surveys in the UK.



Royal College of
Physicians of Edinburgh

SHAAP/SARN Alcohol Occasionals

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are delighted to announce the start of a series of lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars to showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use.

All the seminars will be run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and will take place from 12.30–14.00 at their historic premises at 9 Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JQ. Lunch will be provided.

These events will provide the chance for researchers, practitioners and policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice.

FORTHCOMING OCCASIONALS

Effecting multilevel change through dialogue: experiences of teenage project leaders in The AlcoLOLs project – 24th April 2014

Dr Magda Pieczka & Emma Wood (Queen Margaret University)

Alcohol Marketing and Young People – 26th June 2014

Dr. Richard I. Purves (University of Stirling)

Important: Places for all events are strictly limited and we need you to confirm if you would like to attend these events. You can do this by emailing Anne-Marie Barry shaap@rcpe.ac.uk to confirm. If you have not booked you will not have a place.

If you are interested in presenting your own research, please get in touch with us at shaap@rcpe.ac.uk.