

Drinking behaviour among young people in Northern Ireland

Secondary analysis of alcohol
data from 1997 to 2003



Irish Temperance League



**Health
Promotion
Agency**

Drinking behaviour among young people in Northern Ireland

Secondary analysis of alcohol
data from 1997 to 2003



Health
Promotion
Agency

Foreword

The Irish Temperance League was founded in the 1850s specifically to counter the abuse of alcohol. Its aim was primarily prevention rather than cure. At different times in its history, the League has employed advisory staff, established tea shops and coffee bars as counter-attractions to public houses, organised music and art festivals, supported youth clubs and football teams as ways of providing healthy entertainment, and it has also engaged in education activities.

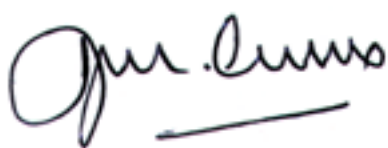
In the century and a half since the organisation was founded, the problem of alcohol abuse has remained unabated, while the growing problem of illicit drug use has added another pressure to young people's lives. Meanwhile, the League's cafes and unlicensed hotel have closed, and, largely because of the lure of alternative forms of entertainment, its sporting and other events have also been discontinued.

Changing times require new ways of working; however, the directors of the League remain as committed as ever to working to counter the detrimental effects of alcohol abuse on society. Currently, the League's policy is to use its financial resources to encourage organisations working with vulnerable young people by providing grant aid.

As in all areas of health and healing, there can be no cure without a proper understanding of the disease. Accordingly, research has always been another of the League's objectives. In order to ensure that interventions are being targeted at the right people, it is important to know as much as possible about who drinks and why. A number of recent surveys carried out with young people in Northern Ireland have explored this aspect of social life, and the League therefore decided to fund the Health Promotion Agency to look more closely at the information gathered in them. The results of this secondary analysis form the basis of this report.

The HPA always tries to ensure that resources are directed to areas and populations where the need is greatest. Public health interventions and initiatives should always be based on best practice, and to achieve this, we need information from surveys and research. Secondary analysis makes effective use of research data and enables a clearer focus on particular groups in the population. This report provides important information about the use of alcohol among young people.

It is hoped that this report will assist those directly involved in working with young people and alcohol to maximise their effectiveness, and also help them to use their resources to best advantage.



Mr Jim Currie
Chairman
Irish Temperance League



Dr Brian Gaffney
Chief Executive
Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland

Contents

Page

List of tables6

List of figures7

Introduction8

The analysis9

Aim9

Objectives.....9

Method9

The surveys9

Methodology for the original surveys.....10

Sample10

Validating the sample.....10

Statistical analysis and presentation of results10

Experimentation with alcohol11

Abstinence levels11

Age of first trying alcohol12

Just trying it out?.....13

Current drinkers and frequency of drinking13

Who are the regular drinkers?.....15

Prevalence of drunkenness17

Recent experience of drunkenness19

Choice of drink19

Consumption20

Access to alcohol and drinking company21

How do young people get their alcohol?21

Drinking settings: where do young people drink?23

Drinking company.....24

Why young people drink26

Reasons for drinking26

Gender differences27

	Page
Education and awareness of risks	29
Education on alcohol and drugs	29
Perception of risk	29
Risk of alcohol compared to other substances	30
Drinking and other risk-taking behaviours	32
Smoking	32
Drugs	32
Solvents	33
Sexual behaviour	33
Psychosocial factors: drinking and mental wellbeing	34
Self-esteem and school experiences	34
Satisfaction with life	35
Perceptions of health	35
Parental strictness	36
Communication	36
Other impacts of drinking	39
Discussion	40
Experimentation and regular drinking	40
Choice of drink	41
Access to alcohol	41
Education	42
Reasons for drinking	42
Risk	42
Types of drinker	42
Communication	43
Future research	44
References	45
Appendix 1: profile and validation of the sample	47
Sample profile	47
Data validation	47

List of tables

Page

Table 1:	Response rate for each survey	10
Table 2:	Percentage of young people reporting ever having drunk alcohol	11
Table 3:	Age of first drink for those who have ever had a drink.....	12
Table 4:	Number of times young people reported having drunk alcohol (2003 survey only)	13
Table 5:	How often young people drink (for those who had ever drunk alcohol)	13
Table 6:	Current drinking behaviour	15
Table 7:	Gender changes in drinking behaviour.....	15
Table 8:	Profile of young people drinking regularly by class year, gender and socioeconomic status	16
Table 9:	Age of first drink for those who have ever had a drink and those who are regular drinkers....	17
Table 10:	Number of times young people have been drunk (for those who had ever drunk alcohol) ..	17
Table 11:	Profile of those who reported being drunk at least once.....	18
Table 12:	Profile of young people who had been drunk 4 times or more (2003 survey only)	19
Table 13:	Choice of drink for those who currently drink.....	19
Table 14:	Choice of drink by age group (2000 survey only)	20
Table 15:	Source of first alcoholic drink.....	21
Table 16:	Source of most recent alcoholic drink	22
Table 17:	Source of most recent alcoholic drink by drinking behaviour (all three years)	22
Table 18:	Sources where young people had purchased alcohol	22
Table 19:	Percentage of young people who had purchased alcohol themselves (2003 survey only) ..	23
Table 20:	Location where young people had their first drink	23
Table 21:	Location where young people had their most recent drink.....	24
Table 22:	Location where young people had their most recent drink by drinking behaviour (2003 survey only)	24
Table 23:	Company in which young people had their most recent drink by drinking behaviour (2003 survey only)	25
Table 24:	Reasons young people give for drinking	26
Table 25:	Top five reasons young people give for drinking for each survey year	26
Table 26:	Reasons young people give for drinking by gender	27
Table 27:	Top five reasons young people give for drinking in 1997 and 2003 by gender	28
Table 28:	Reasons young people give for drinking by drinking behaviour.....	28
Table 29:	Young people's sources of information about drugs and alcohol	29
Table 30:	Effect of alcohol education on inclination to drink less alcohol	29
Table 31:	Perceived risk of different drinking patterns by drinking behaviour.....	30
Table 32:	Perceived risk of different behaviours.....	31

	Page
Table 33: Perceived risk of different behaviours by drinking behaviour	31
Table 34: Prevalence of smoking by drinking behaviour.....	32
Table 35: Prevalence of drug use by drinking behaviour (excludes solvents)	32
Table 36: Prevalence of solvent use by drinking behaviour	33
Table 37: Experience of sexual intercourse by drinking behaviour.....	33
Table 38: Use of contraception among those who have had sexual intercourse by drinking behaviour	33
Table 39: Perceived pressure of school work by drinking behaviour and gender	35
Table 40: Days truant by drinking behaviour and gender.....	35
Table 41: Satisfaction with life by drinking behaviour and gender.....	35
Table 42: Perception of health by drinking behaviour and gender	36
Table 43: Perception of parental strictness by drinking behaviour and gender	36
Table 44: Ease of communication with father by drinking behaviour and gender	37
Table 45: Ease of communication with mother by drinking behaviour and gender	37
Table 46: Ease of communication with same-sex friends by drinking behaviour and gender	37
Table 47: Ease of communication with friends of the opposite sex by drinking behaviour and gender.....	38
Table 48: Perceived ease of making new friends by drinking behaviour and gender	38
Table 49: Prevalence of getting into trouble for drinking	39
Table 50: Prevalence of antisocial activities by drinking behaviour	39
Table 51: Demographic profiles of respondents to the surveys	47
Table 52: Population demographics from the school census compared to each survey	48

List of figures

	Page
Figure 1: Questions used to examine frequency of drinking	14

Introduction

Young people are more vulnerable than adults to suffering physical, emotional and social harm from their own and other people's drinking. There are strong links between high risk drinking and unsafe sexual behaviour, traffic and other accidents, unintended pregnancy, failure at school and mental health problems.¹ In the context of these associated problems, young people's alcohol consumption is considered either as a health risk behaviour or a problem behaviour.^{2,3} Others, however, have emphasised that experimentation with alcohol among young people is part of an anticipatory socialisation process.^{4,5} Experimental and moderate alcohol consumption by the majority of young people has therefore been considered by some as functional behaviour in terms of demonstrating the acquisition of adult status.^{6,7}

Adolescence is the period when more and more young people begin drinking alcohol and, as they get older, increase their consumption in terms of how much and how often they drink.⁸ There is a lack of longitudinal UK data; however, surveys of successive birth cohorts, such as the Health Behaviour of School Children (HBSC), offer evidence of these changes in drinking levels by age groups.⁹ Late adolescence appears to be the period of most excessive use.¹⁰ Although many young people show heavier alcohol use during this period, this behaviour is not necessarily maintained when they make the transition into adulthood. Studies have shown both continuity and discontinuity in drinking behaviour.¹¹

Some studies still show the traditional pattern of alcohol use where male adolescents drink on average more frequently and more excessively than female adolescents.¹² However, several other studies indicate that girls have been catching up with their male counterparts and similar findings have been reported for Northern Ireland.^{13,14}

In their *Declaration on Young People and Alcohol* in 2001, the World Health Organization highlights that the globalisation of media and markets is increasingly shaping young people's perceptions, choices and behaviours.¹⁵ Many young people today have greater opportunities and more disposable income than in the past, and are more vulnerable to increasingly aggressive sales and marketing techniques. The WHO document identifies the main trends globally as greater experimentation and increases in more high risk patterns of binge drinking (heavy drinking episodes) and drunkenness, and in the combination of alcohol with other illicit drugs.

The earliest reported data on young people's drinking behaviour in Northern Ireland date from 1988, when 37% of pupils aged between 11 and 16 were defined as drinkers. By 1994 this figure had risen to 52%.⁹ Several surveys have taken place since, but as the questions and definition of drinker appear to have varied with each survey, the data cannot be reliably compared.

One question that has not varied is the question "Have you ever been drunk?", which has been asked each time of all those who have tried alcohol. The number of young people responding yes to this question increased from just under a third in 1992 to well over half (55%) in 2003. Although not 100% reliable, this gives us an indication of a possible change in drinking behaviour over the last 10 years among our young people and a trend towards more risky patterns of drinking. It is necessary to identify and monitor drinking patterns among young people in order to help provide evidence of where or with whom interventions are most needed. This evidence should also help direct the development of policies and initiatives, and better inform the work of professionals and policy makers dealing with the issue of young people's drinking.

A number of surveys have taken place over the last 10 years looking at alcohol use among children of post-primary school age. This report brings together some of the findings from three of the major and most recent surveys, the 1997 Health Behaviour of School Children survey (HBSC) and the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Surveys (YPBAS) for 2000 and 2003.

The analysis

Aim

To describe and compare young people's drinking behaviour between 1997 and 2003 through secondary analysis of the Health Behaviour of School Children survey (1997) and the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Surveys (2000 and 2003).

Objectives

- To ascertain the prevalence of drinking among children of post-primary school age and report any change from 1997 to 2003.
- To identify the average age of first drink, from whom and where it was obtained, and report any change from 1997 to 2003.
- To explore current drinking behaviour, for those who drink; and if possible, types of alcohol drunk and consumption over a typical week.
- To ascertain the proportion of young people who have ever been drunk, the frequency, and whether this has changed since 1997.
- To identify reasons why young people drink.
- To ascertain young people's level of knowledge about the health effects of drinking.
- To cross analyse drinking behaviour with other lifestyle factors, such as smoking, drug taking and sexual behaviour.
- To cross analyse this with other psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, stress, communication, feelings about school, home and relationships.

Method

The information presented in this report comes from three sources: the 1997 Health Behaviour of School Children survey (HBSC), the 2000 Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) and the 2003 YPBAS. All three surveys have aimed to gain new insight into, and increased understanding of, the health behaviours and lifestyles of young people and their context. In each year, topics such as use of alcohol, smoking, drugs, sexual behaviour and mental wellbeing have been covered.

The data relating to alcohol have been selected and analysed in order to provide an overview of alcohol use among school children in Northern Ireland. We have also examined use of alcohol in relation to other risk taking behaviours (smoking, drugs and sexual behaviour) and looked at the links between mental wellbeing and alcohol use.

Since respondents range from Year 8 to Year 12 pupils, spanning the most formative years of early adolescence, the data have been analysed by school year (age) and gender in order to explore variations between the experiences of boys and girls, and between different age groups.

The surveys

The Health Behaviour of School Children (HBSC) survey is a unique cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the European Region of the World Health Organization (WHO). The study involves extensive quantitative data collection from a representative sample of 11-15 year olds every three to four years. The 1997/1998 HBSC survey was carried out in 26 European countries, as well as the USA and Canada. In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) administered the study.

The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) was commissioned by a consortium of government departments and public bodies to gather information about the behaviour and attitudes of young people towards a range of different topics. These included school, nutrition, sports, smoking, alcohol, solvents, drugs, policing, personal safety, sexual experience and knowledge, relationships, the

environment, and travelling to school. The surveys were administered by NISRA. The health behaviour sections of YPBAS are based on a range of questions from the HBSC. In addition, the sampling methodology for both surveys is identical and so it is possible to compare 1997 HBSC data with YPBAS data from 2000 and 2003.

Methodology for the original surveys (HBSC and YPBAS)

A self-completion questionnaire was administered to over 6,000 post-primary school children in Northern Ireland. In the majority of schools surveyed, five year groups (ie Forms 1-5/Years 8-12) were sampled. A few schools requested that sections containing questions referring to sexual matters be omitted from the questionnaire for one or more year groups.

Sample

A random sample of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, representative of the range of school sizes, selection types (ie secondary, grammar), management groups (ie controlled, voluntary etc) and Education and Library Board areas, was drawn from a list held by the Department of Education. One class from each year group was randomly selected to take part.

Table 1: Response rate for each survey

	1997	2000	2003
Number of pupils responding	5,607	6,297	7,223
Response rate	>80% [†]	85%	89%

[†] exact figure not available

Validating the sample

The demographics of the samples achieved for each survey are shown in the appendix (page 47). It should be noted that in all three samples boys are overrepresented and girls are underrepresented in many age groups. A weighting factor comprising age and gender has been applied to correct this (see the appendix for details).

Statistical analysis and presentation of results

All results are analysed by survey year. Where the three surveys do not have comparable information or where question structure has varied between surveys, this is clearly stated in the text and at individual tables. If applicable, results are further analysed by school year (which acts as a proxy for age group), gender and free school meal uptake (which acts as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status).

Results tables contain mean percentages; however, because of rounding, percentages in each column or row may not total 100 within a survey year. Base numbers are included in all tables to indicate the number (n) of respondents on which percentages are based.

Tables present the overall mean and, where required, the mean by respondents' school year, gender, free school meal uptake and drinking status.

The Chi-square statistical test was employed to test for associations between groups within the data as well as across the three survey years, unless otherwise indicated. Statistically significant findings are shown where appropriate and three levels of significance are present, ie p<0.05, p<0.01, p<0.001. For instance, if a finding is significant at the p<0.05 level it would be expected in a similar population 95 times out of 100. Levels of significance are denoted in tables by asterisks – * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. NS on tables denotes that results are not significant.

Experimentation with alcohol

All young people who took part in the surveys were asked if they had ever tried an alcoholic drink. Comparisons for the three years are shown below (Table 2). It is important to note that the question in the 1997 HBSC survey asked “Have you ever tasted an alcoholic drink?” while the 2000 and 2003 surveys reworded this question to “Have you ever taken an alcoholic drink (not just a taste or sip)?”; therefore, the number of young people responding ‘yes’ to this will be far greater for 1997.

Essentially, we can only really compare the data from the 2000 and 2003 surveys; however, 1997 survey results are included as they give an indication of the demographic patterns of experimenting with alcohol.

Abstinence levels

The latest results from the 2003 survey show that 41% of young people aged between 11 and 16 had never taken an alcoholic drink. Abstinence decreases substantially with age, so that by the age of 16 only 19% have never had a drink. There is little difference in the levels of abstinence between the 2000 and 2003 surveys.

Table 2: Percentage of young people reporting ever having drunk alcohol

	1997 [†] %	Sig (p) within groups	2000 %	Sig (p) within groups	2003 %	Sig (p) within groups	Sig (p) across years
All	79	n/a	57	n/a	59	n/a	***
School year		***		***		***	
Year 8	56		25		29		***
Year 9	73		44		47		***
Year 10	85		59		59		***
Year 11	89		73		75		***
Year 12	93		83		81		***
Base	5,550		6,235		7,065		
Gender		***		***		NS	
Boys	82		60		59		***
Girls	76		54		58		***
Base	5,549		6,230		7,064		
Entitled to free school meals		***		NS		***	
Yes	76		59		63		***
No	80		56		58		***
Base	5,237		6,090		7,050		

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

Table 2 shows that in 1997, 79% of the sample of 11 to 16 year olds had tried an alcoholic drink; however, this would have included those who may just have had a sip or a taste. In 2000 when young people were asked if they had taken a drink (not just a taste or sip), well over half (57%) had taken a drink. This rose slightly by two percentage points to 59% in 2003.

Young people become significantly ($p < 0.001$) more likely to have tried alcohol as they get older. The greatest increase occurs between Year 8 and Year 9 in school (between the ages of 11 and 13), suggesting that interventions or education about alcohol should begin at or before the first year of post-primary school.

Traditionally boys are more likely than girls to drink alcohol, and indeed there was a significant difference between boys and girls trying a drink in 1997 and 2000. By 2003, however, while the prevalence of experimental drinking among boys remained similar to that in 2000, a four percentage point increase occurs for the proportion of girls trying a drink. This increase in girls starting to drink has made the difference between the genders non significant (59% of boys had tried a drink compared with 58% of girls) in 2003. In 1997 and again in 2003, those with entitlement to free school meals were significantly more likely than others to have experimented with alcohol.

Overall, similar trends were observed within each survey year. These include increasing numbers of older children reporting having tried alcohol, and more boys than girls reporting having tried alcohol, although this gap appears to be narrowing. It could be suggested from this data that the slight overall increase in drinking prevalence observed between 2000 and 2003 could be attributed to the observed increase in young female drinkers.

These data relate only to those who reported ever having had an alcoholic drink and are not a reflection of the numbers of young people who are regular drinkers. As previously noted, trying alcohol is a natural occurrence in many young people’s lives, and is considered by some as functional behaviour in terms of transition to adulthood. Experimentation will not necessarily develop into regular drinking.

Age of first trying alcohol

All those who had ever had a drink were asked at what age they first tried alcohol. Figures for 1997 are included but, as before, care must be taken as these data include those who had had just a taste or a sip, whereas in 2000 and 2003 these people are not included. This information is reflected in the higher percentages of those under 11 who reported taking alcohol in 1997 in comparison to 2000 and 2003. From the results it appears that the most common time to begin drinking is between 11 and 14 years of age. The mean age for taking the first alcoholic drink remained fairly constant throughout the three surveys at around 11 years of age.

Table 3: Age of first drink for those who have ever had a drink

	1997 [†]	2000	2003
Mean age in years	11.5	11.8	11.9
	%	%	%
Under 7	6	4	3
8	3	2	2
9	6	3	3
10	13	7	7
11	15	13	12
12	20	16	17
13	17	15	16
14	12	11	11
15	5	4	5
16	1	1	1
Don't know	3	25	26
Base	4,384	3,548	4,107

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

Just trying it out?

When does a young person move from just “trying it out to find out what it is like” to adopting drinking as part of their lifestyle? The 2003 survey investigated this issue in greater depth by asking how many times respondents had ever had an alcoholic drink. Table 4 illustrates that, of the 4,109 young people who had reported ever having a drink, over 10% of this group had only drunk alcohol once in their life, suggesting that they were simply trying it out. However over 4 in 10 young people (44%) had drunk alcohol more than 10 times, and over a quarter (26%) reported having an alcoholic drink 25 times or more. This would suggest that, for at least a quarter, their drinking has moved from experimenting with alcohol to being part of their lifestyle.

Table 4: Number of times young people reported having drunk alcohol (2003 survey only)

	2003 %
Once	11
Twice	10
3 times	11
4-10 times	25
11-24 times	18
25 times or more	26
Base	4,109

Current drinkers and frequency of drinking

To investigate young people’s patterns of drinking further, all those who had ever tried alcohol were asked how often they drink it now. This provides data on how frequently young people are drinking and also helps establish whether they were “trying it out” or adopting it as a regular lifestyle behaviour. Table 5 presents these findings across the three surveys (note that the choice of answers provided in 2003 differed slightly from those offered in the previous surveys).

Table 5: How often young people drink (for those who had ever drunk alcohol)

	1997 [†] %	2000 %	2003 answer choices	2003 %
Every day	2	3	Daily	2
Every week	27	33	A few times a week	12
Every month	21	24	A few times a month	28
Rarely	40	33	A few times a year/rarely	37
Never (now)	10	8	Not any more	22
Base	4,249	3,459		4,083

[†]includes those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

It would be informative to examine change over time; however, comparison across the three surveys proves difficult. The 2003 data vary considerably from those collected in the previous two surveys. In 2003 just over one fifth of those who had tried a drink reported not drinking any more; this figure is less than 10% for both 1997 and 2000. It also appears that drinking frequency has declined by 2003, suggesting that while the proportions of those who drink are remaining steady, the frequency of their drinking may be less.

The style of question used to collect data on drinking frequency changed considerably in the last of the three surveys (see Figure 1 for the questions). In 1997 and 2000 young people were asked how often they drink particular types of drinks at present and a composite variable for frequency of drinking any alcohol was derived. In 2003 they were simply asked how often they drink alcohol at present.

The analysis is further complicated by the variation in the answer categories (see Figure 1). So for example, in 2000 a child who drank alcohol once a week would fall into the “every week” category, whereas in 2003 their answer may have been recorded as “a few times a month”. This would explain why the proportions of those drinking with greater regularity (weekly or more frequently) have fallen from 36% in 2000 to 14% in 2003. Overall, however, the proportion of young people who report drinking every day has remained quite stable at around 2%.

As a result of these discrepancies, the findings vary quite considerably. The greatest variation occurs with those who have tried alcohol but do not currently drink. In 2003 the proportion of those who have tried a drink and say they do not drink any more (22%) is considerably greater than in previous years (less than 10%). This would suggest that – unusually – more of those children in 2003 who had tried alcohol had never tried it again or that the wording of the question and answer categories has affected the accuracy of the response and levels of possible underreporting; unfortunately there is no way of knowing which style of question is giving more reliable data.

Figure 1: Questions used to examine frequency of drinking
Question used in HBSC 1997 and YPBAS 2000

At present, how often do you drink anything alcoholic, such as beer, wine, cider, alcopops, or spirits like gin, vodka, whiskey? Try to include even those times when you only drink a small amount.

	Every day	Every week	Every month	Rarely	Never
Beer/lager/stout	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spirits, eg whiskey, gin, vodka, (excluding spirit based mixers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cider	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alcopops or alcoholic lemonade	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spirit based mixers (eg Bacardi Breezer, Smirnoff Ice, Martini V2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Question used in YPBAS 2003

At present, how often do you drink anything alcoholic, such as beer, wine, cider, alcopops, or spirits like gin, vodka, whiskey? Try to include even those times when you only drink a small amount.

	Daily	A few times a week	A few times a month	A few times a year	Rarely	Not any more
Presently I drink alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

To help clarify this further, we have classified the respondents into new drinking status categories depending on if they drink regularly (once a month or more often), occasionally (less than once a month), had tried a drink but don't drink any more, or had never tried a drink.

Table 6: Current drinking behaviour

	1997 [†] %	2000 %	2003 %
Regular drinker	40	34	24
Occasional drinker	32	19	21
Don't drink any more	7	4	13
Never tried a drink	22	44	42
Base	5,414	6,146	6,999

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

It can be seen that the proportion of regular drinkers in the sample has dropped from 40% in 1997 to 34% in 2000, and again to 24% in 2003 (although as previously mentioned in 2003 drinking may be underreported). The higher proportion in the "occasional drinker" category in 1997 is most likely related to the inclusion of those young people who may have had even a taste or sip of alcohol being included in this year in contrast to 2000 and 2003 data.

The number of young people who could be classified as regular drinkers fell by 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2003. This is further highlighted by the fact that only 4% of young people in 2000 had tried alcohol but now were classified as current non-drinkers while 13% of young people in 2003 were current non-drinkers.

This might suggest that, while increasing numbers of young people are trying alcohol, they are not necessarily continuing experimentation to any extent; however, we cannot be conclusive in saying that.

Previously we observed that there has been an increase in the number of girls starting to drink, making the traditional difference between the genders negligible and now statistically non-significant. Examining current drinking by gender shows that in 1997 and 2000 boys were more likely than girls to be regular drinkers, and less likely to abstain; however, in 2003 boys and girls appear in almost identical proportions for all drinking categories.

Table 7: Gender changes in drinking behaviour

	1997 [†]		2000		2003	
	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %
Regular drinker	43	36	35	32	25	24
Occasional drinker	32	32	20	18	21	21
Don't drink anymore	7	8	5	4	13	12
Never tried a drink	19	24	41	47	41	42
Base	2,752	2,662	3,113	3,027	3,526	3,473

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

Who are the regular drinkers?

It is important to identify who the regular drinkers are in a young population so that interventions or education programmes can be properly targeted. Table 8 presents a profile of those classified as regular drinkers.

Table 8: Profile of young people drinking regularly by school year, gender and socioeconomic status

	1997 %	Sig (p) within groups	2000 %	Sig (p) within groups	2003 %	Sig (p) within groups	Sig (p) [†] across years
% of whole sample drinking monthly or more often	40	n/a	34	n/a	24	n/a	***
Base	5,414		6,146		6,999		
School year		***		***		***	
Year 8	13		8		5		***
Year 9	27		20		12		***
Year 10	41		30		20		***
Year 11	51		47		35		***
Year 12	65		63		48		***
Base	2,138		2,060		1,706		
Gender		***		***		NS	
Boys	43		35		25		***
Girls	36		32		24		***
Base	2,138		2,059		1,706		
Entitled to free school meals		NS		NS		NS	
Yes	39		34		26		***
No	40		33		24		***
Base	2,012		2,009		1,705		

[†]changes in the statistics across the three survey years should be treated with caution due to the change in question structure in 2003.

Looking at all years, a clear pattern emerges of increasing numbers of young people moving into the current regular drinker category as they get older. This association is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). For example 5% of Year 8 pupils were classified as current regular drinkers in 2003 compared to almost half (48%) of Year 12 pupils.

More boys than girls were classified as current regular drinkers in 1997 and 2000, and once again the association with gender is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The most important factor to note is that the variation in gender has disappeared in 2003, when there is no statistically significant difference in the proportions of boys and girls who are regular drinkers. Socioeconomic status (as measured by entitlement to free school meals) appears to have no bearing on regular drinking.

Table 9 shows that the age at which young people tried their first alcoholic drink is little different for those who now drink regularly than for other young people. It seems that age of first drink is not an indicator for later regular drinking.

Table 9: Age of first drink for those who have ever had a drink and those who are regular drinkers

	1997		2000		2003	
	All [†]	Regular drinkers	All	Regular drinkers	All	Regular drinkers
Mean age in years	11.5	11.2	11.8	11.5	11.9	11.5
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Under 7	6	6	4	4	3	4
8	3	3	2	2	2	3
9	6	6	3	3	3	3
10	13	12	7	7	7	8
11	15	14	13	13	12	11
12	20	21	16	16	17	18
13	17	20	15	16	16	17
14	12	12	11	11	11	10
15	5	4	4	4	5	4
16	1	1	1	<1	1	<1
Don't know	3	2	25	23	26	23
Base	4,384	2,137	3,548	2,062	4,108	1,696

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol.

Prevalence of drunkenness

Asking about drunkenness can provide an indication of the prevalence of dangerous levels of drinking. The term 'being drunk' was not defined for the young people responding to the questionnaire. The definition and understanding of drunkenness will vary between individuals and it is not clear what a young person's interpretation of the term would be – for example, do they understand it as feeling giddy, falling over, being sick or is it an evolving term? Nevertheless, the self reported incidence of being drunk is a reasonable indication of whether or not young people have drunk to dangerous levels, and how often they have done so. In each survey year, all young people who had ever drunk alcohol were asked if they had ever had so much alcohol that they got drunk and if so, how often they had been drunk. Table 10 presents the findings.

Table 10: Number of times young people have been drunk (for those who had ever drunk alcohol)

	1997	2000	2003
	%	%	%
Never been drunk	46	39	45
Yes, once	16	17	18
Yes, 2–3 times	13	17	16
Yes, 4–10 times	10	10	9
Yes, more than 10 times	15	17	13
Base	4,313	3,447	4,078

Fifty four percent of the 1997 sample had been drunk at least once, with 61% reporting having been drunk in 2000 and 55% in 2003. Fewer young people in 2003 report getting drunk repeatedly; however, 13% still reported getting drunk more than 10 times. Table 11 presents a demographic profile of those who reported being drunk at least once.

Table 11: Profile of those who reported being drunk at least once

	1997 %	Sig (p) within groups	2000 %	Sig (p) within groups	2003 %	Sig (p) within groups	Sig (p) across years
All	54		61		55		
School year		***		***		***	
Year 8	23		35		24		***
Year 9	40		43		38		NS
Year 10	50		57		51		***
Year 11	63		65		62		NS
Year 12	77		78		72		***
Base	4,313		3,447		4,078		
Gender		**		NS		NS	
Boys	56		61		55		***
Girls	51		62		56		***
Base	4,313		3,446		4,078		
Entitled to free school meals		***		**		***	
Yes	62		65		61		NS
No	51		60		54		***
Base	4,056		3,364		4,072		

The pattern of drunkenness is identical to that of drinking prevalence. The likelihood of having been drunk increases very significantly with age ($p < 0.001$), eg in 2003 24% of Year 8 pupils who had tried a drink had been drunk at least once compared to 72% in Year 12. Across all three surveys, by Year 12 well over 7 out of 10 young people who have tried alcohol have been drunk.

There is a highly significant difference between boys and girls in 1997, with more boys than girls experiencing being drunk, but as with regular drinking levels this gender difference diminishes over time, so that in the 2000 and 2003 surveys a slightly higher proportion of girls (62% and 56%) have experienced drunkenness than boys (61% and 55%).

Unlike the pattern for drinking prevalence, however, within each survey year there is a statistically significant difference in experiencing drunkenness between socioeconomic groups. Young people who are entitled to free school meals appear to be more likely than their counterparts to have been drunk.

In Table 12, closer examination of those who had been drunk more than four times (22% of all those who had ever had a drink) reveals that they are more likely to be boys and that, as expected, their numbers increase with age. One percent of those who had been drunk more than four times were in Year 8, whereas 52% were in Year 12. There is little variation between those who do or do not receive free school meals with regard to the frequency of getting drunk.

Table 12: Profile of young people who had been drunk 4 times or more (2003 survey only)

	2003 %
School year	
Year 8	1
Year 9	6
Year 10	13
Year 11	28
Year 12	52
Gender	
Boys	57
Girls	43
Base	877

Recent experience of drunkenness

An additional question in 2003 asked all young people who had ever drunk alcohol how many times they had been drunk in the last month. Thirty six percent of this group had not been drunk in the last month; however, just over a quarter reported being drunk once (29%) and 23% had been drunk 2-3 times. A further 8% had been drunk between 4 and 10 times and 3% of young people reported that they had been drunk more than 10 times in the last month.

Choice of drink

Many of the young people surveyed drink more than one type of drink. It is not possible to compare choice of drink across all three survey years, as the questions asked in 2003 only recorded drinks taken in the previous week. However, Table 13 below shows data for 1997 and 2000 and does demonstrate that some notable changes have taken place with regard to drinking preference.

Table 13: Choice of drink for those who currently drink

	1997				2000			
	All %	Base	Boys %	Girls %	All %	Base	Boys %	Girls %
Beer	68	3,823	78	55	60	3,362	74	45
Wine	55	3,509	52	57	49	3,289	46	53
Spirits	50	3,544	49	51	62	3,323	62	62
Cider	51	3,511	55	46	49	3,269	53	44
Alcopops	72	3,748	69	74	81	3,297	78	84

Beer is the most popular drink for boys in 1997, but by 2000 it has been overtaken by alcopops, which increased in popularity by nine percentage points while beer declined by four percentage points between the two surveys. Wine and cider have also declined in popularity, but spirits have increased substantially from 49% to 62%.

Alcopops are the main drink of choice for girls in both survey years and their popularity increases by 10 percentage points between 1997 and 2000. The popularity of spirits increases even more, by 11 percentage points, replacing wine as second choice in 2000.

Alcopops, flavoured alcohol beverages (FABs), 'ready to drink' (RTDs) and spirit based pre-mixed drinks, are all ranges of more palatable and sweeter tasting drinks (eg WKD, Bacardi Breezers, Smirnoff Black Ice) introduced in the mid 1990s. These drinks have a higher percentage of alcohol by volume (ABV) than the standard lagers or beers which had previously been the drink of choice for young people.¹⁶

Table 14 highlights how drinking preferences change with age. For Year 8 boys who drink, the clear preference is for alcopops (63%). They maintain popularity for boys through all age groups until Year 12, when beer takes a slight lead as the most popular drink for boys (87%).

In Year 8, alcopops are the most popular choice for girls who drink, with wine coming a close second. Alcopops continue to be first choice for girls in every age group and their popularity increases year on year, from 53% in Year 8 to 93% in Year 12. Spirits also increase in popularity each year, overtaking wine as second choice in Years 11 and 12.

Table 14: Choice of drink by age group (2000 survey only)

Boys	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Cider	Alcopops	Base
	%	%	%	%	%	
Year 8	59	52	39	43	63	181
Year 9	66	49	49	50	72	310
Year 10	65	47	53	52	73	403
Year 11	77	48	68	57	85	482
Year 12	87	39	77	55	84	524
Girls	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Cider	Alcopops	Base
	%	%	%	%	%	
Year 8	21	52	21	20	53	121
Year 9	42	50	45	41	75	237
Year 10	45	57	49	49	82	346
Year 11	46	51	67	46	90	444
Year 12	49	55	75	44	93	500

Consumption

Attempts were made in YPBAS 2000 and 2003 to ask a question that could give an insight into the amount of alcohol young people are drinking. We already know that people generally underestimate their drinking levels and getting reliable information from adults is difficult. It might be expected that as young people may drink less alcohol less often than adults, their recall of what they had drunk the week prior to survey should be good.

However, on examination of the data it appears that a substantial number of young people did not answer the question correctly, leaving gaps in the information that could be interpreted either as zero drink taken or missing information, or deliberately not taking the question seriously and exaggerating the amount of alcohol taken. For example in 2003, 3% of the children who said they had tried alcohol had skipped all items of the question, 12% did not provide complete information to enable total units to be calculated and a small proportion (1%) exaggerated the amount they drank, saying they drank 75 or more units in a week. For this reason we cannot report reliable figures for young people's consumption.

Access to alcohol and drinking company

How do young people get their alcohol?

Another important aspect of young people's drinking is how and where they obtain their alcohol. Both the 1997 and 2000 surveys sought to identify the first source or provider of alcohol.

The majority of young people get their first alcoholic drink from friends or parents, indicating both peer and parental influence on young people's initial experiences of drinking. Table 15 presents these results for the relevant surveys. The most common source of alcohol in both years is from friends. More young people in the 1997 survey reported getting alcohol from their parents; this is likely to be because in this year the question was asked of all young people who had tasted alcohol (even if it was only a sip). In 2000 the question was only asked of those who had had a whole alcoholic drink, not just a taste or a sip, and we can see in this survey year a larger proportion reported that friends were the source. Around one in eight young people in both surveys (13% in 1997 and 11% in 2000) reported that they bought their first drink for themselves from a licensed venue, an off-licence, a pub or a club.

Table 15: Source of first alcoholic drink

	1997 %	2000 %	2003 %
I bought it myself from an off-licence	5	5	n/a
I bought it myself in a pub	3	2	n/a
I bought it myself at a club/disco	5	4	n/a
Friends bought it for me/gave it to me	37	45	n/a
My mother/father offered/got it for me	28	20	n/a
My brother/sister offered/got it for me	8	7	n/a
Other	14	17	n/a
Base	4,103	3,453	n/a

To gain a more comprehensive view of continuing or fluctuating influences on young people's drinking, they were also asked how they got their most recent drink. Table 16 presents this information. The proportion buying alcohol themselves has increased significantly from around 12% at the time of having their first drink to approximately a third for the most recent drink in the 1997 and 2000 surveys, and 20% in the 2003 survey.

In contrast to the relatively high proportion of young people who got their first drink from their mother or father, far fewer had got their most recent drink from a parent. The percentage of young people who reported that they got alcohol from their friends remained consistently high for both the first drink and the most recent drink. This appears to indicate that peer influence impacts both on first trying alcohol and on continuing to drink.

Table 16: Source of most recent alcoholic drink

	1997 %	2000 %	2003 %
I bought it myself from an off-licence	11	16	9
I bought it myself in a pub	8	8	5
I bought it myself at a club/disco	14	11	6
Friends bought it for me/gave it to me	32	37	32
My mother/father offered/got it for me	21	13	14
My brother/sister (or other relative) offered/got it for me [†]	8	5	13 [†]
Other	7	10	22
Base	3,300	2,830	3,870

[†] other relative added in 2003 only

Table 17 reveals that those who drink regularly and those who have been drunk more than four times are much more likely to have bought the alcohol themselves. For the sample as a whole, around 29% purchase alcohol for themselves, compared to 37% of regular drinkers and 45% of those who have been drunk more than four times, and for these two groups buying alcohol themselves is more common than getting it from a friend.

Table 17: Source of most recent alcoholic drink by drinking behaviour (all three years)

	All %	Regular drinkers %	Drunk more than 4 times %
I bought it myself from an off-licence	12	17	23
I bought it myself in a pub	7	9	11
I bought it myself at a club/disco	10	11	11
Friends bought it for me/gave it to me	33	34	32
My mother/father offered/got it for me	16	13	9
My brother/sister offered/got it for me	6	5	5
Other	17	11	9
Base	10,000	4,868	2,423

A further question in 2003 addressed the issue of young people illegally purchasing alcohol from licensed premises. More than two thirds (68%) of young people who had tried a drink had never bought alcohol themselves; however, nearly a third of young people had purchased alcohol themselves at some time, with the majority of these purchases being from a pub (19%), followed by an off-licence (11%).

Table 18: Sources where young people had purchased alcohol

	2003 %	
Never purchased alcohol	68	68
Bought it from a pub	19	} 32
Bought it from an off-licence	11	
Bought it from a shop/supermarket	2	
Base	4,077	

There is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls, with around a third of both boys and girls having purchased alcohol themselves. As expected, greater numbers of young people in the older age groups were buying alcohol for themselves from licensed premises: 7% of young people in Year 8 bought alcohol compared to 58% in Year 12 (see Table 19 below).

Table 19: Percentage of young people who had purchased alcohol themselves (2003 survey only)

	Purchased alcohol from licensed premises %	Sig (p)
Gender		NS
Boys	32	
Girls	33	
Base	1,319	
School year		***
Year 8	7	
Year 9	9	
Year 10	18	
Year 11	38	
Year 12	58	
Base	1,320	
Entitled to free school meals		NS
Yes	34	
No	32	
Base	1,315	

Drinking settings: where do young people drink?

In 1997 and 2000 all young people who had ever drunk alcohol were asked where they had drunk alcohol the first time (this question was not asked in 2003). The largest proportion of young people drank alcohol for the first time in one of three locations: at their own home; at someone else's home; or outside. Of concern is the fact that nearly a quarter (23% in 1997 and 24% in 2000) were drinking somewhere outside and therefore in a more uncontrolled and risky environment. A considerable proportion, 12% in 1997 and 14% in 2000, were drinking (although not necessarily purchasing) alcohol on licensed premises (ie in a pub or at a rave, disco, club or concert).

Table 20: Location where young people had their first drink

	1997 %	2000 %	2003 %
At home	35	24	n/a
At someone else's house	15	19	n/a
Somewhere outside	23	24	n/a
At school	<1	1	n/a
At a pub	4	4	n/a
At a party	9	13	n/a
At a rave, disco, club or concert	8	10	n/a
Somewhere else	5	6	n/a
Base	4,046	3,403	n/a

A similar pattern emerged when young people were asked where they had their most recent drink. The majority of young people had their most recent drink at home or at someone else's house, and once again a consistently high number of young people reported drinking outside.

Table 21: Location where young people had their most recent drink

	1997 %	2000 %	2003 %
At home	25	16	20
At someone else's house	15	20	19
Somewhere outside	17	22	21
At school	<1	1	<1
At a pub	8	8	7
At a party	12	12	14
At a rave, disco, club or concert	18	17	11
Somewhere else	4	5	7
Base	3,440	2,716	3,921

When setting was analysed by the different categories of drinking behaviour, the main aspect to note is that those who have been drunk more than four times appear more likely to be drinking 'somewhere outside' than their counterparts.

Table 22: Location where young people had their most recent drink by drinking behaviour (2003 survey only)

	All who had tried alcohol %	Regular drinkers %	Drunk more than 4 times %
At home	20	16	9
At someone else's house	19	20	19
Somewhere outside	21	25	31
At school	<1	<1	<1
At a pub	7	10	12
At a party	14	12	10
At a rave, disco, club or concert	11	14	16
Somewhere else	7	3	2
Base	4,017	1,654	500

Drinking company

The 2003 YPBAS further investigated the issue of drinking company by asking young people who they were with the last time they had a drink. Peer influence features strongly, as the majority of young people reported drinking with a group of friends (50%) or a single friend (16%). We know from research with adults that binge drinking is more likely to occur when drinking in a group, rather than when drinking with a partner or a single friend.¹⁷

A smaller but substantial number of young people reported drinking with their parents (13%), relatives (12%) or sibling on the last occasion (4%). Worryingly, 4% of young people reported drinking by themselves. When examining the data by the different categories of drinking behaviour, regular drinkers and those that have been drunk more than four times were more likely to have had their most recent drink with a group of friends.

Table 23: Company in which young people had their most recent drink by drinking behaviour (2003 survey only)

	All who had tried alcohol %	Regular drinkers %	Drunk more than 4 times %
By myself	4	2	1
With a friend	16	14	15
With a group of friends	50	65	74
With parents	13	7	2
With brothers/sisters	4	3	2
With relatives	12	5	2
With someone else	2	3	4
Base	3,989	1,653	847

Why young people drink

Reasons for drinking

In addition to determining how and where young people drink, it is vital to establish why young people drink. Each of the surveys listed 13 possible reasons why people drink, and asked the young people to say whether the statement was true or false for them. The percentages for those who said the statements were true are given in Table 24. This information provides some context for young people's drinking behaviour. Table 25 shows the most common five reasons for each survey year.

Table 24: Reasons young people give for drinking

	% answering "True"		
	1997 [†]	2000	2003
I like the taste	74	83	85
I drink to escape problems	25	39	42
I drink to be confident	25	39	37
I drink to feel relaxed	49	60	58
I drink to get drunk	39	52	50
I drink alcohol because my friends do	38	41	38
I drink because my parents/family do	15	16	18
I drink alcohol to be sociable	40	46	41
I drink alcohol to celebrate	79	86	82
I drink because I'm under pressure	18	25	26
I drink alcohol because I like the effects	32	43	35
I drink alcohol because it cheers me up	52	60	55
I drink alcohol to find out what it's like	69	60	63
Base: asked of all drinkers, base varies for each item	4,602	3,471	4,044

[†] including those who have had just a taste or sip of alcohol

The most common reason young people reported for drinking alcohol was "to celebrate" (79% in 1997 and 86% in 2000).

Table 25: Top five reasons young people give for drinking for each survey year

	1997	2000	2003
First	to celebrate	to celebrate	I like the taste
Second	I like the taste	I like the taste	to celebrate
Third	to find out what it's like	to find out what it's like/ to relax/cheers me up	to find out what it's like
Fourth	cheers me up	to get drunk	to feel relaxed
Fifth	to feel relaxed	to be sociable	cheers me up

Worth noting is the percentage change in those who say they like the taste. In 1997 74% said they drank because they like the taste, but by 2003 this has risen to 85% and become the most commonly reported reason for drinking. This may be in part due to increasing popularity of alcopops, especially with young people.

The other most common reasons are “to find out what it’s like”, “to relax” and “because it cheers me up”. “To get drunk” enters the top five in 2000 but drops out again in 2003, although the actual percentage of young people answering “true” to this statement remains similar in both years. Comparing year on year, it appears that drinking for psychosocial reasons could be on the increase. Increasing numbers of young people say they drink “to escape problems” (25% in 1997, rising to 39% in 2000 and 42% in 2003), and “to be confident” (25% in 1997, rising to 39% in 2000 and 37% in 2003). This may, however, be due in part to the fact that in 1997 this question was asked of all young people who had tasted alcohol, even if just a sip, whereas in 2000 and 2003, only those that had taken an actual drink were asked why they drank.

Similar figures were reported for the remaining reasons for drinking between 2000 and 2003. A cause for concern would be the findings that in 2003 one in two young people drank specifically to get drunk, 55% because it cheers them up and 42% to escape problems. The relationship between drinking and mental health will be dealt with in more detail in the mental wellbeing section (see page 34).

Gender differences

Table 26 shows that in general girls are more likely than boys to say that they drink because they “like the taste” (88% for girls compared with 83% for boys in 2003) and “to be confident” (40% compared with 35%). Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to say that they drink “to get drunk” (54% for boys compared with 47% for girls in 2003), “because my friends do” (40% compared with 36%), “because my parents/family do” (21% compared with 15%) and “because I like the effects” (41% compared with 30%).

Table 26: Reasons young people give for drinking by gender

	1997		2000		2003	
	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %
I like the taste	72	75	83	83	83	88
I drink to escape problems	23	29	37	42	41	43
I drink to be confident	25	30	37	41	35	40
I drink to feel relaxed	54	50	62	58	61	57
I drink to get drunk	46	37	54	49	54	47
I drink alcohol because my friends do	42	37	44	39	40	36
I drink because my parents/family do	16	12	19	13	21	15
I drink alcohol to be sociable	43	44	47	44	43	41
I drink alcohol to celebrate	81	84	85	88	81	85
I drink because I'm under pressure	17	21	25	26	26	27
I drink alcohol because I like the effects	40	28	49	37	41	30
I drink alcohol because it cheers me up	52	52	60	61	56	56
I drink alcohol to find out what it's like	66	70	60	59	64	61
<i>Base: asked of all respondents who ever drank alcohol, base varies for each item</i>	2,307	2,077	1,900	1,647	2,112	2,035

Table 27: Top five reasons young people give for drinking in 1997 and 2003 by gender

	1997		2003	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
First	To celebrate	To celebrate	I like the taste	I like the taste
Second	I like the taste	I like the taste	To celebrate	To celebrate
Third	Find out what it's like	Find out what it's like	Find out what it's like	Find out what it's like
Fourth	To feel relaxed	Because it cheers me up	To feel relaxed	To feel relaxed
Fifth	Because it cheers me up	To feel relaxed	Because it cheers me up	Because it cheers me up

Looking at rankings in Table 27, there is little difference between genders and little change over time, except that “because I like the taste” shifts from second place to first place for both sexes.

When analysed by drinking behaviour category (for 2003 data only), regular drinkers and those who have been drunk more than four times are more likely to state psychosocial benefits such as “to be confident”, “to feel relaxed”, and “because it cheers me up”. Sixty five percent of regular drinkers and 81% of those who have been drunk 4 times agree that they drink to get drunk.

Table 28: Reasons young people give for drinking by drinking behaviour (2003 survey only)

	All non-drinkers %	Occasional/ drinkers %	Regular than four times %	Drunk more %
I like the taste	85	80	94	88
I drink to escape problems	42	47	39	49
I drink to be confident	37	32	47	50
I drink to feel relaxed	58	49	73	74
I drink to get drunk	50	40	65	81
I drink alcohol because my friends do	38	39	40	35
I drink because my parents/family do	18	19	16	13
I drink alcohol to be sociable	41	36	51	50
I drink alcohol to celebrate	82	78	91	89
I drink because I'm under pressure	26	26	27	27
I drink alcohol because I like the effects	35	24	52	66
I drink alcohol because it cheers me up	55	42	75	78
I drink alcohol to find out what it's like	63	70	52	45
Base	4,044	2,310	1,624	877

Education and awareness of risks

Analysis for this section has been carried out on 2003 data only, as the regular drinkers could not be consistently categorised over all three surveys. For the purposes of analysis in this section respondents are allocated to one of two categories: regular drinkers (those who drink monthly or more often) and occasional/non-drinkers (those who drink rarely or do not currently drink). Overall, 24% of young people in the 2003 survey were classed as regular drinkers.

Education on alcohol and drugs

In 2003, all young people were asked if they had ever had any type of education on the use of alcohol and/or drugs, either in school, at a youth facility, or somewhere else in the last school year. Nearly nine out of ten (87%) young people had had some education on alcohol and/or drugs in the last year. The main source for information on drugs and alcohol by a substantial margin is school (88%) followed by parents (5%).

Table 29: Young people's sources of information about drugs and alcohol

Source of information	%	Source of information	%
School	88	Books/magazines	<1
Youth club	2	Posters/billboards	<1
Parents	5	Internet	<1
Brothers/sisters	<1	Doctor	<1
Other relatives	<1	Police	0
Friends	1	Helpline	<1
Church	<1	Other	<1
TV	2	Don't know	<1
Radio	0		
Base	6,538		

In 2003, young people were also asked directly if the education they had received on alcohol had made them less inclined to drink alcohol, and 61% agreed that it had. The results show that greater numbers of those who drank less often or had never tried alcohol reported that alcohol education has made them less inclined to drink.

Table 30: Effect of alcohol education on inclination to drink less alcohol

	Yes %	No %	Don't know %	Base	Sig (p)
All	61	39	<1	5,337	
Regular drinkers	25	75	<1	1,353	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	73	27	<1	3,984	

Perception of risk

Current sensible drinking guidelines advise that men should not drink more than 4 units in any one day (equivalent to about two pints of beer) and that drinking 4 units or more a day, every day increases the risk of harm.¹⁸ The same advice applies to women at a level of 3 units per day.

All young people were asked to say how dangerous they considered the following patterns of drinking to be:

- one or two drinks per day;
- four or five drinks every day;
- five or more drinks at the weekend.

Young people who did not drink were more convinced of the risks of drinking either daily or five or more at the weekend. Occasional/non-drinkers were more likely than regular drinkers to say that drinking at these levels is very dangerous. Fewer young people consider it very dangerous to drink five or more drinks at the weekend (41%), than to drink up to four or five drinks every day (60%). This reflects the attitude of the adult drinking population, where a pattern of heavy occasional weekend drinking is considered normal and less risky to health.¹⁷ Both patterns of drinking carry personal risk and, for occasional drinkers in particular (which the majority of young people are), the weekend binge is considered more risky in terms of short-term impact. This issue is currently being addressed through mass media public information campaigns targeted at adults.

Table 31: Perceived risk of different drinking patterns by drinking behaviour

How dangerous is it to have:	Not at all %	A little %	Quite %	Very %	Don't know %	Base
1 or 2 drinks every day						
All	8	28	43	18	3	6,646
Regular drinker	12	32	38	14	3	1,591
Occasional/non-drinker	6	27	44	19	4	4,997
4 or 5 drinks every day						
All	2	8	28	60	3	6,651
Regular drinker	4	12	33	48	2	1,598
Occasional/non-drinker	2	6	26	64	3	4,997
5 or more drinks at the weekend						
All	6	19	31	41	4	6,655
Regular drinker	13	31	32	21	3	1,603
Occasional/non-drinker	4	15	30	47	5	4,998

Risk of alcohol compared to other substances

To put young people's perception of the risks of drinking into a clearer context, the data were further analysed to compare their attitudes to alcohol with their attitudes to other risk taking behaviour, such as smoking, or taking a variety of drugs.

The proportion of young people who considered having five or more drinks at the weekend to be very dangerous (41%) was similar to the proportions who considered trying LSD (43%), speed (42%), crack or cocaine (45%) to be very dangerous. Substantially more young people considered Ecstasy (53%), or solvents (47%) to be very dangerous. Young people's impressions of how much alcohol might affect their general health and wellbeing can clearly be seen when we examine the results for those who thought the options were not at all dangerous. According to the young people in the sample, the least dangerous activity was smoking cannabis once or twice, followed by drinking five or more drinks at the weekend.

Table 32: Perceived risk of different behaviours

	Not at all dangerous %	A little dangerous %	Quite dangerous %	Very dangerous %	Don't know %	Base
Five or more drinks at the weekend	6	19	31	41	4	6,655
Smoke cigarettes occasionally	2	23	41	31	2	6,703
Smoke cannabis once or twice	10	23	26	34	7	6,662
Try LSD once or twice	2	13	29	43	13	6,636
Try speed	2	13	32	42	11	6,634
Try crack or cocaine	2	12	31	45	10	6,642
Try Ecstasy	2	9	27	53	9	6,634
Try solvents	3	12	30	47	9	6,641

When these data were analysed comparing regular drinkers and occasional/non-drinkers (Table 33 below), regular drinkers were consistently more likely to regard activities such as drinking five or more drinks at the weekend, smoking cigarettes occasionally, or smoking cannabis once or twice to be less dangerous than their occasional/non-drinking counterparts. For example, 24% of regular drinkers regarded smoking cannabis once or twice to be “not at all dangerous” compared to 6% of occasional/non-drinkers.

For most illicit drugs listed, the difference between the groups is less but the trend of regular drinkers considering these activities to be less risky still can be observed. For example, 40% of regular drinkers consider trying LSD once or twice to be very dangerous compared to 43% of occasional/non-drinkers, and 20% of regular drinkers consider trying solvents to be a little or not at all dangerous in comparison to 13% of the occasional/non-drinking group.

Table 33: Perceived risk of different behaviours by drinking behaviour

	Not at all dangerous %		A little dangerous %		Quite dangerous %		Very dangerous %		Don't know %		Base
	Reg	Occ/non	Reg	Occ/non	Reg	Occ/non	Reg	Occ/non	Reg	Occ/non	
Have five or more drinks at the weekend	13	4	31	15	32	30	21	47	3	5	6,600
Smoke cigarettes occasionally	4	2	31	21	40	41	22	34	3	2	6,645
Smoke cannabis once or twice	24	6	32	20	19	28	19	39	6	7	6,607
Try LSD once or twice	4	2	17	12	27	30	40	43	12	13	6,584
Try speed	5	1	16	11	28	33	40	43	11	11	6,577
Try crack or cocaine	4	2	15	11	27	32	44	46	10	10	6,589
Try Ecstasy	3	2	11	9	21	28	55	53	9	9	6,580
Try solvents	5	2	15	11	26	31	44	48	9	8	6,586

* Reg. = regular drinkers, Occ/non. = occasional/non-drinkers

Drinking and other risk taking behaviours

Given the findings noted in the previous section that, despite education on alcohol and drugs, young people who drink are likely to have a more casual view of drinking, smoking or taking drugs, a further aim of this study was to examine the relationship between drinking alcohol and other risk behaviours such as smoking, drug experimentation and sexual behaviour.

Again, analysis for this section has been carried out on 2003 data only, as the regular drinkers could not be consistently categorised over all three surveys. Overall, 24% of young people in the 2003 survey were classed as regular drinkers.

Smoking

One of the most common risk taking behaviours among young people is smoking. In 2003, 33% of young people reported they had tried smoking; however, when analysed by drinking behaviour, there is a strongly significant relationship ($p < 0.001$) between drinking behaviour and smoking experimentation (see Table 34). Nearly three quarters (72%) of those who could be described as regular drinkers (those who drink monthly or more often) had tried smoking, compared to 20% of occasional/non-drinkers (those who drink rarely or not at all). While a third of young people in the 2003 survey had tried smoking, 13% were current smokers (Table 34). Again, there is a strong relationship between drinking behaviour and whether or not a young person currently smokes. For example, 38% of regular drinkers are current smokers compared to only 5% of occasional/non-drinkers ($p < 0.001$).

Table 34: Prevalence of smoking by drinking behaviour

	Ever smoked %	Sig (p)	Current smokers %	Sig (p)
All	33		13	
Regular drinkers	72	***	38	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	20		5	
Base	2,273		905	

Drugs

In total, 19% of young people in the 2003 survey had tried at least one type of drug. Table 35 shows the proportion of regular drinkers and occasional/non-drinkers who have ever taken drugs (excluding solvents). As expected, there were statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) in the likelihood of drug experimentation between the two drinking behaviour categories. Regular drinkers were more likely to have ever used any drug than the occasional/non-drinkers. Less than one in ten occasional/non-drinkers have tried any type of drug compared to around half of all those who drink regularly. This trend is evident among both boys and girls.

Table 35: Prevalence of drug use by drinking behaviour (excludes solvents)

	Ever tried drugs %	Never tried drugs %	Sig (p)
All	19	81	
Regular drinkers	52	48	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	8	92	
Base	1,254	5,332	

Solvents

Ten percent of young people in the 2003 survey had experimented with solvents. Table 36 shows the proportion of regular drinkers compared with occasional/non-drinkers who have tried solvents. There is a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between the two groups: a quarter of those who drink regularly have tried solvents compared to only 5% of occasional/non-drinkers.

Table 36: Prevalence of solvent use by drinking behaviour

	Ever tried solvents %	Never tried solvents %	Sig (p)
All	10	90	
Regular drinkers	25	75	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	5	95	
Base	619	5,412	

Sexual behaviour

Just over one in ten (11%) young people in the 2003 survey had experienced sexual intercourse. The proportion of young people who have had sexual intercourse and their drinking behaviour is shown in Table 37. This shows that there is a significant relationship ($p < 0.001$) between drinking behaviour and sexual intercourse; in 2003 31% of regular drinkers had had sexual intercourse compared to 4% of occasional/non-drinkers.

Table 37: Experience of sexual intercourse by drinking behaviour

	Ever had intercourse %	Never had intercourse %	Sig (p)
All	11	89	
Regular drinkers	31	69	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	4	96	
Base	631	5,294	

Overall, 79% of those who had experienced sexual intercourse had used contraception. Table 38 shows that, although regular drinkers are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse, they appear to be better prepared for such activity than their occasional/non-drinking counterparts, as indicated by their higher level of contraceptive use. Worth noting also is the higher level of occasional/non-drinkers who were unsure about whether they had used contraception or not.

Table 38: Use of contraception among those who have had sexual intercourse by drinking behaviour

	Regular drinkers %	Occasional/non-drinkers %	Sig (p)
Yes	82	69	
No	15	27	***
Don't know	2	4	
Base	476	167	

Psychosocial factors: drinking and mental wellbeing

The analysis in this section is also based on 2003 data only, as the regular drinkers could not be consistently categorised over all three surveys. Overall, 24% of young people in the 2003 survey were classed as regular drinkers.

Self-esteem and school experiences

Both self-esteem and school experience were measured by inviting young people to respond to a number of statements. The self-esteem scale asked “During the past 4 weeks, how good or bad have you felt about the following...” and examples of the 14 response items include:

- yourself;
- the things you can do;
- the way you get along with others;
- the way life seems to be for you.

The school experience scale measured agreement/disagreement across 16 items which include the following examples: “My school is a place where...”

- teachers treat me fairly in class;
- I have learned things that will be useful to me;
- I can cope with the work;
- teachers help me to do my best.

The individual item scores were then collapsed into composite scale scores (computed as averaged sum scores).

Because of the composite nature of the measure, no frequency distribution of the variables is presented. Parametric analyses were employed to test for differences between the groups of regular and occasional/non-drinkers. For this purpose, independent t-tests were chosen to compare the two groups of regular and occasional/non-drinkers.

Because the positive responses were scored lower on the answering scale than the negative responses (1=very good, 5=very bad), higher self-esteem is indicated by a lower mean value and lower self-esteem by a higher mean value. The mean value for self-esteem for the group of regular drinkers was $M=2.11$ and for the group of occasional/non-drinkers was $M=1.87$ which indicates lower self-esteem in regular drinkers. Lower self-esteem was also observed in regular drinkers compared to occasional/non-drinkers for both boys ($M=2.01$, $M=1.84$) and girls ($M=2.22$, $M=1.90$). This relationship was highly statistically significant ($p<0.001$) for both.

Regular drinkers ($M=2.13$) also reported their school experiences to be worse than those of occasional/non-drinkers ($M=1.84$, $p<0.001$). Again, the same difference in school experience between regular and occasional/non-drinkers was shown for boys ($M=2.17$, $M=1.90$, $p<0.001$) and girls ($M=2.10$, $M=1.79$, $p<0.001$) separately.

There is a significant association ($p<0.001$) between drinking behaviour and perceived pressure at school (see Table 39). Regular drinkers perceive more pressure from school than occasional/non-drinkers. Young people who regularly drank alcohol were less likely to report no pressure or a little pressure but more likely to report some (29%) or a lot of (19%) pressure. Their occasional/non-drinking counterparts were more likely to perceive no pressure or a little pressure and less likely to report some (22%) or a lot (9%) of pressure. This pattern was reflected for both boys and girls.

Table 39: Perceived pressure of school work by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status		Not at all %	A little %	Some %	A lot %	Base	Sig (p)
All	Regular drinkers	12	40	29	19	1,541	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	19	49	22	9	4,629	
Boys	Regular drinkers	14	39	29	18	864	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	18	50	23	9	2,645	
Girls	Regular drinkers	9	41	29	21	841	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	20	48	22	10	3,467	

There was a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between regular and occasional/non-drinkers in terms of truancy. Regular drinkers were more likely to report having been truant for any given number of days. In contrast, occasional/non-drinkers were more likely to report not having been truant (84% compared with 61% for regular drinkers).

Table 40: Days truant by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status		0 days %	1 day %	2 days %	3 days %	4 days %	Base	Sig (p)
All	Regular drinkers	61	14	8	5	12	1,696	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	84	7	4	1	3	5,265	
Boys	Regular drinkers	58	14	9	5	14	859	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	83	7	4	2	4	2,645	
Girls	Regular drinkers	63	13	7	6	10	838	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	86	6	3	2	3	2,620	

Satisfaction with life

Although regular drinkers were less likely to report that they feel very happy, they were more likely to say they felt quite happy ($p < 0.001$). The reverse relationship emerged for occasional/non-drinkers. In regard to feeling less happy, regular drinkers were more likely to report that they were not very happy or not happy at all, with occasional/non-drinkers being less likely to do so.

Table 41: Satisfaction with life by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status		I feel very happy %	I feel quite happy %	I don't feel very happy %	I'm not happy at all %	Base	Sig (p)
All	Regular drinkers	35	52	10	3	1,541	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	51	43	5	1	4,629	
Boys	Regular drinkers	41	50	7	2	726	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	54	41	4	2	2,247	
Girls	Regular drinkers	31	54	12	3	814	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	48	45	6	1	2,381	

Perceptions of health

Regular and occasional/non-drinkers differed significantly in the perception of how healthy they are ($p < 0.001$). Young people who consume alcohol regularly were less likely to state that they feel healthy (82%) but more likely to say they are not very healthy (18%). The opposite was true for occasional/non-drinkers.

They were more likely to report that they are healthy (91%) and less likely to perceive themselves as not very healthy (9%). Girls who drink regularly were most likely to report themselves as being not very healthy (21%). Occasional/non-drinking boys were most likely to say they feel very healthy (25%).

Table 42: Perception of health by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status		Very healthy %	Quite healthy %	Not very healthy %	Base	Sig (p)
All	Regular drinkers	15	67	18	1,695	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	21	70	9	5,269	
Boys	Regular drinkers	22	64	14	859	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	25	68	7	2,649	
Girls	Regular drinkers	9	70	21	837	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	16	72	12	2,620	

Parental strictness

Young people were asked if they felt their parents were stricter or more easy-going than their friends' parents (eg about allowing them to go out at night to parties, social events etc). There was a statistically significant difference in the perceived parental strictness between regular drinkers and occasional/non-drinkers ($p < 0.001$). Regular drinkers were more likely to report that their parents are easy-going (34%) than their occasional/non-drinking counterparts, who were more likely to describe parental strictness as similar to friends' parents (36%) and less likely to perceive parents as more easy-going (23%).

Table 43: Perception of parental strictness by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status		More strict %	About the same %	More easy-going %	Base	Sig (p)
All	Regular drinkers	43	23	34	1,438	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	41	36	23	4,089	
Boys	Regular drinkers	45	24	30	664	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	44	33	23	1,958	
Girls	Regular drinkers	41	23	36	773	***
	Occasional/non-drinkers	39	38	23	2,131	

Communication

Young people were asked "How easy is it for you to talk to parents and friends about things that really bother you?". Findings are presented in tables 44 to 47 and are analysed by drinker category and gender. Young people's drinking behaviour was associated with how easily they felt they could talk to significant others. Regular drinkers were more likely to find talking to their father or mother difficult, and less likely to report that talking to their father or mother was easy. In contrast, occasional/non-drinkers were less likely to report that talking to their mother or father was difficult and more likely to say it was easy.

A point highlighted in other work, and worth noting here, is that communication between all young people and their parents appears to be easier with mothers than fathers.¹⁹ Eighty five percent of young people reported that communicating with their mothers was easy, compared to 69% for communicating with fathers.

Looking at fathers alone, there is a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between regular drinkers and others in ability to talk to their fathers, particularly for girls. Overall, 31% of young people found it difficult to communicate with their fathers, but regular drinkers are more likely to report this. However the problem seems to be greater for girls: over half of girls who drink regularly (54%) report finding it difficult to talk to

their fathers about things that bother them compared to 32% of occasional/non-drinking girls and 32% of regularly drinking boys.

Table 44: Ease of communication with father by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status	Very easy/easy %	Difficult/very difficult %	Base	Sig (p)
All	69	31	6,653	
Regular drinkers	57	43	1,547	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	73	27	4,914	
Boys				
Regular drinkers	68	32	788	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	77	23	2,497	
Girls				
Regular drinkers	46	54	759	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	68	32	2,417	

Table 45: Ease of communication with mother by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status	Very easy/easy %	Difficult/very difficult %	Base	Sig (p)
All	85	15	7,000	
Regular drinkers	78	22	1,651	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	87	13	5,145	
Boys				
Regular drinkers	77	23	832	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	86	14	2,581	
Girls				
Regular drinkers	78	22	819	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	89	11	2,563	

Table 46: Ease of communication with same-sex friends by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status	Very easy/easy %	Difficult/very difficult %	Base	Sig (p)
All	84	16	6,858	
Regular drinkers	88	12	1,655	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	83	17	5,022	
Boys				
Regular drinkers	83	17	822	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	75	25	2,484	
Girls				
Regular drinkers	94	6	832	NS
Occasional/non-drinkers	91	9	2,538	

Table 47: Ease of communication with friends of the opposite sex by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status	Very easy/easy %	Difficult/very difficult %	Base	Sig (p)
All	59	41	6,634	
Regular drinkers	72	28	1,622	***
Occasional/non-drinkers	54	46	4,846	
Boys				***
Regular drinkers	74	26	808	
Occasional/non-drinkers	60	40	2,403	
Girls				***
Regular drinkers	69	31	814	
Occasional/non-drinkers	49	51	2,442	

With regard to talking to same-sex and opposite-sex friends, there is an association with regular drinking and gender. It appears that regular drinkers are more likely to report finding it easy to talk to friends of the same sex, although this finding is only significant for boys. A quarter of occasional or non-drinking boys report having difficulty communicating with other boys, compared to 17% of boys who regularly drink. This variation by drinking behaviour does not occur for girls with over nine out of ten girls reporting that they find it easy to talk to other girls, no matter what their drinking status.

With regard to friends of the opposite sex, drinking behaviour again has a bearing, with those who drink regularly more likely to report finding it easy to communicate with the other sex. However, this time there is a stronger relationship for girls than boys, with 51% of occasional/non-drinking girls reporting difficulty communicating with boys, compared to 31% of girls who drink regularly.

Table 48: Perceived ease of making new friends by drinking behaviour and gender

Drinker status	Very easy/easy %	Difficult/very difficult %	Base	Sig (p)
All	84	16	6,134	***
Regular drinkers	87	13	1,521	
Occasional/non-drinkers	83	17	4,562	
Boys				***
Regular drinkers	89	11	714	
Occasional/non-drinkers	83	17	2,211	
Girls				*
Regular drinkers	86	14	807	
Occasional/non-drinkers	83	17	2,351	

Most young people (84%) report that it is easy to make new friends; however, once again regular drinkers, both boys and girls, were less likely to report it as being difficult. For example, 14% of girls who drink regularly reported difficulty compared to 17% of their occasional/non-drinking counterparts. This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). A highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$) was found between the number of boys who drink regularly and perceive making new friends difficult (11%) compared to those boys who occasionally or never drink (17%).

Other impacts of drinking

The previous sections have illustrated that drinking more alcohol more often is associated with smoking, drug taking, solvent abuse, and decreased self perception of health. A further problem of drinking may be the antisocial behaviour it can lead to if alcohol is taken in excess in an uncontrolled environment.

Almost a third (30%) of young people who drink have been in trouble with their parents for drinking, one in eight have been in trouble with their friends, 11% have been in trouble with local people and 9% have been in trouble with the police.

Table 49: Prevalence of getting into trouble for drinking

Have you ever been in trouble with the following people for drinking?	Never %	Once %	More than once %	Base
Parents	70	20	10	3,991
Local people	89	7	4	3,671
School	98	1	1	3,629
Police	91	5	4	3,697
Friends	87	9	4	3,698

Regular drinkers were more likely than other young people to report involvement in minor antisocial behaviour, such as being noisy or rude to neighbours or in public places, and spraying graffiti. They are also more likely to report attacking, threatening or being rude to someone because of their religion (18% compared to 6% for occasional/non-drinkers) or for other reasons (37% compared to 16%), carrying a knife or other weapon (17% compared to 6%) or having stolen from a shop (24% compared to 7%).

Table 50: Prevalence of antisocial activities by drinking behaviour

	All %	Regular drinkers %	Occasional/non-drinkers %
Tried to avoid paying the correct fare on the bus or train	14	25	10
Been noisy or rude near your home so that the neighbours have complained	19	33	14
Been noisy or rude in public places so that you got into trouble	18	34	12
Written or sprayed graffiti on a building or fence	15	30	10
Picked on or bullied another school pupil	8	13	7
Attacked, threatened or been rude to someone because of their religion	9	18	6
Attacked, threatened or been rude to someone because of their race/skin colour	3	5	2
Attacked, threatened or been rude to someone because of some other reason	21	37	16
Been joy-riding in a car that either you or someone else broke into	4	9	2
Carried a knife or other weapon for your own protection	9	17	6
Burgled or tried to burgle someone else's house	2	3	1
Stolen something that someone was carrying/wearing, eg mobile phone	3	6	2
Stolen anything from a shop	11	24	7
Stolen a vehicle or driven it away without permission	3	7	2
Stolen from inside a vehicle or parts off the outside of a vehicle	3	7	2
Tried but failed to steal a vehicle or drive it away without permission	2	3	1
Damaged a vehicle on purpose	2	14	3
Stolen anything else (not previously mentioned)	6	16	5
Bought, used or been offered anything you knew or thought had been stolen or was not genuine	8	38	13
Sold anything you knew or thought had been stolen or was not genuine	19	15	3
Base	6,093	1,484	4,559

Discussion

Alcohol plays a significant role in Northern Ireland's culture and society. Research with adults here has highlighted how alcohol contributes to relaxation, increased social confidence enhanced social bonding and strengthening relationships.²⁰ Its use in our culture is socially accepted and often encouraged and addressing the issue is difficult even with adults. For this reason addressing the issue as early as possible and continuing to address the issue with adults is necessary.

Secondary analysis of three surveys conducted with 11 to 16 year olds has thrown up a number of interesting points (although variation in the questions asked in each survey means that reliable comparisons are not always straightforward).

The majority of young people experiment with alcohol. In 2003, 59% had had an alcoholic drink, including 81% of those in Year 12. This level is significantly higher than in 2000. It is similar to the rest of the UK.²¹

- **Experimentation starts early.**

The average age for the first drink is around 11 years old, and the greatest increase in drinking occurs between the ages of 11 and 13. The age at which young people have their first drink doesn't appear to relate to whether or not they later become regular drinkers.

- **Gender differences are disappearing.**

Traditionally, boys were more likely to experiment with alcohol and to drink regularly than girls, but by 2003, there is almost no difference in experimentation, regular drinking or experience of drunkenness; in fact, in 2000 and 2003 girls are slightly more likely than boys to have been drunk.

- **Socioeconomic status impacts on some aspects of drinking behaviour.**

Measured by free school meals entitlement, young people of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experiment with alcohol and also more likely to have been drunk, but no more likely than others to drink regularly.

- **Some young people are drinking to dangerous levels.**

Across all three of the surveys, 2% of young people reported drinking every day. Although fewer young people reported being drunk in 2003, still 13% reported being drunk more than 10 times. The UK has some of the highest levels of youth drunkenness in Europe and the Northern Ireland levels are similar to the rest of the UK.²²

A number of issues have been raised by the secondary analysis that merit further consideration.

Experimentation and regular drinking

Although many young people show heavier alcohol use during their teenage years, this behaviour is not necessarily maintained when they make the transition into adulthood.¹¹ Drinking at this stage is viewed by some as part of the natural transition process into adulthood. The number of young people who could be classified as current regular drinkers fell by 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2003. This is due in part to the change in the question wording in 2003. It may also suggest that, while increasing numbers of young people are trying alcohol, they are not necessarily continuing experimentation to any extent; however, we cannot be conclusive in saying that.

Choice of drink

Choice of drink has become of greater concern since the introduction of alcopops in the mid 1990s. Beer, wine and cider have declined in popularity with our young people, while spirits and alcopops have shown a sharp rise in popularity. Age influences choice of drink: the 2000 survey showed that alcopops are the most popular drink for both boys and girls in Year 8.

The popularity of alcopops among Year 8 pupils is not surprising; due to their sweetness and lack of alcoholic taste they are seen as an entry point into regular drinking. However their popularity is said to decline with age and indeed, by Year 12 beer had overtaken alcopops as the first choice of drink for boys.²¹ Boys' drink preferences may change around age 16, as by this stage they are considered to have moved on from experimentation and see themselves as more responsible drinkers. They see their drinking behaviour as a sign of maturity and experience, by drinking more like adults and probably choosing a more 'adult' drink.²³

Alcopops continued to be the most popular drink for girls of all age groups, while spirits overtake wine as second choice for girls in Years 11 and 12. The rise in the popularity of spirits is quite marked for both sexes. It may be possible that young people are actually referring to spirit based mixers (or shots), which are also referred to by some as alcopops or 'ready to drink' (RTDs). In a recent review of literature, concern was expressed in the way in which drinks are marketed to young people.²³ The rise in drinking prevalence particularly among girls could in part be attributed to the availability and heavy marketing to the youth market of more palatable drinks.

Access to alcohol

The data shows that it is possible for young people in Northern Ireland to purchase alcohol illegally. In 2003 nearly a third of young people had purchased alcohol themselves at some time, with the majority of these purchases being from a pub (19%), followed by an off-licence (11%). A considerable proportion, 12% in 1997 and 14% in 2000, were drinking (although not necessarily purchasing) alcohol on licensed premises (ie in a pub or at a rave, disco, club or concert).

In 2003 14% reported getting their most recent drink from their parents; in contrast only 5% of all respondents in 2003 said they received information about alcohol from their parents. Children's attitudes and behaviours are initially shaped by families directly, as parents act as role models, and indirectly in that levels of family support, parental control and family conflict are linked to teenage drinking. What we do not know is if those 14% who received their most recent drink from their parents did so in a 'sensible drinking' context and from parents who wished to introduce their children to alcohol in a safe supervised environment. There is need for work in this area to ascertain how parents address and deal with the issue of alcohol in relation to their children.

Initially in the 1997 survey, a high proportion of young people reported getting alcohol from their parents; however, the question was asked of all young people who had tasted alcohol even if it was only a sip. In 2000 the question was only asked of those who had had a whole alcoholic drink, not just a taste or a sip, and we can see in this survey year that a larger proportion reported that friends were the source.

We know from other work that spending time with other young people who endorse alcohol use and drink alcohol is related to initiation of alcohol use and increased drinking behaviour.^{24,25} However, both selection and socialisation processes are involved: children choose their friends and friends model and reinforce each other's behaviour patterns.²⁶ In addition, parents again play a role as they have an effect on their children's choice of friends.^{27,4} Thus, although direct family effects may fade in certain areas of young people's lives during adolescence, the foundation for peer influence (which appears more prominent then) has been laid much earlier by the family.²⁷

Education

Nearly nine out of ten young people (87%) had had some education on alcohol and/or drugs in the last year. The main source by a substantial margin is school (88%). It is not clear from the survey how much alcohol education is offered compared to drugs. Nevertheless 61% in 2003 said the alcohol education they had received on alcohol had made them less inclined to drink alcohol. Interestingly, only 5% said they received information from parents even though parents are one of the main influences on their child's first drink.

Reasons for drinking

More young people are reporting that they drink because they like the taste: it rose from 74% in 1997 to 85% in 2003 and became the most commonly reported reason for drinking. This may be due to the increasing popularity of alcopops and spirit based mixers.

Regular drinkers and those who have been drunk more than four times are more likely to say they drink for psychosocial reasons, such as to be confident, to feel relaxed, and because it cheers them up. Almost two thirds of regular drinkers (65%) and 81% of those who have been drunk four times say that they drink to get drunk.

These issues should be explored with young people in any alcohol education or intervention. It is important to maintain a credible voice by acknowledging the positives of drinking alcohol before counterbalancing these by evidence of negative effects.

Risk

In comparison to other harmful substances (except cannabis), young people considered the least dangerous activity to be drinking five or more drinks at the weekend. This reflects the attitude of the adult drinking population, where a pattern of heavy occasional weekend drinking is considered normal and less risky to health.¹⁷ For occasional drinkers in particular (which the majority of young people are), the weekend binge is considered more dangerous in terms of immediate risk. This issue is currently being addressed through mass media public information campaigns targeted at adults.

The relationship between drinking behaviour and other risk behaviours, such as smoking experimentation, drug and solvent experimentation and sexual behaviour, is strongly significant. Although studies have suggested a clear association between for example , alcohol and unsafe sex, it is not possible to identify a causal link between alcohol and this or other risk behaviours. Other studies suggest that some young people are "risk takers", who will partake in a number of risk behaviours such as smoking, unsafe sex and trying illicit drugs. While peer group pressure is often used to explain young people's drinking there is also evidence pointing to the phenomenon of peer association (or peer selection): that is, young people who are already experimenting with certain risk behaviours are likely to choose friends who share similar interests and partake in similar activities.²⁸

Types of drinker

When the Northern Ireland data were analysed by drinker type (based on frequency), significant differences emerged between the two groups. Regular drinkers scored lower on self-esteem and school experiences. They perceive more pressure from school than occasional/non-drinkers and were more likely to report having been truant for any given number of days. Regular drinkers also appear less happy with life and report being less healthy than their occasional or non-drinking counterparts.

Qualitative research suggests that young people can be defined as “high risk problem drinkers” and “low risk problem drinkers”, based on their levels of drinking and the behaviour linked to drinking. Young people in these two groupings would display very different perspectives on the role of alcohol in their lives and this greatly influences their pattern of drinking. Understanding of these patterns should help in the planning of interventions.²⁹

Communication

Communication is an important factor when it comes to understanding why alcohol is used, but it is also important when seeking ways to address problem use among young people. It is widely recognised that one of the main benefits of drinking is the opportunity for social bonding and cohesion.³⁰ It appears that for boys in our surveys, drinking aids male relationships. Boys who drink regularly are more likely to report finding it easy to talk to friends of the same sex than their occasional/non-drinking counterparts. Similarly, those who drink regularly are more likely to report finding it easy to communicate with the other sex; however, this has a stronger relationship for girls than boys.

Importantly, regular drinkers in our surveys were more likely to find talking to their father or mother difficult. Looking at fathers alone, there is a significant difference between regular drinkers and others in ability to talk to their fathers, particularly for girls.

The importance of parent-child communication is paramount. The Communities that Care report lists a number of risk and protective factors for problem drinking derived from longitudinal research studies.³¹ The risk factors cover the areas of family, school community and friends including poor parental supervision and discipline, truancy, disadvantaged neighbourhood and early involvement in problem behaviour. The study also highlights protective factors that are linked to positive outcomes even if children are growing up exposed to risk factors. These are:

- strong bonds with family, friends and teachers;
- healthy standards set by parents, teachers and community leaders;
- opportunities for involvement in families, schools and the community;
- social and learning skills to enable participation;
- recognition and praise for positive behaviour.

The study found that the more young people are exposed to protective factors, the less likely they were to report taking part in activities such as problem drinking. Family demographic factors, such as living in a two parent as compared to a single parent family, seem to be less important than measures of family interaction.²⁴ Warm, supportive and involved parenting and family cohesion have been associated with later initiation of alcohol use and lower consumption.^{4,24} In contrast, both lax and excessive control or inconsistent and harsh discipline were shown to be related to earlier use of alcohol and frequent excessive drinking among young people.^{4,24}

This highlights that interventions addressing directly the issue of alcohol and only with young people, via education packs for example, are not sufficient. It is imperative that parents are involved in the process, not only on the direct issue of alcohol, the example they set and how they raise the issue with their children, but also around parenting, relationship and communication skills. Interventions that also tackle emotional wellbeing from an early age and address the issue of communication with peers and family also need to be promoted.

Future research

The problems encountered in analysing these data across three surveys highlight the need for survey work on drinking prevalence to be consistent. Questions aimed at establishing frequency of drinking and consumption need tested for reliability. Future surveys should also seek to establish the age at which young people have their first unsupervised drink and how much alcohol they are drinking in one session.

Further investigation is needed into alcohol sales to under 18s and access to licensed premises, to assess what the difficulties are in tackling this issue and what could be done to overcome them, such as awareness raising, training and addressing the issue of 'proof of age' cards.

Interventions or education about alcohol should begin at or before the first year of post-primary school, and should always address the reasons for drinking and acknowledge the perceived positive benefits. The issues of social acceptability and the risks associated with heavy occasional or "binge" drinking should also be addressed in alcohol education with young people. A single approach for all age groups is not sufficient: age and gender has a significant influence on the "type of drinker" and ideally interventions should be fine tuned for different drinker types. Qualitative work should be done to examine reasons for the increase in girls' drinking and to get a better profile of the drinker types that exist among Northern Ireland adolescents so that alcohol interventions can be better targeted. Approaches currently used in schools or youth settings in Northern Ireland should be reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness.

There is need for research to ascertain how parents address and deal directly with the issue of alcohol in relation to their children and what information and support needs they may have to enable them to do this effectively. Parents should be made aware of the importance of their behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol in influencing their children.

Finally, we need to emphasise and encourage the creation of supportive environments for young people at home, in school and in the community, so that they are continually exposed to protective factors. Good parenting and children's emotional wellbeing are two key issues that need to underlie any strategy that seeks to address problem behaviours among young people here.

References

1. Gmel G, Rehm J and Kuntsche EN. Binge drinking in Europe: Definitions, epidemiology, trends and consequences. *Sucht* 2003; 49: 105-115.
2. Schulenberg J, Maggs JL and Hurrelmann K. Health risks and developmental transitions during adolescence. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
3. Jessor R and Jessor SL. Problem behavior and psychosocial development: A longitudinal study of youth. New York: Academic Press, 1977.
4. Foxcroft DR and Lowe G. Adolescent drinking behaviour and family socialization factors: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence* 1991; 14: 255-273.
5. Plant MA and Plant ML. Young people and alcohol. *Nursing Times Research* 2001; 6: 887-897.
6. Foxcroft DR. Adolescent alcohol use and misuse in the UK. *Educational & Child Psychology* 1996; 13: 60-68.
7. Sharp DJ and Lowe G. Adolescents and alcohol – a review of the recent British research. *Journal of Adolescence* 1989; 12: 295-307.
8. Fillmore KM, Grant M, Hartka E, Johnstone BM, Swyer SM, Speigelman R and Temple MT. Collaborative longitudinal research on alcohol problems. *British Journal of the Addictions* 1988; 83: 441-444.
9. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland. A report on the 1994 survey. Belfast: HPA, 1995.
10. Coleman JC and Hendry LB. The nature of adolescence (3rd ed.). London: Routledge, 1999.
11. Jefferis BJMH, Power C and Manor O. Adolescent drinking level and adult binge drinking in a national birth cohort. *Addiction* 2005; 100: 543-549.
12. Rodham K, Hawton K, Evans E and Weatherall R. Ethnic and gender differences in drinking, smoking and drug taking among adolescents in England: A self-report school-based survey of 15 and 16 year olds. *Journal of Adolescence* 2005; 28: 63-73.
13. Kloep M, Hendry LB, Ingebrigtsen JE, Glendinning A and Espnes GA. Young people in 'drinking' societies? Norwegian, Scottish and Swedish adolescents' perceptions of alcohol use. *Health Education Research* 2001; 16: 279-291.
14. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland. A report on the 1997/98 survey. Belfast: HPA, 2000.
15. World Health Organization. Declaration on Young People and Alcohol, 2001. (<http://www.euro.who.int/AboutWHO/Policy/20030204>)
16. Becher H, Boreham R and Shaw A. Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2000. London: The Stationery Office, 2001.

17. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Adult drinking patterns in Northern Ireland. Belfast: HPA, 2002.
18. Bennett et al. Alcohol and alcoholism. Sensible drinking: the report of an inter-departmental working group. London: Department of Health, 1995.
19. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Minds matter: exploring the mental wellbeing of young people in Northern Ireland. Belfast: HPA, 2001.
20. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Attitudes and behaviour of young adult drinkers in Northern Ireland. Belfast: HPA, 2003.
21. Alcohol Concern. Young people's drinking. Factsheet 1. www.alcoholconcern.org.uk
22. Hibell B et al. The 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, CAN Council of Europe, Cooperation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs, 2000.
23. Newburn T and Shiner M. Teenage kicks? Young people and alcohol: a review of the literature. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001.
24. Hawkins JD, Catalano RF and Miller JY. Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin* 1992; 112: 64-105.
25. Miller P and Plant MA. The family, peer influence and substance use: findings from a study of UK teenagers. *Journal of Substance Use* 2003; 8: 19-26.
26. Kandal DB. The parental and peer context of adolescent deviance: algebra of interpersonal influences. *Journal of Drug Issues* 1996; 26: 289-315.
27. Collins WA, Maccoby EE, Steinberg L, Hetherington EM and Bornstein MH. The case for nature and nurture. *American Psychologist* 2000; 55: 218-232.
28. May C. Resistance to peer pressure: an inadequate basis for alcohol education. *Health Education Research* 1993; 8(2).
29. Boys A et al. Survey 2000: a follow up study of alcohol use amongst 15- 17 year olds. London: National Addiction Centre, 2001.
30. Hunt GP. The anthropology of drinking: a case of cohesion without division. *Alcologia* 1990; 2: 243-247. In: Brodsky A and Peele S. Psychological benefits of moderate alcohol consumption: alcohol's role in a broader conception of health and wellbeing. In Peele S and Grant M, editors. *Alcohol and pleasure – a health perspective*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1999.
31. Beinart S et al. Youth at risk? A national survey of risk factors, protective factors and problem behaviour among young people in England Scotland and Wales. London: Communities that Care, 2002.

Appendix 1: profile and validation of the sample

Sample profile

Table 51: Demographic profiles of respondents to the surveys

	1997 %	2000 %	2003 %
Gender			
Boys	51.0	51.1	50.9
Girls	49.0	48.9	49.1
School year			
Year 8	20.3	19.5	19.6
Year 9	20.6	20.2	19.9
Year 10	19.9	20.2	19.9
Year 11	19.9	20.2	20.0
Year 12	19.6	19.8	20.6
Total	5,607	6,297	7,223

Data validation

As can be seen from the table overleaf boys were overrepresented in many of the age groups for the 1997, 2000 and 2003 surveys and similarly girls were underrepresented. As an example 10% of school children in 1997 are Year 9 boys whereas our sample shows that 12% are Year 9 boys. To counteract this effect and to ensure that the sample was as similar to the population demographics for each of the survey years, the data have been weighted by a factor comprising gender and class year.

Table 52: Population demographics from school census compared to each survey

	1997 school census		1997 survey	
	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %
Year 8	10.40	9.88	11.13	9.24
Year 9	10.38	9.85	12.45	9.88
Year 10	10.11	9.81	10.83	9.15
Year 11	10.20	9.74	10.38	8.99
Year 12	9.92	9.72	9.32	8.63
	2000 school census		2000 survey	
	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %
Year 8	10.01	9.54	12.54	8.85
Year 9	10.26	9.94	11.87	9.79
Year 10	10.37	9.88	12.22	8.49
Year 11	10.37	9.81	10.54	8.79
Year 12	10.10	9.72	9.39	7.53
	2003 school census		2003 survey	
	Boys %	Girls %	Boys %	Girls %
Year 8	10.02	9.59	11.44	9.83
Year 9	10.13	9.74	11.10	9.75
Year 10	10.14	9.77	11.38	9.18
Year 11	10.27	9.77	10.49	8.83
Year 12	10.39	10.17	9.76	8.24



Health
Promotion
Agency

Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland
18 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast BT2 8HS.
Tel: 028 9031 1611 (Voice/Minicom). Fax: 028 9031 1711.
www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk



Irish Temperance League