

harpers

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ALCOHOL STRATEGY BEATING THE BINGE CULTURE
Helena Conibear

Time BOMB

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit released its long-awaited *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England* report on 15 March. As well as measures to better identify and treat alcohol dependency and deter under-age drinking, Helena Conibear finds that much of the report focuses on binge drinking and the potentially explosive issues it raises

On the surface, the facts and figures that emerge in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit's *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England* report make gloomy reading (see 'Hard facts to swallow' box opposite). They are echoed in another recent report by the British Medical Association (BMA), which cites the current trend of teenage obesity, binge drinking, smoking (25% of 15-year-olds smoke), bad diet, lack of exercise and promiscuity as 'a potential public health time bomb' that will lead to increased infertility, mental illness and premature death. The BMA report blames 'a generation ill-served by education, health services and family' and names the social costs linked to excessive and binge drinking, which range from driving accidents to absenteeism, and include violence, public disorder and opportunistic sexual assault.

Sensible majority

The *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy* report is grim reading indeed, but it is important to remember that the UK consumer is relatively

moderate in his or her consumption (8.5 litres per head of pure alcohol a year) when compared with France and Spain (10.5 litres). The Government recognises that most of us enjoy alcohol in a sensible, convivial social fashion and the report accepts at its core that alcohol plays an important and useful role both in the economy and in British society in general. We drink less than our grandparents did (nearly 25% less than in 1901) but more than our parents did in the austere post-war years (121% up on 1951). Furthermore, a Department of Health survey shows that the percentage of 11–15-year-olds drinking once a week has fluctuated little since 1988 (20%) and 2002 (24%).

What the report does highlight is that, among the young in particular, it is how people are drinking that is causing problems. A pattern of drinking has emerged that takes place at the weekend and revolves around a 'vertical drinking culture' in busy clubs and bars, where drinking rarely revolves around food or sitting in company with friends but in noisy, packed city

centre bars and clubs, where tens of thousands of other young people are intent on getting drunk.

What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking involves consuming a large quantity of alcohol in a short period of time, usually with the specific aim of getting drunk. Binge drinking is usually described as more than five drinks in succession on a single occasion, not over a meal. The drinker's weight, height and sex should also be taken into account, as should the time period over which the alcohol is consumed. The Government recognises that 'binge drinking is a debated term' and that 'many people who are drinking to get drunk will drink far in excess of the 6–8 units in the unit-based definition', and it is really these people that should be the focus of attention.

A tale of two types

The first category of binge drinker has been around since time immemorial. It is comprised of 16–24-year-olds for whom drinking alcohol is a

rite of passage: part of growing up, leaving home, going to college and achieving independence. Most young people grow out of this excessive pattern of drinking once they have settled into relationships and jobs.

BT Jones found that the number of students who binge drink has stayed relatively steady and that consumption peaks with 18–22-year-olds; that there is no evidence that heavy drinking at college leads to excessive use later on; and that drinking is concentrated at weekends (see Jones' 'Alcohol consumption on the Campus', *The Psychologist*, 16, 2003, 523–55.).

J Gill (2002), reviewing 18 British studies, found that students paid little attention to Government guidelines and that binge drinking was the norm. The main issues to be solved in this group are the violence, disorder, accidents and crime associated with their excesses (see 'Reported levels of alcohol consumption and binge drinking within the UK undergraduate student population over the last 25 years', *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 37, 2002, 109–20).

The second category of binge drinker comprises the significant minority of young adults, especially women, who continue the pattern of heavy drinking well into their twenties and early thirties. Most are well-off and well-educated – working hard, marrying later –

and they may well go to a gym and consider themselves healthy. However they are drinking heavily after work with colleagues, partying hard at weekends and doing long-term damage to their livers. (If drinkers combine obesity and/or smoking with heavy drinking over a number of years, the consequences for the liver in particular are serious.) This group of drinkers carry the greatest risk of long-term health damage and premature death (see 'Binge and cringe' box on page 20).

Why the culture of binge drinking and why the increase?

There is no simple reason or solution for this new group of binge drinkers. For the young, boredom or lack of alternative entertainment is a factor, especially for 16–24-year-olds. The Government has recognised this in its report and has pledged £2 billion for sports facilities over the next two years. The British climate and centuries-old culture and social life, which is based around drinking in pubs and clubs, are also factors. In a recent survey, 47% of students cited their prime reason for drinking as 'to get drunk'.

Women are better off and are marrying later and earning more but, according to the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London, 36% of women are still binge drinking in their mid twenties in comparison with 30% of men. These findings were further reflected in a recent Whitehall study that showed high-performing women drank more than their male colleagues.

Status, peer pressure and stress

Binge drinking is also believed to be linked to the age at which people begin drinking, educational attainment, employment, ethnicity, level of enjoyment of leisure activities, parents, religion and socio-economic status.

Also debated are the roles of advertising, outlet density, licensing hours and, finally, the regeneration of city centres, which has led to 'zones of drinking' that tend to be dominated by young people who move from premise to premise at the weekend.

Industry involvement

Regulation of advertising, health warning labels, restriction of licences and increased taxes or local levies on businesses to pay for extra policing remain on the agenda. The following extract from the report is especially pertinent to the industry: 'The success of the voluntary approach will be reviewed early in the next parliament. If industry actions are not beginning to make an impact in reducing harms, Government will assess the case for additional steps...including legislation.'

The report has commissioned the Office of Communications (Ofcom) to 'oversee a fundamental review of the code on alcohol advertising', with particular emphasis on avoiding under-age appeal or irresponsible behaviour. The report acknowledges that

In another recent report, the British Medical Association cited the current trend of teenage binge drinking as 'a potential public health time bomb' that can lead to premature death

although there are few complaints regarding alcohol advertising, some adverts have broken with 'the spirit of the code'.

Of equal importance is the damage to the reputation and profile of producers, retailers and outlets. According to a study by Heineken, the alcoholic drinks industry is regarded as less socially responsible than companies producing genetically modified (GM) food, oil and petroleum industries, or chemical producers – in fact only tobacco scores lower in public opinion.

Making a difference

The problem could look insurmountable, but if we look at how attitudes to drink-driving have transformed in the UK over the last twenty years, changing a 'social norm' of going out to get drunk is possible with imagination, funds, enforcement and determination at several levels.

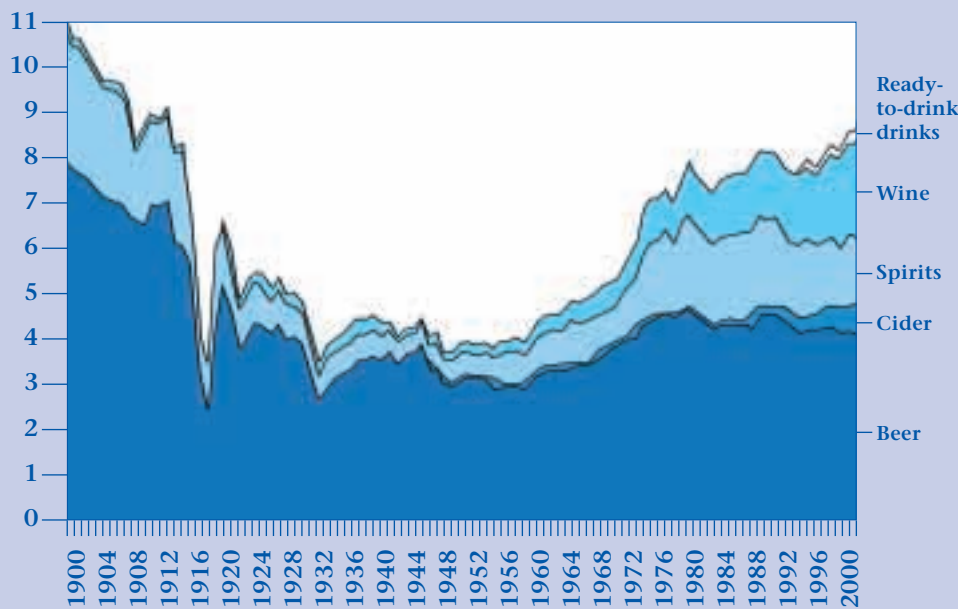
Many companies and associations already have schemes in operation aimed at reducing binge drinking and its associated behaviour. The British Beer and Pub Association has been particularly proactive in this respect, with guides on server training, outlet design, good practice and regulation of promotions. Through PubWatch, the association has introduced a scheme whereby pubs communicate with the police if problems are brewing.

Similarly, The Portman Group has produced imaginative campaigns in cinemas, loos, pubs and clubs, speaking in young people's language and showing the effects their actions have on their lives and status rather than adopting a 'nanny' approach. Individual companies like Diageo and Carling have aired adverts advocating moderate drinking, and many of Allied Domecq's brands carry key moderation messages.

Hard facts to swallow

- 92% of police claim to have been attacked by a drunk in Britain.
- An estimated 47% of violent crimes in the UK are 'alcohol-related' and 88% of police believe 'alcohol misuse is the most significant factor in public disorder facing the country'. The police and A&E staff are 'at the coalface', dealing with the antisocial consequences of large numbers of young people converging on city centres, mainly at weekends, with the prime purpose of getting drunk.
- One in four women exceeds the Government's sensible-drinking guidelines of 2–3 units a day and often drinks those units in one or two sessions at weekends.
- Nearly 6 million (out of 40 million drinkers) are drinking more than the recommended daily guidelines of 2–3 units for women and 3–4 units for men. These people are not necessarily binge drinkers, but the 1.8 million heavy drinkers almost certainly are.
- 40% of men and 22% of women under 35 drink more than twice the Government's guidelines.

Alcohol consumption in the UK: 1900–2000 per capita consumption of 100% alcohol



The UK is in the middle of the range for alcohol consumption compared to other European countries. However, while consumption has fallen over recent years in most of the wine-producing countries, British alcohol consumption continues to rise. If present trends continue, the UK will rise to near the top of the consumption league within the next ten years.

- preventing the use of open containers outside
- providing help points for people in trouble
- installing 82 CCTV cameras (this alone reduced vehicle theft by 17% and drug offences by 28%)

Despite these measures, 14 officers are still expected to deal with troublemakers on a Saturday night. Many forces claim they cannot tackle city-centre incidences at weekends due to lack of resources, which has led to home secretary David Blunkett's proposal that a local levy should be raised to pay for extra policing in city centres. This is also discussed in the report.

Effective self-regulation

Some £200 billion is spent by the alcohol industry on advertising in the UK each year. The report concludes that 'the evidence is not sufficiently strong to suggest...a ban on advertising or tightening existing restrictions on scheduling'. Self-regulation of products, websites and advertising on the whole works well in the UK through The Portman Group's Code of Practice, although 2003 saw a spate of rather dubious adverts that are alluded to in the report.

Effective communication between marketing departments, sales teams and public affairs departments within companies is essential, and the Ofcom (Office of Telecommunications) review of advertising codes will tighten up guides.

Regulation and control

In his book *Binge Drinking: Causes, Consequences and Cures* (distributed by CBA), Adrian Furnham states that 'efforts to reduce, regulate and control alcohol intake by governments often ignore the complexities of the issues' and 'simple-minded

Binge and cringe

- A prolonged period of binge drinking weakens the heart muscle and can lead to a condition called alcoholic cardiomyopathy. Symptoms include an irregular heartbeat and palpitations.

- The risk of alcoholic liver disease increases with binge drinking, as does cirrhosis. The Office for National Statistics estimates that 3% of deaths of women between 15 and 44 years old are attributable to alcohol-related cirrhosis and liver disease. In young men, 7% of deaths are alcohol-related, up from 2% in 1980.

- The health costs of binge drinking are estimated by the Government to be up to £1.7 billion, and 40% of A&E admissions at weekends are alcohol-related.

- Violence and disorder are estimated at 1.2 million incidents and cost up to £7.3 billion.

Drinking environment

There is no doubt that the design and layout of drinking establishments makes a difference to drinkers' behaviour. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit has noted that it is very noticeable that in 'places where you can sit down you don't have the same levels of antisocial behaviour'. Even the siting of loos can make a fundamental difference – for example if customers have to cross a crowded area to reach loos, it increases accidental spilling of drinks and pushing.

Having well-trained bar staff and door people who diffuse potential trouble and are confident enough to say no to troublemakers and obviously drunk punters is crucial. Alcohol Focus Scotland has done a lot of work in this area.

Good guidelines produced by associations that can offer assistance to premises also help, as does communication between premises and the police to avoid conflict and trouble. The Government is proposing a good practice code for the industry to sign up to that includes the above-mentioned patterns as well as measures such as asking for ID, having free water on the bar, using safety glasses and regulating promotions. This means careful use of happy hours and avoiding cut-price promotions over long periods, drinking as much as you like for a set sum and drinking games. The 2003 Licensing Act gives the police extra powers to penalise poor premises.

Education messages

The report acknowledges that many industry campaigns are 'highly effective' and reach many people. However just 10% of drinkers check their unit intake and only 25% of us know what a unit is (8g of pure alcohol). Designated-driver schemes have worked well, but the same cannot be said for attempts to stem the tide of binge drinking.

The Government will 'strongly encourage all manufacturers and retailers to carry unit information and sensible-drinking messages on containers and at points of sale (many already do). The Government has also pledged to enhance its sensible-drinking guidelines with messages for particular groups such as binge drinkers.

Community cooperation

Manchester launched its City Centre Safe scheme in 2000. The scheme has shown how, with the cooperation of police, transport authorities, industry and the council, a real difference can be made, with a 20% reduction in violence and crime in two years. Although Manchester has 550 licensed premises and absorbs an average of 120,000 revellers each weekend, a combination of the following has made a real difference:

- working with door staff and security officers
- rewarding well-run premises and enforcing action with badly run premises
- providing adequate taxis, night buses, bright lighting and bins for bottles

Parental guidance

Parents should:

- Try to eat with their children and introduce alcohol in a relaxed and convivial family setting.
- Drink in moderation and set an example.
- Encourage self-respect and social interaction.
- Encourage children to discover models of positive drinking-patterns outside the home.
- Encourage children to pace themselves and to eat before going out drinking or clubbing.
- Provide guidance and reassurance as teenagers enter high-risk environments.
- Highlight the consequences of drunkenness without affecting their friendships and social life.

attempts at increasing taxation, limiting licensing or banning advertising can have unanticipated and paradoxical effects, actually doing the opposite of that intended'.

Although the Strategy Unit has identified education, information and communication as key to changing drinking habits, as well as enforcing community safety through the criminal justice system to identify, deter, penalise and rehabilitate problem cases, a key statement is made that 'controlling supply (availability) and pricing through regulating suppliers and levying tax' is an option that will be reviewed.

Law enforcement

The report outlines a range of measures to crack down on drunk and disorderly behaviour at a local level, including on-the-spot fines for antisocial behaviour; confiscation of open containers on streets; the withdrawal of licences; and the closing of persistently irresponsible work premises. In Ireland, closing premises beset by public disorder has resulted in a fall of serious assaults and disorder by 20%.

Granting of licences

New regulations next year will pass the responsibility of granting licences to local councils rather than magistrates. Studies have shown that a mix of types of outlet in city centres (cafes, bars, restaurants and clubs) helps encourage a broader mix of customers to help alleviate the problem of 'no-go' areas in city centres at night.

The Government recognises its alcohol education campaigns need an overhaul and will now consult on the best way forward

Role models

Teenage icons and role models often set a bad example. 'Ladettes' such as Zoë Ball and Sara Cox and stars with drinking problems such as Robbie Williams and Kate Moss can affect how alcohol is portrayed in soaps and TV series. There are plenty of positive role models out there – especially in sport – such as David Beckham and Jonny Wilkinson.

Individual and the family

Over a twelve-month period, young British and Swedish people are twice as likely as the Italians and the French to participate in binge-drinking occasions. Adrian Furnham suggests that parents play the most powerful causative

role in establishing drinking patterns.

Upbringing determines a child's values, media consumption, friendships and expenditure, and parents set an example by their own drinking. However it is vital for parents to recognise the excitement and rewards offered by drinking as part of 'independence' and that demonising alcohol is counter-productive. Banning alcohol in the household can in fact lead to unregulated secret drinking.

Children naturally experiment with alcohol, often with friends, but if their parents have been positive, open role models and are 'well socialised', children are unlikely to develop bad habits with respect to alcohol (see 'Parental Guidance' box for other tips for parents).

Looking towards the future

The Alcohol Harm Reduction strategy outlines an excellent framework of measures to tackle binge drinking that embraces the need for education, better facilities for the young and effective law enforcement in dealing with poor premises and the drunk and disorderly. It encourages cooperation and joint initiatives with the industry and its associations and embraces the role of self-regulation. At this stage it offers both carrot and stick.

The Government recognises its alcohol education campaigns need an overhaul and funds and will now consult on the best way forward. Stephen Twigg, the minister responsible for alcohol and drugs education in schools, has pledged a new programme for secondary schools. ■

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Alcohol consumption in the world – litres of pure alcohol per inhabitant, 1999

