

**The social contexts of
underage drinking**

by
Terry Honess
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Summary

The aim of this research was to aid understanding of the meaning of alcohol in the lives of 12- to 17-year-old young people. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted in respect of the 'why' of drinking, its antecedents, expectations and potential consequences. Consequences involved respondents' concerns with their own safety, their possible involvement in antisocial behaviour and, more generally, the social significance of their drinking, including sexual behaviour. Principal data collection was with school pupils in London and South Wales, with particular attention given to 16- to 17-year-old young women. However, given the broad agenda-setting function of the research, work was also undertaken with young people outside of the school environment, i.e. from youth groups, young offender groups, and those in residential care. The total number of young people participating was 180. The research also involved a further 50 young people in the pilot use of the Internet for data collection, the evaluation of which was positive.

The accounts of drinking experiences suggest three separate sets of reasons for alcohol use:

1. 'Individually-based' reasons, these primarily involve relaxation. At times, this was seen as a way of helping to cope with stressful life events. In general, however, the individually-based reasons appear to be derivative of adult discourse on alcohol use, such as 'unwinding' at the end of a long day.
2. 'Socially-based' reasons were more common, particularly for the 15- to 17-year-olds, and are clearly identified with young people rather than adults. These are expressing one's views more easily, allowing opportunities for developing trust with friends in a variety of social settings and allowing possibilities for exploring sexual relationships in a less threatening context. For these social reasons, alcohol is seen to serve both relaxing and bonding functions within a peer group. In addition, and importantly, it may be used to excuse one's behaviour.
3. 'Peer influence', although including unwanted pressure, more generally involves a tacit social expectation that certain kinds of events will entail particular types of alcohol use. In the latter case an individual is best seen as a willing member of a social group in which particular norms and expectations concerning alcohol use had emerged and were subject to continuous change.

For the majority of young people, drinking alcohol constitutes a necessary feature of some social activity. This argument moves beyond alcohol use as imitating adult behaviour. Rather, particular forms of alcohol consumption appear to be normalised amongst young people, i.e. drinking is as much 'young people' behaviour as 'adult' behaviour. The particular form of this behaviour was shown to depend on several socio-cultural parameters:

- Gender of participant. Accounts of alcohol and social life were clearly gendered. In addition, accounts were clear and consistent from all respondents concerning differences between the behaviour of young men and women.

- Local culture. The local community served by the South Wales school included areas that embodied a culture of heavy drinking. This was reflected in the social activity talked about by these young people, including those who did not drink themselves.
- Family and support characteristics. The attitudes and behaviour of parents was very important in shaping drinking behaviour. Young people in care have a different structure of opportunities and occasions for drinking.
- Religion and ethnic identity. Religion might provide a rationale for abstinence and, if alcohol is proscribed, will impact on the location of any alcohol consumption.
- Age of respondent. This factor is especially important - particular kinds of drinking behaviour are age-dependent.

Antisocial behaviour. A range of drink related antisocial behaviour was described, generally with the assumption that these things would not have happened if the respondent had been sober. These fell into two distinct categories: first, drink had led to an unexpected loss of control or second, drink was used strategically in the sense that lowered inhibitions had been anticipated. Five antisocial features that are associated with alcohol use were identified:

- the link between drinking and the intention to get drunk, especially for young people around the age of 15
- the need for boys to show a tough macho image
- drinking and threatening behaviour in relatively large groups
- alcohol use as an excuse for 'bad' behaviour
- male sexual harassment.

The degree to which 'looking out for friends' is territorial partly explains the uneasy juxtaposition of sharing/friendship and aggression/violence in many of the accounts given by young men from all of the backgrounds sampled here. Indeed, there was overwhelming evidence from both young men and women, that aggression was expected on some of the social occasions that involved drinking. However, given the multi-function use of alcohol described in this report, a simple causal link between alcohol use and antisocial behaviour is not sustainable. For all respondent groups, it is important to stress that although alcohol linked aggression might be expected, other forms of crime and disorder were generally not planned or expected. If other forms of disorder did occur, whether they were recounted as regrettable or amusing, they were generally treated as a simple by-product, or unfortunate consequence of the 'night out'.

Influences on drinking and strategies for changing behaviour. Strategies for controlling or reducing alcohol intake were based almost entirely on personal experience. However, it is argued that school is suitable for the provision of health-related information if it given more significant attention and as early as possible within the secondary school framework. However, advice and guidance is much more problematic, and must acknowledge the reality of adolescent drinking in

spite of the existing legal framework. A discussion-based interactive approach that allows a broad consideration of alcohol-related situations is necessary. Focus style discussion groups are recommended, with appropriate confidentiality safeguards. The issue of where and with whom these should take place requires trials, and a variety of options are discussed.

Sharing of views and experiences should certainly be used for promoting personal safety when drinking. This invariably invokes considerable interest and debate about different social strategies. An interactive forum could also be used to challenge antisocial behaviour. For example, many accounts present alcohol-fuelled sexual harassment as both unmanly and unattractive, and involve a clear moral censure from the peer group. Overall, it is clear that the basis for promotion to more sensible drinking, whether personal safety or challenging antisocial behaviour, are already evident in the accounts of young people.

A persistent feature of the accounts from young people emphasised their need to discover and decide for themselves how to deal with alcohol. Health interventions and other policy changes need to be seen as supporting and informing, but not dictating these decisions. Indeed, a key argument is that any initiative would most usefully build on these pre-existing ideas. This position is reinforced by our central finding that drinking is as much ‘young people’ behaviour as ‘adult’ behaviour, and that any interventions need to operate within that context.

1 The research and policy context

Patterns of onset and frequency relating to young people's drinking behaviours are becoming much clearer, and are increasingly appropriate for indexing change. For example, sex differences appear to be diminishing and young people are increasingly involved in binge drinking. Moreover, these findings are broadly similar to European and US reports (e.g., Hazard and Lee, 1999; Mayer et al. 1998).

Given this extensive survey base, the work reported here addresses the more complex question of the meaning and value of drinking of alcohol in the lives of 12- to 17-year-olds. It uses focus groups and individual interviews with young people living in different environments: families in urban and semi-rural communities, those in care in children's residential homes, and a sample of young offenders. A brief overview of research findings is given below, followed by the specific questions that guided the research reported here.

The changing patterns of adolescent alcohol use have received considerable attention. Particularly noteworthy is the survey work of Alexandrou, Flood-Page and Graham (1998), Goddard and Higgins (1999), Measham (1996), Sutherland and Willner (1998) and the review by Wright (1999). In general, the following patterns are evident for changes in the last decade:

- young people are drinking alcohol more frequently (although Goddard and Higgins indicate a dip for pupils aged 11-15 between 1996 and 1998)
- those young people that drink are drinking more alcohol per session
- in general, the foregoing changes are particularly pronounced for young women
- higher levels of alcohol use are associated with the use of cigarettes and illegal drugs.

The relations between alcohol use and crime and nuisance have been less extensively explored. However, in the relatively few British studies (Deehan, 1999, provides a review), associations between alcohol use and criminal activity or antisocial behaviour have been established. For example, regular young drinkers are much more likely to have a criminal record than those who do not drink or only drink occasionally (Newcombe, Measham and Parker, 1995). In addition, Alexandrou et al. (1998) find that four per cent of male young drinkers and six per cent of females said they had stolen, broken or damaged something during or after drinking, and four per cent of females and eight per cent of males reported they had been violent or got into a fight during or after drinking.

The relationship between alcohol use and criminal or antisocial behaviour is recognised to be complex. It is illustrated in the Fergusson, Lynskey and Horwood (1996) finding that young people who misused alcohol had significantly higher rates of both violent and property offences.

However, Fergusson et al. showed a substantial component of this association arose from shared risk factors such as social background and parental characteristics. Commentaries on this work by Farrington (1996), amongst others, explore in some detail the issues that must be considered in interpreting cohort studies of this kind. Other commentators, such as Parker (1996), argue the need for more interview-based work to explore the formative role of social context in understanding alcohol use and offending behaviour, or as Deehan puts it the ‘inherently social’ nature of alcohol use and its relationship to offending behaviour.

In a similar vein, Wright (1999) argues that the social contexts for drinking are necessary to understand alcohol’s more general ‘place and meaning’ for young people. Pavis, Cunningham-Burley and Amos (1997) illustrate this in their interview study of the alcohol use of 15-year-olds living in the East Coast of Scotland. Alcohol was drunk in a range of social contexts including street corners, pubs and clubs, and in friends’ and their own homes, and these contexts informed their reasons for drinking. The authors argue that as alcohol is widely used and accepted within adult society, it is one of the tasks of adolescence to learn how to use it appropriately.

The notion of a developmental task is an important one; it stems from the classic works of Havighurst, Erikson and Allport (Honest, 1992, provides an overview). From this perspective, the young person might see alcohol as serving any or all of the following: (a) distancing from parents, (b) fostering a feeling of security, in the sense of being relaxed, and able to express one’s own views, (c) allowing opportunities to develop trust with particular others, and (d) providing opportunities to explore sexual relationships in a less threatening context where drinking may be used to excuse one’s behaviour. These different threads allow an anticipation of accounts from young people that will shift between those that identify alcohol as a marker of ‘adult status’, those that allow acceptance of more ‘outrageous’ behaviour (release and exploration) and, finally, those that suggest a ‘childlike’ interest in experimentation that assists in establishing personal boundaries and guidelines.

Turning now to methodology, the last decade has seen a considerable growth in the use of focus groups in health and lifestyle research. Relevant examples include work that seeks to inform public policy, such as the Rivers et al. (1996) study on drinking and driving, which suggests that programmes be conducted in small groups, and emphasise real-life situations. Similarly, Levine and Zimmerman (1996) used focus groups to evaluate a media communications strategy for violence prevention for at-risk inner city youth – familiar people, settings and events were reported to be the most persuasive.

Part of this growth is attributable to the limitations of alternative methods: Manfredi et al. (1997), for example, found that in comparison to survey instruments, focus groups highlighted the situational contexts that gave meaning to lifestyle decisions. In addition, Seal et al. (1998) argue that individual interviews provide a valuable complement to focus groups insofar as they allow a more detailed, ‘richer’ analysis that does not focus only on the more dramatic and uncommon.

More generally, a broader context for understanding drinking behaviour allows an integration of personal and family factors within the wider subculture, including gendered expectations. Young drinkers’ direct and indirect experiences might be said to feed into their stories about alcohol use. This is important insofar as such accounts should not be regarded as mere reports of events, rather

they define a position for individuals (with consequent rights and obligations) that can be seen to set the foundation for meaningful choice and action.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted within the following orienting framework: (a) drinking occasions, i.e. where, what, how much, with whom, and (b), consideration of degree of choice, the 'why' of drinking -- antecedents, expectations and potential consequences. Consequences involve respondents' concerns with their own safety, their possible involvement in criminal/antisocial behaviour and, more generally, the social significance of their drinking, including sexual behaviour. Such information allows consideration of how things could be otherwise and can inform an agenda for promoting safer, more sensible drinking, including attempts to minimise the impact of alcohol use on antisocial behaviour.

In summary, the research reported here seeks to aid our understanding of the social and developmental significance of alcohol use, in the following respects:

- providing further insight into the age specific meaning of alcohol use by working with discrete age bands of 12–13, 14–15- and 16–17 years of age
- giving particular attention to the meaning of alcohol in the lives of young women since survey findings suggest that the rate of increase in alcohol use is particularly high here
- examining alcohol meanings with potentially vulnerable young people – those in care and those convicted of criminal acts
- addressing the lack of work with different ethnic groups
- exploring the proposition that the broader social context may powerfully shape the experiences and perceptions of young people by employing parallel data collection in North London and a semi-rural environment in South Wales.

2 Sample and data collection

Participating organisations

Given the need to be sensitive to age, gender and cultural differences in accounts of alcohol-related experiences, a range of young people were involved. A large North London comprehensive school that draws on a broad socio-economic catchment area provided facilities for interviewing 12- to 17-year-olds, including the specially targeted young female drinkers in the 16-17 year age band. A second comprehensive school, situated in South Wales, also provided facilities for interviewing 12- to 17-year-olds. Both schools received a donation to the school funds for help in organising and taking part in the research.

Although we shall sustain the urban (London) versus semi-rural (South Wales) labels for convenience, it is acknowledged that what constitutes 'rural' is not at all straightforward, particularly for young people, who are typically subject to an urban pull (see Henderson, 1998, for a discussion of this issue). The South Wales school was different to the London school in several ways:

- it covered a wider catchment area, including several Welsh valleys as well as sparsely populated farming communities
- there was less disposable income for these young people
- there were fewer licensed and non-licensed social venues available to them.

The school can best be described as being situated on the outskirts of a small valley town, including areas that once served a large mining community which embodied a culture of heavy drinking.

Four children's homes, and one youth justice team from London also participated, as did one team from South Wales. The respondent group from the South Wales team was made up of young offenders who were in residential care. It is possible that the children in care, and the young offenders might be especially vulnerable to different forms of substance abuse (Lloyd and Griffiths, 1998). In addition, the young offender interviews allowed some consideration of the alcohol-crime link. Interviews and discussions were also held with young people attending a youth centre in east London, to ensure the inclusion of early school leavers and to boost the representation of ethnic minorities. The youth centre provided more participants than initially planned because of the emergence of unexpected aggression linked themes.

Given that the research is in the tradition of analytic rather than statistical inference, it is not claimed that respondents are representative of each of the settings, e.g. of 'London schools' or 'UK youth offenders'. Rather, the settings were chosen to help represent the range of circumstances in which young people are to be found, with some attention being given to potentially vulnerable young people.

Enrolment of participants

The precise method of enrolment depended on the organisation concerned, but all potential participants were given the same information, and, where necessary, written parental approval was obtained. For example, the London school information follows:

“We are researching drinking habits of people between the ages of 12 and 17 on behalf of the Home Office. We are talking to people like you across the country over the next few months to find out your attitudes to drinking alcohol. We want to talk about your ideas in discussion groups of around 6-8 young people (about an hour and a half), these may be followed by short individual interviews (approximately half an hour). Most people find that these kind of interviews are good fun. Everything you tell us will be confidential. None of you will be identified by name in the research – at most you will be referred to as, for example, a thirteen-year-old girl or boy from London. Once we have finished collecting all the information we will write up what you have told us in a report which will help to understand more about drinking and possibly help promote sensible drinking in the UK.

If you do take part, we would want to thank you for your help by giving you a £15 HMV or Virgin token, and if you also do the short interview, a total of £25 in tokens”.

Table 2.1 details the characteristics of the achieved sample. In total, 180 young people took part in focus groups or participated in an individual interview: 25 focus groups were carried out, 64 individual interviews from schools, and 28 from other organisations. The high number of 16- to 17-year-old female groups stemmed from the need to investigate rapidly shifting patterns in the drinking behaviour of young women. The ethnicity category in Table 2.1 is a much simplified category set based on the self identified descriptions requested in the questionnaire.

Table 2.1: Characteristics of the sample

Category of respondent – Type of focus group – Total number seen	Boys	Girls	Ethnicity of total: either focus group or interview
London (12-13) 1 male & 1 female group 16	3 interviews	3 interviews	71% white 14% black 14% Asian
London (14-15) 2 mixed groups 16	4 interviews	4 interviews	63% white) 11% black 26% Asian
London (16-17) 1 male & 5 female groups 1 mixed group 44	6 interviews	16 interviews	74% white 9% black 9% Asian 9% mixed
Rural (12-13) 1 male & 1 female group 16	4 interviews	4 interviews	100% white
Rural (14-15) 2 mixed groups 17	5 interviews	3 interviews	100% white
Rural (16-17) 1 male & 1 female group 1 mixed group 25	6 interviews	6 interviews	100% white
Youth centre 2 male and 1 mixed group 22 (M age = 15.0 years)	5 interviews (ages 1x16, 4x17)	1 interview (age16)	60% Asian 36% black 5% white
Children in care ¹ 3 mixed groups 15 ² (M age = 13.8 years)	4 interviews (ages 12, 14, 2x16)	9 interviews (ages 2x12, 14, 15, 5x16)	53% white 40% black 6% mixed
Young offenders ¹ 1 male group 9 ² (M age = 15.3 years)	8 interviews (ages 13, 4x15, 3x17)	1 interview (age 15)	78% white 11% black 11% mixed

M = Mean

Total number of focus groups: 25

Total number of individual interviews: 92

Total number interviewed in either context: 180

¹ Children in care does not include the four young offenders in care

² Includes those not seen in a focus group

Context and procedure for data collection

All discussions and interviews took place on the premises of each host organisation; for schools this was during the normal school day. Soft drinks were provided during the running of the focus groups which took place in a quiet room set aside for this purpose. At the end of the focus groups, all participants completed questionnaires (see below) and, after a short break, individual interviews were conducted. All participants were given a copy of the Alcohol Concern booklet 'Enough bottle? Can you handle booze?: A guide for teenagers'. The exception to this was the South Wales school who needed more time to clear the use of the booklet with interested parties.

The first mixed sex focus groups were taken by two experienced focus group researchers (one male and one female): one leading and the other taking detailed notes. This strategy encouraged consistency and sharing of ideas; following this, all groups were led by one of the two key focus group researchers, with a second experienced researcher acting as a note taker. Both researchers were female for the all female focus groups. Group sizes ranged from five to nine.

The target number of individual interviews following each focus group was three to four, the interviews shared between the two researchers (the leader and the note taker). If more than four were available to be interviewed, equal numbers of male and female participants were selected, with more experienced drinkers given preference. The interviews were audio-taped.

Questionnaire

All participants completed the questionnaire, provided in Appendix 1, at the end of their focus groups, and therefore prior to any individual interview. The questionnaire was based on the Home Office Youth Lifestyles survey questionnaire (Alexandrou, Flood-Page and Graham, 1998) in order to allow comparison with this large database. The questionnaire addresses frequency, location and social setting for drinking behaviour, including any negative consequences. It had been intended to give the questionnaire, for the school-based sample, to a wide range of potential participants and then select particular kinds of drinkers for the focus groups. However, this proved administratively cumbersome because parental approval was needed for any individual interviews and, secondly, providing reasons for selection was seen to prejudice confidentiality. Moreover, administering the questionnaire after the focus group facilitated standardisation in an informed context for participants. The questionnaire underwent modifications to allow its use online, as discussed elsewhere in this report.

The questionnaire results are summarised in Appendix 3. Comparing the schools' data to the Alexandrou et al. (1998) survey findings indicates that the sample used in this study were heavier drinkers and were more likely to acknowledge alcohol-related antisocial behaviour.

Focus groups

Focus groups are not simply discussion groups but are designed to generate ideas and encourage an interplay of thoughts and reflections. To this end the following features characterised the running of the focus groups:

- creation of a permissive environment that nurtured different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to reach consensus

- gate-keeping, especially helping all members to participate, drawing out quieter members, controlling dominant members
- focusing the group on the subject: curtailing digressions, keeping the discussion on track without being overbearing. Probing as appropriate
- using a variety of different questioning techniques, encouraging contributions, but avoiding comments that signal approval of specific ideas
- enjoyment, generally speaking, is necessary for generating creative ideas and for participants revamping or putting a new spin on old themes
- encouragement for people to spark off each other.

One clear indicator that at least some of these aims were achieved was the extent to which new prospective participants came forward once the work had begun. As the key contact in the London school remarked: "the whole school would probably have been happy to be interviewed". The themes that were introduced for focus group discussion necessarily reflected our own research questions following practice/pilot runs, the protocol detailed in Appendix 2 was established. Clearly not all of these questions (and prompts) were asked – it depended on the group constitution and the way the group itself moved on the day.

Individual interviews

The individual interview had almost invariably been preceded by participation in a focus group. For these participants, this proved an excellent platform for discussion of the individual's own feelings about drinking. The aim of the interview was to complement the focus group information by allowing the respondent to provide greater depth and detail when giving accounts of particular drink-related experiences. To this end, the individuals own experiences were allowed to shape the course of the interview. On the very few occasions when participants had become upset by the recounting of some event in the focus group, the individual would always be given an opportunity to talk about this, and offered appropriate support. Apart from this proviso, the following areas were usually covered, with appropriate modifications based on the individual's age and background.

1. Opportunity to comment on what came up in the group.
 - Any points that the interviewee particularly agreed or disagreed with? Anything that surprised the respondent? The interviewer might highlight any issues that caused controversy, or spirited discussion.
 - Points that could not be aired, whether through lack of opportunity, or the respondent's wish not to raise something in the group.
2. The issues introduced in (1) usually led into commentary on the preceding focus group discussion. This featured the respondent's personal experiences. Alternatively, or in addition, the following specific themes were introduced (prompts the same as those described in the focus group schedule), with the emphasis on personal experience.

- Can you describe a ‘good night out’ or time (that actually happened)?
- Can you describe a ‘night out’ or time when you got too drunk? What went wrong?
- Can you describe a ‘night out’ or time when things went wrong?

On the few occasions (four of the young offender interviews and four of the children in care interviews) when a focus group meeting had not proved possible, the questionnaire was completed first and followed by a revised version of the focus group protocol, but with an emphasis on personal experience.

It is appropriate to report one aspect of the findings at this point. In response to the individual interview question concerning surprise or disagreement, there was only one instance of a respondent suggesting that people may have been exaggerating. Rather, other group members not only appeared to facilitate disclosure, but also acted as a check on the veracity of any accounts. Moreover, the focus group-oriented respondents to such a degree that the individual interviews almost invariably proceeded rapidly and effectively.

Data recording and analysis

The focus group records were typed by the note taking researcher in as close to verbatim form as possible, with special regard to noting which speaker was contributing at any particular time – ‘M1’, ‘F1’ notations indicated the speaker as Male or Female, with numbers uniquely identifying a particular speaker. Following this, the group leader added or qualified any aspect following discussion with the note taking researcher. The individual interviews were audio-taped and all relevant material simply transcribed by the interviewer. All typed records constituted data for analysis. In the results, extracts from an interplay between focus group members are designated by the M1, M2 etc. notation, and comments from individuals (from individual interviews or individual contributions in focus groups) are identified with M* or F* notation.

The technical issues involved in the analysis of qualitative data are very important, but discussion is beyond the scope of this report. Our methods are best located in the traditions known as quantitative and thematic content analysis; in methods that emphasise the significance of narrative; and in case study procedures. In concrete terms, the following procedure was adopted: the material was initially categorised by age, gender and location. Within each category, say, the 12- to 13-year-old London girls, the focus group was regarded as the primary source, and the typed script re-ordered into thematic groupings that captured what the young people had said.

This analysis was followed by careful consideration of each individual interview in turn, with new material being added in under the relevant thematic grouping; which might itself be revised in this process. In an important sense, each interview is a new case from which confirming or novel threads are manifest. In instances where more than one focus group was available (e.g. the 16- to 17-year-old young women), all focus group material was considered before the individual interviews.

The same procedure was followed with other categories of respondent, which allowed consideration of which accounts were relatively invariant between categories and which were relevant only to particular categories of respondent. This data summary was then examined by a second researcher who, with access to the original scripts, was charged with searching for

competing interpretations. In summary, the key requirement for the analysis reported here was that all commentary must have been fully justified with reference to the typed focus group and interview data.

The following themes captured the key issues raised in the interviews, and each chapter is arranged around them:

- what and where young people drink
- why young people drink:
 - Alcohol as a symbol
 - Individually based reasons
 - Socially-based reasons
 - Peer influence
- differences between males and females
- alcohol, personal safety and related nuisance and criminal behaviour
- role of parents
- controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking behaviour.

3 Findings: 12- to 13-year-old young people

Young men and women from the London and South Wales populations are considered together in this chapter. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency of drinking, based on the questionnaire responses, are to be found in Appendix 3.

What and where young people drink

The majority of respondents in this group had consumed some alcohol – usually within the family setting – in order to try the taste. However, their reaction to this experience varied markedly – some young people of this age stating quite clearly that they found alcohol unpalatable. Take this example from an interchange in one of the female focus groups:

F5 I normally drink Diamond White.

F4 What's that?

F5 Cider. But it's not very nice. Even smelling it makes you churn up inside. I drink it though, if everyone else has it.

F4 I've tasted my Mum's Baileys with ice – nasty!

F8 I've tried stuff, just to try it. But if I don't want to, I don't.

F7 My next door neighbour has got some strong stuff. I just smelt it, and it was horrible.

Several stated their intention not to drink alcohol until they were much older. Indeed, only four (12%) of the 12- and 13-year-olds reported that they drank once a week or more.

However, most young people were drinking at this age, if not very frequently, and the most common type of drink was some form of 'alcopops' – Hooch and 20/20 were particularly popular. The sweet taste of alcopops was an attraction as were reports of its relative cheapness and ease of purchase (but note that relatively few purchased at this age). Moreover, the belief that it was not strong in alcohol was common. This was reflected in their responses to the alcohol quiz which formed part of all focus groups. In addition to alcopops, some young people, especially those from the semi-rural setting, expressed a preference for beer and also for cider, which was considered easy to drink and also relatively cheap. Some 12- to 13-year-olds liked the idea of Bacardi Breezers, which had the attraction of being both sweet and associated with older drinkers.

It was fairly typical to find one 12- or 13-year-old young person in a focus group who drank considerably more than the others. This person often had older friends and, when interviewed individually, expressed the view that fellow focus group members were dull. One girl said:

F* The others are all too quiet – they don't have an opinion or anything – I'd like to move classes. It annoys me, gets on my nerves a bit. I'd never go out with the girls from the group this morning – I wouldn't fit in – I'd be the loud one and everyone would be saying "calm down". All my other friends are just the same – we have a laugh, and everyone is loud and we joke around.

The converse view was often found with some of those 12- to 13-year-olds who were virtually teetotal and saw their drinking peers as irresponsible. One boy said:

M* I think they are wasting their lives. If they are drinking now, they will get addicted too quickly and they will waste their lives because if they get really drunk – like if they get drunk before their exams because they are nervous – then they won't do well in the exams and then they won't do well when they are older looking for jobs because they won't have any qualifications.

When young people of this age did drink, it was mainly at home with their family or at family parties. Visits to pubs with parents had a mixed reception – pub lunches were seen as good, but the smokey stale atmosphere was generally disliked. However, those 12- to 13-year-olds who consumed alcohol regularly were drinking mainly outside: in the streets, at the park or in a sheltered area by a block of flats:

F* (Interviewer: You say you drink on estates – does anyone complain?) Yes. If we go to this one estate near my friend's house – it is big blocks of flats all connected with stairs and we just go underneath, beneath this big roof and we'd all be drinking there and smoking and normally a man would come out and say "you're making too much noise, you're leaving all your rubbish here" but we would clear our rubbish up and wouldn't just put our butts out anywhere.

F* [We drink] out on the streets and at the park. We'd all chip in on money and someone will go to the shop and get it. Usually there's a 17- to 18-year-old who goes to get it.

The questionnaire data show that whilst parents were the most common source for obtaining alcohol, for the small number of 12- to 13-year-olds who were drinking alcohol regularly, purchasing it themselves was sometimes possible. Others got an older friend to buy on their behalf or, rarely, waited outside an off-licence and asked an adult stranger to buy alcohol for them.

F* I went to the off-licence yesterday – it was the only shop open at 9 p.m. – I went to get some Ribena and I was looking and there were 8 bottles of Hooch for £5, which is three pounds off, and the man says "you can get it if you want". But I was looking at the other drink (non-alcoholic), so he is blatantly offering me that drink – if I want it, then I can have it. But not so that anyone else can hear. They do know – they say "if I give you this drink, you can't be seen coming out of the shop with this drink because you are under age". So they will tell you but they will still go along with it. They ask proper questions when someone else is around or maybe they turn you away, and when the other people have gone they'll say "sorry about that".

M* In my local rugby club, they serve anyone because they just want the money.

Why young people drink

Alcohol as a symbol

Many young people in this group – drinkers and non-drinkers – acknowledged explicitly the image function of alcohol use. In particular, the feeling of growing up:

M5 It's OK at parties.

M4 People want to look older and hard ...

M* They [older friends] drink beer – they are two/three years older than me. They say drinking makes them feel older and more in control of their life.

F* It was good (referring to her focus group) because everybody said how they were drinking or how they weren't drinking and what they thought about it so it was good. And you got to know if your friends were drinking or if they were just trying to be cool.

Individually and socially-based reasons

However, some drinkers at this age stated that they drank to relax and to aid socialisation, a view more typically held by older teenagers:

M* Everything seems a bit nicer when you are drinking – it is an escape from reality.

F* You can just relax – though it depends on what you are drinking. It will calm you down, you can sit and talk – you don't have to go home and have to do things. You can just relax and you feel okay about things. It calms you down and you just feel nice and easy. Proper hard drinks – like Diamond White or whisky – makes you so tired – you don't want to do anything. But Hooch and Bacardi Breezers and those kinds of drinks just make you calm and they make you talk and you get feelings off your chest ...– when you get together – you can talk. It gets you all together, so you can gossip, talk to everyone ...

More generally, the respondents – largely from the semi-rural sample – talked about boredom as the prime reason for drinking at their age. One of the female focus groups concluded with a general discussion about neighbours complaining about them being on the street but, they argued, there is nowhere for them to go.

Peer influence

Several 12- to 13-year-olds commented on the pressure from friends to drink, although they did not necessarily give in to this pressure:

F* Sometimes it makes you feel awkward and embarrassed and stuff, if most of my friends are drinking and it's just me and maybe one other person who's not doing it.

F* I've never really felt under that much pressure, but I know people who have and they've just ended up giving in to it. They don't want to be the odd one out, the one who's called 'boring', the one who's not doing it.

M* Ever been pressured? Yes, but I just ignored them. If my mum caught me I'd be dead. They don't pressure me now (friends) because they know I don't like it. My parents ask me not to drink when I go out, so I don't, it makes me feel bad.

Differences between males and females

Several 12- and 13-year-olds of both sexes commented that there was more pressure on boys to drink:

F* Well, I know some boys who are very mature and when they drink they are very relaxed and they don't show off or anything. But I think there are more of a majority of boys who just drink under pressure because all their friends are doing it compared to girls. It's a more boyish thing just to do it to say 'Oh, I've had a drink'. Just to show off. Just to show that they are capable of doing that and they are real lads or whatever. I mean I know more girls than boys who if you ask them if they've been drunk will simply say 'Oh no' or whatever. Whereas, if you ask boys and they haven't, they get all embarrassed!

Alcohol-violence links were not a common feature of accounts from this age group, but there was a clear assumption that males get more aggressive than females when they have been drinking. The following interchange in an all-male focus group containing a majority of regular drinkers illustrates this:

M4 I wouldn't stop my friends if they'd had too much, they get violent.

M2 Yeah, people are twice as strong.

M4 Boys always hold onto girls, they think they can pull everybody...They think they're 'ard and then they drink more.

M6 They fight.

M8 They swear.

M4 (What about girls?) Girls just argue, they don't fight.

M2 Yeah, they argue over nothing. Boys argue over girls. Girls say things like, "I'm better lookin' than you" ...

Alcohol, personal safety and related nuisance and criminal behaviour

On the whole, the London 12- and 13-year-olds did not drink often enough to have many considerations about their personal safety, although most could recount stories of problems from people who had been drinking too much and the consequent need to avoid people who were drunk. The boys from the semi-rural sample who drank together talked of the need to have friends you can trust in case you collapse, although there were evident problems in this regard:

M* ... but I've got some friends, not in this school but, they drink tons and tons, and I hang around with them and sometimes I've taken stuff off them but sometimes I'm really scared they spiked my drink or something 'cos they're nutters ... Yes, like they've given me a can of Carling and it was half full of Vodka or something and it made me really ill.

M* My friend got really drunk, and his friends stripped him and tied him to a lamp-post.

Some young girls from the semi-rural setting did not choose to drink outside because they considered the local park unsafe in the evening, mainly owing to the presence of drug dealers. Another young girl from the urban setting was concerned but was determined not to let the behaviour of others interfere with her enjoyment:

F* Yes, especially around **** because it is turning really rough now. There are loads of weirdos and nasty people around and loads of things have happened just round the corner from me – like girls, and people getting beat up for no reason and mugged and shot. But I can't stop my life just for stupid people going round shooting people and stuff – I still go out but I'm more cautious about everything.

Analysis of the questionnaires showed relatively low rates of antisocial behaviour consequent on alcohol use, but six young people (18%) had broken, damaged or destroyed something that did not belong to them. No one reported taking anything that did not belong to them, and only two individuals admitted to missing school after drinking. Accounts of personal behaviour tended to relate to silliness:

M2 My friends said I took my clothes off, I don't remember

M4 I walked around with my pants on my head ...When you're drunk you say jokes and laugh loads ...

However, some young women talked of being associated with antisocial behaviour – somewhat to the surprise of other focus group members:

F* They were saying that they throw stuff at windows and throw bottles and stuff. I was surprised that they don't really know what they are doing at the time and the stuff they get up to and then in the morning, I can't imagine what they feel – like maybe they hit someone or put someone in hospital – then you would feel really guilty just over one drink – when you could just have coke or lemonade.

Role of parents

The range of reported parental attitudes was considerable: two unrelated 13-year-old boys from London had been put off alcohol by their parents telling them that alcohol was urine. Some parents appeared to condone the drinking of their sons more than their daughters. In other cases, mothers had talked to their daughters about drinking, encouraged controlled drinking and stated they would rather know what they were drinking than be deceived. The following interchanges illustrate this range:

F5 My brothers drink. My Dad's cool about me drinking, but my Mum's not so relaxed. She started when she was 11, so she can't really say nothing.

F8 My parents told me all the dangers and that. They drink, but not to excess. Don't know what my parents would think about me drinking.

- F7 My parents know that I wouldn't drink excessively so...not an issue.
- F6 My Mum doesn't like me drinking, but Dad offers me sips – he doesn't really mind.
- F4 My sister has been caught drinking – Dad says “if I ever catch you drinking, I'll wring your neck”.
- F5 But they can't do nothing. But they just try to drum it into your head. They've got no power when they're not around.
- M2 I wouldn't be too drunk. My parents said stop after three or four cans, that's fair.
- M4 I play rugby, and I don't want to get too fat, anyway the coach doesn't like people drinking.

In one important respect the London and South Wales samples were different – the latter were more ready to describe the use of alcohol within their own families:

- F8 When my brother (15) was drunk he started hitting me so I threw water over his head 'cos he didn't know what he was doing to me. I had bruises down my arms and down my legs. Next day, he couldn't remember hitting me. And he goes 'oh, sorry'.
- F1 I went to a party and my mother was drunk. She had 12 Hooch and was really drunk. We were walking down this big hill. Have you seen Hocus Pocus with the witches? Well she grabbed me and we were walking arm in arm. Everyone was looking at us and I was so embarrassed. She got me bit by a dog ... She can't remember anything that happened.

Whilst consumption of alcohol typically took place in front of parents at family gatherings, most conceal all of their other drinking behaviour, presuming that parents would disapprove. Many young people are ambivalent about parental advice and involvement in their decisions to drink. Interestingly, some wish for more parental involvement in this issue than they receive. It was an issue that respondents acknowledged was a difficult one to get right:

- F* I suppose I think that a good parental attitude is if they tell you about drinking, but they don't say 'you must never drink' or 'if you get drunk I'm going to disown you' or whatever. It puts a lot of pressure on you that attitude. And then some people will think 'well, because my parents have said that I'm going to go off and drink and go against their word'. I think it would be good if they told you about the dangers and everything so you know what you are doing with it, but it's your choice.

Parents and other family members were also seen as a safety net in respect of 'sensible drinking':

- F* It doesn't bother me that I think it is going to increase because my mum started drinking when she was younger, and she still drinks now but she'll go out Wednesday, Friday and Sunday – just a couple of nights a week. I think I'll be like her but if it starts to get out of control then I am sure she will stop me.
- F* My brother is 16 and some friends of the family have just turned 18 so we had a party at our house. Mum left some drinks but she says I'm not allowed such and such and then my brother doesn't let me anyway, so it's OK.

Controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking behaviour

The drinking behaviour of most 12- to 13-year-olds was to some extent controlled by the lack of opportunity to drink to excess. Most drinking took place at family events and therefore was subject to supervision and although many of this age group had tales to tell of getting drunk or vomiting, they tended to be rare events. They were most common with the semi-rural group:

F6 Me and F4 got tipsy last year (New Year's Eve). Me and a friend took F4 out and walked down the street and she kept fainting, like not fainting but she couldn't walk. We got her home and gave her lots of water. We had to carry her down the street, it was embarrassing.

F4 My friend got really drunk and was trying to hide it from her mother but it was really obvious ... I started fighting once when I was drunk with my Uncle. It was a few weeks ago. I got really angry. I remember what I did and felt really guilty and embarrassed.

For some young people – particularly the non drinkers – health messages such as liver problems were readily recounted. A number also reported negative personal experiences that mitigated against alcohol use.

M4 Man three doors away, he drinks too much, wife chucked him out (implied – to sober up), got mugged on the street, blood and everything...

M3 [If you are drunk..] anyone can do anything to you.

M1 Yes, you can faint on the streets.

M4 (more on neighbour): when he gets drunk, always big rows, they go up to their bedroom and you can always hear their yelling.

F* My cousin is always drunk. She's 15. She came home the other night and she was really drunk. It scared me, you don't know what they're going to do. There's this man who was hanging around the shops and he was drunk. My friend doesn't like drinking and she was really scared.

F* ... and in the nights, when my mum has a hangover she gets really sick and I don't like that.

F* And I've seen people outside on the streets – there are loads around where I live... [gives detailed description of the area] ... and people are dealing drugs and hanging round *** with their boyfriends and their girlfriends and drinking themselves to death and running into the road.

The general question about influences on alcohol use brought some comment on the role of advertising. This was usually talked about in respect of what was felt to be the specific attempt to influence young drinkers:

M8 Budweiser is the worst (M8 imitates the adverts) "Bud-weis-er".

M4 I think they are aimed at kids 'cos they're fun adverts.

M2 Labels are bad as well, they look like a strawberry drink or something.

However, the idea of the need for personal experience was beginning to take hold for some:

M* I want to be given a choice! There's like we are trying to turn us all into the model person – blond, blue-eyed, straight ... we should be open to all of life's experiences.

F* ...but you're going to have to make your own decisions. You can't just go with what your mother says is unhealthy.

In discussing ways in which alcohol messages might best be delivered within the school context, the clear majority argued for something young people could 'relate to' – all of which ruled teachers out for most.

4 Findings: 14- to 15-year-old young people

Location differences were more evident for this age group. Most notably, in the semi-rural population there was greater peer pressure to drink (especially for young men) and an acceptance of a heavy drinking culture and the violence it sometimes generated. Young men and women from London are considered first, followed by a comparison with respondents from South Wales. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency of drinking, based on the questionnaire responses, are to be found in Appendix 3.

What and where young people drink

The majority of respondents had consumed an alcoholic drink in the previous week, mainly at the weekend. A wide range of drinks were cited in response to the question ‘what do you like to drink?’, with keen interest shown in the focus groups in the taste of anything unusual, or that had not been tried; strength took second place in discussion. The following is typical:

F2 I tried cream and rum – it was disgusting.

M3 You mixed them together?

F4 I liked it – it was very sweet, something different.

F2 I like vodka and coke or Baileys.

F4 I like vodka and orange ...It has a nice taste but it's strong.

M4 I had some 36 per cent proof – I don't know what it was – it was in a green bottle ...people don't like drinking spirits.

Individual interviews, especially with girls, introduced still more combinations (e.g., ‘Malibu mixed with Lilt, you really would think it wouldn't be nice, but ...’). However, the majority of drinkers in this age group identify particular favourites, with an awareness of which drinks are best if the aim is to get drunk. For this, vodka is the overwhelming first choice. The following provide illustrative context for what and where young people drink:

F4 I had Tequila and Bacardi – on their own. We were at a friend's house. It wasn't a party, just a gathering. A friend brought the drink with her.

M4 I went to the cinema and bought some Hooch and drank it on the way there and then in the cinema.

M4 Round a girl's house...or just round someone else's.

M1 Clubs are a good night out or round a friend's house for a party. I don't like pubs.

M2 Yeah I don't like pubs, they're full of old men ... I like going round a friend's house.

M3 It's hard cause we're too young for clubs and too old for other things.

F3 Not all pubs are old, some are like club pubs they play music. I like going around to friend's houses, some parents are safe.

Those in the 14–15 age group who expressed a view on pubs generally perceived them as dirty and smoky, with some talk of their being an unwelcome and threatening environment. Free houses (i.e. with parents absent) were perceived to be particularly good venues for drinking, and parties, where alcohol was consumed, were becoming more commonplace. For girls, drinking outside in the street was not a popular venue – primarily because of danger, but also reputation:

F* I think this was said – about getting pissed on the streets, I don't know why people do that – I couldn't do it – I only drink when I have a reason like you're at a party, or at a friend's house. I think just going to the streets because you have nowhere else to go, you'll get caught and I just don't agree with that.

Although street drinking could be disguised if necessary. For example:

F* No, we were just on the streets. And we went to MacDonalDs and we poured the alcohol in the MacDonalDs' cups so that we could drink it on the streets. It looks a bit weird if you have bottles on the streets.

However, being on the street having already been drinking, and on the way to a club or party was seen as entirely acceptable and commonplace:

F* We get drink from the shops and get drunk while we get ready, then we were walking down the street being really silly and loud and people were looking at us.

The issue of entry to venues was raised:

F4 I like bars and clubs, but we went to **** the other night and they asked for ID, all my friends got in but I didn't.

M1 Sometimes I get stopped, most bouncers are blokes so girls get through, girls can put on make-up to look older and that.

Generally, girls had less problem with ID than boys, but all see it as simply an irritation to be overcome where necessary and obtaining false ID was reported to be easy. Even where venues did not allow entry, simply obtaining alcohol was not seen as a problem. Respondents had a variety of strategies from getting to know a retailer, to asking strangers or older siblings to buy it on their behalf.

Why young people drink

Alcohol as a symbol

The mere availability of alcohol symbolises that an event is OK, this particularly and invariably applied to parties arranged by young people. Although respondents were keen to emphasise that being with friends and engaging in a whole range of activities did not require alcohol, it is an important symbol:

F4 People always ask if there is going to be alcohol at a party otherwise they won't go.

F3 It depends on the people. If they are crap you just won't go to the party.

M4 But a crap party can be turned around by bringing some bottles.

M3 People drink to make the party better... I went to this party ... I didn't really know anyone, but everyone was drinking and then I got chatting to them and I got to know them. Drinking breaks the ice.

One interviewee summarised it as follows:

F* Not that I want to drink, or need to, but I probably will have a drink. A lot of people go to a party and think if I don't have a drink, it will be a really bad party. It is just something that is always there – you get alcohol at a party. Party – alcohol, alcohol – party. It is just the way it is.

The more detailed accounts of reasons for drinking fell into three broad categories: individually-based, socially-based and peer influence.

Individually-based

Although not in the majority, there were a number of references to the use of alcohol for helping the individual to relax and cope with stress. In some cases the source of stress was clearly identified: pressure of exams or a family problem. Male and female accounts were not distinguishable, the following focus group interchange illustrates this:

F1 Some people are really up tight, and having a drink makes them relax, so it can be a good thing.

F2 The good things are that it makes me happy, it makes me feel different, a bit giddy and light-headed. I drink to get that feeling. I don't want to do anything stupid...

F3 If you are feeling depressed, you forget about it.

M1 It gives you a sense of release – you can do whatever you want to.

F4 I drink to relax for the feeling you get. Makes you feel better.

M2 It makes you more relaxed and open.

M3 It is not like trying to get drunk – it is like relaxing. If it is the end of the week and you have all the homework and you are a bit stressed and you wonder how you are going to do it all, you just want to go out and relax and not think about it – go round to a friend's house.

F5 Not thinking of what I'm doing, just sort of forgetting about what you're doing.

Some, more usually male, focus on alcohol and a sense of energy:

M* It gives you energy, it stimulates – the taste.

M* It is fun – everything is funny when you drink.

M* I like the taste, it tastes sharp. It has a taste you can't get from Coke, not like Fosters.

Socially-based

A key reason for drinking was the lowering of personal inhibitions and barriers between people. Social reasons substantially outnumbered the individual reasons, in the interview reports as well as the focus group discussions. Relaxation in the social sphere was typically equated with a loss of self-consciousness which confers a much broader range of what is acceptable, indeed people are expected to be more outrageous – having been drinking is broadly accepted as an excuse. These features gave a particular charge to some events: less predictable and more exciting:

F* Yes. It gives a lot of people confidence. It is more than just girls or boys, it gives everyone confidence generally. You'll be the loudmouth of the party, the one that everyone notices, that does something funny. You just forget all your self-pride all the stuff that says, "no, don't do that" and you just think it is fine.

F* More flirty–Yes. We all talk about it (afterwards) and laugh because they are stupid. You can tell the people that over-act when they are drinking, obviously I would tell my best friend – not everyone – what they had done. But I think we do judge people when they probably shouldn't be judged...

F3 You don't worry about what you say so much, I mean you know what you're doing but not so much judgement.

M1 It means they [boys] can try it on with girls.

F4 Yes, you get more guts, more self-esteem.

M4 You can make a fool of yourself and you don't care if people laugh at you. Like if you fell over in the street – if you are drunk it's okay, but if you weren't ...

The potential dangers associated with this lack of inhibition were acknowledged:

F2 You don't think of the consequences.

F4 But it's dangerous when people don't know when to stop.

- F3 You can blame mistakes on being drunk.
- F2 I know of a girl who flashed these boys and then blamed it on the drinking. I think it was just an excuse.
- M3 Drinking encourages people to do things – to do silly things – even if they are not drunk. But they know their own limits.
- M3 If you drink it can be good or bad. If you get drunk it can be good because you make friends and you enjoy yourself.
- F3 If you're in a good mood it makes you happier, but if you're in a bad mood it can make you cry.
- F* Also when it gets out-of-hand with puking and then people have to get responsible and help them – it takes away from it just being fun and you have to be serious and you have got to worry about them – like when they get so pissed you wonder how they are going to get home – that means it has gone too far and it is a responsibility, a worry and not just a laugh.

Interestingly, drinking with mates seemed to be a significant bonding experience for young men – many spoke of how they could talk openly and honestly with their friends and others, voice genuine opinions and express feelings of closeness and affection.

Peer influence

Initial responses to questions about peer pressure in focus groups normally met with assertions that individuals would not be pressured into drinking. However, subsequent discussions in both focus groups and individual interviews led to many young people admitting that they did feel pressured to drink the same amounts as their friends and companions:

- F1 But people don't like to admit they drink due to peer pressure.
- F4 If everyone drinks – say you are at a party, and you don't, you feel out of it. Everyone around you is drinking.

Differences between males and females

As with the younger 12- and 13-year-age group, both sexes felt there was more pressure on boys to drink:

- F2 There is more pressure on boys. They have to be tougher. I don't have peer pressure, I just wouldn't do it if I didn't want to.
- F3 It depends who you are.
- M2 They call you chicken.

Also in common with the younger age group, it was taken for granted that alcohol-violence was more associated with males than females:

- M2 Say that someone is looking at you and you think they are starting, but really it's you.
- F1 I get drunk so easily, just four units and I'm drunk. It makes me more lively though, boys want to look tough.
- F4 Some boys are violent when they are drinking.
- M2 [One time] these boys started for no reason, boys are usually up for a fight.
- F3 Even when they get older men get aggressive, girls just get silly. We have a laugh just watching other people.
- F* I don't think you can generalise. But generally girls get really happy and they can get bitchy, but the boys can sometimes get violent or start fights. [Recounting a confrontation between two boys at a party] ...if they haven't been drinking they'll say someone's been giving them a look or something but they won't actually punch them...but as they were drunk you could see this thing in their eyes and you really thought they would do it because they'd had more to drink and they weren't worried. They came on all strong – that's what the alcohol does to them.

Alcohol, personal safety and related nuisance and criminal behaviour

All young people involved in this study seemed to share a common understanding that groups of friends had a duty to look after each other. The expectation that one of the group would be relatively sober was widely held, as was the view from girls that their male friends would take care of trouble:

- F* ...my friends would stop me [from going too far]...Wherever I go, whether it is their personality, there is always someone who is not drinking as much. It is when everyone around you gets completely pissed which is when it gets really bad because there is no-one sitting there saying, "no, yuck, stop it". In big crowds there is always someone who could stop you – I wouldn't get pissed unless I was with my friends because I know they would protect me.
- F* We always go out in a group and usually there's one of us who isn't as drunk and they say like 'Watch out' when you're crossing the road. We'll take a taxi home together, or if we've run out of money or its not far to walk we'll walk. Then we sober up because we have been dancing a lot and drinking water. Anyway when there are boys with us if anything happened they would sort it out.

Many respondents gave specific examples of alcohol-related nuisance or criminal behaviour. These fell into one of two categories: those in which they had a personal involvement (self or companion); and those that they had observed or been told about. The former were generally excused, the latter were generally cited as illustrations of the need to be careful:

- F* No, but my friend once jumped on all over this car and dented it [but he had been drinking].
- M* A guy a friend of mine knew – he got in trouble with the police because he was trying it on with a girl. He'd been drinking since lunchtime before he got to the party.

Role of parents

Alcohol as a marker for movement through the teenage years is clearest in its significance for reflecting the complex transformation of parent – adolescent relationships. Although the majority of focus group members said they would be offered a drink at home, virtually all felt that drinking outside of that environment needed to be kept from parents:

M3 You don't want to be pissed going home.

F4 So you don't drink for the last few hours. Parents don't realise when you have a hangover anyway.

M3 My parents know but try not to – my sister told my mum what I was up to and she was joking about this and my mum said, "I shouldn't be told about this"....

F4 My friend got pissed at my house and my mum was on her way home and it was awful because my friend was still drunk.

The ambivalence and uncertainty of parents themselves – monitoring, advising, proscribing – is also evident in the views given by young people:

F2 Parents don't sit you down and talk about drinking – like they try and do with sex.

F1 But they should tell you more. We don't realise what is rubbish, kids don't know what is true.

M2 Parents let you learn your own lessons.

F3 If a parent says don't drink – then you just want to.

M3 That's why you experiment with parents.

M4 And it provokes people if they tell you not to do things – you just try and do them.

The most positively perceived role of parents involves the caring but accepting frame (in this regard, older siblings may also be cited):

M* They would rather I drink with them where they know where I am and they are responsible for me, than for me to drink outside – at someone's house with no parents there and drinking. But they are not too stressed about drinking – it is not that they are so relaxed that they say, "there you go, you can go anywhere, get some beer, whatever". It is more that they are concerned to a certain extent but my dad doesn't ask me "where are you going, when are you going to get back, are you drinking, are you smoking, are you doing this, that and the other" so he is relaxed to a relative extent. He accepts that I am becoming more and more responsible for my own actions.

One interviewee details subterfuge, but worries that she appears to get away with it:

F* I always have to kiss Mum goodnight and I said to my brother "I can't do this because when I come home she'll realise" and he said "no, when you kiss them just breathe in so then you won't breathe on them and they won't notice". And it is true... I had some drink on Saturday

and kissed them goodnight and they didn't realise at all – I think that's a bit worrying... Maybe when I'm older, when I'm 16, I'll make it a bit more obvious. I'm only 15 – I don't expect her to accept that I'm getting pissed. I don't want her to accept that.

Interviewees describe tacit collusion with adults:

F* Yes – when my mum picks me up. She doesn't ask me what goes on. Well I did ask her what she thought went on at these parties because me and my mum are quite close and she said, "I don't know, why don't you tell me". I said "Obviously you know that lots of people bring drink" and she said, "I know you're not that stupid". I don't know whether she thinks I don't touch it because I know I've told her that I do.

Controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking behaviour

Vomiting in public was regarded as particularly degrading and therefore to be avoided, especially amongst girls. This concern resulted in a conscious monitoring of the number and the mix of drinks. General prescriptions about how to moderate drinking were also quite widely held, the most frequent related to avoiding drinking during the week – which would adversely affect school. Many young people described particular incidents, that had stayed with them as cautionary tales:

M* A friend told me about a boy that got drunk at a party and then ran a bath and then ran round the house naked. He didn't remember anything about it afterwards, although he regretted it.

F* I know a girl who climbed a fence when she was drunk – she wanted to be a model – but this spoiled it because she got scarred.

F* A sister of my friend fell off a ladder when she was drunk and split her head. It makes people unpredictable

When asked what would affect their drinking habits, information (e.g., in school context) is often pointedly discounted – specific incidents/personal experiences are volunteered. A number of young people voiced the importance of memorable messages, for example, in the manner of the drink-drive messages that featured believable people in horrific accidents.

Repondents occasionally introduced the role of TV advertising that promoted alcohol and, like the 12- to 13-year-olds' noted its attraction for younger people:

M1 My brother (6/7) loves the budweiser advert with the frogs. It's like a cartoon.

F9 There aren't enough drink and drive ads.

F4 They film people on holiday who are drunk and loads of people watch it because they think its good entertainment.

F2 The funny ads get your attention. They're more funny for young people than older people.

A comparison of London and South Wales respondents

Three themes – what young people drink, how they obtain alcohol, and differences between males and females – produced the same commentary for the semi-rural sample as have been described for the London sample, and are not discussed further in this section. In respect of the remaining themes, an illustration of each is given below and where there were particular differences between the samples, these are treated in more detail.

In respect of where they consumed alcohol, family gatherings were important contexts for both populations but there were important differences. These are illustrated here in the answers to the question about recent drinking: girls might drink on the streets and the local rugby culture was important for both sexes:

F3 On a street with friends (and will drink anything).

M8 Yesterday. In the rugby club, just after I played rugby, with friends and family, I had Carling.

F2 Hiding behind the back of the rugby club on Friday night.

M1 At the rugby club on Saturday night, all the boys were celebrating.

The significance of alcohol for feeling grown up and therefore an important part of some social events was less marked in the semi-rural interviews, but its status was explicitly acknowledged:

F2 These days it all seems to be don't do it (referring to school and alcohol messages).

M6 We're teenagers, we're supposed to be rebellious.

M7 There's so many rules.

M6 It should be up to the individual.

F2 Once you become 18, they are some people who are just bored of it. There's nothing to look forward to.

For the Welsh respondents, in contrast to the London respondents, there appears to be higher peer expectation of relatively heavy drinking. The following interchange illustrates this:

F2 There's pressure on you, when you hear all your friends got drunk last night.

F5 You tend to show off with friends.

M1 Your parents tell you when to stop but friends don't, you keep going.

F2 It depends how long you've known them. If you've known them all your life you can trust them to tell you when to stop.

M1 You feel left out sometimes if you don't drink.

F4 Like they say you haven't lived if you haven't tried this drink.

M8 I say, 'no leave me alone' ...It depends how much they've had as to whether they respect this or not.

M7 I don't trust people to get my drinks. You don't know that people won't put something in it.

F2 They have like competitions like this big tube with a ball on the end, when you drink it, it's a lot to drink. It looked fun, I want to try it. Competitions do have an effect.

M8 Downing competitions, see who can drink the most and the fastest. Just happens.

In contrast to the urban sample, greater emphasis was given to the downside of alcohol use which all agreed makes people behave differently.

F9 They get angry.

F2 Upset, do stupid things.

M1 They tell you private things, like about family and that.

M6 Then they regret it the next day.

F4 You have an excuse ...

M1 Smash windows. Jump on cars and stuff...

F9 Drink and drive.

F2 Get all upset ...Sometimes, I'm not a shy person, and I get louder. Every time I drink, I cry.

M1 Nearly all the girls at a party cry.

M8 You can't remember what you did.

F2 Makes you feel embarrassed. You don't know whether you did something or not.

F4 And friends can be horrible for the rest of the week, cos they're saying you did this to me.

In respect of alcohol and personal safety it was generally agreed that planning to get home was important, although for the semi-rural young people parents played a significant role in collecting their children – which is likely accounted for by the poor public transport systems later at night. There was also agreement that certain places were to be avoided and, compared to the London respondents, there was greater discussion about the possibility of unprovoked violence, although the perception that teenagers themselves have a 'bad name' was shared with the London respondents:

M1 I wouldn't go nowhere near one place after 6pm.

M8 We plan where we won't go.

M7 When its dark you know not to go down dark alleys, you know to stick to the roads. You end up seeing people drunk down there.

- F9 They have like a penknife with them, they could stab you.
- M6 When you see drunk teenagers on the streets it gives us a bad name. We're not flavour of the month.
- M1 It gives the area a bad name.
- F2 If you wanted to organise a disco they might not let you because of the troubles in the area.

Street drinking brought disapproval from the majority of respondents, but there also appeared to be an acceptance of its inevitability:

- M7 People go out on the street to drink. You drive past and you think, its irresponsible...they think they're really cool but they're just standing around doing nothing.
- F9 There's people at the bus stop who are always drinking...it's pathetic.
- F2 There's a 25-year-old boy and he's with 11-year-olds and that, they're all drinking there every day.
- M1 Where I live there's two shops that sell alcohol and an alley and the police won't do anything.
- F2 The police round me won't do anything. Mum found this boy in the bus stop and she was worried because he'd been drinking and he was lying on the floor and so she turned him over and went to the police station to tell them and they wouldn't answer the door. She was banging on the window and they just looked at her.

There were rather more crime and nuisance-related incidents citing personal involvement (self or friend/family) described by the semi-rural sample. For example,

- M6 We went to a party down the road. It's funny now but it was quite serious at the time. People were throwing bottles. The parents came home and they didn't know they were having a party and there was lots of drinking. People were walking up and down drunk.
- M8 Friends told me that I smashed windows and threw bottles. If I did I'm sorry but I don't remember it.
- F2 My dad got drunk on holiday and got in a fight. It was scary.
- M8 I've been to a friend's party and as soon as one person started fighting, everybody started fighting. People had broken arms, black eyes.
- F9 My sister was at a party a couple of days ago and when she arrived there were tons of police cars. So she said she's not going out again.
- F5 My Dad's friend had metal plates put in his face because people who were drunk beat him up.

In respect of the role of parents, the same themes were evident as for the London sample, but these young people were far more ready to acknowledge heavy drinking within their own families:

- M1 Depends on your family (if you go home drunk). They could be heavy drinkers and not mind. Some people end up in the wrong crowd.
- M8 I went with four other families on holiday we had a laugh. They had competitions, who could drink the most. Dad was downing them easy.
- F9 When my parents are drunk I just go to my room.
- F2 My parents are funny when they're drunk. At New Year's Eve we all went to a party and then we went to a neighbour's house and all the parents were drunk. They were all getting up on the karaoke machine. My mum was lying on the floor laughing.

When asked about 'sensible drinking', the respondents also volunteered a number of cautionary tales as had the urban sample. Difficulties with moderating underage drinking were again recognised – particularly the attraction of its illegality, but also the lack of other things to do. However, it was also evident that respondents felt it was unlikely that anything positive would be done to moderate the situation or that their views would be heard anyway:

- F2 I think that people drink because they know they're not supposed to, so if there was a limit then I think less people would do it because it takes the fun away.
- M3 If it was legal then I don't think that many kids would drink then.
- F2 They're too busy, making up rules. They should look through teenager's eyes.
- F9 According to them we're trouble. They don't ask us anything.
- F5 We drink because there's nothing for us to do.
- F4 They haven't got anything better to do.
- M6 The government patronise us – building nice little parks for the little ones – it doesn't work like that.
- F2 There's nothing for us. The youth clubs don't offer enough for 15-year-olds to do.
- M8 They've just opened a youth club up by me, and people that used to drink go to the youth club. So that's good because its cut down drinking in that area.
- F2 They only have them in certain places and so it's getting there and getting back. You have to organise everything.

5 Findings: 16- to 17-year-old young people

For this age group, the female London school respondents are summarised first, followed by a discussion of similarities and differences with male London respondents. Then similarities and differences with the South Wales sample are discussed. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency of drinking, based on the questionnaire responses, are to be found in Appendix 3.

What and where young women drink

The range of drinks cited by the 16- to 17-year-olds were the same as those mentioned by the 14- to 15-year-olds and are not repeated here. In addition, a number reported drinking wine (especially with the family), cocktails (viewed by some to be expensive, but by others to be good value), flavoured vodka shots, and champagne ('champs'). A noticeable difference from the younger group was the lack of interest in experimenting with combinations ('something when we were younger'), and the fact that they now tried to avoid mixing drinks.

Drinking at a 'free house' (i.e. a house where adults are not present) remains a welcome location, and drinking while getting ready to go out, or on the way to a venue is still common. In general, alcohol is seen to be readily available to this age group, and changes in respect of alcohol availability were most marked where lack of problems in gaining entrance to pubs and clubs were concerned. Decisions about venue are now made on the basis of what a place has to offer:

F6 If I go into a pub and see slimy old men, I'd leave....

F7 It's the music. Depends if it's the vibe I want to be on.

F6 Depends on what's on in a club that night.

Places were also chosen with safety in mind:

F* In the places we go, you get such a big mix of people so you don't get people fuelled and out looking for a fight, so we generally know the places where the hard people tend to go so we stay away.

Why young women drink

Alcohol as a symbol

The availability of alcohol is taken for granted and its role in conferring adult status is no longer directly given. Some still see alcohol as a defining feature of a good time, but this tended to be the case for those who were relatively light drinkers:

F* It is nice to drink an alcoholic drink because it feels more like – I can't explain – it just goes with the occasion more. Like if it was a special occasion you would like to have a drink just to celebrate.

By the age of 16 and 17, the use of alcohol in marking development was much more by way of distancing from younger people:

F7 Recently been going to local pub [i.e. local to school]. But everyone goes there, including teachers. I was shocked to see Year 9s in there. They walk around school so dressed up with cropped tops and short skirts – it's ridiculous...

F6 They think they are really cool.

F3 You see really young people in parks drinking Hooch.

F2 Little kids drink because they want to get drunk.

F6 It's horrible when young people come up and ask you to buy them drinks or cigarettes.

F4 It's not strict at all. It's ridiculous. Pubs are next door to schools and kids get served.

Precisely the same ideas were evident in reflections on their own lives:

F* I think that when you are 14 you are just discovering alcohol and you want to rush in and drink as much as you can, smoke as much as you can. It is just a fascinating new thing that is illegal. But as you get older it becomes a thing that isn't so fascinating. Like curiosity killed the cat – you just get over it – I did it, most people in there (the focus group) did it.

F* It was really horrible then [when I was 13/14 and first got really drunk]. I didn't realise – I was out of control. I am a lot more responsible now for what I am drinking and aware that it is not just something you do to end up sprawled across the streets.

F* At the time you think you are sensible but now I look back and know that I have learnt so much more. It becomes less peer pressure and more your own truth. When you go out it is not "drink this" it is "so you are not drinking tonight, okay". It is up to you – everyone has to go through that experience themselves – it is a process.

In a complementary vein, several young women also discussed alcohol use in the context of the life cycle with respect to the future as well as the past:

F* Well, after this its sixth form and art college, university or whatever and the image of that time is that you will drink all the time. So, it will probably get worse before it gets better! But then it will probably ease off. It's different when you are working. I'd say I'll probably end up as a 'social drinker' because that's what my parents are ...

F* I think that people go through a kind of curve in their drinking. My sister, she's 20, at the moment she is on the way down the curve, and I'm on the way up. So, I do think you reach a stage when you start to calm down, but when you are a teenager I think it's part of growing up.

Individually-based reasons

The 16- to 17-year-olds produced much the same commentary as the 14–15 age group in that alcohol can provide a sense of release and relaxation and at times may be used to help cope with stress. However, although the perceived benefits of the release/relax impact were widely held, in contrast to the younger age group there was a greater recognition of the possible downside in respect of a concomitant loss of judgement:

- F3 But you can't trust people's judgement when they are drunk.
- F4 It heightens your emotions.
- F6 When you are sober you think it through a bit.
- F7 Yeh, you act on your impulses.
- F3 It's not a good thing. You don't think straight.
- F1 Lose control. Feel more confident because you don't realise what you're saying.
- F* I mean I've been to family planning clinics with my friends and they always ask you if you were drunk and it always turns out that you were slightly tipsy or whatever when things weren't planned or just happened. A lot of things can happen when you're drinking alcohol 'cos you're not exactly clear-minded...

Socially-based reasons

These were also reminiscent of the younger age group. However, for these 16- and 17-year-olds there was more consideration given to the contingent use of alcohol: a more conscious decision-making, or at least an understanding of what was happening, affected by company and venue:

- F7 When you go out to the pub, it's more relaxed. Boys and girls. When you're clubbing, you're more self-conscious and it's easier to go with girls.
- F1 Agree...
- F7 With friends you would get drunk, but with a boyfriend you would want to be as alert as possible!
- F4 Makes it easier to have a good time. Not always though. Being around the wrong kind of people can be bad if you drink – get into arguments...
- F6 If a boy wants to go for a drink, you know they want to get you into bed.
- F3 No. No. Will not accept that! (General agreement that you cannot generalise.)
- F6 When women have more to drink it make them more vulnerable and men have control.
- F7 Yeh, but men can be smart about the way they do it!
- F6 You really have to be careful on a first date and know your limit.

Peer influence

Overt pressure to drink was not considered to be a problem for these young women, rather there was a tacit social expectation that certain kinds of events would involve particular types of alcohol consumption. Some saw pressure to drink as particularly characteristic of their earlier experiences:

F* I used to when I was younger – I thought everyone was drinking and I'd never drunk before. It was almost like I had to buy a vodka bottle. But not anymore – if I don't want to drink, I won't drink. It is respected and I respect all my friends if they say they don't want to drink – it is up to them, it is their money, and if they want to buy drink then they can and if they don't, then it is fine by me.

However, it was acknowledged that there were some circumstances that could result in a pressure to drink:

F6 If you are with older friends, you don't want to feel left out of the crowd ...

F4 Depends on your level of confidence.

F5 Depends on the person. Some people can just say no... people can go on if they're drinking though.

The influence of a group's shared expectations can be seen in the relatively unusual case of friends who sustained a norm of low alcohol consumption. All of the six girls in this group drank occasionally, but specifically said they would not go out to get drunk and would typically have non-alcoholic cocktails, coke, apple-juice. Indeed, these girls explicitly acknowledged their difference ('This group here are all quite sensible'). The question of a good night out focussed on the importance of friends:

F4 Going to a concert. Maybe having a couple of drinks, but that's not the important thing. It's important to enjoy the concert and being with friends.

F6 Going to clubs. But you don't need to have alcohol.

F5 Just out with friends.

F1 I don't care where I am, it's who you are with that matters. I can be chilling staring out of a friend's window or being in a club.

Their norm of careful alcohol consumption is also reflected in a more begrudging sense of obligation to help if things went wrong because of alcohol:

F6 A friend of mine got very very drunk and couldn't go home, so she came to stay at my house. I felt she was my responsibility, but she wasn't so it's a bad thing.

F4 Yeah, it's difficult if you feel responsible for friends. If you have to go and 'rescue' them.

F3 My friend, when she gets drunk, feels she has to go off with a boy and might get pressurised to have sex, so I feel I have to look after her.

Differences between males and females – the views of young women

The main comments articulated by the 14- to 15-year-olds were repeated with the older girls, especially male aggression towards other males. There was also explicit acknowledgement that boys had an image to sustain as far as alcohol was concerned. The girls themselves gave a mixed reaction to this – from irritation through acceptance of boys' need to sustain an image (it was conceded that role expectations were much sharper for boys) to an encouragement of the tough image (e.g., the 'gay' comments below). These issues are inter-related as illustrated in the following extracts:

F1 For girls, it doesn't matter [what they drink]. For boys, it might make them look weird if they are seen drinking a girl's drink.

F2 They want to be seen to be hard...

F3 Men tend to get more aggressive.

F1 Girls are more sociable. Guys tend to go for getting drunk.

F3 Showing off.

F2 Boys tend to make more of a show of drinking.

F3 Yeh, boys tend to let others know how much they've drunk.

F1 Macho image.

(What would you think if a man went into a pub and ordered a pint of orange and lemonade?)

F3 He's gay!

F6 Yeh, he couldn't hack it! But when a woman orders a pint of lager, men like that! Depends though if the guy wants "a lady".

F7 I would think "toughie" if a woman did that ...

F6 Some boys say things like "Yeh, I had 20 pints" and you know they are lying.

F7 Men don't want to be seen as 'lightweights'.

F6 People want to keep that image. It's OK for a woman to say they've had enough and go on to orange juice.

Interestingly, the same question to the low alcohol use group resulted in a norm-consistent 'what of it?'. In general, female respondents asserted considerable differences between males and females across a wide range of behaviours which were typically seen as 'inevitable':

F* Lots of the reactions I have seen from men on the street have been really violent reactions – not all men get violent – if someone approaches them and upsets them then they'll flip immediately and it is really difficult to stop them. The women end up weepy, happy, depressed – swinging emotions – like PMS but on alcohol ... I've seen my friends (male) get

really angry – every single male that I’ve seen get like that has never been able to stop themselves. It doesn’t matter what you say because they are so focused on being angry. That is a real male thing.

F* I think that, at the end of the day, boys and girls are different. I think there are big differences in the characteristics and traits of boys and girls. I mean all the guys in our year are just loving up Star Wars and I just don’t get it. I think that in everything there are just such big differences between boys and girls and with alcohol there are differences as well, because they just pick it up differently and boys become more violent. Generally girls just become happier and gigglier.

Alcohol, personal safety and related nuisance and criminal behaviour

Once again, friends were seen as the key to personal safety. Personal aids such as mobile phones and rape alarms were carried by some, however how to get home remained the enduring problem:

F5 Try to save money for a cab.

F4 But when you have been raving for seven hours, you don’t really care.

F3 My friend always keeps a £10 in her bra, so we know we’ve got money for the taxi home.

F7 I get the night bus. It’s terrible though, all those old tramps on the night us.

F6 I would go home by myself in a cab. People say cabs aren’t safe, but I think they are OK.

F3 Yeh, make sure it is legal. Lots of times clubs do provide you with cabs. Black cabs take a long time to come.

Respondents had different views on whether they would call their parents if they were stuck – depending on parents’ general attitude to their drinking and the difficulty of pretending not to be really drunk.

When meeting boys, or going out with a boyfriend, the issue of spiking drinks was raised in several individual interviews:

F* She [mother] is always saying you shouldn’t let people buy you drinks because they can spike it, you know, put whatever they like in it really. So I usually say no, or go up to the bar with them so I can see them ordering it.

There were very few instances of crime-related behaviour that the young women had themselves participated in, however, there were several accounts relating to observing violence, and in one instance being caught up in violence:

F* ... I was about to put my drink there when I got caught in a fight. What happened was **** was across the road and the club night there was opening an hour later, so loads of guys from the queue were in the bar drinking – it was an alcohol fuelled fight because I have seen them before and I got caught in the middle of it – if I hadn’t been where I had been standing then I would have been underneath the fight. But still I got crushed against the metal shelf which really hurt my ribs – they were all bruised.

However, virtually all could provide examples of unwelcome attention from boys/ guys who had been drinking too much. One example will suffice:

F* If I am dancing and a guy won't stop dancing behind me, they [friends] will grab my hand, but if I am standing at a bar – like when the guy grabbed my hand (referring to an earlier account of 'a guy who grabbed me hard ... and he wouldn't get off ') – my friend came up and screamed at him.

Role of parents

Given the ethnic differences evident in the school sample (see Table 2.1), it might have been expected that there would be systematic differences attributable to ethnicity. However this was not the case, although there was rather more concern among those who self-classified as 'Asian' to keep quiet in front of parents. In general, in contrast to the younger age groups, there was rather more explicit acceptance from parents that drinking is part of their daughters' social activity:

F* [My mother has said]... be careful, don't drink if you are coming home on your own. Avoid spirits because they are not good for you. And know your limits. She is not saying, "if you do that, that is it" because obviously I am going to rebel.

F* My mum knows that I go to the pub now but she trusts me – if that's what I choose to do and if I'm responsible, she would rather that I discover alcohol at a young age and discover the bad things about it than discover at 16 or 18 suddenly. She'd rather I discovered it slowly. They didn't know about when I was younger and drinking vodka. But I've told my mum now.

F* She is pretty much relaxed because she knows that I won't do silly things and because she was a bit of a rebel when she was my age ... She is pretty relaxed about it. She doesn't buy me alcohol but she does ask me if I want a glass of wine with dinner and I say "that will be nice" even though I don't like it.

F4 My parents say, "just as long as you learn from your mistakes".

F6 I've had a good conversation with my Dad when I've been tipsy and he's been drunk.

F2 I think my Mum knows that I drink, but she knows that I'm not stupid enough to get paralytic or anything like that. But I still have to pretend I'm not drunk when I go home...I'm like holding onto the walls trying to look like I'm not mashed.

F6 Thing is, alcohol is pretty much accepted. Most parents expect kids of 13 or 14 would try drinking.

The parent theme was different for the group of girls who sustained a norm of low alcohol consumption: the majority simply described the lack of alcohol in their homes or their parents' very strong views. For example:

F3 My mother was paranoid about getting hooked on drugs and drinking.

F6 My mother is a counsellor for alcoholics, so she was very wary.

F2 I've never really seen my parents drink. We don't have alcohol in the house.

Controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking behaviour

Like the younger respondents, the 16- to 17-year-olds had a number of negative experiences they could recount. Once again, getting sick in public was regarded as an emblem of what to avoid, but examples of this tended to be retrospective, suggesting that this was now a less likely occurrence in comparison to the 14-15 age group. Matters relating to family members still featured, including those who had direct, threatening and upsetting implications for the person concerned. The following quotes (from groups) illustrate these:

F* My uncle gets really over the top when he's drunk. He says things to hurt other people in the family, then the next day he won't know why people aren't talking to him.

F* I hate people who drink. My step-dad drinks every weekend. It really pisses me off. Life is hell. He loses control. He does really bad things. He punched me in the face once. You damage your health and brains and don't realise what you are doing. I never told anyone before. I feel so ashamed.

Some young women talked about the influence of an early experience of an alcoholic within the family, most poignantly if this was a parent:

F* I suppose it is hard to explain unless someone has actually lived with one themselves – it has a much deeper meaning [than drinking too much]... It is a scary thing to talk about, as people don't really understand. My mum (whom she no longer lives with, but sustains contact) would never get violent but she is an alcoholic that hangs around with other alcoholics who are violent around her ...It is such a big thing – people drink when they are depressed and it is so wrong because they think they will forget their problems. When you are sober they don't go away.

These young women also talked readily about alcohol and its relationship to smoking and illegal drug use. Generally, their firm line was alcohol and drugs should not be taken together, but their alcohol use encouraged smoking behaviour (many talked of being 'social smokers'). In contrast to alcohol use, nearly all young women were concerned about the harmful effects of drug use. The following is typical:

F4 Also, you don't know what you are taking with those little white pills. Drinking is easier – know what you are getting.

F5 And I've seen friends on the biggest come-downs.

F4 Alcohol is just as bad as drugs, but alcohol has a short-term effect. You know tomorrow that the alcohol will be out of your system – with drugs....

Questions about sensible drinking invariably produced advice and remedies:

F2 Not mixing your drinks too much.

F3 Eating before drinking.

F2 But then you have to spend more to get drunk.

F5 But you don't feel so bad later...

F2 If you mix spirits that's OK, but if you mix spirits and beer that's not good...

Some respondents (but less commonly than the 14- to 15-year-olds) also cited the importance of avoiding drinking during the week:

F* I don't know – getting up for school and having to think about your work. There is no point in getting tipsy during the week. You look forward to it every weekend. I don't know why, but I feel really weird when I drink during the week. Maybe it is just because that is something that I don't normally do. If I drink in the week I am sort of breaking one of my own self-imposed rules that I don't drink in the week because I have school and in the evenings I generally have homework to do.

The notion that 'people are different' was a very common theme, so one has got to get to know one's own limits. It is partly for this reason that young people rarely related to general guidance:

F2 It affects different people differently.

F4 It affects skinny people more. I have more body fat, so it takes longer to get round my body.

(...do people know their limits?)

F6 Not everyone.

F7 You have to go through a certain process to find your limits.

F6 Yeh, you have to experiment to know your limits.

F* The thing is that because of that I have learnt that there is a risk and there is a limit to what you can drink (after describing an unexpected night of getting drunk and sick) . I think it is something you need to do. Maybe you can say that we're too young, we're only 17, but say no-one drank and then at 18-years-old everyone thought "Oh, I can drink now" and went into a pub and got drunk... I think its something you need to learn with time, and gradually learn how much you can drink. Although that wasn't a great night, I don't regret it because I have learned that I have a limit, and how much will get me to that limit, and I stick within certain boundaries.

In contrast to information about sex and drugs, many young people felt they had been told relatively little about alcohol except potential harm to liver (in 'health' or 'science' context), and would like access to more information:

F* The only thing I relied on when I was 12-13 was Just 17 magazines and Bliss magazine and personal experience and things I picked up from older people about this drink's cool, this drink isn't. It was never about mixing drinks or anything, which is why most teenagers end up puking up. You are not taught about alcohol no matter how much everyone says – there is nothing anywhere. Just magazines and a couple of leaflets ... I don't think it is taught properly.

As with the younger groups, advertising impact was introduced into some discussions about influences on underage drinkers:

- F4 The TV advertises a lot of alcohol.
- F3 And teen magazines, like J17, there's always something to do with alcohol, some kind of advert or promotion.
- F4 It's like the Hooch ads on TV and like 10-year-olds think 'oh that new pop drink'. I don't think they should advertise it on TV at all, because it does influence the younger generation. And children younger than us these days watch more TV. And they can't say 'we'll put it on after 9 o'clock' because some 10-year-olds are still up at like half past ten, eleven o'clock.
- F3 My brother thinks the Bud advert is brilliant and he's only 12. Every time it comes on, he'll sit and do the impressions and he'll come up with impressions of it just because its funny.
- F* Alcopops are completely ridiculous – the government is asking for it – like Haggan Daz ice-cream with Malibu and Baileys – they are bringing out alcoholic lollypops now – they are for kids – you don't see an adult walking round with a lolly. You can have alcohol in them but you are not allowed to have it otherwise – it is like playing with everyone. They should ban it. Like Hooch has little faces of smiling lemons – it doesn't taste of alcohol – initially kids don't like alcohol because it tastes horrible – it does taste horrible. If they are putting lemonade, and strawberry and coke stuff in it so you can't taste it, they will drink more and think alcohol is brilliant and when they can handle it, they will go on to harder stuff. But no-one will stop that because they make too much money from it.

More generally, some argued for high impact information to influence their own behaviour, perhaps meeting young people who had been through something:

- F7 Raw stuff, nitty gritty stuff.
- F3 Really shocking stuff.
- F6 Show videos. Real-life stuff. Need to make it interesting though.
- F4 Need to break through that barrier.
- F2 Like drink driving ones – they are very shocking – even though they are absolutely horrible they should be shown more – the one where the man is being fed by his mother – it is awful but it makes people think more.

Getting the information in early, without condescension, was stressed by all who volunteered an opinion:

- F* I think there are different approaches that need to be taken to different ages within the teenage age group. I don't think it should be focused on "teenagers". There is so much difference between a 12-year-old and a 16-year-old drinking – hitting children at 12 is the time to start.

F* Interactive ways to learn, instead of having people coming into school with booklets and videos that show drunken teenagers on street corners. There should be something interactive – I don't know what – that shows you – helps you to understand how to react to situations – what to do if someone approaches you if you are drunk, what to do if someone gets drunk, what's good and bad. Not preaching alcohol – not saying it's a good thing or a bad thing because at the end of the day no-one is going to stop – they're always going to drink, you can't stop that. It's just natural.

16- to 17-year-old London boys

This section highlights the *differences* between girls in this age group and boys, following the same structure as above. Where differences are not explicitly highlighted, the findings for boys were the same as for girls.

For boys, drinking in clubs featured less strongly, to be replaced by drinking in pubs. Consistent with this, beer was increasingly popular as the drink of choice, rooted in cultural ideas about 'maleness':

M* It's what men drink. Football, pub culture – men behaving badly and the media. Beer is what you drink – not wine or shots. It lasts longer.... I suppose it is peer pressure ... I've got a friend who only drinks Bacardi Breezers and we all take the piss.

M* I like the feel of a pint glass. I only buy bottles of beer if I'm dancing.

Purchasing alcohol from off-licences and so on was seen as entirely unproblematic (indeed, some looked back to the time when it was necessary to use fake ID). However, like the girls, club entry still depended on knowing a venue:

M* When we get to the West End, we walk around (mixed group) and look at all the bars we'd like to go in but know we won't get served. Then we go to our cheap little venue, the *** (this particular bar was named very frequently by both male and female respondents).

At the same time, these young men also tended to present themselves and their drinking as more adult:

M* At 13/14, you look old enough to buy drink from a shop and everyone comes in Monday morning telling stories of how drunk they got – specially the girls. At that age, you just want to do everything you know is against the law, that you shouldn't be doing.

However, alcohol as a key part of a good night out appeared important for at least some of the male drinkers, especially for all male pub groups.

M* I'm driven by drinking. I go out every Friday and Saturday and am only limited by money. I used to go to the pub at lunch time from school and play pool but I don't do that any more...I always spend all my money – come home with some fluff in my pocket and 7p. I drink more than others.

As with the girls, boys cited 'relaxing' as a reason why they drank, but when citing socially-based reasons there was an emphasis on the sexual side of alcohol-enhanced confidence in social situations:

M* I had about four drinks and called this girl over and talked to her. I was amazed I did it.

M* I've got to admit that without a drink, I can never talk to a girl. In that sense, it's good – gives you confidence. But too much and you lose control – I don't like losing control...

1–2 drinks is nice.

3–4 I am really confident – I don't care what she thinks of me, I can talk to her.

5–6 I better start slowing down

7–8 I start making a fool of myself, saying I really love you – it's too many

Alcohol use could be interpreted as a marker of masculinity, although the negative side of this was acknowledged:

M* I've always got something to prove, I go a bit further than anybody else. It's good fun to drink someone under the table but I do think I sometimes put too much pressure on others to drink too much.

M* It's all about boys' pride. I used to go to those garage clubs where everyone acted bad and just stood about to be respected. They just stand there saying are you looking at me and threatening to go outside after. I don't like that any more. I've moved away to more happy, jolly people.

Indeed, some young men talked about the importance of alcohol in terms of opening up and bonding with mates:

M* When you've had a drink you speak the truth and say what you feel. My friends and I get much funnier when we drink. I relate more to my friends, I get more emotional. It's all that male bonding. I tell them I love them and they know what I mean – they don't misunderstand me... We all do it. Things come out. That you think no-one else does. Like girls 'Am I the only one who thinks that about her?'

Boys made no particular reference to personal safety issues, beyond avoiding certain types of club, and the crime and nuisance related references were all in respect of fighting and easily precipitated violence.

M* Drink can get you in a lot of trouble. A friend of mine got so drunk, he was in the chip shop putting ketchup all over his chips and saw this guy and decided he didn't like him. He threw ketchup all over him and tried to head-butt him but missed and fell over, then all his mates tried to beat my mate up. It was a mess.

A comparison of London and South Wales respondents

This section focuses on the differences between young people in London and those in South Wales. A key feature is the relatively limited choice of social venues, exacerbated by transport difficulties:

F4 We all live in different areas.

F6 I only live seven miles out of *** so I tend to go there (where clubbing is an option).

F4 But if you live like I do in the middle of hills basically, then you don't go out a lot, because there aren't many people around me ... I don't tend to go out on a Saturday night in *** because you drive around and there's all these drunk people on the side of the road. I go to a friend's party or something... There's not a lot of places for people to go round here. It can be really difficult because you have to arrange lifts ...

F* Yeah pubs definitely. There is nothing else to do really. There are youth clubs but they're for the younger children. I can't even think of anywhere to go for people my age really. I suppose you could do sporty things. But I'm not into sport. I go to a lot of concerts and things, but then they're down in __ and they're very expensive. It takes time to get down there and everything. Where I'm living there's nothing but pubs.

In the all male focus groups, the boys identified the Welsh as drinking nation – more rugby, industrial base, less things to do and the importance of rugby clubs as drinking venues:

M* It's like rugby clubs here, and nightclubs in London. People in the Valleys tend to drink a lot of lager in the rugby clubs.

Location was also important in terms of access to alcohol. For example, all three focus groups contrasted the position in Cardiff with valley towns such as ***:

F* Its stricter in the city, like Cardiff. There's a place in *** that serves alcohol that's packed with kids, like 12-year-olds.

Reasons for drinking mapped onto those given by the London sample but, in addition, there were more reports of pressure to drink from friends. (There was also evidence of pressure to drink from family members – see this section below):

F* ... and my friend turned round and said, "she is not having an orange juice, get her a vodka and lemonade." I said "I don't like vodka" and she said "I don't care, you are drinking it". (Do you find it difficult to explain to drinkers that you can have as much fun without drinking?) With some... With girls it is harder ... With my friends, the girls, some of them they are practically alcoholics – like the one that said I had to have the vodka, she is bit of a ruffian. I find it harder with girls – they drink so much, so they think everyone has to. But with boys they just accept it.

F* I have said no in the past and they have said "hah" and then they haven't spoken to me for the whole night because I didn't have a drink with them. If you don't have a drink you are not part of the crowd and you would have to find another lot of friends who don't drink.

Perceptions of male and female differences were also shared with the London sample, although there were rather more examples of boys exerting sexual pressure on girls:

F4 They get really macho and act like they're god's gift to women.

F3 They do competitions, like who can kiss the most girls, when they're more drunk.

F2 They do points. They become more sleazy. And they don't give up.

F4 It can be frightening ... You don't know what they're going to do and it can get really heavy. It's not a nice situation to be in especially with someone you don't know.

F6 It happens to me on trains, people drink on trains. I've had a lot of people sit next to me on trains and say 'You're really nice, do you want to spend the rest of the day with us'. Its quite disturbing.

Personal safety was generally more of an issue for these girls and the risk of violence weighed more in their decisions and accounts:

F7 I feel most threatened by drunk girls than by drunk boys. Girls can be nasty and bitchy.

F4 You can't even look at some people.

F3 You've got be really careful when you on your own and there's a lot of them.

F4 You can get singled out by gangs.

F3 A lot of my friends are quite quiet. They take advantage then because they know the quiet ones will back off. ...

F5 The Spar (supermarket) is terrible. There's a lot of problems. Like 12-year-olds. A lot of them are too young to get drink so they ask people to go in. They pay them. Like they say if you go and get it, I'll give you a fiver.

This theme was echoed in the all male focus groups, where the key to avoiding trouble was seen to be avoiding gangs (and 'skinheads') and never to stare back at anyone.

Accounts of experiences of violent encounters (involving women as well as men) were much more common. For example:

F* I was at my friend's party and me and a friend went to get some drink and we came back. A lot of the people I knew didn't like her and they had been drinking quite a lot. They decided to follow us back to her house 'cos they knew we were going back to her house. They followed us all the way down to this quarry area and we crossed to go across to her house and my friend was in front. They overtook us and started to hit her and pull her hair. People like that can really mess things up for you. They had been drinking a lot. We had been drinking but not a lot. ... They were tearing pieces out of my friend. We couldn't get to them because there was like 20 of them.

F* Where I live there's a lot of younger children (10- to 11-year-olds) who drink. They can get really violent. Our house has been attacked. If I'm with friends then I'll go down to the train station and get a train as quickly as possible. I get paranoid on the streets like on the cycle track.

As with the London sample, the changing role of parents in respect to drinking was acknowledged (more accepting at this age), although there were two important differences relating to alcohol use and parents. First, there was a greater reliance on parents knowing their whereabouts for safety

reasons – parents pick up their daughters, pay for taxis, or have bought them mobile phones. Second, as with the younger sample, there were a greater number of references to drinking within their own families, but also with regard to pressure from family members to drink:

F6 I get pressure from my mother. Like she gets wine and if we go for a meal she'll offer me cider and I just ask for a coke she thinks that's a bit strange. So sometimes there's more pressure than from friends...

F5 I have drunk in the past, not to get drunk but if I go out with my family, my Aunty and Uncle especially are practically forcing it down me. After seeing what this person (reference to an account about an alcoholic that she knows) had done to their life it was too scary.

Finally, many of the themes concerning controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking were the same as those already described. Two points are worth highlighting: First, in common with the London sample, the lack of information on alcohol use in contrast with drug information ('it 's not seen to be a drug, it's normal, its what everyone does'). Second, in contrast to the London sample, there was a greater sense of the inevitability of 'serious' underage drinking.

6 Findings: Young people interviewed in a non-school setting

In this chapter, the findings are detailed from the focus groups and individual interviews held in non-school settings. There were three main sources: children's homes, youth programmes and youth justice programmes. Insofar as numbers precluded banding the findings in terms of age and source, all of the young people from non-school settings are considered in this chapter. Hence, although the same notation is used as in previous chapters, age and source are also given. In addition, ethnic background is identified in this chapter since it did help shape interpretation, and was, indeed, the reason for the inclusion of the young people from the youth programme. The same key issues identified in the discussions with young people in school settings are covered. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency of drinking, based on the questionnaire responses, are to be found in Appendix 3.

What young people drink

The types of alcoholic drink consumed by young people interviewed in a non-school setting were broadly similar to that of those interviewed in school with a clear progression from alcopops as young people passed through their teenage years. The younger respondents mirrored their peers interviewed at school in the way that some were highly interested in alcohol and were drinking whenever the opportunity presented, whereas others were disinterested and did not see alcohol as at all important in their social lives.

Vodka was a strong favourite with many, not least because it was relatively odourless and made young people feel more confident of concealing their alcohol consumption. There were occasional examples of individuals who had developed an early preference to more adult-oriented drinks. One white 14-year-old looked-after young man comments:

M3 It's late at night and I'm thirsty, I will go to the off-licence and get a bottle of whisky and share it with my mates.

F1 Why won't you just get water?

M3 Wouldn't be bothered, I drink whisky when I'm thirsty, it's my favourite.

The older respondents were beginning to develop choices that reflected adult patterns of drinking. Some young men in particular were developing a pub-based beer drinking routine of alcohol consumption. Spirits became more popular for the older young women, e.g. developing a preference for brandy and Jack Daniels as well as vodka. Although many young women bought their own alcohol, several had older boyfriends with access to more income. Like the school samples, it was important for them to describe their drinking in terms of its sophistication and adult nature; many claimed to drink because they now like the taste:

F* I like champagne, because you don't really know it's getting to you. One minute you'll be all right and the next you're wow, I think it tastes nice. I drink brandy and coke or vodka and orange, it's the taste I like. I didn't like the taste before, but you know how you learn to appreciate tastes. It keeps me on that stable level, I'm pacing myself and taking it slowly. So I'm not one minute normal the next minute gone, you can feel it working up on you. If you're drinking champagne, you'll be fine one minute and the next you're gone. [16-year-old black looked-after female.]

Like the school respondents, they were generally scornful of 12- to 13-year-olds, including their memories of their own experiences at this age. Having developed more adult tastes, they looked down on alcopops and the majority had convinced themselves that alcopops had a lower alcoholic content than is the case. Indeed several averred that they needed to drink many more alcopops than their current preferred drink, despite alcopops containing more units of alcohol:

F* Yes, I used to drink Hooch, but when you drink more and more and more it gets harder to get drunk and you go on the harder stuff. I'd get a Hooch from the off-licence on the way home and I'd drink it while I get dressed – it's just like a can of coke to me but you see young kids they're on their backs after one bottle.' [15-year-old white female offender.]

The focus group of male young offenders made a clear distinction between the alcohol tolerance of males and females, with consequences for preferred drinks:

(What's a cool drink?)

M2 Tennents, Hofmeister, Carling.

M1 Vodka. Strong stuff. Not the girlie drinks.

(What's girlie?)

M1 Hooch. Lambrini. Babycham.

M2 They're ponies. Not worth wasting your money on. Need about 15 to get pissed.

Where young people drink

Virtually all young people interviewed in the school setting recalled parents' staged introduction to alcohol use and many reported drinking at home. This is not an option for young people looked-after in a children's home and many of them drank more frequently in the streets, parks and around the entrance to blocks of flats to escape supervision by care workers. For example, within the 14- and 15-year-old group, half (3/6 in London and 2/4 of the young offenders looked-after in South Wales) drank in the park or street once a month or more frequently compared to some 25 per cent (8/33 children) of the same age interviewed at school. Young looked-after children who get drunk may also opt to stay out for the night:

F* Sometimes, for example, if it's pouring down with rain, we're not going to get drunk, because what's the point. If it's sunny then we will have a drink, if it's cold and it ain't raining or snowing, then you would drink. It would give that energy to do something that would make you warm up. [14-year-old white looked-after female]

F* On Saturday I went out and I was practically paralytic. I had to stay out the whole night. Yeah, there's three of us that got really drunk on Saturday. We just stayed out, and we slept in my mate's dad's car. All night. [15-year-old white looked-after female.]

On the other hand, Bangladeshi young men were very careful not to drink in any public place, drinking only in each other's homes or on the tops of blocks of flats.

For the majority who were drinking alcohol, purchasing it, especially from an off-licence, was a fairly straightforward process. Although some appeared younger than their years and struggled to purchase alcohol, many looked-after children and young offenders found it even easier to buy than those young people that were interviewed in a school setting:

F* I've never been turned away at an off-licence, pub or club. When I was aged 11 I could get served at an off-licence. Even if you couldn't, there's loads of fake ID about. [15-year-old white young female offender.]

F* I've been buying drink since I was about 11 and no-one has ever asked me for any ID. Off-licences or Tesco's or Sainsbury's or anywhere. My mum used to send me out to get bottles of wine for her, for the house. [16-year-old white looked-after female.]

In some cases, perseverance was necessary:

F* When I was your age (in focus group discussion), 14 or younger, and I couldn't get served, me and my friends would drink for the sake of it. We had our pocket money, and we'd stand outside the off-licence, asking can you get us drink, no, no. Some people do, mostly men, women won't hardly. You've just got to know who to ask, after a while you get the hang of who to ask. But it is kind of hard, you can be standing outside there for a good hour, before you can actually get drunk.' [16-year-old black looked-after female]

Why young people drink

Alcohol as a symbol

Although not many young people talked about how drinking alcohol made them feel grown up in the focus group setting, it emerged as a strong theme in some individual interviews. As was the case with the young people interviewed in the school setting, alcohol is seen as part of adult life and learning to drink was therefore seen as something to be achieved:

M* You feel like you're big, you feel like you're an adult, like you got power. [12-year-old white looked-after male]

F* We were having a good time and we went to the bar to be served, cause we was only 15 and we got into this club, we were proud after we got in, we felt good to be going to the bar and asking for a drink. [16-year-old black looked-after female]

Once again, participants saw their learning to drink about alcohol as part of a life cycle of changes, this was particularly evident for the Bangladeshi young men who recounted how their older brothers had gone through a period in their late teenage years when they drank to excess but

had 'settled down' in their early 20s and were now described as teetotallers and pillars of the local community.

However, several young offenders and looked-after children 'progressed' relatively early in their adolescence. A number of 14- to 16-year-olds were already drinking in ways that mimicked adult patterns or were members of mainly adult drinking circles. The more detailed accounts of reasons for drinking once again fell into three broad categories: individually-based, socially-based and peer influence.

Individually based reasons

A number of respondents talked about their use of alcohol to relax and cope with stress. In some cases the source of stress was specific, but more often for this group of young people it was connected with coping with a major life event such as a bereavement or being placed in care. One 16-year-old mixed race looked-after young man talked about being in a foster placement where he drank regularly. He would go round to a friend's flat and drink the alcohol purchased by his friend. He would drink three or four cups of Archer's followed by as many as six cans of Stella Artois. He enjoyed the drinking a lot, stating that it relaxed him and got rid of his nervousness. His drinking caused some problems in his foster placement as he frequently came home late and drunk. He stated there was no behaviour associated with his drinking, he would just go straight to bed. This young man said that sometimes he had drunk alcohol to cope with depression, particularly over his mother's death but he also acknowledged:

M* It helps a bit, you're still left with your problems at the end of the day [16-year-old mixed-race looked-after male.]

However, several young people, as was the case with the school sample, merely appreciated relaxing when drinking with their friends. This relaxation was often equated with a loss of self-consciousness and a suspension of the normal teenage rules that prescribe what forms of behaviour are acceptable. Many young people spoke at some length about the joy of just being yourself and not caring what others thought:

M* Yeah, it makes you confident. When you are drunk, you sort of feel untouchable. Well actually, not untouchable, you don't really care who's around you, who's watching you, you don't really pay no mind to anyone. [17-year-old black offender.]

The importance of being carefree was expressed by the group of young offenders in local authority care:

(What do you like about drinking?)

M1+4 The buzz.

M1 Happy. Don't need to care about anything else.

M2 Happy. Concentrate on what trying to do. Like trying to walk.

The same group were also candid in saying that they used alcohol to cope with feelings of depression:

(... So you drink partly because you feel bad?)

M4. When it's not worth living any more.

M2. So you have a drink. After drinking, you're concentrating on yourself more. Other people say you're drunk, and you don't care. The troubles are gone. Then you have to think about them again in the morning.

M1 If you're depressed, you get more depressed. Have argument with mother. She had beaten me up. I was crying and screaming in the street.

One of the individuals in this group was aware that drinking alcohol made him vulnerable to feeling strong emotions that he found troubling:

M* You actually think when you are drunk, you actually do think. You don't normally think about what you're thinking. Like, things start to set in and you remind yourself in the back of your head what you're actually doing now, what you were doing the day before or the day before that and that's when anger starts coming in or depression and stuff like that.

(So your frame of mind when you start drinking...)

M* Yeah. Well before I start drinking I make sure that everything is out of me, like if I wants to cry it'll be out of me. So I knows I'm OK so I'll drink but if I knows I got something in me, I'll drink but I make sure that I keep it on the level that I wants to be that won't make me depressed or angry. I just knows how much to drink.... I gets more emotional when I've had a drink because it tends to creep up on you, like one minute you're not thinking about it and the next minute you're .. then it starts getting all emotional and stuff like that.... if you think about it when you're sober you can sort it out but when you're drunk you can't until it sorts it out itself.' [15-year-old white young offender.]

Within this group of more vulnerable young people, the main influence on their drinking behaviour was sometimes a traumatic event in their own lives:

M* My father's dead anyway. Because this woman he was going out with, him and my mum had an argument and like, this woman who was drunk off whisky and that and has had too much, she ends up killing my dad. So, and she's in prison now and so...

(That was a big message for you?)

Yeah, and that was what stopped me drinking loads, that's why I only drinks a little bit because if someone like that is going to get really drunk and do things like that, I might do it. That's why I'm scared to do...like... that's why I don't drink too much and end up doing something that you shouldn't do. So I has a little bit to calm me down like, just a little bit in my system to keep me calm all through the night.' [15-year-old white male offender.]

Again, consistent with the school sample, many young men talked about how they could talk openly and honestly and express feelings of closeness and affection, which did not happen when they were sober. This was a particularly strong theme for young Bangladeshi men who used group

drinking sessions to let off steam and overstep normal boundaries. Many of them felt strong pressures to conform to families' expectations of them and it was a relief for them to join together and assert their personalities in breaking a taboo. In these situations, they also became involved in antisocial behaviour and vented their frustrations about racism; this topic is explored in the section on alcohol and related nuisance and criminal behaviour.

Socially-based reasons

When many of this group of young people were asked about the attractions of drinking, the answer was obvious to them – to have fun, 'have a laugh', or enjoy 'the buzz'. It was seen as an unquestionable part of being a teenager and messing around, becoming involved in games and minor antisocial behaviour were all considered normal ways of being:

M* I like to have a drink and a laugh with my friends, go and get pissed, be sick, go home. Yeah, when I go out to drink, then I get drunk. [17-year-old mixed race offender.]

F* It wasn't so much the effects on myself. It was more about seeing other people drunk that was funny. They would never get violent or anything, my friends, they'd just have a laugh and have a joke. They'd do stupid things like throw themselves in the lake or do dares like run around the park naked. And they'd do it because they were really drunk. So it was just funny. [16-year-old white looked-after female.]

F* What happens is you swap names and you have to answer quickly when your name is called or you have to drink. And so if you drink, you get slow and can't remember what name you are and all this funny stuff happens. Most of the time we play that game and others times after that we play truth or dare and it's really funny because people just tell the truth or do stupid stuff. [16-year-old black looked-after female.]

A prominent theme for these young people was the same as for the school-based sample: by drinking alcohol they gave themselves permission to act in a different manner. Several gave examples of knocking on doors and running away, throwing objects through windows or abusing passers by. They saw all these activities as fun and were adamant that they would not engage in such when sober:

M* One time he fell off the wall and he's not getting up and I'm drunk and I want to go home. So I had to kick him to get him up again and then took him home to sleep it off. And then he was sick out the window, which was funny as well.' [17-year-old mixed race offender.]

Drinking alcohol to give oneself confidence around dating and sexual attraction was a recurrent theme. In particular, the excusing function of alcohol was cited:

F* Some people use drink as an excuse to ask someone out, and if they don't get the answer they want they can always blame the drink, some people get loud and rowdy and play jokes on people, girls use it as an excuse to kiss anyone. Some girls have one night stands and blame it on the drink. [15-year-old black female from Youth Centre.]

The group of Bangladeshi young men were clear that they did not need alcohol to give them confidence to talk to young women and that 'nice' Asian girls don't like drinking alcohol. However, they did confess to having group evenings with other young women who they got drunk in the hope of having sex with them.

Peer influence

Initial responses to questions about peer pressure in focus groups were similar to those that had taken place in the school context, they were normally met with assertions that individuals would not be pressured. However, subsequent discussions in both focus groups and individual interviews led to many acknowledging pressure, which was sometimes direct:

F* When I was about 11–12, I used to hang out with these girls who pressurised me into drinking. They would say I was boring and I couldn't hang out with them if I didn't drink. At a young age before you start making decisions for yourself, I think a lot of people do get pressurised into drinking. [16-year-old black looked-after female.]

More generally, in exactly the same way as for those young people interviewed at schools, respondents were themselves clearly the biggest influence on each other's drinking behaviour. Drinking patterns amongst groups of friends are often similar and there is a clear progression through different types and brands of alcohol as young people move through their teenage years:

F* It depends as well on if they are your close friends and they are doing it as well and you're just standing there, you feel out of place and left out kind of thing, and you want to do what they are doing. [16-year-old black looked-after female.]

In other situations, some groups of friends had a cultural norm of only drinking and getting drunk if everyone wanted to. This could bring its own pressure to drink:

F* They were saying 'Oh come on just have a drink'. Sometimes I say I haven't got any money and they say they will buy it for me. The thing is if one of us doesn't get drunk, then none of us get drunk, so if you don't feel like getting drunk, or you don't have the money that day the pressure is on you. So sometimes you just think I might as well, and you just go ahead with it. [14-year-old white looked-after female.]

Some were very confident in asserting their choice not to drink. This was more common amongst black and Asian young people. One 16-year-old Asian male enjoyed going to the pub with his friends but was quite happy to drink only soft drinks. He felt that being able to attribute his choice to his religious beliefs as a Moslem made this situation easier. Many Asian young men are influenced by their religious beliefs. Most either do not drink (as was also the case with respondents from the school sample) or feel guilty about their drinking:

M* My religion forbids it, I realise it's wrong and sometimes I feel guilty cause I know it's not allowed. If my parents found out they would go crazy and disown me, it would be so disrespectful. [16-year-old Asian young man from Youth Centre]

Finally, the young people that were interviewed outside school were more likely to have circles of drinking friends older than themselves:

F* Like sometimes, like, normally now, I'm the youngest in our group. Like, all the other girls are a mixture of 17, 18, 19. So, if, normally they've got older boyfriends, 20 something plus, they're into the drinks, but we're not so much.' [15-year-old black looked-after female.]

Differences between males and females

Whilst some maintained that behaviour was more related to individuals than to gender, the majority felt that young men became more aggressive and violent and that young women often became more bitchy:

- F* Boys and girls act differently. For some reason I don't know, I think when boys get drunk they act as though they own the world, and they are on top of the world. They act more muscular kind of thing, you know. Maybe they could go into violence, they think they are all it and start an argument with their friends. I think they feel more powerful, but girls I think would just laugh and that ... I think like if I'm with the boys and they try to kiss me or whatever and you have to fight with that. I think it gives them confidence and courage and they think they're all it and cool and all that stuff. Girls behave more calmly and observing kind of thing, and laugh and whatever. [16-year-old black looked-after female.]
- M* Yeah. I don't know, just different. You can tell if they've had a drink. Depends on the individual. Boys get up to mad things, you know when they go on their stag night and go to little parties. Things erupt. Fights and stuff like that. [16-year-old black looked-after male.]
- M* Girls are completely different. Girls are even worse if they want to go out with a boy. That's how girls get in trouble. [17-year-old white young offender.]
- F* For instance my ex-boyfriend, if he had a drink, he'd get aggressive and violent, my mum's the same. A few of my quiet mates, if they had a drink, they'd come out of themselves and be louder. It changes everyone really, in a way. You usually see the bad side of people rather than the good side. [15-year-old white young female offender.]

Alcohol and personal safety

There was considerable interest in this issue and it was a substantial component of the discussions in both focus groups and individual interviews. Two main themes were covered : mutual support and the fear of sexual attack.

Mutual support

Many young people, like their counterparts in the school setting, shared a clear understanding that groups of friends had a duty to look after each other. On one level it was simply a 'given' that no-one would be separated from the group and everyone was responsible for getting everyone else home. Indeed, even this group of ostensibly 'street-wise' young people would rarely consider going out drinking on their own and safety was a part of their reason for this:

- F* Even if I go out with a tenner in my pocket, I always make sure that I save a fiver for cab fare. Even if we all get in a cab together, we'll drop each other off and all put money in and if I was the last person one of my mates would say to the cab driver, make sure you look after her. [15-year-old white female offender.]
- F1 If you're going out raving and you want to have a good time, I say you should bring some of your mates. Because if one of your mates can stay stable, if you take someone that doesn't

drink and they can remain stable. If you get in an unfit state and you're on your own you are leaving at 2 am–3 am that's no good.

F2 You shouldn't go raving by yourself, it's not safe.

[Interchange in focus group of 12- to 16-year-olds in children's home.]

Fear of sexual attack

This factor featured much more strongly in comparison to those interviewed in school and were voiced particularly often in the interviews with looked-after children. Some of these concerns appeared to come from stories on the media and fictionalised events in television soap operas. Others clearly sprang from first or second hand experiences: both males and females were equally likely to recount these fears, but clearly from different gendered positions:

M* I reckon that when you're drunk as well, boys tend to manipulate people, get them excited, make sure they have one too many and then take them home and then it just gets out of hand and what usually happens, when girls get drunk, she's manipulated, she ends up in a field and she's been raped. [14-year-old white looked-after male]

F* You get persuaded easily to do things if you're drunk. If you're raving and a man will offer you drinks, and he'll buy you drinks. And you're in no fit state to make a clear decision anyway. And he'll be asking for water and he'll get you a Brandy and coke. So he's in a fit state to play with your mind and to manipulate you, and leading you to do things you wouldn't do if you were in a normal state. [16-year-old black looked-after female]

M* That's how girls get in trouble, they might be that drunk, somebody will probably rape them or something. Girls should know what they do before they drink. You hear on the news about people that go to a night club and come back and don't be seen. [17-year-old white young offender]

One 16-year-old white looked-after young woman had two personal accounts of herself and a friend being in situations where they were at considerable risk of being sexually assaulted or raped. In both cases the respondent had managed to extricate herself and her friend from danger. Although this deterred her friend from getting drunk for a short period of time, she soon went back to drinking large amounts of alcohol in unsafe situations and the second incident occurred within a few months of the first.

Alcohol and related nuisance and criminal behaviour

A wide range of antisocial and criminal behaviour was described. The role alcohol plays in excusing young people's boisterous behaviour and minor acts of criminal damage has already been commented upon. A succinct view on the link between alcohol and antisocial behaviour was given by one respondent:

M* Like, when you are sober then you tend to know what you are doing, and when you are actually drunk you gets angrier quicker, when you are drunk than when you are sober. And you tend to get into more mischief when you're pissed as well.' [15-year-old white young offender in care.]

In another example, one young offender regretted being talked into a criminal act of interfering with a motor vehicle by a friend – an offence he had never previously committed. The following is more typical:

M* I don't go around smashing windows, I push people out of the way. When I'm not drinking I'm usually a good little angel. I would let an elderly person on the bus first, but when I'm drunk I'd push them out of the way, and I wouldn't pay my fare. It's probably because I've had one too many and I don't know what I'm doing ...When I wake up in the morning, if I can't remember it and my friends do. I'll ask them what I was like. And if they tell me, and if it's serious, I'll think about what I've done, spend most of the day in my room and think about what I've done. If my friends say are you coming out on the same day, I'll just say no, I'll say I'm doing something or waiting for a phone call.[14-year-old white looked-after male]

However, some young men became involved in serious aggressive and violent crime when they were drunk, all maintaining that they would never do so when sober. A group of 16- to 17-year-old Bangladeshi young men described how they would initiate fights with groups of white males when drunk and talked about how they enjoyed the experience. Some enjoyed the feelings of power and others saw their actions within a context of the racist abuse that they and their families experienced. They did not explicitly go out to rectify wrongs, but were clear that they would not attack a group of Asian young men. As part of the bonding within their group they also described other activities. The majority of these young men feel remorse following these incidents, but several also indicate that they are likely to repeat the behaviour on subsequent occasions:

M* If we've done something really stupid, I regret it. If a girl in a mini skirt walks down the road, we'll whistle and call out but it's harmless fun. She might be scared but we're not going to do anything. I regret some of the fights and smashing car windows. After you trashed the car, you feel bad but later you laugh about it. [17-year-old Bangladeshi male]

There were a number of stories (from both sexes) about the aggression young men showed towards young women, sometimes in pursuit of sexual activity. One 16-year-old mixed race looked-after young man talked about drinking too much at clubs and being 'too pushy' with girls. He implied that he would be quite aggressive in trying to persuade them to 'get off with me'. He was clear that he stopped short of any physical force. He did not appreciate the likely effect of his actions, stating that he would sometimes be embarrassed the next day because he had 'got off with an ugly bird'. One respondent was surprised by his own actions:

M* The worst thing I've ever done when I'm drunk – I'd never do it when I'm sober – is I went up to some girl and I beat her up. I just beat her up. I did not know what I was doing.' [14-year-old white looked-after male]

Sometimes, serious offences are committed through the effects of intoxication, rather than deliberate intent:

(Do you ever get into fights or arguments or anything when you've been drinking?)

M* I blew up a caravan. By accident. Well, my friend did. I was laughing my head off and fell on my back. He lit a candle for two hours. He fell asleep. I was literally unconscious. I woke up

and there was flames everywhere. The blankets and everything were on fire. I was like, 'Boys, let's get out of here'. There was £160 TV player, flipping mini disc player, and god, I felt sorry for him.

(How do you feel afterwards?)

I went back in for my coat. it was burning. Went inside, got my coat, and just thought, I was so close to getting killed. If I hadn't woken up. [15-year-old white offender in care.]

Finally, the Bangladeshi young men described getting young women drunk in the hope of having sexual intercourse with them:

M* Yes, we don't force them. But we know what they're like when we ask them, that's why we take them. We take girls we know we can have fun with, we don't take our girl friends.' [17-year-old Bangladeshi male.]

The role of parents

Although some of the young people that were interviewed in non-school settings had little or no contact with their parents, parental influence was still important. Occasionally, young people's high levels of drinking appeared to have a connection with the importance of alcohol in the parental home:

M* Mum used to own a pub, I was brought up in a pub. I was always brought up by my Nan and she used to go to other pubs. Before I used to come home drunk and my mum used to go mad. Then I got into a lot of trouble and I had to go into foster care. Now I go down to see my mum, I'll meet her in a pub and we'll have _ lager together. There's not much she can say. ... My Nan died of cirrhosis of the liver, I was really close to her. [15-year-old white young offender]

One set of parents had set their son non-traditional boundaries, allowing him to drink in a familiar pub with the landlord operating in loco parentis to control intake:

M* I know the owners of the pub and they know my parents. If I go overboard, they contact my parents straight away. In the pub I used to go to, there was a certain limit for me. They would serve me, but if I asked after three drinks, they would stop and kick me out the pub, you can only have coke, orange or a glass of water. [14-year-old white looked-after male.]

The same young man recounted how his mother had become so concerned about his drinking and associated behaviour that she monitored his whereabouts:

M* My mum was concerned actually. My mum actually did a 24 hour watch on me, she phoned the school to make sure I was there, she did everything. I felt I was having no privacy, no space, I wasn't getting to do what I wanted to. But at the end of the day, it was helping me. If I go out with my friends now, my mum will phone up to make sure I'm there, or I'll phone my mum to let her know we're just going out. My friend will carry his mobile and my mum will phone that up.

As with those young people interviewed in a school setting, some referenced their parents in respect of monitoring their drinking, but this could appear chaotic:

M* Um, Yeah. I just keep on drinking more and more and when I've had enough, I just stop, because my mum tells me when I've had enough. Just has one more and that's it then...I do get paranoid when I'm drinking in clubs... and with my mum, I've got to admit. Yeah, I do feel paranoid, but my mum don't care, and after that I don't get so paranoid. ...I'm worried that something's going to go wrong. Yeah, sometimes I do think that my mother's going to come over and say something, and it'll end up turning into a fight or something, an argument. [15-year-old white young offender in care.]

However, some were quite clear about the limits to parental supervision:

M* My parents don't really know. My mother knows, but she just advises me. She can't stop me from doing it. Can't like lock me up in the bedroom and keep me there. [13-year-old white young offender in care.]

Controlled/sensible drinking and influences on drinking behaviour

Many young people were oblivious of the health risks of their drinking behaviour; most thought that the risks of liver and brain damage (the two most frequently cited dangers of drinking – the same as for the school-based samples) were not relevant to them. In particular, they saw no concern in the common behaviour of drinking so much that they got drunk and vomited. Most young people who were regular drinkers could recount a story of getting this intoxicated:

F* I don't know what sensible drinking is – as much as your body can take? [15-year-old white female offender.]

Many 16- and 17-year-olds who recounted stories of having got so drunk that they vomited now claimed to know their limits (precisely the learning from experience discourse voiced by the school-based respondents). However, in most cases exploration of this issue in individual interviews in particular revealed that few young people limited their consumption to a specific amount. In most cases, 'knowing my limit' meant that they would stop drinking when they were beginning to feel nauseous:

F* I think it's self tolerance, and after so long you learn. I can't remember an actual time when I did learn my limit. You just know that one more drink and you'll be gone, so you say to yourself, no more. [16-year-old black looked-after female]

There were several other beliefs that these young people shared with the school-based respondents: they thought that intoxication and vomiting were more related to mixing drinks than quantity of alcohol, and few had good knowledge of the relative strengths of alcoholic drinks.

7 Overview and commentary

This research has been designed to help understand the meaning of alcohol in the lives of 12- to 17-year-olds; in particular, their motivations for drinking and strategies for safe drinking. This required consideration of (a) drinking occasions, i.e. where, what, how much, and with whom, and, in particular, (b) the ‘why’ of drinking, its antecedents, expectations and potential consequences. Consequences involved respondents’ concerns with their own safety, their possible involvement in antisocial behaviour and, more generally, the social significance of their drinking, including sexual behaviour. Primary data collection was based on school pupils in London and South Wales, with particular attention given to 16- and 17-year-old young women. However, given the broad agenda setting function of the research, work was also undertaken with young people outside of the school environment, i.e. from youth groups, young offender groups, and those in residential care. Although 180 young people took part in this research, it needs to be emphasised that our focus was to generate an understanding of the meanings of alcohol use, rather than employ statistical inference to make claims about particular populations, such as the frequency of drinking amongst London school children. This caveat is especially relevant to consideration of the those interviewed in a non-school setting.

The report therefore involves a wide ranging consideration of the meanings of alcohol use rather than the piloting or evaluation of particular initiatives. Nonetheless, a better understanding of the social contexts of drinking should inform policy considerations, such as those to be considered in the first National Alcohol Strategy. Initiatives to encourage more sensible drinking might include both social considerations, such as the enhancement of self-control strategies, and structural modifications, such as the facilitation of safer drinking environments and possible changes in licensing laws. Indeed, taking a more comprehensive view, there are a number of areas that might be informed by this research. These include health education, broader education issues within schools and colleges, parenting, alcohol-related crime and nuisance, national youth programmes and activities, licensing laws and alcohol advertising and marketing.

In addressing the ostensibly simple question ‘why do young people drink alcohol?’, consideration was given to the argument that learning to use alcohol could be seen as a developmental task. This proved to be helpful, but the findings suggest that alcohol use is not simply a matter of acquiring new behaviour repertoires, nor solely a matter of identifying with an adult behaviour. Rather, the accounts of drinking experiences suggest three separate sets of reasons:

1. ‘Individually-based’ reasons, which involve feeling more relaxed and unwinding. At times, this was seen as a way of helping to cope with stressful life events – what Pavis et al. (1997) call a ‘drug of solace’. In general, however, the individually-based reasons appear to be derivative of adult discourse on alcohol use, such as ‘unwinding’ at the end of a long day.
2. ‘Socially-based’ reasons were more common, particularly for the 15- to 17-year-olds, and are clearly identified with young people rather than adults. These are expressing one’s views

more easily, allowing opportunities for developing trust with friends in a variety of social settings and allowing possibilities for exploring sexual relationships in a less threatening context. For these social reasons, alcohol is seen to serve both relaxing and bonding functions within a peer group. In addition, and importantly, it may be used to excuse one's behaviour.

3. 'Peer influence', although including unwanted pressure, more generally involves a tacit social expectation that certain kinds of events will entail particular types of alcohol use. In the latter case an individual is best seen as a willing member of a social group in which particular norms and expectations concerning alcohol use had emerged and were subject to continuous change.

Taking account of its multiple social functions, alcohol is not simply part of a 'consumption repertoire' (as suggested by Aldridge, Parker and Measham, 1999). For the majority of young people, it constitutes a necessary feature of some social activity. This argument moves beyond alcohol use as imitating adult behaviour. Rather, particular forms of alcohol consumption appear to be normalised amongst young people i.e. drinking is as much 'young people' behaviour as 'adult' behaviour. The particular form of this behaviour was shown to depend critically on several socio-cultural parameters:

- Gender of participant. Accounts of alcohol and social life were clearly gendered. In addition, accounts were clear and consistent from all respondents concerning differences between the behaviour of young men and women.
- Local culture. The local community served by the South Wales school included areas that embodied a culture of heavy drinking. This was reflected in the social activity talked about by these young people, including those who did not drink themselves.
- Family and support characteristics. Young people in care, for example, have a different structure of opportunities and occasions for drinking.
- Religion and ethnic identity. Religion might provide a rationale for abstinence, and if alcohol is proscribed, will impact on the location of any alcohol consumption.
- Age of respondent. This factor is particularly important – particular kinds of drinking behaviour are age-dependent.

A summary of key findings is now provided. This is followed by consideration of the alcohol-antisocial behaviour link, and means to influencing the drinking behaviour of young people.

Alcohol and 12- to 13-year-olds

The general picture of the 12- to 13-year-old sample was of young people who were starting to experiment with alcohol, albeit tentatively and usually within the safety of the family environment. The majority had at least tried alcohol, but very few were drinking once a week or more. Experimenting with alcohol was commonly associated with the desire to move on from childhood status, and there were indications of some peer pressure here. This pressure was seen to be greater for boys than for girls as part of a taken-for-granted expectation of gender differences in

experience and behaviour. This gendered account also included an assumption that alcohol would make boys more aggressive than girls, although the rate of antisocial behaviour reported by this age group was generally low.

The role of parents in drinking behaviour for the 12- to 13-year-olds was complex: some parents were against alcohol use by this age group altogether, whilst the majority encouraged controlled drinking, i.e. in the family environment. The views of young people themselves reflected this ambivalence: some were clearly rooted in the discourse of adolescent rebellion and the need to learn from personal experience, whilst others found comfort in the idea of parents providing a safe introduction to alcohol use.

Alcohol and 14- to 15-year-olds

By the age of 14 and 15 drinking was a more commonplace activity with the emphasis on experimentation and on drinking away from the family environment. Whilst entry to venues was still a problem for some – most commonly boys – obtaining alcohol was relatively easy with a range of strategies being employed. The presence of alcohol was an important symbol that an event was acceptable and marked it off from ‘younger’ activities. Surveys (as discussed in Chapter 1) that show an increase in heavy sessional drinking amongst young people are reflected in the opinions of many respondents that such drinking, in a social context, is entirely normal and is not indicative of an alcohol problem or health risk. Indeed, for many interviewees in this age band, the purpose of recreational drinking with their friends was to get drunk.

The power of alcohol to raise social confidence and ease social interactions was seen as liberating and exciting. Indeed, a much broader range of behaviour was deemed acceptable where alcohol was involved, giving the young person a ready-made excuse for experimenting with behaviour which stepped across the normal boundaries. The experience of alcohol as a ‘releasing agent’ was also evident from the reports by some respondents that they drank just to relax or help cope with stress. At the same time, respondents recognised some of the potential dangers of drinking to excess which were supported by examples from personal experience. The perceived role of friends in preventing one ‘going too far’ and in securing personal safety emerged as a significant part of the drinking culture.

The role of parents had also shifted. Drinking outside of the home was generally something to be kept from parents and was seen to belong to a distinctly different social world. From the perspective of these young people, ideal parents operate in an accepting, but caring, frame – over tolerance could be seen as uncaring. However, parental disapproval did not feature as mitigating against heavy drinking, rather cautionary tales involving embarrassment such as the degradation of vomiting in public or learning of others’ injuries did have an effect.

Alcohol and 16- to 17-year-olds

At 16 and especially 17, the majority of young people were drinking regularly and experimenting with alcohol was seen as a thing of the past. Respondents now presented themselves as people who had progressed from ‘younger years’ – having a more responsible attitude to drinking (including the belief that they now knew their own limits), selecting venues on criteria other than whether they would gain entry. These reflections took place within life-cycle discourse where excess of early years was seen as an inevitable part of growing up.

Perceived gender differences in drinking behaviour were consistent with those described by younger samples, although the need for young men to show a tough image (with a shift to pub venues) and engage in aggressive behaviour was more marked. The role of parents had again shifted. Now there was seen to be a more explicit acceptance from parents that drinking is part of normal adolescent social activity, together with the notion of parental trust in the young person as a 'responsible drinker'.

Alcohol and young people interviewed in a non-school setting

The general picture of alcohol use amongst the sample interviewed in a non-school setting shared many features with those interviewed in schools: drinking patterns amongst groups of friends were similar and there was the usual progression through different types and brands of alcohol. In respect of safety, the importance of mutual support was again cited. Drinking to get drunk was again a feature for some, and like the school-based sample, vodka was preferred. The fact that it was relatively odourless was cited as a reason for its use both by looked-after children, and, particularly, those for whom alcohol use was proscribed on religious grounds. One possibly important difference for the looked-after young people was that older drinking friends and partners were more likely which appeared to encourage more alcohol consumption. In addition, the detailed accounts of reasons for drinking revealed more emphasis on coping with stressful, and in some cases traumatic, life events.

The youth club and the young offender respondents did not present different meanings for alcohol use compared to those interviewed in the school context.

Alcohol and antisocial behaviour

The proportion of respondents who reported drunken antisocial behaviour was not high. However, a range of antisocial and criminal behaviour was described, generally with the assumption that these things would not have happened if the respondent had been sober. These fell into two distinct categories: first, drink had led to an unexpected loss of control or second, drink was used strategically in the sense that lowered inhibitions were anticipated.

The degree to which 'looking out for friends' is territorial partly explains the uneasy juxtaposition of sharing/friendship and aggression/violence in many of the accounts given by young men from all of the backgrounds sampled here. Indeed, there was overwhelming evidence – from both the young men and women of all ages, that aggression was expected on some of the social occasions that involved drinking. However, given the multi-function use of alcohol described in this report, a simple causal link between alcohol use and antisocial behaviour is not sustainable.

Sexual harassment from males who had been drinking was a consistent theme in the accounts from the female respondents. Part of the flip side of these accounts was that young men tended to emphasise the sexual side of alcohol-enhanced confidence in social situations as one reason for drinking. Moreover, a small number of young men specifically acknowledged that they were, or had been, physically intimidating in order to pursue sex. In such situations, a young woman who had also been drinking would find this more difficult to handle, but this was offset by the very powerful culture of an expectation that friends (both young men and young women) would help.

In respect of unwelcome sexual advances, girls in local authority care appeared to be at more risk. There could be no drinking in the relative safety of the family environment, and their drinking partners tended to be older; factors that would be exacerbated by the emotional vulnerability of many young people in care. Indeed, several of the residential social work staff expressed concern about the drinking of some of the young people in their charge – both boys and girls – but did not feel well equipped to discuss it or set equivalents of parental supervision or monitoring. This raises problematic practical and ethical issues about how residential care workers can help looked-after children learn sensible drinking models. The training requirement of the government's 'Quality Protects' initiative for all residential care staff may afford an opportunity for alcohol education to be integrated into the relevant vocational training materials.

For all respondent groups, it is important to stress that although alcohol linked aggression might be expected, other forms of crime and disorder were generally not planned or expected. If other forms of disorder did occur, whether they were recounted as regrettable or amusing, they were generally treated as a simple by-product, or unfortunate consequence of the 'night out'. In this regard useful parallels might be drawn with ongoing research on alcohol-related disorder involving adults in city centres, which is part of the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme.

In summary, five antisocial features that are associated with alcohol use can be identified. We illustrate in the next section how any attempts to address this behaviour might best be built on counter positions to be found in the accounts of the young people themselves.

1. The link between drinking and the intention to get drunk, especially for young people around the age of 15.
2. The need for boys to show a tough macho image.
3. Drinking and threatening behaviour in relatively large groups.
4. Alcohol use as an excuse for 'bad' behaviour.
5. Male sexual harassment.

Influences on drinking and strategies for changing behaviour

Strategies for controlling or reducing alcohol intake were based almost entirely on experience, e.g., avoiding mixing drinks by the 16- to 17-year-olds. Whilst many respondents were at least vaguely aware that alcohol consumption can lead to liver and other organ damage in later life, this did not concern those that drank. However, such information was an important source for supporting the arguments of non-drinkers. For most drinkers their lack of concern over health consequences appears inevitable in that they anticipate their own alcohol use will change as they enter into an adult culture which, in any event, is perceived to accept and encourage alcohol consumption. An important exception to the general discounting of health-related information were those who told of alcohol problems with members of their own family.

In responding to questions about 'sensible drinking', the older respondents talked about the difficulties for younger people who had no safe drinking environment outside of the home. It is necessary to note that these older participants, whilst abhorring the behaviour of 'these kids' did

not suggest they should not drink, rather that it was difficult for them to find more acceptable places to drink. To propose protected but licensed youth clubs would be a step too far for most adults. However, the observation from some respondents, especially where based on experiences from school trips, that young people abroad did not seem to go out and get drunk because of more relaxed licensing laws is not easily discounted. It was also suggested that boredom and the lack of affordable activities contributed to underage drinking. This leads to more tractable implications including the greater spread of cheap passes for activities such as cinema, bowling and ice-skating. In addition, a number of respondents from all age groups suggested the need for local youth clubs and non-alcoholic nights in clubs for under-18s. However, it was stressed that such venues needed to be very carefully tailored to different age groups (the bandings employed in our research seemed acceptable), and to cater to 'real teenage interests and needs', rather than the organisers' perceptions of what teenagers need.

The older respondents also argued that any information about alcohol use should be provided as soon as possible within the secondary school framework. It appeared that many young people received their rather sparse alcohol education at an age when they already had considerable experience of drinking. Information provision appears necessary in respect of several areas. First, 'what constitutes safe drinking?'. A 'just say no' approach was seen to be unwelcome advice rather than information provision. This could be allied to a clear understanding of how to calculate the strength of different drinks. Second, short term health consequences could be tied with implications for fitness and sporting ability. Third, an outline of longer term consequences is also necessary. These mitigated against the desire to drink to excess for any age group where chronic illness and violence-related incidents had been observed in others, especially within their own family. More generally, the experience of real people was generally regarded as the most effective way to deliver alcohol information.

Before discussing the provision of advice, it needs stressing that the problem of dependence should not be overlooked. This follows from our argument that the young person's use of alcohol should be treated as a phenomena in its own right, not simply a stage to adulthood. This needs emphasising because concerns over violence, personal safety, sexual vulnerability and so on, could easily overshadow this issue. The obvious comparison is the manner in which problems related to the use of alcohol by adults are focused around dependence and a diminished ability to function as an effective citizen. In short, it may be necessary for responses to dependence to be given clear attention alongside other initiatives.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, alcohol advice (as opposed to the provision of information) within the school framework was regarded with scepticism by many, not least amongst the younger age group interviewed. Our own view mirrors this – school is certainly suitable for provision of information, as discussed above, but advice is more problematic, and at least needs to acknowledge the reality of adolescent drinking in spite of the existing legal framework. A discussion-based interactive approach that allows a broader consideration of alcohol-related situations is necessary. Focus style discussion groups are one possibility (with appropriate confidentiality safeguards), as are the Internet-based discussion groups outlined in Appendix 4. The issue of where and with whom these should take place requires trials, and a variety of options are likely to be plausible. For example, Honess and Charman (1992) interviewed 60 young adults in night clubs to solicit views on fear of crime and crime prevention. Discussion and exchange of

ideas is essential. Countless studies, based on a variety of topics, have shown that information provision alone is unlikely to be effective. Rather, simple information is best seen as a helpful resource that can inform reflection and discussion about the personal use of alcohol.

Any interactive provision of information would involve alcohol use in its wider context – inseparable from issues of sex, cigarette and drug usage, crime and safety. Such a focus in areas like technology, health, money, activities and careers will impact on messages provided about alcohol in a more concrete and relevant way. A simple example would be using technology modules to engender discussion about the best mobiles/ pagers and net access available. This could thereby incorporate information provision and issues of drinking and safety to keep others informed of their whereabouts.

Sharing of views and experiences could be used not only for promoting personal safety, but also to challenge antisocial behaviour. For example, consider the features identified above under alcohol and antisocial behaviour. The link between drinking and the intention to get drunk would invariably be condoned for some occasions – ‘everybody needs to know what it’s like’. However, repeated drunkenness is seen by most respondents as neither powerful (‘you can’t hold your drink’), nor attractive (viz. images of vomiting and the lack of control that is increasingly rejected by the older respondents). Similarly, the need for boys to show a tough macho image could be addressed through differing ideas about what constitutes masculinity, e.g. being able to deal with a situation through control of oneself and others. In respect of excusing ‘bad’ behaviour, silliness, embarrassment and ‘one-offs’ are clearly distinguished by respondents from unrepentant or repeated objectionable behaviour. There is a basis in some accounts that allows a counter-discourse to such behaviour that implies weakness, a failure to sustain control, and a failure to comprehend what others might feel. Similar issues relate to alcohol fuelled sexual harassment – which many accounts position as both unmanly and unattractive, and may involve a clear moral censure from the peer group.

The foregoing is clearly not an operational prescription for delivering alcohol messages. Location, format and group constitution (age mix, gender mix and so on) would all need careful pilot and monitoring. Rather the commentary indicates how moves to more sensible drinking are already prevalent in the accounts of young people. Our argument is that any policy initiative could most usefully build on these pre-existing control mechanisms. Indeed, the young people interviewed in the current study were fiercely protective about the need for personal choice based on their own experiences and that of their friends.

There is also a more fundamental implication suggested by the research – that any health programme needs to integrate initiatives for young people with those of adults and children. For example, if cracking the association between drinking alcohol and drunkenness is a key public health challenge, it becomes necessary to unpack the cultural and social foundation of alcohol consumption, not just for young people, but also for adults, who may be seen to celebrate drinking and drunkenness. Indeed, the role of parents, although complex, was seen to be most important either directly or indirectly in the accounts of many respondents of all ages. Licensing laws and alcohol advertising were not a central focus of this research, but are clearly relevant to the broader policy debate and deserve brief mention.

Licensing laws are perceived by some to be complex, and inconsistent with age related constraints on other behaviours. In addition, their perceived rigidity is compared unfavourably by some respondents with continental practice. Advertising, marketing and media (not least 'the soaps' and teen magazines such as Bliss and Just 17) were all seen as potentially strong influences on underage drinking. Moreover, some respondents believed that particular alcoholic drinks were not only very attractively packaged but that their design and promotion were blatantly aimed at underage drinkers. Whilst this is important in its own right, it may be damaging for government-backed health and education programmes which some respondents saw as hypocritical in the light of a tacit acceptance of what was perceived to be the industry's targeting of underage drinkers.

Conclusion

A persistent feature of the accounts from young people emphasised their need to discover and decide themselves from their own experience how to deal with alcohol. Health interventions and other policy changes need to be seen as supporting and informing, but not dictating these decisions. These features are illustrated in our final quote, from a 16-year-old young woman:

When you are younger you say "God – you got drunk on only that?" But it depends on whether you have drunk before and sometimes you think, "I should be able to drink a lot more than that" or "I'll drink the same as so-and-so" and so-and-so might be a lot older. If younger people go out with a lot older people in groups, then a younger person looks silly but they are only trying things out. With time you have experiences and you become more responsible. At the time you think you are sensible but now I look back and know that I have learnt so much more than when I started out. It becomes less peer pressure and more your own truth. When you go out it is not "Drink this!" it is "So you are not drinking tonight, OK". It is up to you – you get to realise it is your own choice. Everyone has to go through that experience themselves – it is a process.

In conclusion, one major implication for policy makers is that there must be a holistic approach to underage drinking. Drinking behaviour amongst teenagers is not a discrete issue – instead it is a consequence of, and impacts upon, a diverse number of social, educational, cultural and political arenas.

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Appendix 1

Drinking questionnaire

1. Have you ever had an alcoholic drink – that is, a proper drink, more than just a sip?

Please carefully CIRCLE the answer that best describes you.

Yes No

2. How often have you had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 MONTHS?

Please carefully CIRCLE just ONE letter for the answer e.g. a that best describes you.

- a Not at all
- b Just on special occasions
- c Less than once a month
- d Once or twice a month
- e Once a week
- f 2–4 days a week
- g 5–6 days a week
- h Every day

In which of the following places do you usually drink?

Please TICK the answer in the box that best describes you for each of the places

Hardly ever or Not at all	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	About once a week	Twice a week or more
------------------------------	---------------------------	--------------------------	----------------------	-------------------------

3. Home

4. Home of other relatives

5. At parties

6. Pub or wine bar

7. Night club

8. Park or street

9. Other*

* Please write in where:

Who do you usually drink with?

Please TICK the answer in the box that best describes you for each of the people

Hardly ever or Less than Once or twice About once Twice a week
Not at all once a month a month a week or more

10. Group of friends –
both sexes

11. Group of friends –
same sex as you

12. Brothers or sisters

13. Other family, inc. parents

14. On my own

15. Boy or girl friend *

16. Other– please say who:

* if you have no particular boy/ girl friend, tick ‘not at all’

17. Have you ever felt very drunk in the past 12 MONTHS?

Please carefully CIRCLE the answer that best describes you.

Yes No

18. How often have you felt very drunk in the past 12 MONTHS?

Please carefully CIRCLE just ONE letter for the answer e.g. a that best describes you.

- a At least once a week
- b Several times a month
- c Once or twice a month
- d Every couple of months
- e Less often
- f Not at all

19. In the last 12 MONTHS, have you had a hangover after drinking too much alcohol?

Please carefully CIRCLE the answer that best describes you.

Yes No

20. How often have you had a hangover in the past 12 MONTHS?

Please carefully CIRCLE just ONE letter for the answer e.g. a that best describes you.

- a At least once a week
- b Several times a month
- c Once or twice a month
- d Every couple of months
- e Less often
- f Not at all

When you drink, how do you mostly get the alcohol?

Please TICK the answer in the box that best describes you for each

	Never	Hardly ever – Rarely –	Sometimes	Usually
21. My parents give it to me				
22. From home without my parents knowing				
23. Friends bring it from their home				
24. I buy it*				
25. Friends who are under 18 buy it				
26. Friends who are over 18 buy it				
27. I ask a stranger to buy for me				
28. Other way –please say how:				

* Please write in here where **you** usually buy alcohol

In the last 12 MONTHS, which of the following, if any, have you done *during or after drinking*?

Please carefully CIRCLE the answer that best describes you.

29. Got into a heated argument	Yes	No
30. Got into a fight	Yes	No
31. Broken, damaged or destroyed something that did not belong to me	Yes	No
32. Taken something that did not belong to me	Yes	No
33. Missed school, college or work	Yes	No

For our monitoring purposes, please complete the following:

Please give your age: Please say whether boy or girl:

Please tick the category that best describes you:

- | Asian | Black | White |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi | <input type="checkbox"/> African | <input type="checkbox"/> White |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indian | | |

Other Asian – write in here: Other Black – write in here: Other White – write in here:

Any other – write in here:

MANY THANKS

j

Introduction

Explanation of project – the content of the session, how it will run, confidentiality issues.

Note

The bracketed information covers possible prompts. Not all themes are introduced – to some extent, the group can dictate direction provided it is relevant.

Start

with icebreaker re participants' name and alcoholic drink beginning with the same letter.

1.1 Alcohol consumption

- What's your favourite drink?

[How often do you usually drink alcohol? Who had a drink yesterday/day before/last weekend? Who is intending to have (thinking about having?) a drink later today/tonight? What did you/will you drink, who will you be with?, where will you be? What are cool drinks/ if you want to impress/naff drinks?]

2.1 The role of alcohol on behaviour/ self-awareness

- What do you like about drinking?

[How does alcohol affect the way you feel about yourself? How does alcohol affect the way you behave?]

- What makes a good night out? What might spoil this?

[Can you describe a good experience with drinking or being drunk? When would you go out to have a drink?]

- What don't you like about drinking?

[What do you think about the way alcohol affects how other people behave? What do you think about other people's drinking – is it ever a problem? Do boys and girls behave differently when they drink?]

- Do you sometimes drink so that you can get intentionally drunk (on purpose?)– why?

[What does getting drunk mean – at what point would you say you/he/she's drunk?] [What do you drink if you want to get drunk? How much do you drink? Where do you go? Who are you with?]

2.2 The role of peers

- Can you describe a typical night out that involves drinking alcohol?

[Who do you drink with? What role do you think alcohol plays in your social life? How much do you drink compared to your closest friends?]

- What would that night be like without alcohol – what else do you do which doesn't involve alcohol?
- Do friends ever pressurise you to drink more/less?

[If yes, How do you feel about this? If you don't want to drink, how do you deal with the pressure to drink? How do you control how much you drink – what kind of alcohol would you drink? When/why would you decide not to drink? Is it acceptable to drink less/not drink for boys or girls? Do you drink different drinks when you are out with boys/girls?]

3.1 Links to antisocial behaviour and crime

- How does your behaviour change when you drink?

[Have you ever got into an argument/fight, destroyed/damaged/broken something that didn't belong to you, taken something that didn't belong to you, missed school/college/work after drinking?]

- Have you ever committed a crime when drunk or done something antisocial – what happened?
- Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone else being drunk? What happened?

[Have you, or a friend ever been the victim of a crime or something as a result of someone else drinking or being in a pub/club/at a party – what happened?]

3.2 Safety and drink

- How do you keep out of trouble when you drink?

[Do you know what signs to look out for to avoid trouble? What are they?]

- Do you think about your safety when you're drinking (when you get drunk)?

[What places are safest to drink in? Are some friends safer to go out with than others? Which drinks are safer to drink/mix than others?] [Introduce drugs here: Alternatives or complements, together or separate, how does money enter the equation, different friends for each?]

- How do you make sure you get home safely after a night out drinking?

[Do you plan how you are going to get home before you go out? Would you drive if you had been drinking? Would you be a passenger in a car if the driver had been drinking?]

- What would you do if one of your friends got too drunk when you were out?

[How would you know they've had too much to drink? How would you look after them? What if this happened regularly – how would you encourage your friend to cut down his/her drinking?]

3.3 Sensible drinking

- The Government is trying to promote 'sensible drinking'. If you think about a typical night out, what do you consider is a safe amount to drink?

[How much is okay to drink in one go/night? How much is okay to drink in a week? What kind of combinations of drinks do you think are okay to mix – and in what quantities?]

4.1 Influences on drinking

- Who or what influences your drinking – and in what way?

[Do your parents/friends influence you – how? What about adverts? What else influences you?]

4.2 Learning about alcohol

Possible use of quiz here – or earlier

- What have you been taught about alcohol?

[Who taught you, where were you, do you believe what you were told?]

[Would more information make a difference?/What else would you like to know about drinking/alcohol? What would make you (radically) change your drinking?]

Possible additional questions

Younger participants

- Have you ever had an alcoholic drink?

[Buying alcohol: Where, with whom, how do you convince bar person or cashier, do you get anyone to buy it for you?]

- What was your first experience of drinking?

[What about friends/brothers/sisters first experiences?]

What did/didn't you like about it?

Do your parents drink? What do/would they think about you drinking?

What are cool/naff drinks? What makes them cool/naff?

Girls' groups

- What do you think about boys drinking? Does it change their behaviour – in what way?
- Do you drink more when you are with boys? Do you drink different drinks than when you are with girls?
- What are cool/naff drinks for boys? What are cool/naff drinks for girls? Why are there differences? [if there are] What makes a drink cool?
- What effect do you think drinking has on your weight/skin/looks?
- How does drinking affect how other people see you? What does your drinking say to boys? [lead on to sexual behaviour]

Appendix 3 Questionnaire responses from total sample

Table A1 *Frequency of drinking in the past 12 months*

	12–13 years	14–15 years	16–17 years	Youth centre	Children in care	Young offenders
not at all	7	1	4	9	3	0
special occasions	10	6	7	8	7	3
less than once a month	3	4	11	2	1	0
once/ twice a month	8	12	16	1	2	1
once a week	2	7	14	1	1	2
2–4 days a week	1	3	15	0	1	3
5–6 days a week	1	0	0	1	0	0
every day	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total number	32	33	68	22	15	9

Table A2 *Percentage yes to questions concerning the social consequences of drinking alcohol*

	12–13 years	14–15 years	16–17 years	Youth centre	Children in care	Young offenders
ever had an alcoholic drink?	73	97	95	55	80	100
ever felt drunk in the last 12 months?	33	69	70	32	67	67
had a hangover in the last 12 months?	27	45	46	23	47	33
got into heated argument?	6	14	20	14	33	33
got into a fight?	9	14	5	14	20	33
damaged or destroyed something?	18	28	11	14	27	11
taken something?	0	3	7	0	7	22
missed school, college or work?	6	7	11	18	60	33
Total number	32	33	68	22	15	9

Table A3 *Obtaining alcohol*

	12–13 years		14–15 years		16–17 years		Youth centre		Children in care		Young offenders	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
given by parents	2.21	2	2.41	2	2.16	2	1.37	1	1.36	1	1.22	1
from home w/out parents	1.33	1	1.45	1	1.30	1	1.41	1	1.41	1	1.22	1
friends bring it from home	1.72	1	2.00	2	1.83	2	1.68	1	1.69	1	1.22	1
buy alcohol themselves	1.12	1	2.24	2	3.25	4	1.56	1	1.54	1	3.67	4
bought by friends < 18	1.45	1	2.78	2	2.46	3	1.95	2	1.95	1	1.67	1
bought by friends > 18	1.39	1	2.24	2	2.39	3	2.09	2	2.09	2	3.11	4
bought by a stranger	1.12	1	1.48	1	1.10	1	1.23	1	1.22	1	1.11	1
Total number	32		33		68		22		15		9	

1 = Never 2 = Hardly Ever/ Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Usually

Table A4 *Frequency of feeling drunk and having a hangover in the past 12 months*

	12–13 years		14–15 years		16–17 years		Youth centre		Children in care		Young offenders	
Feeling drunk												
at least once a week	0	0	0	0	7	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
several times a month	1	4	4	4	5	5	0	0	0	0	1	1
once or twice a month	1	6	6	6	12	12	0	1	1	1	2	2
every couple of months	5	7	7	7	18	18	4	4	4	4	3	3
less often	5	8	8	8	10	10	3	5	5	5	0	0
not at all	20	8	8	8	16	16	15	5	5	5	3	3
Total number	32		33		68		22		15		9	
Feeling hungover												
at least once a week	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
several times a month	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
once or twice a month	0	1	1	1	9	9	1	2	2	2	1	1
every couple of months	5	3	3	3	13	13	1	2	2	2	0	0
less often	3	14	14	14	10	10	3	4	4	4	3	3
not at all	23	15	15	15	32	32	17	7	7	7	5	5
Total number	32		33		68		22		15		9	

Table A5 *Location of drinking and company for drinking*

	12–13 years		14–15 years		16–17 years		Youth centre		Children in care		Young offenders	
Places to drink	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
at home	2.03	2	2.17	2	2.28	2	1.41	1	1.27	1	1.44	1
other relatives	1.64	1	1.79	2	1.55	1	1.36	1	1.20	1	2.11	2
at parties	2.03	2	2.41	2	2.60	3	1.86	2	2.13	2	3.22	3
at pub or bar	1.42	1	1.90	1	3.07	3	1.45	1	1.20	1	2.55	3
in night club	1.27	1	1.48	1	2.47	3	1.54	1	1.73	2	2.55	3
in park or street	1.39	1	2.03	1	1.34	1	1.72	1	1.73	1	2.44	1
Total number	32		33		68		22		15		9	
Drinking with whom												
group same sex friends	1.61	1	2.69	3	3.01	3	2.00	2	2.07	1	3.22	4
group both sex friends	1.70	1	2.48	2	3.15	3	1.73	1	1.80	1	2.11	2
siblings	1.36	1	1.78	1	1.52	1	1.14	1	1.27	1	1.78	1
parents/ other family	2.06	2	1.79	2	2.10	2	1.36	1	1.60	1	1.67	1
by oneself	1.06	1	1.21	1	1.21	1	1.14	1	1.00	1	1.33	1
with boy or girl friend	1.21	1	1.21	1	1.92	1	1.32	1	1.40	1	3.11	4
Totalnumber	32		33		68		22		15		9	

1 = Hardly ever or not at all 2 = Less than once a month 3 = Once or twice a month
4 = About once a week 5 = Twice a week or more

Section 1 Overview

The purpose of this aspect of the research was to explore different possibilities for using the Internet to collect data or to facilitate feedback and discussion. In addition, the opportunity was taken to pilot the use of the Internet for collecting both closed and open ended questionnaire data. There has been very little research into evaluating the Internet as a data collection method, although a number of current research studies, particularly those being carried out in the United States, are based around online methodologies. The American Psychological Society publish a list of experiments that use Internet technology as part of data collection (<http://psycho.hanover.edu/AS/exponnet.html>). The use of online technology varies between the different research studies and covers online surveys and questionnaires, web-based counselling and testing teaching aids. Similarly online chat-rooms and email facilities are increasingly being used as a source of information and exchange between healthcare practitioners and patients.

The primary target for the online questionnaire was pupils from the two schools which had already participated in the focus groups and individual interviews. Unfortunately, computer problems related to the installation of new systems in the schools restricted the involvement of the South Wales school, where access to only one computer was possible, and the London school could not participate within the time span required. Hence, a second London school was enrolled in the research. Given concerns that data collection might breach data protection laws if the information provided by the users was identifiable, it was decided that demographic details should be kept to a minimum (age, gender and ethnic group). However, this meant that it was impossible to offer users an incentive for completing the form, as winners could not be identified.

Setting up the website. Following the appointment of a multi-media design company, a number of decisions, taking account of cost implications could be made. First, since all schools were unlikely to have state-of-the-art hardware, the design needed to be compatible with the lowest common denominator in web browsers and computing platforms and be accessible with standard 28.8K analogue modems and above. In developing the website, it was necessary to identify which marketing is successful with the target age group and examples such as Budweiser, Levi's (Flat Eric), Pepsi Max, Tango and Metz were analysed. The final design involved a separate homepage for each of the two different age groups.

For the pre-homepage design, a simple design was used asking users to select one of the two age groups to get into the registration webpage. This page also contained viewing instructions informing users that the site was best viewed with the following monitor settings: Monitor resolution: 800x600 pixels; Colour palette: 16 bit. Once the user clicked the appropriate age group, he/she was directed onto the password page. Using passwords ensured that only targeted users would be able to access the website and would stop general Internet users accidentally finding and accessing the questionnaire and submitting data.

The final design for the 12- to 14-year-old homepage used a block cartoon style to depict three different glasses on a red background. Either side of the glasses were two columns of animated bubbles rising from the bottom to the top of the page to add movement to the design. Introductory text explaining why the website had been set up was included on the homepage under the image of the glasses. A roll-over mechanism was introduced as an extra feature, so that when users scrolled the cursor across any of the three glasses they were given access to the questionnaire.

The homepage design for the 15- to 17-year-old group was more sophisticated . At the top of the page were swirls of slightly blurred drinking logos and words such as “off-licence”, “cocktails”, “pubs” and “parties”. Under the graphic were two buttons which included roll-over mechanisms that allowed users either to read the introductory text about why the website had been set up or allowed access to the questionnaire. The amount of white space used around the buttons added to the crisp, clean feel of this homepage. Once the user had used the roll-over mechanisms to access the questionnaire from either of the two websites, the design and layout of the rest of the webpages (i.e. the questionnaire itself) were identical. The text for the homepages and questionnaire is provided in the next section.

Section 2 Text for homepage and questionnaire

Text for both homepages (roll-over mechanism)

This website has been set up by M&A Research who are working for the Home Office to find out what 12- to 17-year-olds think about underage drinking. We are doing this by running discussion groups and individual interviews across the country to allow people to tell us their experiences and opinions about drinking. We are also collecting information from you by using this online questionnaire. Once we have all your data, we will write up your opinions and experiences and present them in a report to the Home Office.

Questionnaire

[The following provides the questionnaire text only, with spacing condensed. Answers to the closed questions were set up in a ‘tick box’ format.]

Ever wondered why everyone seems to have an opinion on underage drinking – politicians, teachers, your parents, in fact all adults – yet nobody ever asks you what you think? Well this research project asks people between the age of 12 and 17 what you think about underage drinking. This online questionnaire is completely confidential – we don’t ask your name or address so you can’t be identified. This means you can be entirely honest about your experiences and your opinions.

1. How often have you had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months?
Please pick just one answer that best describes you

- a Not at all
- b Just on special occasions
- c Less than once a month
- d Once or twice a month
- e Once a week
- f 2–4 days a week
- g 5–6 days a week
- h Every day

2. How often have you felt very drunk in the past 12 months?
Please pick just one answer that best describes you

- a At least once a week
- b Several times a month
- c Once or twice a month
- d Every couple of months
- e Less often
- f Not at all

3. When you drink, how do you mostly get the alcohol?
(choices: Never, Hardly ever– Rarely – , Sometimes, Usually)

- My parents give it to me
- From home without my parents knowing
- Friends bring it from their home
- I buy it
- Friends who are under 18 buy it
- Friends who are over 18 buy it
- I ask a stranger to buy it for me

4. Are there any other ways you get hold of alcohol?

Please tell us about the other ways.

If you don't get alcohol any other way please type "None" [BOX PROVIDED]

5. In the last 12 months, which of the following, if any, have you done during or after drinking?
Please pick either "Yes" or "No" for each question

- | | | | |
|---|---|-----|----|
| a | Got into a heated argument | Yes | No |
| b | Got into a fight | Yes | No |
| c | Broken, damaged or destroyed something | Yes | No |
| d | Taken something that did not belong to me | Yes | No |
| e | Missed school, college or work | Yes | No |

If you answered YES to any of the above, could you please tell us about one of these times [BOX PROVIDED]

6. What are the best things about drinking for you?
Please tell us what you think. If you don't drink please type "Don't drink"
[BOX PROVIDED]
7. What are the worst things about drinking for you?
Please tell us what you think. If you don't drink please type "Don't drink"
[BOX PROVIDED]
8. Some people we have spoken to say that they drink because there is nothing to do and they get bored.
Please tell us what you think about this. If you don't have an opinion, please type "No opinion" [BOX PROVIDED]
9. What things would you like to know about alcohol that you don't know, or you are not sure about?
Please tell us what you think about this. If you don't have an opinion, please type "No opinion" [BOX PROVIDED]

1. About you

- a Please give your age
 - b Please say whether you are a boy or girl
 - c Please type in your ethnic background e.g. African, Bangladeshi, Chinese, White
2. If you *have* to fill in a questionnaire, do you think this way is good or bad?
Please give one good reason (if any), and one bad reason (if any) – give two in all. If you don't have an opinion, please type "No opinion". [BOX PROVIDED]
 3. What school do you attend?

Once you have answered all the questions please hit the submit button
to send us your questionnaire.

Thanks for taking part.

[*Note*. Incomplete questionnaires were not accepted, omissions were re-presented.]

Section 3 Results

Fifty pupils participated in the data collection: 20 from the South Wales school and 30 from the newly enrolled London school. There were fourteen aged 15, twenty aged 16 and sixteen aged 17 who participated. Responses from all of these young people are summarised below.

First, the quantitative data from the Internet are presented in Tables A6 and A7 (see Appendix 3 for findings from the main sample).

Table A6 (Internet): Frequency of drinking and frequency of feeling drunk in the past 12 months

Drinking	Frequency	Feeling very drunk	Frequency
not at all	0	at least once a week	2
special occasions	9	several times a month	6
< than once a month	4	once or twice a month	10
once/twice a month	16	every couple of months	10
once a week	11	less often	14
2–4 days a week	7	not at all	8
5–6 days a week	2		
every day	1		
Total	50		50

Table A7 (Internet): How alcohol is obtained and the social consequences of drinking alcohol

Obtaining alcohol	Mean		Percentage
	Mean	Median	
given by parents	2.45	2	got into heated argument? 27%
from home without parents	1.45	1	got into a fight? 16%
friends bring it from home	2.00	2	damaged or destroyed something? 16%
buy alcohol themselves	2.45	2	taken something? 7%
bought by friends < 18	2.95	3	missed school, college or work? 14%
bought by friends > 18	2.55	3	
bought by a stranger	1.09	1	

1 = Never 2 = Hardly Ever/Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Usually

The open ended responses gained through the Internet are now summarised:

Question 5 Antisocial behaviour? Those young women that responded to this question described arguments or fights with boyfriends, friends or sisters, and missing school because of a hangover. More particularly, drinking had resulted in being ill and having to take time off from school and had resulted in arguments with parents/friends over schoolwork. For the older boys, a couple of respondents said that drinking resulted in fights.

Question 6 Best things about drinking? For the young women the best things were described commonly as “the buzz”, being “hyper”, a relaxant and a way of giving confidence and diminishing feelings of self-consciousness/embarrassment. A couple of responses indicated the sociable aspect of drinking or using drink as escapism, as one 15-year-old young woman remarked “It is fun to escape from reality for a little while”. One young woman suggested that it made her feel more mature and “more like an adult”.

Again one young woman used it to escape reality “It helps me enjoy at least one day of the week ...it helps me forget my problems”. For the boys socialising is highlighted as the reason or result

of drinking, leading to greater relaxation and lack of inhibitions e.g. “it gives me the courage to enjoy myself”. Both boys and girls noted the added benefit of alcohol providing “freedom”. The taste of alcohol was positively mentioned several times.

Question 7 Worst things about drinking? For both young men and young women, the loss of control involved with drinking resulted in not always knowing what they were doing; doing something stupid was referred to several times. Other bad things associated with drink were related to not feeling well, throwing up and the money it costs to buy drink. One young woman commented about other people’s drinking spoiling a party. Another commented on a worry about other people dropping substances in drinks. Finally, the problems of alcohol exacerbating bad moods or depression and parents finding out about the amount of alcohol consumed was recorded.

Question 8 Do people drink because they are bored? About half of the younger respondents declined to express an opinion. With those that did, there was a mix of opinion with some agreeing or partly agreeing the statement was true as drinking was seen as exciting and a way of overcoming boredom. A couple of responses indicated peer pressure was more responsible for underage drinking than boredom or that this age group drank for the simple reason that they wanted to have fun. For the older respondents, this statement resulted in more judgemental comments about using this as an excuse to drink, with some citing other examples of activities that did not involve drinking.

Question 9 What else would you like to know about alcohol? Relatively few respondents would have liked more information. The following are examples from those that did: how alcohol works and makes people drunk; whether it was dangerous to drink lots of spirits every weekend – if so, why and what damage does it cause. The older (especially female) respondents solicited more generic information, e.g., about why drink was so expensive, and why the licensing laws used 18 as a cut-off for legal consumption, especially when sex and smoking was legal at 16.

Online questionnaires – what is good and bad. The short tick-box questions followed by the open-ended questions were seen as a good format and respondents were motivated to complete the questionnaire. However, one young woman thought people may lie in their responses and one young man thought the questionnaire was too long with too much writing. The confidentiality of responses was commonly identified as a very good thing, especially in a school environment, as it was felt to be important to keep one’s identity and the amount of alcohol use private. Other responses were also mainly positive – the questionnaire appeared to cover “all areas of the topic” and it was felt that drinking was a worthwhile topic to address. The instructions were seen to be easy to follow although one respondent thought that the format was quite impersonal. The opportunity for expression of ideas was welcomed. Less positive aspects were the lack of opportunity to interact with others and discuss opinions.

Comment on Internet use

This work was designed to pilot the use of the Internet for data collection. Overall, the results are positive. On the one hand data collection was slowed by problems with access to some school computer systems, on the other hand, the data in every questionnaire were complete and easy to work with. The Net data were broadly similar to the school based work in respect of the frequency distributions for drinking and feeling very drunk in the past 12 months, as is the pattern of

obtaining alcohol. However, there was an overall tendency for the Net responses to yield more alcohol related antisocial activity. The question of whether this reflects more honest responding merits controlled study, especially in view of the positive comments on confidentiality.

Answers to the open-ended question were consistent with the pattern established from the interview-based responses, and this format was generally well received. However, a reliance on typing has obvious potential disadvantages in that both competence and motivation are necessary. Should online work become more widespread, a more interactive format would assist e.g., in providing requested information about alcohol use.

Section 4 Further proposals for using the Internet

The online work piloted here is relatively modest and a myriad of variations are possible; with a more sophisticated use of online technology discussed here. It was clear from the focus groups and individual interviews that experiences, drinking habits, perceptions and influences changed dramatically from the age of 12 to 17. This suggests that information on safe drinking for teenagers needs to be tailored to these individual age groups: for example 12- to 13-year-olds cited television programmes as influences, whilst 16- to 17-year-olds were more influenced by possible effects drinking could have on exam success and part-time job performance.

A fully worked up website could prototype an online information/education resource aimed at 16- to 17-year-olds which can be used independently or as part of supervised study within schools and colleges. This website would be packaged as an online infotainment site that provides information and entertainment based on ideas, suggestions and needs expressed at the focus groups and individual interviews. It would have a homepage aimed at gaining attention and providing signposting to the four different areas of the site. The style of the site would be in keeping with the most popular youth websites.

The site could have four parts:

Part 1 Information you wanted to know

Divided into

- drinking scenarios, possible actions and consequences of those actions
- hard facts, subdivided into the good, bad and the ugly facts of drinking.

Part 2 Drinking chat room

This is an opportunity for users to share experiences and debate different topics such as

- sex, drugs and drinks
- drinking horror stories
- how it feels if you don't drink
- what you should have been told about drinking when you were 12- to 13-years-old.

Part 3 Change the world

This would be an opportunity for teenagers to talk to policy makers about issues on underage drinking to increase involvement and participation. The focus groups revealed that this age group had sophisticated ideas on media culture and underage drinking, so this part could also include a competition to design an underage drinking advertising campaign for print or broadcast media.

Part 4 Quiz

This self-administered online quiz would let all users test their own knowledge of drinking and alcohol. The answers would provide key information about the effects of drinking and signpost users to other resources such as leaflets and helplines for further information.

Strengths of a website such as this

- does not require supervision to use, although it can be incorporated into teaching as a key resource
- provides a prototype that can be tested in a controlled environment which could then be developed for wider application
- could utilise full web technology including interactive elements, animation, graphics, photographs and design to interest and excite users. This would move away from sterile adult-led ‘preaching’ forms (a criticism of existing information and teaching on underage drinking) to a website that responded to teenagers’ requests and interests
- an online chat room would encourage discussion and exchange of ideas amongst teenagers, strengthening the idea that this is a website developed with teenagers for teenagers
- a development team including teenagers from the target groups could lead this website. This would encourage ownership, participation by other teenagers and could spawn sister sites developed by schools, youth groups and teenagers across England which make the Government seem more responsive and in-tune with young people
- could be developed with links to other appropriate websites such as www.alcoholconcern.org.uk