What changes social norms?
Alcohol consumption trends in the UK and their drivers

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HOW HAS ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION CHANGED IN THE UK?
Alcohol consumption in the UK: the long-term trend

Alcohol consumption per adult fell by 18% between 2004 and 2014

Beverage-specific alcohol consumption in the UK, 2000-2016

GB alcohol consumption and beer consumption by trade-sector, 2000-2017

We only drank 29% of our alcohol in the on-trade in 2017

Source: NHS Health Scotland (2018) Alcohol sales and price update 2018
Number of pubs in the UK

Pub numbers have fallen by 21% since 1999

Units consumed per week by age and gender: England, 2001

Source: Health Survey for England, 2001

Source: Health Survey for England 2001 and 2016
Units consumed per week among women by age: England, 2001 & 2016


Source: Health Survey for England, 2001-2016
Change in prevalence of weekly drinking among 11-15 year-olds: 2002-2014


Key messages

• Alcohol consumption rose and fell sharply in the decades either side of 2004
• The decline is particularly due to less beer drinking in pubs
• Young people are drinking much less but...
• Those in middle- and older-age are drinking more
WHY IS ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION CHANGING?
What drives alcohol consumption trends?

Factors pushing down:
- Taxes
- Controls on availability/access
- Societal responses to problems

Factors tending to stabilize:
- Cultural customs
- Habit-forming nature of drinking

Factors pushing either way:
- Structural changes
- Drinking norms
- Cultural politics

Level of alcohol

Factors pushing up:
- Greater availability/access
- Advertising/promotion
- Rising purchasing power

Factors which reduce consumption: Alcohol taxes

- **2005-2008** Inflation
- **2008 (Mar)** Inflation + 6%
- **2008 (Dec)** Up 8% (spirits +4%)
- **2009** Inflation + 2%
- **2010-2012** Duty escalator (Inflation + 2%)
- **2013** Duty escalator (except beer -2%)
- **2014** Duty escalator scrapped – Cuts and freezes
- **2015-2016** Cuts and freezes
- **2017** Inflation-level increases
Factors that reduced consumption: Reduced availability/access

Has availability reduced?

• Few regulatory changes to availability

• Is alcohol less available to young people?
  • Challenge 21 and Challenge 25
  • Collaboration between policy and local government
  • Growth of large national retailers
  • Social supply still commonplace
Factors which reduce consumption: Societal responses

• Formal responses include national alcohol strategies
Factors which reduce consumption:

Societal responses

- Informal responses include public censure
Factors which reduce consumption: Societal responses

• ...and community action
What drives alcohol consumption trends?

Factors pushing down:  
Taxes  
Controls on availability/access  
Societal responses to problems

Factors tending to stabilize:  
Cultural customs  
Habit-forming nature of drinking

Factors pushing either way:  
Structural changes  
Drinking norms & cultural politics

Factors pushing up:  
Greater availability/access  
Advertising/promotion  
Rising purchasing power

Factors that increase consumption: Reduced availability/access

Has availability increased?

- 2003 Licensing Act liberalised licensing hours
  - Little evidence of major changes in response
  - Relevant for younger drinkers?
- Large increase in off-trade availability
  - Relevant for older drinkers?

% change in outlet numbers: 2003-2013

Factors that increase consumption: Alcohol marketing

Changing forms of marketing

• Traditional forms persist:
  • TV and billboard advertising
  • Sponsorship

• New forms include:
  • Websites
  • Social media accounts
  • Influencers

• More competition on social media?
  • Wellness and alternative activities
Factors that increase consumption: Alcohol affordability

71% of alcohol is now bought in the off-trade

Source: Author's calculations from multiple data sources
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Factors pushing up:
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Factors that push both ways: Structural changes

- New gender roles:
- New working patterns
- Economic insecurity
- Population demographics
- New technologies
Factors that push both ways: Changing norms

- Examples of recent changes:
  - New approaches to parenting around alcohol
  - Social media limits transgressive behaviour
  - New ideas around the ‘authentic self’

- Are norms becoming more moderate or abstemious?
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Factors pushing either way:
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Factors pushing up:
- Greater availability/access
- Advertising/promotion
- Rising purchasing power

Factors that stabilise consumption:  
Drinking cultures and practices

- Drinking culture as a series of drinking practices:
  - Big nights outs
  - Relaxing at home
  - Going out for a meal
  - Etc...

- Comprised of multiple elements
- Systematically reproduced
- Endure over time
  - But can emerge, evolve and decay
Summary

• Alcohol consumption in the UK has declined since 2004
• Uneven decline across the population
• Multiple competing forces create this uneven decline
• We should not assume the problem has gone away
  • ....or that it will stay away
Two questions for discussion

• What does the decline in youth drinking mean for public health, public policy and public debate around alcohol?
• What would an acceptable drinking culture look like?
Thank you to our funders
Further information

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