

Executive summary



Still seldom heard and hard to reach. Still drinking? NEET young people and alcohol consumption in a Northern town.

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Key findings

- Many young people described as NEET are drinking little or no alcohol and drinking plays no part in their lives.
- Experimental drinking starts at a young age and can include risky and harmful behaviour but has been grown out of by the age of 17.
- Social media plays little part of NEET young people's lives and acts to discourage drinking.
- Park and street drinking is for those in their early teens. When those in their later teens do drink it is at home or with those they trust at friends' houses.

Research team

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Background

In 2008 the researchers undertook a study exploring the drinking careers of young people who are not in education, employment and training (NEET) in a small post-industrial town in England, (Nelson and Tabberer 2015). This report presents research which repeated the study with the same cohort of young people described as NEET, in the same geographical location, to see if anything has changed over the ensuing 10 years, and to further investigate this under researched group. Recent trends both in the UK and also more widely in an international context suggest adolescent drinking is declining amongst young people (Fat, Shelton, and Cable, 2018; Looze, et al 2015), with some groups seemingly bucking this trend including those from deprived areas, or those who are NEET.

Aims

This project aimed to look at the transitions of young people described as NEET, in terms of starting, stopping, moderating or increasing their alcohol usage. To see if the characteristics of this group have stayed the same over the last 10 years and if this is reflected in their drinking, or if this group has, like their peers been affected by wider changes and are now decreasing their drinking.

Methods

A project advisory group was set up from young people who met at the outset of the project, to guide the direction of the research, interviewing content and protocol, and then during the project to validate emerging findings. A professional group was set up to guide sampling and research design

Sampling used a range of settings to access young people aged 16-18, (an identified research gap), who might be described as NEET including a Youth Club, a Training provider with young people not engaged in other forms of education or training, the Youth Offending Team, and the Leaving Care project, all based in the same geographical area as the first study. It is important to add a word of caution as to whether we can be sure we have been talking to the same demographic group of people in both research projects. Changes in social and government policy required different sampling processes with the consequence that we cannot be sure they are the same cohort of young people; some almost certainly are but others may not be.

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with 16 young people. A focal point of the interview is a simple graph the young person completes charting their drinking behaviour alongside a map identifying their place in the community and where drinking takes place. Framework analysis methods were then used to generate categories, codes and themes that captured the experiences, views and perceptions of the sample and which arose from the data.

Following data analysis, a focus group was held separately with professionals and the young people's advisory group to validate emerging findings and test explanations. As part of our dissemination verbatim testimony from the interviews will be used to tell the story of the research to professionals working with young people.

Findings

Our original research concluded:

The young people we talked to were drinking a lot of alcohol, most of them saw drinking as an important part of their social life and part of having fun. Drinking led to other activities from the risky but enjoyable 'messaging about', to being out of control, and more problematic behaviours including fighting, unprotected sex, and in some cases rape and death. (Nelson and Tabberer 2015:438)

Our current research appears to indicate there have been changes in the drinking behaviour of young people described as NEET.

- 1 In contrast to our earlier work where all but one of our interviewees were regular drinkers, many of the young people we interviewed in the current research drank little or no alcohol and drinking played little part in their lives. In particular in our first study young women were drinking a lot, now they were not. Alcohol had been tried and drinking undertaken in an experimental and celebratory manner, often to excess, but this had taken place at an earlier age. Exposure to drunkenness and risky behaviour tended to occur in their early teens. By seventeen they had *grown up* and drinking and particular drunken behaviour and losing control was seen as *stupid*.
- 2 Young people had their first experience of alcohol at a young age, often pre-teen, but in our sample only a small number went on to become heavy or regular drinkers primarily those drinking for therapeutic or adaptive reasons to overcome, or help manage, previous adverse life experiences.
- 3 Where young people drank also appeared to have changed emphasis. In our earlier study the park and street drinking were central. Now drinking in the park occurred primarily only at an early age when drinking had to be hidden from parents. As the young people grew up street drinking was described as unsafe and undesirable with drinking mostly occurring in friend's houses where parents tolerated or even encouraged drinking.
- 4 Parental involvement in young people's drinking was a recurring theme, whether that be hosting the drinking, encouraging early drinking experiences or buying alcohol. This may be an attempt to control their children's drinking regarding amount and place but as the focus group identified early exposure to alcohol is not linked to health benefits.
- 5 The apparent reduction in street drinking, and a reduction in alcohol use overall can be seen as contributing to a reduction in risky behaviour identified in the first study and improving wellbeing. However, for a group described as NEET and already socially and economically isolated, the removal of a community of drinkers potentially removes the one group, to which they could belong, increasing isolation and potential mental health problems. Certainly, the activities our interviewees undertook rarely involved socially going out to a pub or club. Isolated activities such as playing computer games or watching films predominated. Interestingly for a group who described themselves as grown up at seventeen there was a curious mix of younger age activity, set against much rarer going out behaviour of a maturity beyond their years.
- 6 NEET are perhaps drinking less and going out less because they cannot afford to drink in clubs. The change in benefit policy means they have no money and therefore cannot afford the cost of drinks in pubs or clubs. Consequently, where alcohol is

bought is the corner shop or local off-licence where it is cheap and most readily available for the under aged, and drunk at home with small groups of friends.

- 7 There was some evidence in our sample of alcohol acting as a gateway drug and of young people using cheaper legal and illegal drugs. The use of drugs other than alcohol appeared to be something that occurred after younger early experimental drinking behaviour had started. Initially this was alongside alcohol but could go on to replace alcohol as the drug of choice. The professional focus group felt that for young people today drug use was accepted and not problematic, particularly cocaine. Cannabis use was thought to be increasing. Another change was that heroin users were not drinking to help with their drug habit, rather using spice which was cheaper.
- 8 These young people overall used social media sparingly and over a limited range with Facebook the most common. The influence of social media in encouraging drinking was seen as being mostly on younger teenagers. It acted by making people feel left out and wondering why they were not having as much fun as those they saw on Facebook. Mainstream media and television were described by a small number as acting in the same way. As they became older the images were described less as fun and more as people looking stupid. As public drunkenness was disapproved of so was losing control through drugs. Images of drunkenness and being out of control on social media as in real life were given as reasons to not drink rather more than being seen as encouraging drinking.

Implications

Young people described as NEET are drinking less, but risky and harmful behaviours as a result of drinking alcohol are still occurring at an early age and it seems unlikely this behaviour is restricted to those subsequently NEET. If preventative public health or individual interventions are to have impact they should target a younger age group, and be one which includes parents; by thirteen it is perhaps too late.

The overall message of young people drinking less should not obscure the small number drinking in a therapeutic manner who may require more targeted support.

Changes in social policy and income benefits means NEET young people have little money, impacting on the supply, pattern and place of their drinking. The reduction in amount drunk perhaps gives some weight to the view that making alcohol expensive relative to income leads to reduced drinking amongst some sections of the community. However, for a group described as NEET and already socially and economically isolated, the removal of a community of drinkers potentially removes the one group to which they could belong, increasing isolation and potential mental health problems.

More research is required to identify the change agents leading to reduced drinking, so that appropriate interventions can be put in place to support positive trends, whilst guarding against punitive economic sanctions which may have positive impacts on drinking behaviour but adverse impacts on wider measures of wellbeing and social isolation.

Conclusion

This project was an in-depth qualitative exploration of the drinking behaviours of young people described as NEET which sought to replicate a study where data collection occurred ten years ago, in order to identify changes in a group where the norms of transition to employment or study are lacking. The findings support the research literature about young people in general - young people described as NEET are drinking less than they were ten years ago. In particular in the original study young women were drinking a lot, now they are not.

There are of course exceptions, particularly those drinking for therapeutic or adaptive reasons to overcome, or help manage, previous adverse life experiences. Our original research described the NEET population as hard to reach and easy to ignore. In making statements about overall drinking behaviour it is important not to ignore those engaged in harmful drinking and to be mindful of their specific needs.

In a sense the young people we talked to describe themselves as simply losing interest in drinking. It was something they tried in early teenage years but is now something in which they no longer want to engage. It is difficult to point to any one specific reason for this apparent change in behaviour and it may in fact be a combination of social policy changes allied with more individualistic psycho-social influences which has brought about change.

References

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