

Drinking in the UK - An exploration of trends by Helena Conibear, AIM Executive Director

A comprehensive analysis of recent consumption trend papers has been written by David Foxcroft and Lesley Smith on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The report presents comparative tables of trends in new and interesting ways and draws together consistent trends shown by the reports.

Trends in adult drinker status

There has been a decline in the prevalence of drinking over the last decade in Great Britain as a whole, with greater change observed in younger adults (aged 16 to 24 and 25 to 44 years).

Fig 1: Mean alcohol consumption (units) in the last week, in men in Great Britain 1992 to 2006, by age group

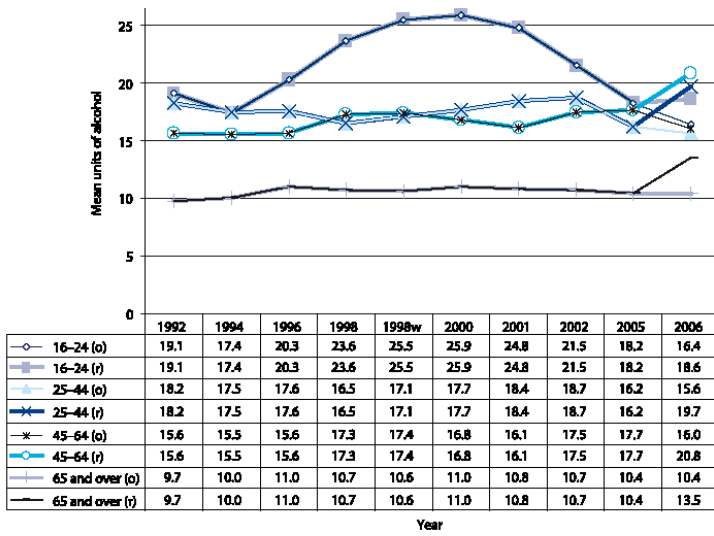
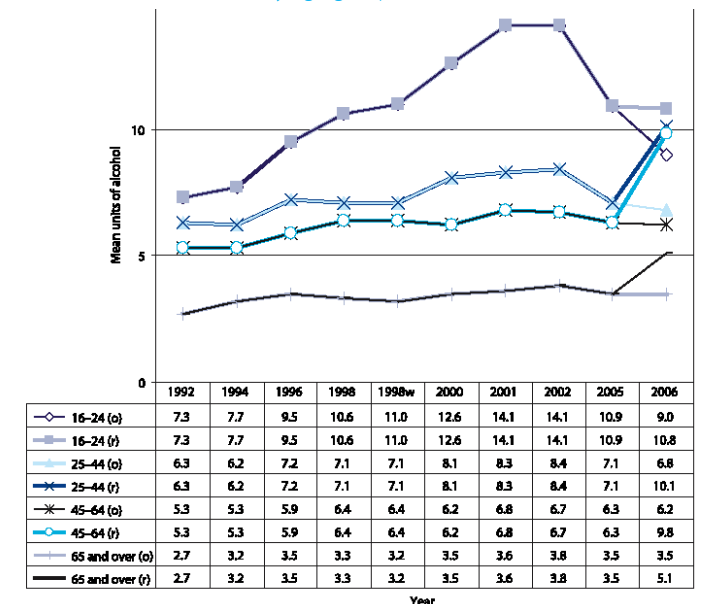


Fig 2: Mean alcohol consumption (units) in the last week, in women in Great Britain, 1992 to 2006 by age group



There was some increase in the prevalence of drinking in Northern Ireland in the last two decades in both men and women, and across all adult age groups, but especially in the younger adults (aged 16 to 24 years) and 45 to 64-year-old women.

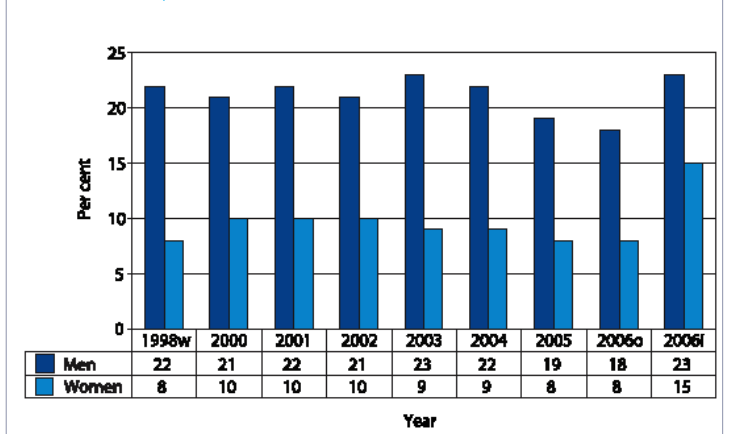
The proportion of young men aged 16 to 24 years binge drinking in England has fallen from 39% in 1998 to 30% in 2006, despite taking into consideration revised methods for unit calculation. Limited data on trends in binge drinking were available for Scotland. For Wales, there has been little change in the proportion of men and women binge drinking from 2003 to 2007. Even after taking revised methods for unit calculation into consideration in 2006, average consumption among 16 to 24-year-old men has fallen in recent years following a pronounced peak around 1998 to 2000 in England.

Revised methods for calculating a unit of alcohol have been introduced recently. These affect data recorded for Great Britain for 2006 (Goddard, 2006), Scotland for 2003 (Bromley et al., 2008) and pupils in England for 2007 (Fuller, 2008). The revised method effectively doubles the units of alcohol calculated for a glass of wine. The trends presented in this report incorporate this revised method for the most recent year, if available, and it is clearly stated when used.

Excessive consumption among 16 to 24-year-old men increased initially from 1992 to 2000, but has since fallen to a similar proportion to 1988. A similar trend was observed in women aged 16 to 24 years, though the decline occurred after 2002.

The increase in women drinking more than 6 units on one day from 8% in 1998 to 15% in 2006 is more marked than the overall increase of 1% seen for men exceeding 8 units (Fig. 3). It is worth noting that women are disproportionately affected by the change in unit calculation because of their greater representation as wine drinkers.

Figure 3 Trends in the proportion of men in Great Britain drinking more than eight units, and women drinking more than six units, on any one day in the last week, 1998 to 2006

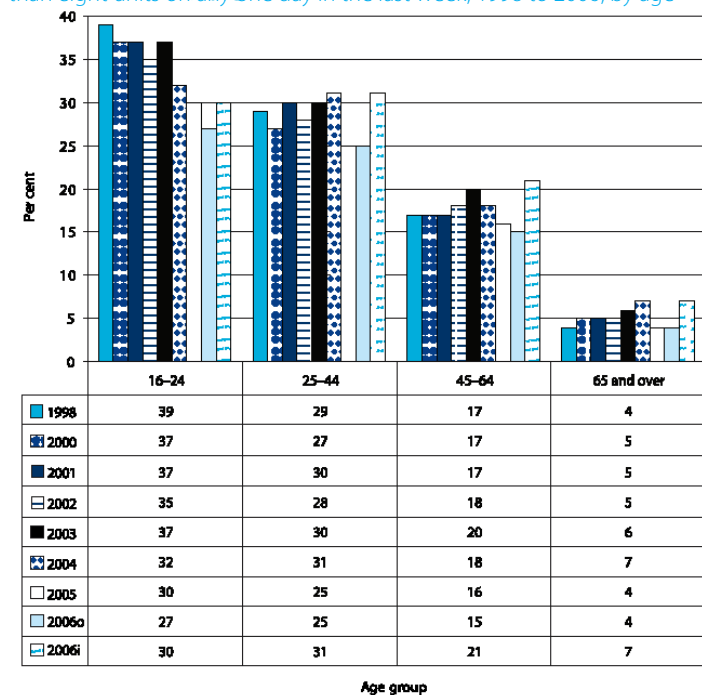


While the overall trend in consumption in men is little different from 1998 to 2006, there is a marked difference in young men compared with older age groups (Fig. 4). In young men aged 16 to 24 years there has been a marked decrease from 39 to 30% in the proportion drinking more than eight units on at least one day in

contrast to a slight increase in the older age groups. Older age groups are also disproportionately affected by the change in method used to calculate alcohol units in 2006, as they are more likely to be wine drinkers.

In women, the greatest increase is seen in the 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 year age groups and little change has occurred in younger women aged 16 to 24 years.

Figure 4: Trends in the proportion of men in Great Britain drinking more than eight units on any one day in the last week, 1998 to 2006, by age



Underage drinking declining

The trends suggest that, in both girls and boys from 8 to 15 years old, there has been a recent decline in the prevalence of weekly drinking in England, Scotland and Wales. The reductions were more marked in older age groups.

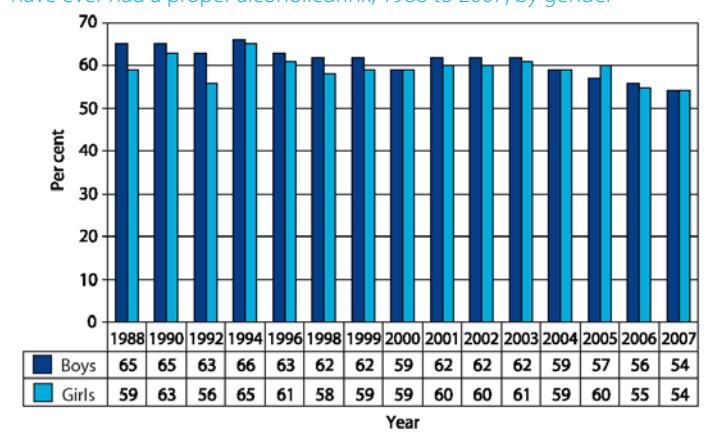
The prevalence in 2006 is the same in 11 to 15-year-old girls as in boys of the same age in England; in Scotland the decline was greater in boys, such that the prevalence in 2006 is actually higher in 13 and 15-year-old girls than in boys.

While the Scottish Health Survey (SHS) showed an increase in boys and girls aged 14 and 15 years, the sample sizes were small and data is available only for 1998 and 2003. The other national surveys show declines in weekly drinking in more recent years. There has been no clear pattern overall for the proportion of 15 and 16-year-old pupils in the UK drinking 40 times or more in a lifetime or ten times or more in the last 30 days from 1998 to 2003.

In the SDD survey, the proportion of pupils who report ever having drunk a proper alcoholic drink has been

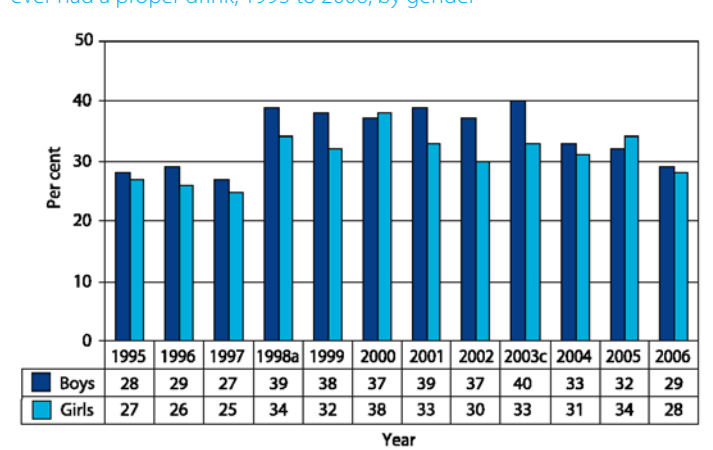
variable overall (Fuller, 2006, 2008). Between 1998 and 2001, there was no clear pattern in either boys or girls. From 2001, the overall trend shows a small decrease from 62 to 54% in 2007 in boys and from 60 to 54% in girls (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Trends in the proportion of 11 to 1 year olds in England who have ever had a proper alcoholic drink, 1988 to 2007, by gender



The trends described above are similar to those of children aged 8 to 15 years from the HSE (National Statistics, 2006) (Fig. 6). The age group covered in the survey includes children from as young as 8 and there is a difference in the way that the question is asked so the overall proportions are much lower.

Figure 6: Trends in the proportion of 8 to 1 year olds in England who have ever had a proper drink, 1995 to 2006, by gender

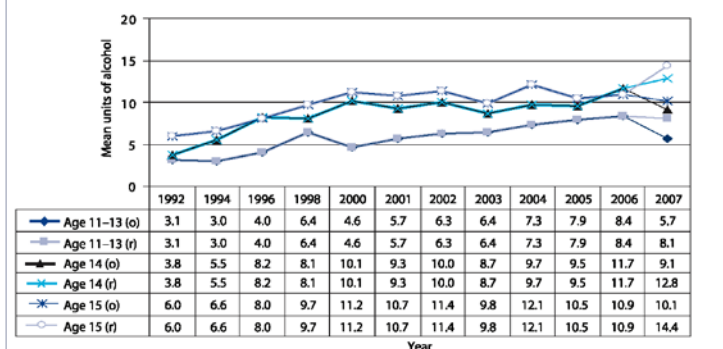


The HSE reports trends in the proportion of boys and girls aged 8 to 15 years who have ever had a proper alcoholic drink by age group. Following rising trends from 1995 to 2003, there were reductions in recent years for all age groups. The proportion of boys aged 9, 13, 14 and 15 years ever having an alcoholic drink was higher in 2006 than in 1995.

The trends in girls were similar to those in boys, with increasing prevalence from 1995 until around 2003 followed by a reduction in the proportion of girls ever having had an alcoholic drink.

The mean alcohol units consumed by younger boys and girls aged 11 to 13 who drank in the last week continued to rise from 2000 to 2006, but then decreased sharply according to both methods of unit calculation (see Fig. 7). Interpretation of trends from 2006 to 2007 in the two older age groups is dependent on which estimate for 2007 is used. According to the original method of unit calculation, there was either little change or a marked reduction in 14 and 15-year-old boys, respectively, from 2006 to 2007.

Figure 7: Trends in mean alcohol consumption in girls aged 11 to 1 years in England who drank alcohol in the last week, 1992 to 2007, by age



Trends in expenditure and beverage type

Figure 8: Average weekly household expenditure (£) based on the Food Expenditure Survey (FES) classification at 2006 prices

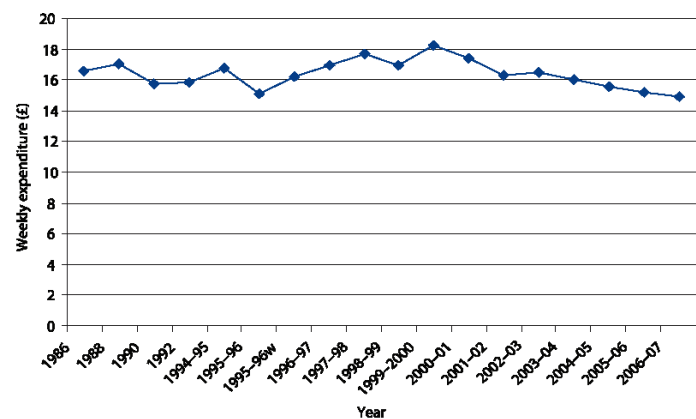
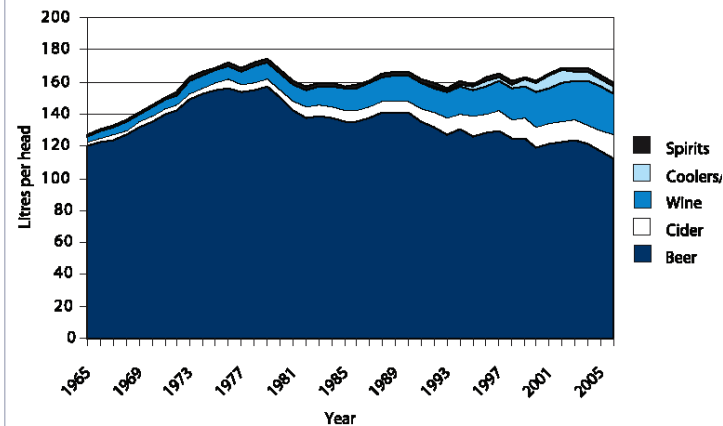


Figure 9: Trends in alcohol consumption, litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15 years and over, 1965 to 2006, by type of beverage



Conclusions

Gender gap closing

The average consumption of alcohol per week for women is just 6 units by the old calculation, or rises to 9 units with the new methods, which allow a greater unit allocation for wine.

The report states however: 'Our current examination of trends in drinking behaviour over the last 15 to 20 years indicates that it is the drinking behaviour of women that has increased compared with the drinking behaviour of men, at least in the UK where the gender gap in drinking at excessive and harmful levels has decreased over the period covered in this report. This can be interpreted as one expression of the historically recent emancipation of women in western society in terms of gender roles and also the increased financial security and independence of women. Factors that have been shown to be positively associated with drinking in women include affluence, educational achievement, belonging to managerial and professional groups, and living alone (Goddard, 2006; Pattenden et al., 2008). These are all factors that increasing numbers of women have achieved over succeeding generations. Also women who are unmarried, separated or divorced are more likely to drink in excess of recommended limits than women who are married or co-habiting (Goddard, 2006).

Older age groups

While alcohol consumption among middle and older age groups is lower than for younger age groups, in recent years there has been a small but steady increase in the amount of alcohol consumed by the middle and older age groups. The trend is consistent across different surveys and different consumption measures (GHS, SHS, CHS and HSE). This age group will also be disproportionately affected by the change in alcohol unit calculation method, as older age groups are more likely to drink wine. One possible explanation for the increase in drinking among older age groups over recent years is that we have a more affluent and active older population, with more disposable income and better health. Investigation of associations between alcohol consumption and various socio-economic and health factors were investigated in about 15,000 community-dwelling people 75 years and older in England, Wales and Scotland. Drinkers were more likely to be people with an active and sociable lifestyle, and with better self-reported health status compared with non-drinkers (Hajat et al., 2004).

The full report is available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/UK-alcohol-trends-FULL.pdf>