

Binge drinking: young people's attitudes and behaviour

A report commissioned by Positive Futures

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Introduction

The consumption of alcohol, often to excess, has long been a feature of British social and cultural life affecting all ages and all walks of life. Critically though it is the impact that binge drinking is having on young people which is perhaps of the greatest concern. This prompted the Government's recently updated, 'Safe, sensible, social' national alcohol strategy to identify young people as a priority group for action in a context where:

'While the proportion of young people who are drinking has declined in recent years, those who do drink are consuming more alcohol, more often. High levels of alcohol consumption are associated with a range of high-risk behaviours including unprotected sex and offending'.

Government statistics suggest that young people who drink are drinking twice what they were in 1990 and that the amount of alcohol consumed by younger adolescents aged 11-13 continues to climb.

By their own admission these trends are not yet fully understood by the Government and it was in this context that Positive Futures², commissioned a survey to find out more about the experiences and attitudes towards alcohol consumption with the young people they work with. In this report the findings from this survey have been brought together with wider evidence and analysis from Substance, who are responsible for the national evaluation of the Positive Futures programme.

Following the executive summary we will briefly outline the methods employed, and then go on to consider the survey respondents' 'behaviour and perceptions' towards alcohol consumption and their preferred 'solutions and suggestions' for reducing alcohol consumption and related crime and disorder. These findings are then looked at alongside the body of evidence generated from the broader range of research and evaluation activities relating to the Positive Futures programme. Finally, we consider the questions that these findings pose collectively for the future of the programme, the national alcohol strategy and the youth alcohol action plan, due to be published in Spring 2008, as referred to in the Government's recently published Children's Plan.

The Positive Futures team would like to thank all the Positive Futures projects and young people who took part in this important survey.

Executive summary

There were 1,250 responses to the Positive Futures survey from young people aged 10-19, living in deprived communities. 75% of the 123 projects across the country took part. The survey results reveal a number of compelling findings which both reinforce and challenge some of the contemporary thinking around young people's alcohol consumption.

How much young people consume

The respondents to the Positive Futures survey revealed that:

- 39% drank up to 20 units of alcohol per week
- 15% drank over 20 units per week - in excess of safe drinking levels³
- 22% 'drank a lot'
- 42% began drinking when they were 13 or under and 23% were either 14 or 15.

These findings support the Government's focus on the age of 13 as a tipping point in young people's introduction to alcohol. The prevalence and volumes young people reported appeared to demonstrate a greater propensity to drink and higher levels of consumption amongst this group of young people.

Why young people drink

The three most common reasons respondents provided for why they started drinking were:

- that friends did it and it looked like fun (40%)
- a desire to experiment and see what it was like (19%)
- following the example of family members and relatives (17%).

In terms of current motivations:

- 69% said that they enjoyed drinking
- 29% said getting drunk for the sake of it
- 29% said socialising with friends and having fun.

The survey also revealed that families have an influential role to play with 50% of parents being reported to condone or not care that their children drank and a further 11% of their parents didn't know about their drinking. This point was reinforced by the fact that 25% of respondents drank the most at home and that 22% obtained alcohol from home with parental approval. Perhaps unsurprisingly 42% of the respondents know family and friends with alcohol related problems.

These findings strongly accord with the national alcohol strategy's focus on parents and peers as a key influence on young people's drinking and the need to drive education and prevention programmes alongside family intervention strategies.

'Drinking helps me party and let my hair down'

'Drinking alcohol means no fear and no worrying'

¹ Safe, Sensible, Social: The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy, Department of Health, London, p.22

² Positive Futures is a national social inclusion programme, managed by Crime Concern on behalf of the Home Office, which uses sports and leisure activities as a catalyst to engage young people aged 10-19 living in deprived communities

³ The UK Government advises that men should not regularly drink more than three to four units a day and women not more than two to three. Consistently drinking four or more units for men, and three or more for women, isn't advisable because of the progressive health risks it carries.



Binge drinking: what, where, when

From the survey results

- 35% did not know the correct measure for a unit of alcohol, of these 24% underestimated the amount
- 38% were unclear what the term 'binge drinking' meant
- the youngest respondents were even less aware of the correct measurements for units of alcohol and what binge drinking was than their older teenage counterparts.

However the trend towards 'binge' drinking was confirmed by respondents who revealed:

- They were most likely to drink at peak 'binge drinking' times including the night (49%) and weekend (28%). During these periods 50% of young people surveyed would drink up to 20 units of alcohol and 12% would exceed this level. A further 18% 'drank a lot' but could not estimate how much.
- Where they got their alcohol from is linked to where they drank it. 52% obtained alcohol from their local corner shop, off license or supermarket, and up to 44% then drank it in their park, street or elsewhere in the housing area.
- A noticeable trend was that older looking friends and peers would often buy alcohol for them.
- Whilst beer was the most popular alcoholic drink (35%), 29% drank spirits, 22% cider, 21% wine and 20% alcopops.
- 62% drank in the company of their friends, mates and acquaintances.

These findings highlight the links between the availability of alcohol to young people, where it is purchased, where it is consumed and the vulnerability of young people leading to problems related to binge drinking.

The consequences of drinking

Among respondents the most common consequences of drinking included violence and fighting, vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Responses differed in relation to gender with one in three young females admitting to greater sexual irresponsibility and young males reporting higher levels of vandalism.

These findings are largely consistent with the direction of the national alcohol strategy which suggests strong links between high levels of youth alcohol consumption and other risk factors such as youth offending, teenage pregnancy, truancy, exclusion and illegal drug misuse. However these wider studies also draw attention to the risk of injuries, health problems and school failure not alluded to by respondents to the survey.

56% of young people surveyed thought Positive Futures had directly helped them to reduce their drinking

Responding to binge drinking

Despite their own active involvement in underage drinking a number of measures for reducing alcohol-related harm were favoured by the young people which could have policy implications for work in this area:

- 46% favoured diversionary sports and leisure activities
- 38% wanted better health information
- 33% wanted underage sales from off licenses and shops to be tackled
- 56% of young people participating in the Positive Futures programme felt it helped them to reduce drinking levels.

The results of this survey suggest a stronger need for positive interventions and long term developmental programmes for young people than is currently proposed in the national alcohol strategy. This also applies to the relevant sections of the recently published Children's Plan⁴. The range of suggestions provided by respondents also reinforces the value of engaging young people in the design of any new strategic developments.

33% wanted underage sales from off licenses and shops to be tackled





Research method and survey responses

The Positive Futures programme is committed to the use of research and evaluation in order to inform the future direction and development of the programme. Since September 2006 the programme has made use of a new monitoring and evaluation framework developed by Substance⁵ which was designed to achieve fresh and inclusive means of assessment and learning and which embraced the views and aspirations of those most directly affected by the interventions being monitored. The intention was to provide a useful and practical tool to help projects organise their work which would break with conventional understandings of monitoring and evaluation as a burdensome requirement with little local value.

Alongside this core, ongoing, project level, evaluative monitoring a number of discrete research activities have been conducted which have used a range of methodological approaches including participatory observation, case study research, mapping and surveys.

In this report we will present the findings of one such survey designed by an independent researcher following consultation with Positive Futures staff and piloted with the Bolton Positive Futures project which had previously conducted considerable work in this area. The survey was then distributed to project managers at 123 Positive Futures projects around the country along with guidance inviting project workers to conduct one-to-one consultations with young people they worked with. The completed surveys were kept anonymous and treated in confidence, not having been designed to inform the nature of responses to individual patterns of alcohol use.

No limits were placed on the number of young people invited to complete a survey and a total of 1,250 were returned, which came from 75% of the projects contacted. Whilst in no way intended to generate a representative sample of Positive Futures participants as a whole, this is an excellent response rate for a consultation of this type.

All respondents were aged between 10 and 19 years with 47% indicating that they were male, 36% that they were female and 17% remaining unspecified. This compares to a gender breakdown of 74% males and 26% females for the programme as a whole.

Substance were then engaged to consider the survey findings and to place them both within the wider theoretical and policy context and alongside a broader consideration of the contribution of Positive Futures in this area of social policy.

75% of Positive Futures projects participated

Survey findings

In this section we review the responses to each of the questions presented in the survey of Positive Futures participants, beginning with a focus on young people's behaviour and perceptions before moving on to consider the participants' proposed solutions and suggestions.

Behaviour and perceptions

Question 1 'Do you enjoy drinking alcohol?'

69% of the young people surveyed said that they enjoyed drinking alcohol. However, only 42% said that they enjoyed drinking alcohol all of the time with the other 27% only enjoying drinking alcohol sometimes.

18% of the young people surveyed said that they did not enjoy drinking alcohol at all, and therefore in most cases did not drink, although the majority of these indicated that they had previously tried alcohol. The remaining 13% did not respond to this question.

Question 2 'What is it about drinking that you enjoy?'

29% of respondents said that they participated in drinking purely and simply as a means of getting drunk and getting a 'buzz', suggesting a more direct correspondence with concerns around binge drinking, alcohol-related crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour.

When these young people were asked what they specifically enjoyed about drinking, comments included: 'Going on a bender and getting off your face'; 'Getting pissed, wrecked and hammered'; 'Getting wasted, steaming and mashed'; 'The feeling that I get'; 'Feeling out of it'; 'The feeling of being very drunk'; 'The effect and the buzz that you can get'; and 'The moment and the taste'.

A further 29% of the young people surveyed said the aspect of drinking alcohol that they enjoyed the most was socialising with friends and having fun. Whilst considered to be a key feature of current concerns around anti-social behaviour it is clear that for a significant proportion of respondents the appeal of underage drinking relates to the opportunities it provides to be 'sociable', at least with the other young people engaging in this activity.

Some quotes from the many survey respondents who gave this response included: 'I enjoy drinking because of the social side and the night out'; 'Alcohol is just about having a laugh, being with my mates and having a good time'; 'Drinking alcohol is something that I can do with my friends'; 'I like the atmosphere drinking gives the group'; 'Drinking with my friends is cool'; 'I feel more sociable after a drink and can enjoy myself more'; and 'Drinking helps me party and let my hair down'.

29% of respondents said that they participated in drinking purely and simply as a means of getting drunk and getting a 'buzz'



16% of respondents said they enjoyed drinking as it was relaxing and helped release stress with the key social benefits including increasing happiness, confidence and popularity with their peer group, and allowing problems to be forgotten if only for a brief period of time.

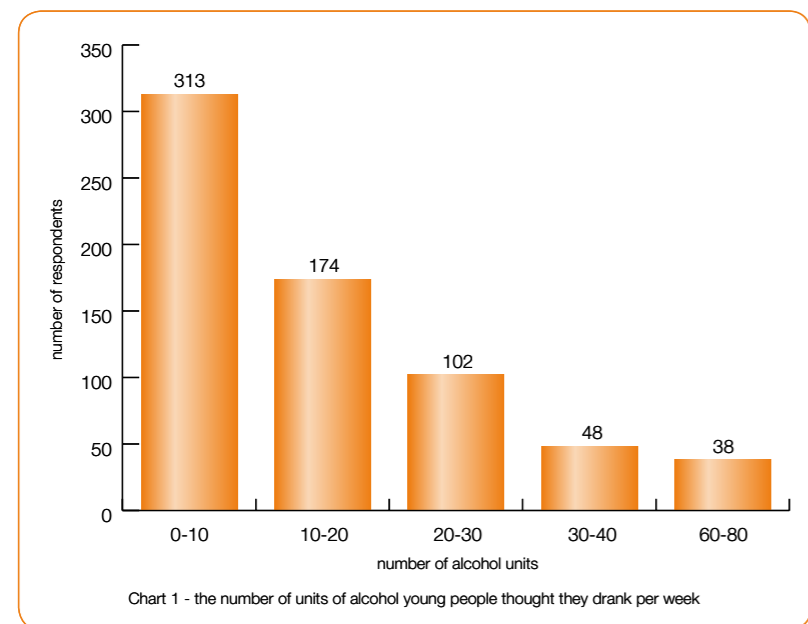
Comments from this group included: 'Drinking is very calming and it helps me chill out with my pals'; 'Alcohol makes me happy and it gives me lots of self confidence'; 'Drinking makes me feel alive and popular'; 'Drink lowers my inhibitions and lets me do things I wouldn't normally do'; 'Drinking alcohol means no fear and no worrying'; 'Drinking just seemed the right thing to do as it helps you forget everything and escape reality'; and 'Drinking is something to do and it relieves boredom'.

4% said they did not know why they enjoyed drinking. A further 10% replied that they do not drink whilst the remaining 12% did not respond to this question. Question 9 later in the survey probed young people's underlying reasons for starting drinking in more detail.

Question 3
'How many units of alcohol do you drink a week?'

15% of the young people who took part in this survey stated that they drank over 20 units of alcohol a week - in excess of safe drinking levels⁶. Within this figure 8% said that they drank between 20 and 40 units per week, 4% between 40 and 60 units per week, and a further 3% between 60 and 80 units per week. A further 22% of the young people said that they did not know how much they drank on a weekly basis. It should be pointed out that in many of these cases young people said that they drank 'a lot' and it could reasonably be expected that some would exceed recommended levels. The amount of alcohol drunk on average each week by all of the young people surveyed is shown in Chart 1.

15% of the young people who took part in this survey stated that they drank over 20 units of alcohol a week



39% of respondents said that they drank up to 20 units of alcohol per week. Within this figure, 25% of respondents said they drank between 0 and 10 units and the other 14% between 10 and 20 units per week.

11% of young people replied that they did not drink whilst 13% did not respond to this question.

Question 4
'What do you think a unit of alcohol is?'

35% of young people questioned were unclear about a correct measure for a unit of alcohol. 24% underestimated the strength of a unit of alcohol and 11% of young people overestimated the strength of a unit of alcohol.

This finding suggests that significant proportions of young people are not always aware of the amount they are drinking which also has repercussions for the confidence we can have in the answers given to Question 3. 37% of young people knew a recognised measurement for a unit of alcohol. In most instances they said that a unit of alcohol was equivalent to half a pint of beer or lager or a glass of wine⁷. 7% of young people replied that a unit of alcohol was the volume or % of alcohol in a drink. 21% of young people did not respond to this question.

Question 5
'What does the term 'binge drinking' mean to you?'

38% of respondents were unclear about the meaning of the term 'binge drinking' which in simple terms is defined as drinking too much alcohol over a short period of time⁸. The most frequent alternative responses were that binge drinking meant either 'alcoholism', 'dependency' or 'addiction' to alcohol; 'weekend drinking' on Friday and Saturday nights; 'underage drinking'; or 'mixing drinks'. Within this figure, 5% of young people admitted that they did not really know what binge drinking meant.

38% of respondents were unclear about the meaning of the term 'binge drinking'

39% of young people questioned did understand what binge drinking meant. Most of their responses said that binge drinking involved excessive drinking over recommended levels over a short space of time, in one go, over one night or in one session, to a level that the body cannot handle. 23% of young people did not respond to this question.



⁶ The UK Government advises that men should not regularly drink more than three to four units a day and women not more than two to three. Consistently drinking four or more units for men, and three or more for women, isn't advisable because of the progressive health risks it carries.

⁷ NB. Strong beers and large glasses of wine would not correspond with this definition

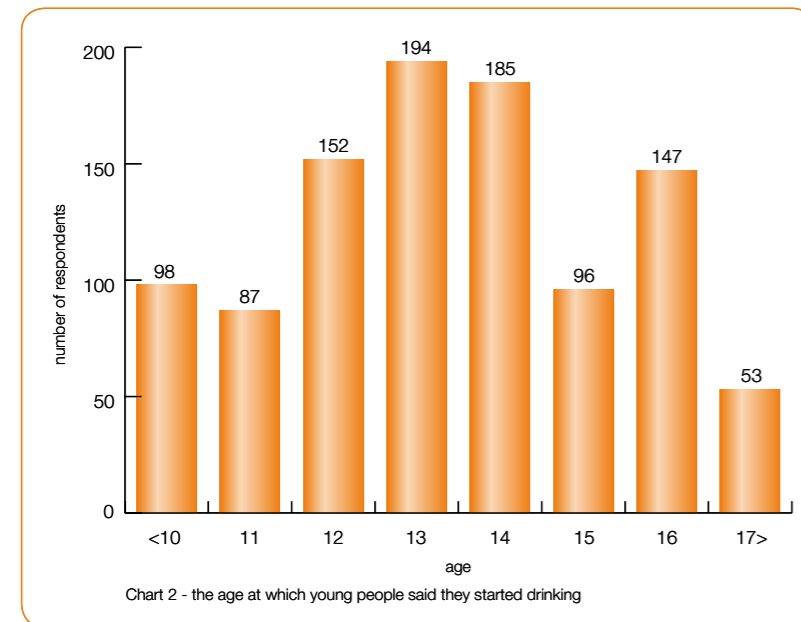
⁸ *Safe, Sensible, Social: The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy*, Department of Health, London, p.3



Question 6

'How old were you when you started drinking? How old are you now?'

In response to this question, 42% of young people said that they started drinking before they were 13 years old. 8% said they started drinking at 10 years old or younger; 7% at 11 years old; 12% at 12 years old; and 15% at 13 years old. A further 23% of young people surveyed said that they started drinking at 14 or 15 years old. 12% said they started drinking at 16 years old and 4% said they started drinking at 17 years old or over. The age ranges are represented in Chart 2.



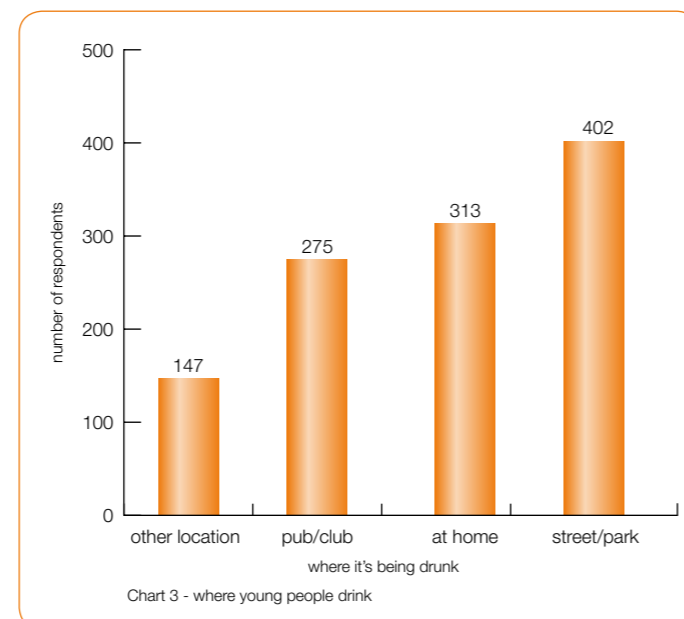
32% of respondents said that they mostly drank in the street or the local park

As a supplementary question respondents were asked how old they were 'now', which revealed that 38% were either 15 or 16 years old years suggesting that some of the respondents had now been drinking alcohol for a number of years. 19% of young people did not respond to this question.

Question 7

'Where do you tend to drink the most?'

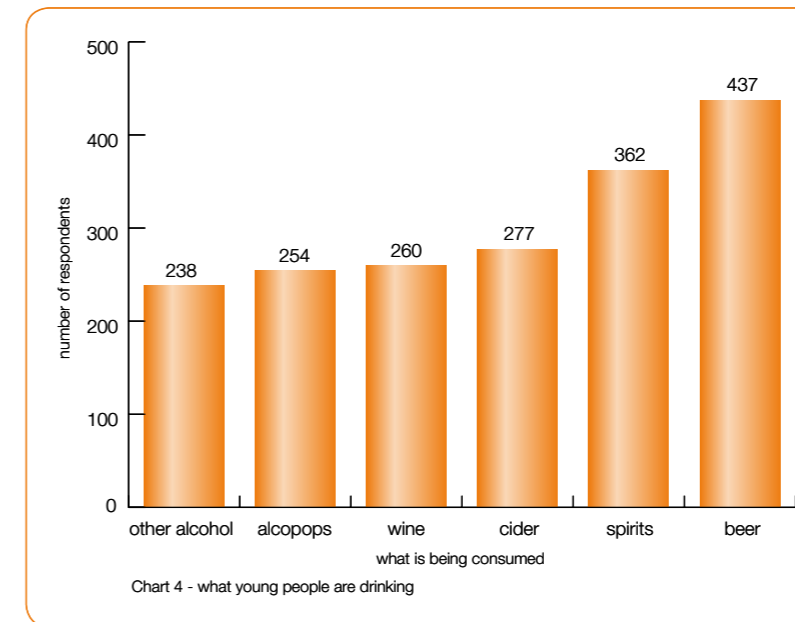
32% of respondents said that they mostly drank in the street or the local park revealing this location as the most popular place for drinking. This response supported other findings suggesting that young people often start to drink in the company of their friends within their local area. 25% of young people stated that they drank the most at home with members of their family. This response supports the later findings of Questions 9 and 11. An additional 22% of young people said that they drank the most in pubs, night clubs or bars despite being underage to do so legally. 12% of young people said they drank the most in other places, usually on their local housing estate or area. These findings are illustrated in Chart 3. 9% of young people did not respond to this question.



Question 8

'What do you usually drink?'

35% of young people questioned responded that they usually drank beer which made it the most popular drink amongst respondents. 29% of young people said they usually drank spirits; 22% usually drank cider; and 21% usually drank wine. 20% of young people questioned drank alcopops. 19% of young people questioned drank other forms of alcohol. These responses are illustrated in Chart 4.



Question 9

'Why did you start drinking?'

40% of respondents said they started drinking because their friends did and it looked like they were enjoying themselves. Another 19% of young people claimed that they started drinking because they wanted to try it for themselves and see what it was like. These were the two most popular reasons that young people gave for starting drinking and they complemented the findings of Question 2 which revealed that being sociable and having fun was the aspect of drinking that 29% of young people surveyed enjoyed the most. However they also demonstrate the power of 'peer pressure' in influencing young people's decisions to begin drinking.

A further 17% of young people stated that they began drinking because other family members already drank and consequently they had grown up watching them drink at home. This statistic again demonstrates how the behaviour of others, such as parents or siblings can influence young peoples' introduction to alcohol. 10% of young people surveyed said they initially drank as they were bored and had nothing or little else to do. 14% of young people did not respond to this question.





Question 10

'Do you know people whom you think have alcohol-related problems?'

42% of young people surveyed said that they knew family and friends who they thought had alcohol-related problems. The people that they mentioned included parents, both mums and dads, as well as close relatives such as brothers, sisters and uncles. 32% of young people said they did not know people with alcohol problems. 26% of young people did not respond to this question.

Question 11

'What do your parents think of your use of alcohol?'

38% of respondents asserted that parents condoned or approved of their drinking alcohol. In 12% of these cases young people felt their parents were either ambivalent or just did not care. 19% of parents disliked their children drinking alcohol. 11% of respondents stated that parents did not know their children drank and 10% were not sure what their parents thought. 22% of young people did not respond to this question.

38% of respondents asserted that parents condoned or approved of their drinking alcohol

Question 12

'At which times do you drink more than usual?'

49% of respondents said they drank more than usual at night time. A further 28% said they drank more than usual at the weekends. 6% said they drank more than usual during the day and 4% said they drank more at other times such as before college. The remaining 13% of young people did not respond to this question.

Question 13

'At these times how many units of alcohol do you consume?'

50% of respondents drank up to 20 units of alcohol during these periods of more intense drinking. Within this figure, 26% of young people drank up to 10 units and 24% drank between 10 and 20 units of alcohol at these times. 12% of respondents drank between 20 and 40 or more units at these times. 18% of young people said they did not know what their level of drinking was but a significant number of them stated that it was 'a lot'.

As noted before in the findings to Question 4, 24% of young people underestimated the strength of a unit of alcohol so it could therefore reasonably be expected that these young people drink a larger amount of alcohol at peak times than they think they do. The remaining 20% of young people did not respond to this question.

Question 14

'Do you tend to drink with others? Do you ever drink alone?'

62% of young people surveyed said that they drank with friends or mates. 17% said they tended to drink alone. 21% of young people did not respond to this question.

50% of respondents drank up to 20 units of alcohol

Question 15

'Where do you get alcohol from?'

52% of respondents said they got alcohol from their local corner shop, off licence or, in a smaller number of instances, their local supermarket. In 16% of these cases young people would wait outside the shop and their friends or neighbours would buy alcohol for them, sometimes at a small profit to themselves. In a smaller number of cases young people stated that they would ask 'random people' they encountered in the street to buy their alcohol.

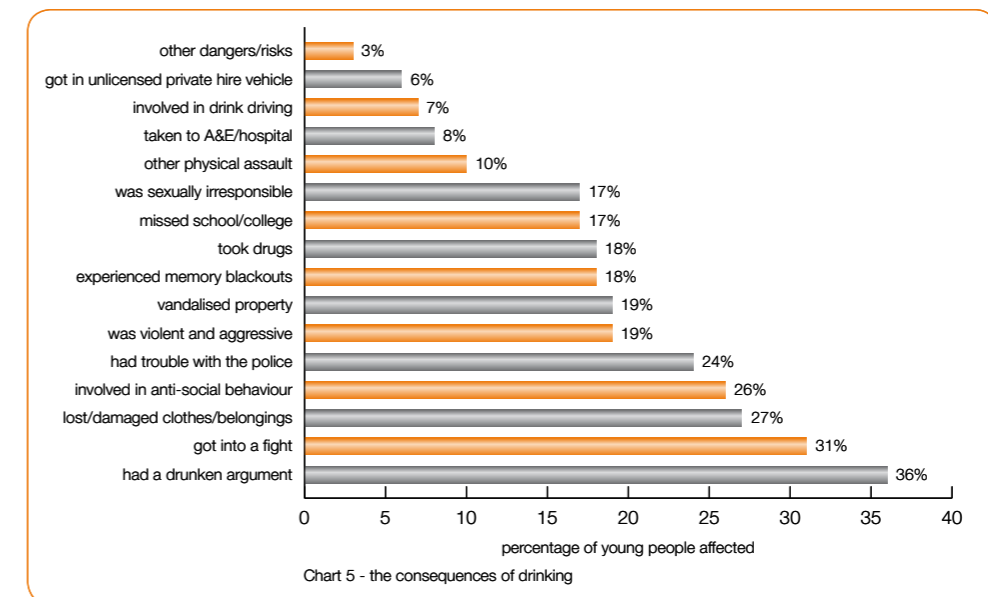
22% of young people obtained alcohol at home from their parents or other family members which supports the findings of Question 11 of high levels of parental condoning of drinking. A small number admitted to stealing alcohol from the house without parents knowledge or consent. 9% of young people obtained alcohol from pubs, bars and clubs though still underage. 17% of young people did not respond to this question.

50% of young people had been involved in fighting, violence and aggression due to drinking

Question 16

'Which of the following have you experienced due to drink?'

Survey results showed that alcohol misuse, underage drinking and binge drinking create serious problems for the young people canvassed. Alcohol-fuelled behaviour caused a range of harms to communities, families and young people. The varied effects of drinking that impacted on crime, disorder, anti-social behaviour, lifestyle, physical health and mental health most frequently are highlighted in Chart 5.



Many young people had been involved in fighting, violence and aggression (50%); anti-social behaviour or vandalism (45%); drunken arguments (36%); or trouble with the police (24%). In terms of personal safety, considerable numbers had experienced 'memory gaps' and 'memory loss' after consuming alcohol (18%); had taken another drug whilst drinking (18%); or had been sexually irresponsible (17%). Equally revealing was that only 13% of those surveyed had not experienced any undesirable after effects or side effects from alcohol.





Young people identified some other dangers from underage drinking. These included injuries from falling over or nearly getting hit by cars; alcohol poisoning; downing drinks; hangovers; vomiting; loss of appetite; paranoia; depression; mood swings; remorse; guilt; peer pressure; personal safety risks; spiked drinks; and date rape.

Regarding specific gender related findings, 12% of the 17% of young people surveyed who admitted to sexual irresponsibility were female. A very high 16% of the 19% of young people who vandalised property after drinking were male.

Solutions and suggestions

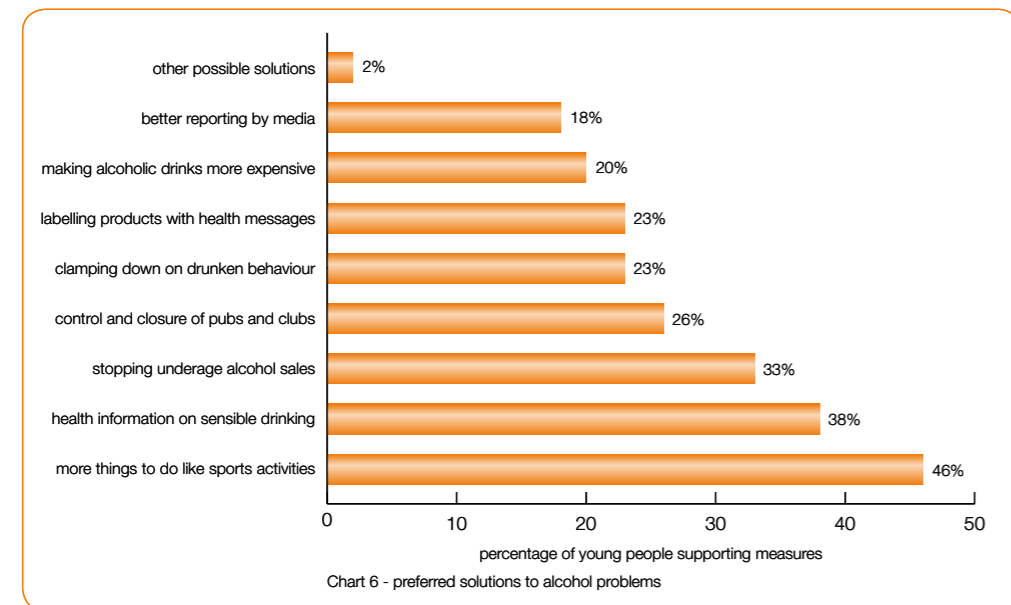
Question 17

'What do you think would most reduce youth alcohol-related crime and disorder?'

Although potentially skewed by the respondents' existing engagement with the Positive Futures programme, when asked for their opinion, 46% of respondents thought that sport, leisure and more positive activities would reduce alcohol-related crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour. Health information and education campaigns for those wanting to drink less were the next popular preventative measure, with 38% of respondents supporting their widespread availability.

Tougher enforcement of underage alcohol sales by staff in local off licenses, corner shops and supermarkets (33%); improved management, control and closure of licensed premises via licensing laws (26%); and harsher criminal justice for drunken behaviour (23%) were also well supported measures. Labelling alcohol bottles and products with safety messages (23%); making alcoholic drinks more expensive (20%); and more balanced reporting by the national and local media (18%) were also favoured. The support for each measure is displayed in Chart 6.

46% of respondents thought that sport, leisure and more positive activities would reduce alcohol-related crime



Other solutions were also suggested including closer working and information sharing between the police, local authorities and health agencies; banning consumption and selling of alcohol in specific locations; and distributing guidance on drinking levels for parents (2%). Other issues raised included examining links between drug misuse and alcohol; increasing education on alcohol in schools; keeping 'alcohol diaries' to identify alcohol consumption triggers and risks; and tackling adults who are prepared to buy drinks for young people.

Question 18

'Has the amount you drink changed since you joined Positive Futures? If so how?'

The survey findings highlighted the important contribution that the Positive Futures programme can make in addressing young people's alcohol consumption. 56% of young people surveyed thought Positive Futures had directly helped them to reduce their drinking.

Whilst 34% did not know if their alcohol consumption had reduced, a further 10% felt their drinking levels had certainly not increased since joining Positive Futures. This improvement in stabilising drinking should be recognised.

The survey identified three main ways in which respondents believed Positive Futures had assisted in reducing their drinking:

1. Education

Positive Futures plays a pivotal role in educating and steering young people to healthier lifestyles, and teaching young people the health risks of drinking. Representative quotes included:

'The Positive Futures worker has given me good advice about drinking so I now know the risks and have cut down my alcohol intake'; 'Positive Futures has given me helpful information at workshops without lecturing me'; 'Education and raising awareness on drinking has been really helpful'; and 'I used to binge but Positive Futures has taught me about drink and its effects on the body allowing me to sort myself out'.

56% of young people surveyed thought Positive Futures had directly helped them to reduce their drinking

'Positive Futures has taught me about drink and its effects on the body allowing me to sort myself out'





The Positive Futures approach

2. Positive role models

Project workers, managers and peer mentors act as positive 'role models' to young people involved in some projects, engaging young people in activities they enjoy and then building relationships based on trust. Typical quotes included:

'The Positive Futures worker has been a great role model for me'; 'I have had some good communication with Positive Futures workers without being treated like a kid'; 'Youth workers answer my questions and are there if I need them'; 'I now drink more sensibly and am more careful as I understand more and I have increased responsibility'; 'I have a more positive outlook on life'; 'My friends don't influence my drinking habits as much anymore'; 'I have made school and my boyfriend come first'; and 'I have changed more to positive thinking and can control my anger from alcohol now'.

'The Positive Futures worker has been a great role model for me'...

...'My friends don't influence my drinking habits as much anymore'

3. Positive activities

Positive Futures provides sport, art and leisure activities to occupy young people's time, giving them constructive alternatives to drinking and getting involved in anti-social behaviour. Reflective quotes included:

'I now have something to enjoy at night instead of drinking'; 'I drink less as I am much more physically active'; 'I don't drink as much as I do more sports'; 'I lead a much healthier lifestyle'; 'I am dedicated to basketball'; 'Yes I have reduced drinking because I love boxing'; 'Get the chance to channel my energy through boxing now so yes it has helped reduce drinking'; 'Encouraged me to stay fit'; 'Turn up on time, fitter for sessions'; 'Cut back a bit to stay fit'; 'No time to drink'; 'Don't get wasted as often due to playing football regularly'; 'In to football more so don't have time to drink so much'; and 'Have got things like swimming, the gym and horse riding to get up for'.

'I now have something to enjoy at night instead of drinking'

At this point it is useful to reflect upon the Positive Futures approach in more detail.

Longitudinal studies tracking children's development over time have plotted some of the most significant predictors of future offending and alcohol/drug misuse and found a cumulative effect, in that, on aggregate, the greater the number of risk factors to which a child is exposed, the greater the likelihood of negative outcomes⁹. Crucially though, the term 'risk', whilst implying the possibility of an undesirable outcome also suggests the potential for avoidance. In 2005 this point was formally recognised through a policy response focused on the ways in which young people might be protected from these risk factors with the publication of Risk and Protective Factors which stated that:

'The risk factors for youth offending and substance abuse overlap to a very large degree with those for educational underachievement, young parenthood, and adolescent mental health problems. Action taken to address these risk factors (and to increase levels of protection) therefore helps to prevent a range of negative outcomes. Moreover, because these outcomes are closely related... this broad-based approach to prevention offers the greatest prospect of securing lasting reductions in offending behaviour'¹⁰.

Over time, whilst Positive Futures has sought to distance itself from claims of any direct causal relationship between activity provision and drugs or alcohol misuse reduction, the focus on 'protective factors' has come to be more central to the approach. Indeed the DfES report Offenders of the Future? highlights four broad types of protective process, each of which might be regarded as central to a Positive Futures approach:

1. reduce the impact of, or exposure to, risk
2. reduce chain reactions to negative experience
3. promote self-esteem and achievement
4. provide positive relationships and new opportunities¹¹.

Strong support for the programme's fit with these processes is emerging from the range of evidence presented by projects through their ongoing monitoring activity. Some 48,262 young people made over half a million attendances at activities in the year to 30th September 2007 and the range of activities they attended reveals the programme's ability to create gateways to a broader range of educational and support provision.

Chart 7: non activity based sessions October 2006 – December 2007	
Issue based sessions	Number of sessions
Alcohol and substance misuse education	366
Education	1761
Employability	1684
Life skills	3234
Support and advice	2846

Outside of the ongoing relationship building, guidance and advice provided in the context of activity based sessions this demonstrates a commitment to providing regular direct access to structured alternative education and support which might be seen to ameliorate the risk factors related to alcohol misuse and broader forms of offending behaviour. Indeed given that the Government has highlighted how the risk factors for youth alcohol consumption mirror those of

⁹ Farrington, D. P. (2003) 'Key results from the first 40 years of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development', in T. Thornberry & M. Krohn (eds.) Taking stock of delinquency: An overview of findings from contemporary longitudinal studies, p. 137-183. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum

¹⁰ Communities that Care (2005) Risk and Protective Factors, London: Youth Justice Board

¹¹ McCarthy, P., Laing, K. & Walker, J. (2004) Offenders of the Future? Assessing the Risk of Children and Young People Becoming Involved in Criminal and Antisocial Behaviour, DfES Research Report No 545, London: HMSO





other risky behaviours, where appropriate, such activity is more directly targeted at addressing the underlying factors contributing to alcohol and drug misuse.

The point about activity based interventions of this type is that they can build up confidence, self-esteem and provide opportunities for young people, but if the participants are ultimately faced with challenging, unsupportive and extreme circumstances at home then the aspiration to change can be difficult to sustain and the role of the initial programme of activities easily forgotten. Equally it is not always easy to be confident about what has led to any change in behaviour.

Through its focus on participant engagement and progression the Positive Futures programme is principally concerned with providing individual support through the building of relationships and development pathways which protect against the risk factors that are understood to contribute to negative behavioural outcomes.

This model is borne out by the extent to which the evidence of what Positive Futures projects provide in their support to young people can be mapped against the risk factors identified in the Youth Justice Board (YJB) report Risk and Protective Factors¹². Whilst the YJB report itself identifies a number of 'effective programme strategies' and the particular risk factors they address, Positive Futures provides an example of the ways in which a single programme or project can address these factors 'across the board'. In Chart 8 we have attempted to identify the ways in which Positive Futures might impact upon each of the risk factors identified by the YJB.

Chart 8: risk and protective factors relating to Positive Futures	
YJB risk factors	PF protective factors
Family	
Poor parental supervision and discipline	Surrogate supervision and discipline
Conflict	Supervised, ordered environments
History of criminal activity	Involvement of former offenders
Parental attitudes that condone anti-social and criminal behaviour and or substance/ alcohol misuse	Intergenerational work, and peer mentoring
Low income	Free/low cost activity in locality
Poor housing	Alternative places to go
School	
Low achievement beginning in primary school	Alternative markers of achievement
Aggressive behaviour (including bullying)	Protection from and challenge to aggressive behaviour
Lack of commitment (including truancy)	Alternative education
School disorganisation	Structured activities
Community	
Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood	Investment of resources
Disorganisation and neglect	Active community development
Availability of alcohol/drugs	Alternative sources of excitement
High population turnover, lack of neighbourhood attachment	Reasons to stay

Chart 8: risk and protective factors relating to Positive Futures	
YJB risk factors	PF protective factors
Personal	
Hyperactivity and impulsivity	Activity based management of impulse
Low intelligence and cognitive impairment	Alternative sources of development
Alienation and lack of social commitment	Positive involvement
Attitudes that condone offending and drug misuse	Drug/alcohol education and peer mentoring
Early involvement in crime and drug misuse	Early intervention
Friendships with peers involved in crime and drug/alcohol misuse	Alternative peer networks

It is this more holistic approach which maybe of the greatest significance in terms of the contribution that Positive Futures and similar programmes can make to the national alcohol strategy and the youth alcohol action plan.

About Positive Futures

Launched in 2001, Positive Futures is a national sports, arts and activity-based social inclusion programme which is funded by the Home Office in partnership with the Football Foundation. The programme aims to engage young people living in some of the most deprived communities, and is managed by national crime prevention organisation, Crime Concern. Each project offers a variety of sport and activities aimed to build relationships between responsible adults and young people based on mutual trust and respect in order to open up new pathways into achieving, education, and employment.

Key facts and figures:

- the programme has grown from around 20 projects originally, to over 123 projects in operation nationally
- the projects operate in each of the 30 areas worst affected by drug-related crime in the country
- the programme has helped thousands of young people back into education, training and employment
- programme data for the 12 months leading up to 30th September 2007 revealed that 48,000 young people attended nationally
- projects are delivered locally by a range of agencies including local authorities, charities, sports clubs and crime reduction agencies.



positive futures 

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