

National Child Development Study
User Support Group

Working Paper
No 5

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*           A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION           *  
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*           AMONGST YOUNG ADULTS IN BRITAIN                       *  
*  
*           II  A National Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Consumption *  
*           Between the Ages of 16 and 23                          *  
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National Child Development Study User Support Group Working Paper Series

This Working Paper is one of a number, available from the National Child Development Study User Support Group, which report on the background to the Study and the research that has been based on the information collected over the years. Other Working Papers in the series are listed below.

No.	Title	Author(s)	Date
1.	The National Child Development Study: an introduction to the origins of the Study and the methods of data collection	P. Shepherd	October 1985
2.	Publications arising from the National Child Development Study	NCDS User Support Group and Librarian, National Children's Bureau	October 1985
3.	After School: the education and training experiences of the 1958 cohort	K. Fogelman	October 1985
4.	A Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Consumption Amongst Young Adults In Britain: I Alcohol consumption and associated factors in young adults in Britain	C. Power	December 1985
5.	A Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Consumption Amongst Young Adults In Britain: II A national longitudinal study of Alcohol consumption between the ages of 16 and 23	M. Ghodsian and C. Power	December 1985
6.	A Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Consumption Amongst Young Adults In Britain: III Childhood and adolescent characteristics associated with drinking behaviour in early adulthood	M. Ghodsian	December 1985

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Working Papers 4,5 and 6 report on drinking behaviour, in particular heavy drinking, among young adults in Britain. Data from the National Child Development Study are used to explore: the personal, social and economic characteristics of young adults in relation to alcohol consumption (Working Paper No. 4); the relationship between alcohol consumption during adolescence (age 16) and early adulthood (age 23) (Working Paper No. 5); and alcohol consumption in early adulthood and its associations with a wide range of characteristics during childhood and adolescence (Working Paper No. 6).

The first paper covers a stage in the life cycle during which important social transitions, such as marriage and starting work occur. Alcohol consumption during this period has attracted considerable interest and several influences on drinking behaviour have been suggested. Many of these suggestions are represented in the first and second papers, whereas, there are no known previous studies of childhood factors and the approach adopted in the third paper was to cover as wide an area of individual and social experience as possible.

It is evident from these analyses that heavy drinking during early adulthood is associated with a wide range of social, economic and personal characteristics. There are, however, several main themes which have emerged. Of those characteristics examined in the first paper, marital status and equivalent net weekly income in particular, were associated with heavy drinking for both sexes. Whereas, other associations for women included partnership history and depression, and, for men, economic status and number of job changes. In the second paper, longitudinal analysis of the data showed that those who drank most and more frequently at 16 were the most likely to drink heavily at 23. This was consistent with one of the main findings in the third paper which showed that young men and women who took part more frequently in extrovert activities, such as party-going and sports, were most likely to be heavy drinkers at 23. Interestingly, neither deviant behaviour, nor measures of social disadvantage during childhood and adolescence were uniquely associated with heavier drinking later on.

It is important to point out, however, that it has not been possible to combine these analyses given the short length of this project and this could be done in a future analysis thereby producing a more comprehensive picture. Other areas which are not covered in this report, which are of topical interest and which would be possible using these data include:-

- a) A comparison of those who drank relatively more than their peers at 16 and who subsequently became heavy drinkers at 23 with those who did not. Also, a comparison of those who drank little at 16 and who consequently became heavy drinkers at 23 with those who did not.
- b) A comparison of those reporting similar consumption levels but who reported different numbers of alcohol-related problems (for example, health, accidents, marital breakdown), according to their drinking patterns and personal and social characteristics.

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Summary

Data on alcohol consumption was available in a national sample of young people at age 16 and again at 23. Twelve per cent of men consumed more than 50 units of alcohol per week at age 23, and two per cent of women consumed more than 35 units, levels of intake which have previously been defined as heavy consumption. A comparison of drinking behaviour at the two ages showed that those who drank most and more frequently at 16 were the most likely to drink heavily at 23.

Introduction

There is strong evidence of a close relationship between increases in per capita alcohol consumption in the general population and increases in alcohol related problems (Kendell, 1979, 1983; Paton, 1985; Cartwright and Shaw 1978). Part of the general concern in this area is focused on alcohol consumption in the teenage and early adulthood years (Kinden, 1977; Blane, 1979). This may be because the age at which people first start drinking has been declining (Aitken, 1978) and thus many more people now start drinking in their teens. It is also a time of relatively high consumption (Wilson, 1980) and of increased risk of alcohol related problems such as road traffic accidents or committing offences (Ritson, 1975; DHSS, 1981). Furthermore, little is known of the extent to which drinking amongst teenagers is related to later drinking (Stacey and Davies, 1970; O'Connor, 1977). Those studies which have examined the continuity of drinking habits have either been based on small numbers or on highly selected regional or social groups (Fillmore, 1974; Donovan et al, 1983; Plant and Peck, 1985) and there is a particular lack of knowledge about the relationship of early and later drinking within Britain (Two of the above studies are American and one confined to Scotland).

The present paper is based on data from a large, nationally representative study of young people in Britain at two points in time. The purposes are to provide data on alcohol consumption in young

adulthood (age 23), to examine the relationship between this and earlier consumption (age 16) and to provide a background for further exploitation of the same data in companion papers.

Method

The Study Sample

The data used are from the National Child Development Study (NCDS). This study has its origins in the Perinatal Mortality Survey which was designed to examine the social and obstetric factors associated with stillbirth and death in early infancy (Davie et al, 1972). The subjects were all the children born in the week 3-9 March 1958, and resident in England, Scotland and Wales. Information was obtained on an estimated 98 percent of the total births - about 17,000 children. The sample has been followed up by the National Children's Bureau at the ages of 7, 11, 16 and 23. Immigrants to Britain born during the same week were incorporated at each sweep of the survey, except at age 23. A large amount of personal, social, educational and medical data were obtained at each sweep. The present analysis is based on information obtained at 16 and 23 only. These were from a self-completed questionnaire at age 16 and a highly structured interview at age 23.

Data on alcohol consumption

At age 16, individuals were asked when they had last had an alcoholic drink. Those who had been drinking in the preceding week also reported what they had drunk in that week and where they had been drinking. Place of drinking was precoded to include home, friend's house, restaurant and 'somewhere else'. If the latter was stated to be a public house this was coded separately. However, this is likely to be an underestimate of the proportion drinking in a public house, as not everyone would have given this information at this age.

At age 23, respondents reported their usual frequency of drinking and how much they had consumed in the preceding week. (Questions are available upon request). The total number of alcohol units (i.e. half pints of beer, measures of spirits or glasses of wine) have been calculated for each individual at each age.

Non-Response

The response rate in the sample as a whole has been documented previously (Fogelman, 1983). On the whole, the response has been high although such attrition as there has been has tended to be from those with somewhat more disadvantaged backgrounds. We have also examined the representativeness of the sample between 16 and 23 specifically in relation to alcohol drinking. At age 23 there was an under-representation of 16 years olds who had never had an

alcoholic drink (the percentage bias* was 9%) and those who had not drunk recently (range 0.5 to 4%). There was also an over-representation of those who had drunk more recently at 16 (range 0.5 to 3%). In the light of findings reported in this paper, the non-responders at 23 would have been more likely to be non-drinkers or light drinkers. Thus, these groups may be under-represented at 23.

The total number of respondents with data on alcohol drinking at both ages was 9,337; this figure excludes those who were interviewed in a three-week period over Christmas.

Results

Drinking at 23

The distribution of units of alcohol consumed at age 23 was characteristically highly skewed with progressively fewer people drinking large amounts. In the tables which follow this distribution has been divided into categories of consumption which are comparable with those of others (Wilson, 1980; Kendell et al, 1983) and provide adequate sample sizes.

* Percentage bias was calculated as the ratio of observed over expected values minus 1, expressed as a percentage. These were similar for both men and women and are therefore combined.

Table 1 shows the drinking behaviour of men and women separately at age 23. A greater percentage of women (28%) compared with men (9%) didn't drink at all or only drank on special occasions.

Conversely, a lower percentage of women were medium and heavier drinkers (36% and 2%) compared with men (50% and 12%) despite the lower thresholds used for women.

Not surprisingly, amongst those who drank at 23, the amount consumed in the preceding week was closely associated with usual frequency of drinking for both men and women (Table 2). For example, amongst the men who drank heavily, 83% usually spread their drinking out over most days of the week compared with only 6% of men who were light drinkers.

Drinking at 16 and 23

Table 3 shows the relationship between reported frequency of drinking at the ages of 16 and 23. The question used to measure frequency at age 23 refers to 'usual pattern' of drinking, whereas at 16 it refers to the number of weeks since the last alcoholic drink. For both men and women, there was a strong positive association between frequency of drinking at the ages of 16 and 23. For example, amongst men, 12% of those who never drank and 39% of those who drank in the last week at 16, usually drank on most days at 23. Similarly, there were differences in the percentages of women who drank on most days at 23, ranging from 4% to 15%

according to how frequently they drank at 16. (The differences in Table 3 and subsequent tables are all statistically significant, $p \leq 0.02$, Chi-squared test). Thus, the difference between those who had and had not drunk recently at 16 who subsequently drank on most days at 23 was greater for men compared with women. Whereas the ratio between the two extremes was similar for both sexes (ie. 3.3 and 3.8).

Frequency of drinking at 16 was also related to the units of alcohol consumed in the previous week at 23. Table 4 shows that men and women who drank frequently at 16 (i.e. they had had a drink in the last week) were the most likely to drink more units of alcohol at 23. For example, of those young men who had never drunk at 16, only 4% consumed more than 50 units of alcohol in a week at 23, compared with 15% of those who had drunk in the preceding week at age 16. Similarly those women who drank alcohol during the preceding week at 16 were most likely to consume more than 35 units in a week at age 23.

Table 5 shows amount drunk in the previous week at 16 and 23. The categories used for units consumed at age 16 have been determined by the particular way the earlier data had been coded. The absolute levels of alcohol consumption differed between the two ages with more alcohol being consumed at 23 (34% of 16 year old men consumed four or more units compared with 62% who drank more than 10 units at 23; 15% of 16 year old women consumed four or more units, compared with 39% who drank more than five units at 23).

However, the emphasis of this table is on the relationship between drinking at 16 and 23. Thus amongst men, those who drank four or more units per week at 16 were the most likely to consume more than 50 units in a week at 23 (18%) and those who had never drunk at 16 were least likely (4%). For women there was a similar trend. Those who had not drunk at 16 were less likely to consume more than 35 units in a week at 23 (0.6%) compared with those who had had a drink in the previous week (3.4%). Comparisons in the heavy drinking group for women are difficult because they form a small overall percentage (1.6%) at 23. Nevertheless, other categories based on larger percentages also show a strong relationship between amount consumed at the two ages.

Table 6 shows the relationship between amount drunk at 23 and place of drinking at 16. Although the differences are statistically significant they are small and notable only amongst the heavy drinkers. Thus, those men who had had their drinks in a public house at 16 were more likely to be heavy drinkers at 23 compared with those drinking at home only (20 and 12% respectively). Similarly, there was a higher percentage of women drinking more than 35 units at 23 who had previously had their drinks in a public house (4.8%) compared with those who had drunk in the home or other places, which included friends' houses and restaurants (2%).

Conclusions and discussion

The main purposes of this paper were to provide data on alcohol drinking in early adulthood and to examine the relationship between drinking at this age and drinking in teenage years.

The amount of alcohol consumed by respondents in this study at the age of 23, has been categorised into groups similar to those used by Wilson (1980) and the percentages in each group agree well for the equivalent age group especially for the men. For women there were fewer light drinkers in the present study who were compensated by a larger proportion of 'special occasion' drinkers and those who had not had a drink in the previous week. In addition we found 2% of the women to be heavy drinkers compared with his 4%. However, there were differences between the two studies which may partially explain these discrepancies. For example, the relevant age range was wider (18 - 24 year olds), the number in the sample was smaller (the relevant total was 248, and indeed there were only five women who consumed more than 35 units of alcohol) and Scotland was not included (Wilson, 1980). Despite these differences, we have confirmed the high levels of drinking in a large sample of young adults, an age which Wilson has shown to be one of peak consumption.

When considering the relationship between earlier and later drinking, the present study has shown that how recently the young people had drunk at 16, the amount they had drunk and the place of drinking were all associated with heavier drinking at age 23. Some of the differences in consumption at 23 between individual categories of consumption at 16 were not large. However, there were consistently higher percentages of respondents consuming more at 23 with increasing consumption at 16.

The overall percentages of men and women who are defined here as heavy drinkers were small and perhaps disguise the disproportionate contribution of those who consumed the highest quantities of alcohol at 16. Thus, 52% of men and 30% of women who drank heavily at 23 had drunk four or more units of alcohol in the preceding week at 16 compared with 25% of men and 12% of women who were 'light' drinkers at 23. Similarly, 69 - 70% of men and women heavy drinkers at 23 had had a drink in the last week at 16, compared with 45% of men and 36% of women who were light drinkers at 23. Previous studies have also shown the greater risk for those who drank more in their teens of heavier drinking at later ages (Donovan et al, 1985; Fillmore, 1974). On the other hand Plant and Peck (1985) compared drinking in early and late teens and reported low or no associations (correlation coefficients 0.1 - 0.2). Data in the present study show similar low correlations (0.15 - 0.16). However, this does not detract from the main result in this study which shows that those who drank most and more frequently at 16 were the most likely to drink heavily at 23.

Young people who only mentioned drinking in public houses at 16 were also more likely to be in the heavy drinking category while those drinking at home at 16 were less likely to be heavy drinkers. Although these differences were not large, the findings are consistent with other studies. For example, Wilson (1980) found a relationship between drinking in a public house before age 18 (recalled retrospectively) and level of later drinking.

It should be pointed out that there was also considerable movement between the two ages in drinking behaviour, but that nevertheless there were strong continuities as noted above. However, the results presented here are limited to age 23 and continuities to beyond this age must await further follow-ups of the sample.

In a review of the field of adolescent drinking, Stacey and Davies (1970) have asked whether early drinking indicates 'early development or precocity with the implications of adequately controlled drinking habits at a later stage; or is it an indication of a problem that will not disappear in later life?'. Definitions of problem drinking differ (O'Connor, 1977), and in this study we do not have such a measure at age 23. There is also a wide range of opinions regarding what constitutes safe levels of consumption, partly because they would depend on the type of problem under consideration (Anderson et al, 1984). Nevertheless, the heavy drinking groups identified here are well towards the top end of this range and would be more likely to contain 'problem' drinkers than those with lighter consumption. To the extent that this is so, this study has shown that early drinking behaviour can be an indication of later problem or at least heavy drinking in early adulthood.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by a grant from the Alcohol Education and Research Council.

Table 1: Drinking groups at age 23

Type of Drinker	Men (n = 6109)	Women (n = 6151)
	%	%
Non-drinkers	3	6
Special occasion	6	22
None in last week	5	9
Light ¹	24	25
Medium ²	50	36
Heavy ³	12	2

1, 2, 3 are classified according to the number of units of alcohol consumed in the last week: (1) 1-10 for men, 1-5 for women; (2) 11-50 men, 6-35 women; (3) over 50 for men, over 35 for women.

Table 2: Frequency of drinking and amount consumed at age 23

Amount consumed in previous week	(Number)	Usual frequency of drinking				
		Never drinks	Special occas'n	<Once /week	1-2 times week	Most days
<u>MEN</u>						
Non-Drinkers*	(611) %	35	65	-	-	-
0-10 Units (L)**	(1752) %	-	-	27	67	6
11-50 Units (M)	(3037) %	-	-	2	58	40
> 50 Units (H)	(706) %	-	-	-	17	83
<u>WOMEN</u>						
Non-Drinkers*	(1737) %	22	78	-	-	-
0- 5 Units (L)**	(2065) %	-	-	41	58	1
6-35 Units (M)	(2248) %	-	-	7	70	23
> 35 Units (H)	(100) %	-	-	1	42	57

*Non-drinkers include those who did not drink or only drank on special occasions. Table 1 shows the proportion of these in the total sample.

** In this and subsequent tables the 'light' category also includes those who had not drunk in the previous work.

Table 3: Frequency of drinking at 16 and 23

Usual frequency at 23	Frequency at 16			
	Never	<u>Weeks since last drink</u>		
		Uncertain*, 9+	2-8	1 or less
	%	%	%	%
MEN	(n=218)	(n=856)	(n=1176)	(n=2497)
Never Drinks	15	4	3	2
Special occasions	12	11	7	4
< Once/week	18	12	9	6
1-2/week	43	50	53	49
Most days	12	23	28	39
p<.001				
WOMEN	(n=354)	(n=1266)	(n=1259)	(n=1901)
Never drinks	25	7	3	4
Special occasions	29	26	21	17
< Once/week	16	18	18	14
1-2/week	26	43	49	50
Most days	4	6	9	15
p<.001				

*Those who were uncertain about when they had last had a drink were combined with those who had drunk alcohol 9 or more weeks ago since the distributions at 23 were similar and it is likely that they could not remember because of the long time gap.

Table 4: Frequency of drinking at 16 and amount consumed at 23

Amount consumed in previous week at 23	Frequency at 16 Weeks since last drink			
	Never	Uncertain ² , 2 - 8 9+	1 or less	
	%	%	%	%
MEN	(n=212)	(n=835)	(n=1155)	(n=2437)
Non-Drinkers ¹	28	15	10	6
0-10 units (L)	38	35	31	25
11-50 units (M)	30	43	50	54
> 50 units (H)	4	7	9	15
P<.001				
WOMEN	(n=345)	(n=1244)	(n=1244)	(n=1867)
Non-Drinkers ¹	54	33	24	21
0-5 units (L)	30	36	37	30
6-35 units (M)	16	30	38	46
> 35 units (H)	-	1	1	3
P<.001				

¹ Refer to footnote, Table 2

² Refer to footnote, Table 3

Table 5: Amount consumed at 16 and 23

Amount consumed in previous week at 23	Amount consumed in previous week at 16			
	Never had a drink	0 Units	1 - 3 Units	4 + Units
	% (n=212)	% (n=1990)	% (n=814)	% (n=1537)
MEN				
Non-Drinkers*	28	12	7	5
0-10 units (L)	38	33	30	22
11-50 units (M)	30	47	52	55
> 50 units (H)	4	8	11	18
P<.001				
WOMEN	(n=345)	(n=2486)	(n=1108)	(n=686)
Non-Drinkers*	54	29	22	19
0- 5 units (L)	30	36	31	27
6-35 units (M)	16	34	44	51
> 35 units (H)	0.6	0.9	2.8	3.4
P<.001				

*Refer to footnote, Table 2

Table 6: Place of drinking at age 16 and amount consumed at 23

Amount consumed in previous week at 23	<u>Place of drinking at 16</u>			
	Pub not home	Pub and home	Home not pub	Other
	% (n=732)	% (n=257)	% (n=703)	% (n=721)
MEN				
Non-Drinkers*	5	5	7	6
0-10 units (L)	21	25	28	25
11-50 units (M)	54	54	53	55
> 50 units (H)	20	16	12	14
P<.003				
WOMEN	(n=456)	(n=123)	(n=490)	(n=787)
Non-Drinkers*	21	14	20	23
0- 5 units (L)	28	26	30	31
6-35 units (M)	46	58	48	44
> 35 units (H)	4.8	2.4	1.8	2.4
P=.02				

*Refer to footnote, Table 2

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NATIONAL CHILD DEVELOPMENT STUDY

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) is a continuing longitudinal study which is seeking to follow the lives of all those living in Great Britain who were born between 3 and 9 March, 1958.

It has its origins in the Perinatal Mortality Survey (PMS). This was sponsored by the National Birthday Trust Fund and designed to examine the social and obstetric factors associated with the early death or abnormality among the 17,000 children born in England, Scotland and Wales in that one week.

To date there have been four attempts to trace all members of the birth cohort in order to monitor their physical, educational and social development. These were carried out by the National Children's Bureau in 1965 (when they were aged 7), in 1969 (when they were aged 11), in 1974 (when they were aged 16) and in 1981 (when they were aged 23). In addition, in 1978, details of public examination entry and performance were obtained from the schools, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges.

For the birth survey information was obtained from the mother and from medical records by the midwife. For the purposes of the first three NCDS surveys, information was obtained from parents (who were interviewed by health visitors), head teachers and class teachers (who completed questionnaires), the schools health service (who carried out medical examinations) and the subjects themselves (who completed tests of ability and, latterly, questionnaires). In addition the birth cohort was augmented by including immigrants born in the relevant week in the target sample for NCDS1-3.

The 1981 survey differs in that information was obtained from the subject (who was interviewed by a professional survey research interviewer) and from the 1971 and 1981 Censuses (from which variables describing area of residence were taken). Similarly, during the collection of exam data in 1978 information was obtained (by post) only from the schools attended at the time of the third follow-up in 1974 (and from sixth-form and FE colleges, when these were identified by schools). On these last two occasions case no attempt was made to include new immigrants in the survey.

All NCDS data from the surveys identified above are held by the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex and are available for secondary analysis by researchers in universities and elsewhere. The Archive also holds a number of NCDS-related files (for example, of data collected in the course of a special study of handicapped school-leavers, at age 18; and the data from the 5% feasibility study, conducted at age 20, which preceded the 1981 follow-up), which are similarly available for secondary analysis.

Further details about the National Child Development Study can be obtained from the NCDS User Support Group.