

Lack of alternatives drives teenagers to drink, study warns

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(Medical Xpress)—A focus on alcohol-related entertainment in the North East normalises binge drinking among young people, a new study has found.

Tim Townshend, of the School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, aimed to capture how 'ordinary' urban young English people live, which included getting them to keep a diary for a weekend to show how they spent their leisure time. This was followed up by in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The study focussed on 15 and 16-year-olds in both the North East and South East of England and found that – rather than money or social status – it was a lack of viable alternatives that made the real difference to their drinking habits.

"Bars and club are highly visible in many places where North East

teenagers spend a significant amount of their time," explained Mr Townshend. "For example, a popular indoor leisure complex with teenagers also has nine chain-style bars which they have to pass when entering or leaving the cinema."

He added that the teenagers were well aware of lots of clusters of bars close to shopping areas and transport interchanges in the North East which are loud, colourful and fun-looking with window displays, advertising boards and staff members (including scantily-clad female employees) handing out flyers on the street during the day.

The visibility and noise from these establishments and the associated drinking culture was extremely high, and much higher than in the South East.

"When asked what aspects of their life would change at 18, almost without exception young people in the North East related this question to going out at night to bars and clubs, even among those who currently professed little interest in alcohol," added Mr Townshend, whose research is published in the current issue of *Social Science & Medicine*.

Most of the young people who took part had already tried alcohol, usually at around 11 to 13-years-old in a family setting such as special occasion.

There was little relationship between the amount of weekly spending money and the number of activities they took part in – the most important issue was being exposed to positive influences and possibilities. Many participants with very little cash still had a wide range of inexpensive and creative hobbies.

The fact that there were a greater number of opportunities for non-alcohol related leisure activities in the South East – such as park

facilities and youth clubs - was a significant finding in this research and an indicator of why there was such a difference between attitudes to drinking among the two groups.

Most young people in the study disapproved of drinking on the street or in parks, suggesting the behaviour was 'trampy' or 'chavvy' and dismissing those who drank all weekend as 'sad'.

Many said they would like to enjoy open spaces more as they were important locations for socialising outside of the home. However, they often felt victimised by other people or authorities when they tried to play football or just hang out with their friends.

While an older sibling who drank sensibly was cited as a good role model, many young people felt their parents were more concerned about excessive drinking because they didn't want anyone to be sick in the house at a party, rather than having more serious health concerns.

The North East and South East of England have contrasting Local Alcohol Profile for England (LAPE) scores, which examine [alcohol](#) in relation to hospital admissions, disease, mortality and crime. As they are also the poorest and wealthiest (outside of London) regions, researchers were careful to recruit groups of [young people](#) from comparable socio-economic backgrounds to ensure the results were not skewed by other factors.

More information: Townshend, T.G., Youth, alcohol and place-based leisure behaviours: A study of two locations in England, *Social Science & Medicine* (2013) [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.02.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.02.017)

Provided by Newcastle University

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