

Alcohol sales to underage adolescents

INTRODUCTION

A number of recent studies have reported high levels of alcohol consumption among adolescents in the UK. Ease of access to alcohol may be one important factor.

This study, carried out by Professor Paul Willner and his colleagues at the University of Wales, Swansea, used a variety of methods to investigate the availability of alcohol to underage drinkers. First, they asked British adolescents how easy they found it to purchase alcohol from different types of outlet as well as the extent to which sales are actually made to underage customers. A test-purchasing study was then carried out. This involved 13 and 16-year-old adolescents attempting to purchase alcohol. They also assessed the attitudes of alcohol vendors to underage sales, vendors' ability to judge the ages of their underage customers, and the effectiveness of a police intervention intended to reduce underage alcohol purchases.

FINDINGS

- Young people report that alcohol is freely available, from a variety of different types of outlet, to underage adolescents who wish to purchase it.
- The young people's views were corroborated by test-purchase observations confirming that 16-year-old girls and boys, and girls as young as 13, have little difficulty in buying alcohol.
- Challenging young people on their age at the point of sale may deter them to some extent from buying alcohol. However, challenges are rarely issued, and little use is being made of the 'Prove It' scheme, at least in the areas studied.
- The overwhelming majority of vendors tested were keen to sell alcohol to minors.
- Underage purchasers were still sold alcohol even after showing a card that displayed their date of birth.
- There was little difference between different types of outlet in their willingness to sell alcohol to minors. In particular, there was no support for the public perception that the problem of underage alcohol sales resides mainly in corner shops, and that the chain supermarkets have put their houses in order.
- Vendors perceive little risk in selling alcohol to minors.
- Vendors overestimate the age of underage customers, particularly girls. However, age-estimation errors were not sufficient to account for the full extent of underage alcohol sales.
- The police intervention failed to decrease sales. This suggests that vendors do not change their behaviour in response to the threat of legal action.

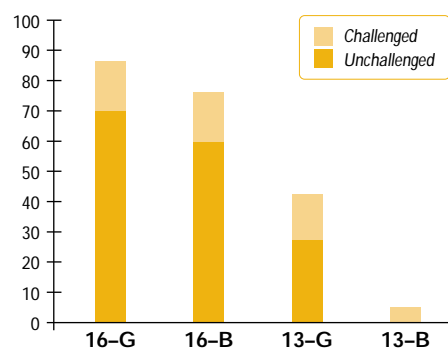


FIGURE 1

Proportion of test-purchase attempts that resulted in sales of alcohol to 16-year-old girls (16-G), 16-year-old boys (16-B), 13-year-old girls (13-G) and 13-year-old boys (13-B). The lower part of each bar shows sales that were made without challenge and the upper part shows sales that were made following an age challenge.

This project is the work of:
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ENQUIRIES AND COPIES OF THE REPORT

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Hard copies of the report are available from the AERC Secretariat price £10. An electronic copy may be obtained free of charge by sending an e-mail to andrea.tilouche@aerc-sec.demon.co.uk (during August 2000 to ray.hodgson@bigfoot.com)

ALCOHOL INSIGHTS

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IMPLICATIONS

- Earlier onsets of drinking have been linked to increased risks of alcohol and drug problems in later life. It has also been shown repeatedly that restricting the availability of alcohol to young people decreases deaths and injuries through road traffic accidents. It follows that the easy availability of alcohol documented in the present report has significant adverse consequences for young people's mental and physical health.
- As alcohol vendors appear to overestimate the age of their underage customers, there may be some scope to reduce underage sales by vendor training programmes aimed at improving the ability of vendors to judge young people's ages accurately, and encouraging them to err on the side of caution.
- Training programmes to increase vendors' confidence to request proof of age, together with more reliable proof-of-age schemes are also recommended.
- Test-purchasing methods are used by police and trading standards officers in the enforcement of age restrictions on the sale of a variety of commodities (e.g. tobacco, fireworks and pornography). However, alcohol differs from these other commodities in that it is illegal not only for the vendor to sell alcohol but also for the underage purchaser to buy it. This legal anomaly has meant that, while several police forces use test purchasing to identify vendors who sell alcohol to children, the evidence obtained in these operations is almost never used to bring prosecutions or to remove alcohol licences. The present data suggest that a change in the law is needed to legalise test purchases of alcohol and so enable more effective enforcement of the minimum age laws. The easy availability of alcohol to young people would then be likely to decrease.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Copies of the full report can be obtained from the AERC. There will be £10.00 handling charge for a hard copy. An electronic copy can be sent by e-mail free of charge. Requests to **Len Hay** (len.hay@aerc-sec.demon.co.uk).
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