



Youth drinking in decline: Implications for policy and practice

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SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar

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Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems ([SHAAP](#)) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network ([SARN](#)) are proud to host the lunchtime Alcohol Occasionals, which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. These events provide the chance for researchers, healthcare professionals, policy makers and members of the public to hear about alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme is *alcohol and society*.

[Event reports](#) aim to capture the main discussion points and communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is responsible for the contents of this report, which is our interpretation.

Introducing the seminar, SARN co-chair Professor Carol Emslie welcomed Dr Inge Kersbergen ([@Inge_Kersbergen](#)) and Dr Laura Fenton ([@soc_researcher](#)) on behalf of SARN and SHAAP, provided some background to SHAAP and SARN, introduced Kersbergen and Fenton and gave context to their background and research.

Kersbergen thanked participants for joining the webinar and thanked the research funders, [Wellcome Trust](#). **Kersbergen** also confirmed that the authors had no conflict of interest. Kersbergen provided background to the Youth Drinking in Decline project at the University of Sheffield



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([@Y_DiDshef](#)) and thanked the team working on the project.

Kersbergen began by providing statistics on youth drinking levels in England. The proportion of secondary school children (aged 11-15) in England who have reported ever having drunk alcohol has dropped from 61% in 2003, to 38%. The proportion of those who had drunk in the week before being surveyed also fell from 25% in 2003 to 8%. A similar trend can be observed in young adults (aged 16-24), with the proportion of those having drank in the week previous to being surveyed dropping from 66% in 2003 to 40% in 2018.

Kersbergen highlighted that evidence also shows rising abstinence rates, lower consumption levels and less frequent drunkenness in children and young people.

Kersbergen next gave international context to this, highlighting that this downward trend in youth consumption in alcohol is reflected across the world, although is particularly prominent in UK countries.

Kersbergen went on to explain that the decline in youth drinking appears to be universal across the population, with data showing a decline across genders, socioeconomic groups and ages. **Kersbergen** also explained that research has shown that youth drinking has declined across the whole distribution of drinkers (from light to heavy drinkers), though this decline has been steepest in those drinking at the heaviest levels.

Kersbergen went on to discuss whether the decline in youth drinking persists into adulthood. This is important to establish because rates

of harm from alcohol-related health conditions peak in middle and older age. **Kersbergen** introduced [research from Australia](#) which investigated this, and found that the decline in drinking is not sustained into adulthood – with young adults born in the early 2000s equally as likely to drink as those born in the 70s by their early twenties. However, the study did find a maintained reduction in consumption levels. So even though prevalence is similar, total consumption appears to be reduced in later cohorts.

Fenton next investigated the reasons why young people may be drinking less, highlighting that it appears that there is no single direct driving force behind the decline, but it is likely a complex mix of wider socio-cultural shifts that cannot easily be captured in statistical analysis. **Fenton** introduced seven possible reasons which have been considered:

(1) Better enforcement of alcohol policies aimed at underage drinking, particularly sales regulations (2) new technologies, particularly smart phones and social media, which may be diverting young people towards other forms of socialising (3) new social norms which don't value heavy drinking (4) happier and more conscientious children who are more health conscious (5) changes in parenting and better relationships (6) demographic shifts, particularly increased numbers of children from ethnic backgrounds associated with lower alcohol consumption/abstinence (7) reduced affordability of alcohol and lower economic confidence of young people.

Fenton went on to discuss whether the internet is influencing this decline in drinking, however, researchers cannot find a robust enough relationship between internet, smartphones, and social media use and the declining trend in drinking. **Fenton** then introduced qualitative research which shows that young people's attitudes towards alcohol have fundamentally shifted. **Fenton** next discussed whether this decline in drinking has been substituted with

consumption of other substances. However, there is little evidence to indicate this, as smoking and drug consumption rates have also declined.

Kersbergen and **Fenton** next presented 3 other (unpublished) pieces of work that have been conducted in the Youth Drinking in Decline project, which all point to potential implications for policy:

1 *Change and continuity in adolescent health behaviours, attitudes, wellbeing and relationships*, which found that the decline in youth drinking is reflective of a wider shift in health and wellbeing-related behaviours in youth which may be widening socioeconomic inequalities.

2 *University students' transition into heavy drinking*, which found that heavy drinking commences at university when 'belonging' is negotiated and some individuals with little experience of drinking are introduced to this at university. Reducing the imperative to drink would create changes for individuals to negotiate this 'belonging' without alcohol.

3 *Investigating trends in alcohol acquisition methods among 11 to 15 year olds in England*, which found that there has been a decrease in young people buying their alcohol from licensed premises, but an increase observed in the 'social supply' of alcohol from friends, family, and peers.

Kersbergen concluded that the decline in youth drinking is likely good news for public health, emphasising the importance of harnessing the effects of the decline to gain the most health benefits. **Kersbergen** highlighted some potential policy implications of the findings of the Youth Drinking in Decline project's work, including: tackling inequalities, the introduction of non-drinking social activities in universities, and targeting the social supply of alcohol to youth.

Emslie thanked Dr Kersbergen and Dr Fenton, before opening for

discussion and questions, which explored various themes and issues, including: messaging on social media, study samples, the experiences of youth (with alcohol) who don't go on to university, opportunities for change in university drinking culture post-pandemic, substitution of alcohol for E-cigarettes, international drinking cultures, 'jump-ins', the role of parental behaviours, the role of industry, and the need for alcohol control policies.

Watch this seminar

You can [watch this seminar](#), and other recent webinars



Forthcoming event

All 2022 *Alcohol Occasionals* are [available for booking](#)

The next will be on Monday 23 May: *Navigating the complexity of harm and care: a qualitative study of self-harm and alcohol use*.

[Book here.](#)

SHAAP Blog

Read [our blog](#), including posts on alcohol screening/interventions in prisons, and the PCANOS model.

