

Binge drinking in the UK: an exploration of a confused concept

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What is binge drinking?

- Depends on who you ask.
- OED, 2nd edn. (1989): “a heavy drinking bout.”
- 1854: Miss Anne E. Baker Glossary of Northamptonshire words and phrases:
“A man goes to the alehouse to get a good binge, or to binge himself” (OED, 1989).

Definitions of binge drinking

Two distinct meanings:

a pattern of heavy drinking that occurs over an extended period set aside for the purpose ...usually defined as more than one day drinking at a time...A binge or bout drinker is one who drinks predominantly in this fashion, often with intervening periods of abstinence.

(WHO, 1994) *Lexicon of alcohol and drug terms*

- Jellinek (1960): epsilon alcoholism – paroxysmal or periodic drinking, binge drinking, dipsomania.
- Ray Milland in the film *The Lost Weekend* (1945)
- Nicholas Cage in the film *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995)

Definitions of binge drinking

Single drinking session leading to intoxication often measured as having consumed more than X number of drinks on one occasion (Gmel *et al*, 2003)

Other terms used: heavy episodic drinking; risky single occasional drinking; heavy sessional drinking; heavy drinking.

Cut-off definitions: not as straightforward as they first appear

- No consensus as to what level of intake constitutes binge drinking (BMA, 2005)
- What constitutes a 'standard' drink varies from nation to nation: 8g in UK-19.75g in Japan (ICAP, 2004)
- US drink 14g alcohol =1.6 UK units
- ABV and size of servings vary
- Do not take account of factors such as weight, speed of drinking, social context, whether food consumed or not

Examples of cut off definitions

- >8 units for men and >6 units for women on at least one occasion in past week (72/54g of alcohol) e.g. General Household Survey; Cabinet Office (Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England, 2004)
- ; 8 units for men and ; 6 units for women on at least one occasion in past week (64/48g of alcohol) e.g. Health Survey for England
- ; 10 units for men and ; 7 units for women in one session (80/56g of alcohol) e.g. Royal College of Physicians report 2001; Jefferis *et al* (2005)

Different cut offs - does it matter?

Analysis of national cohort data using two different cut-offs:

- ; 10 units for men and ; 7 units for women: at age 23 years 37% of men and 18% of women were binge drinking.

- ; 8 units for men and ; 6 units for women: at age 23 years 49% of men and 29% of women binge drinking.

Jefferis, Manor and Power (2005)

A confused concept

“The Englishman nurses a pint until last orders, then has two more for the road, into which he reels at 11.30pm. The Irishman quaffs six pints and comes out fighting. The Scotsman sits in the corner, steadily downs eight pints and wanders off home.” (Kolvin, 2005, p.21)

Which of them is binge drinking?

- Department of Culture, Media and Sport
- Cabinet Office
- Home Office
- Mayor of London
- Portman Group

Who is binge drinking?

	Englishman	Irishman	Scotsman
DCMS	Yes	No	No
Cabinet Office	No	Yes	Yes
Home Office	Yes	Yes	No
London Mayor	No	Yes	No
Portman Grp	Yes	Yes	No

Media (mis)representations

Liver cases double to 35,000 a year

BINGE DRINK DEATHS SOAR

BRITAIN'S binge-drinking culture is claiming lives at an alarming and escalating rate, figures revealed yesterday.

The last five years have seen a 37 per cent rise in drinkers dying from alcoholic liver disease - while hospital admissions

By **Julie Wheldon**
Science Correspondent

for the condition have doubled in a decade to a record level of more than 35,000 a year.

The stark statistics emerged in a report
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ANDY HOOPER

Your country needs
YOU at 4pm today

SEE PAGE THREE

Daily Mail, July 1st, 2006.

Binge drinking: 'facts' or myths?

'BINGE DRINKERS ARE ALL YOUNG'

British cohort study: Percentage of men and women binge drinking at ages of 23; 33; 42 (≥ 10 units for men and ≥ 7 units for women) (Jefferis *et al*, 2005)

	23 yrs	33yrs	42yrs
Men	37	28	31
Women	18	13	14

GHS 2004/05

Percentage of adults binge drinking by age and gender (>8 units for men and >6 units for women on at least one occasion in past week)

	Men	Women
16-24	33 (31)	24 (22)
25-44	31	12
45-64	18	6
65+	6 (4)	1 (1)
All ages	23 (19)	9 (8)

Binge drinking: 'facts' or myths?

'YONG PEOPLE ALWAYS BINGE DRINK'

Qualitative research (e.g. Harnett *et al*, 2000) indicates that young people adopt a variety of drinking styles based on context (venue, companions, day of the week).

Not all young people drink e.g. 2006 survey of students a fifth were non drinkers.

Why it is seen as a youth issue?

- High visibility drinking in public spaces
- Young people as a 'problem'
- Reflect definitions that emphasise crime and disorder rather than health
- Assumptions about young people's drinking

Media (mis)representation



Drunk & disorderly

Independent On Sunday, 22 Oct. 2006

Official: Women in England and Ireland are the worst binge drinkers in the world

By Roger Dobson, Sophie Goodchild and Marie Woolf

Women in England and Ireland are officially the world's biggest binge drinkers, according to a unique study of global alcohol consumption.

One in three 17- to 30-year-olds is now classed as a heavy drinker, bingeing on four or more drinks in one session at least once a fortnight.

These disturbing figures are 11 times higher than those of Germany and Italy, prompting

warnings that record numbers of women face liver damage and premature death unless they curb their alcohol consumption.

The findings are based on a survey of more than 17,000 women and men from 21 countries, including Belgium, France and the United States, in the largest study ever carried out into worldwide drinking habits.

The disclosure will alarm policy-makers struggling to combat Britain's growing drink

Worse for wear: one in six women has a serious drink problem

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WOMEN & DRINK
SPECIAL REPORT, PAGES 8-11

The vodka monologues

Paula Hamilton on her battle with the bottle



Life after bingeing

Women who lived to tell the tale



Dying for a drink

What alcohol does to your body

The week the war came to the White House

SPECIAL REPORT P22-23



Lotto Lout

Robert Chalmers talks to Mikey Carol

IN THE SUNDAY REVIEW

The making of myths: role of the media

“One in three 17-30 year olds is now classed as a heavy drinker, bingeing on four or more drinks in one session at least once a fortnight” (Drunk and disorderly article)

“33% of women are binge drinkers, consuming more than five units of alcohol at a time” (Special report)

“One drink at the wrong time can damage the baby” (Special report)

Final thoughts

- ‘Confused concept’
 - failure of understanding of the problem
 - failure to develop proper social policy response
- Politically charged
- Myths emerge/perpetuated
- Role of researchers: makers of myths or challengers?