

## **COMMUNICATION ON ALCOHOL & HEALTH: EFRD SCIENTIFIC FOCUS ON ALCOHOL & YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE**

### **Key points**

- ▶ Data show that drinking levels in the young population are not indicative of an overall increasing problem
- ▶ There are significant variations in drinking patterns across EU countries demonstrating the additional cultural complexity of alcohol consumption
- ▶ Given that most alcohol-related harm is associated with excessive drinking supports a targeted approach with flexible strategies in line with the cultural differences in alcohol consumption across member states

The effectiveness of European alcohol policies for reducing alcohol-related harm should be judged using an evidence-based approach. We have developed positioning documents that provide evidence-based assessments of key issues relating to alcohol policy in Europe (taxation/pricing, alcohol-related harm in young people, marketing/advertising and education) and that highlight the need for a targeted approach to reduce alcohol-related harm and its causes.

The current document is an assessment of the use and the misuse of alcohol by young people in Europe, taking into account the cultural differences in alcohol consumption and the need for a targeted approach in alcohol strategies. Young people<sup>1</sup> are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of acute heavy drinking (“binge drinking”) and chronic alcohol intake. Binge drinking<sup>2</sup> can be associated with immediate adverse consequences such as injuries from road accidents, violent behaviour and risk-taking behaviour, while chronic alcohol intake is associated to long-term consequences such as liver cirrhosis. An evidence-based assessment of the drinking patterns in young Europeans is vital to determine appropriate strategies to address alcohol-related harm.

### **Evidence-based assessment of drinking in young people**

Two large-scale international youth surveys [European School Survey project on Alcohol and drugs (ESPAD); Health Behaviour among School Children (HBSC)] have been undertaken to assess drinking behaviour (regular drinking and binge drinking) in adolescents. The HBSC, conducted

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<sup>1</sup> *The definition of “young people” is not always clear. According to WHO definition, “young people” includes anyone under the age of 25. But in most publications, “adolescents” or “youngsters” refers to persons under the age of 18. HBSC study refers to 11, 13 and 15 year olds. ESPAD study refers to 15 and 16 year olds.*

<sup>2</sup> *Define as more than 5 drinks in one drinking session*

every four years with the last assessment in 2001-2002, includes children ages 11, 13, and 15 in a total of 26 European countries, Canada, and the United States [1]. The ESPAD, conducted every four years (1995-1999-2003), surveys alcohol (and other psychotropic substances) consumption in 15-16-year-olds from 35 European countries [2].

Data from these youth surveys [1,2] show that:

- a) Before the age of 16, experimental alcohol consumption is common across Europe, while regular drinking is not a widespread issue. There are even quite low prevalence rates in countries with high per capita consumption, e.g., France, Hungary.
- b) Regular consumption increases between the age 11 and 15, especially in UK and in Denmark, for boys and girls.
- c) The evolution over time of drinking levels is not parallel with the evolution of the national per capita alcohol consumption. Some countries with a decreasing per capita consumption have an increasing consumption rate among youngsters (e.g. Portugal) while it is the opposite for other countries (e.g. Finland).
- d) More than half of the adolescents in the majority of countries covered by the ESPAD study have never been drunk. However, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries (especially Denmark and UK) show significantly more binge drinking than in Southern European countries (e.g. France, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Spain [3] ) and some Central European countries (Hungary, Poland and Lithuania).
- e) The evidence suggests that the prevalence of harmful drinking behaviour amongst young people is stabilising since 1999, with the exception of Estonia, Lithuania and the Slovak Republic.
- f) In most European countries, boys drink more and are more often drunk than girls. However this gender gap has narrowed in Scandinavian countries where in Anglo-Saxon countries, girls are now more often "binge drinkers" than boys.
- g) In most countries, beer is the most popular beverage among youngsters. Alcopops are also quite common among youngsters. But, according to Wicki et al [4] alcopops do not seem to be linked to specific riskier drinking patterns or consequences per se.

In conclusion, the data clearly demonstrate the cultural differences in alcohol consumption and drinking patterns. While the regular consumption model is not prevalent among young people, even in Southern Europe, "binge drinking" is clearly common in the North of Europe. With regard to Eastern Europe, the increases in extreme drinking can be a result of the socio-political and economic transformations. Investigating the reasons for these differences will be important in future research.

### **Principals of a targeted approach for alcohol-related harm**

- That most alcohol-related harm is associated with excessive drinking supports a targeted approach to avoid risky patterns of drinking rather than on reducing average alcohol consumption.
- Because of the cultural complexities of alcohol consumption no single approach to alcohol policy is likely to succeed, instead flexible strategies are required.
- Interventions among young people must consider the reality of youth experience with alcohol, and that adolescence is a natural period of exploration.
- There is value for “referent” adults, and especially parents, to tell their children about moderation in a controlled and safe setting of the family, but also to control their leisure time as most adolescents are drinking in pubs and with friends on week-ends. Children with a high parental control are less likely to abuse alcohol or have drinking problems [5]

### **The context of youth dinking**

Understanding why and in what context young people are drinking is an important consideration in the approach to alcohol consumption and alcohol related-harm.

- ▶ Most studies have shown that all over the world, social facilitation and enjoyment are the strongest motivations for drinking among young people. But some cultural differences were found. In Southern Europe [6-7], two main distinct drinking patterns exist: on the one hand, the daily drinking of moderate amount with meals together with parents, which was more common among males than females, and on the other hand, the occasional intake in excess, with the peer group. In these countries, girls were expected to control boys’ consumption as well as their own consumption [8]
- ▶ Results from a European comparison suggest that the value of alcohol consumption as well as risk taking behaviour is quite different from country to country [9]. In France, Germany and Italy, young people consider risk to be a positive challenge, where in Spain risk has a double meaning of danger but also amusement. In Greece risk is perceived as a tool for personal growth while in the UK, it is linked to adrenaline excitement.
- ▶ Much research has been devoted to examining the respective roles of family, peers, culture, social forces, advertising and other factors in young people’s decisions on whether to drink or not. Of these, family and peers appear to be the most powerful factors in shaping beliefs and attitudes about drinking, and drinking patterns among young people are much more likely to be influenced by the prevailing culture around alcohol, than by advertising [10.11]. There is an obvious value of teaching young people to drink in moderation in a controlled and safe setting of the family home. Children who are taught moderation by their parents are less likely to abuse alcohol or have drinking problems. As young people move through adolescence, they are increasingly influenced by their peers versus family [12] and, in this context, perceived norms of social behaviour are particularly important

### **Alcohol related problems.**

Most studies have shown that heavy drinking (and especially “binge drinking”) is related to behavioral problems in general, such as substance use, violent behavior, conduct disorders, suicide attempts and sexual risk behavior [13-18] Some data also suggested that academic failure increased considerably when the week consumption is high[19]. However, most of these studies consider alcohol as an indicator of a pre-existing vulnerability to behavioural problems, rather than the causal factor.

The early onset of drinking is also considered as a risk factor for alcohol-related problems in adulthood [20 ]. Most of these studies are coming from the US, while in Europe there is little evidence to show that such early onset of drinking is related to alcohol problems later in life [21].

### **Conclusions**

There is general concern about more experimentation with alcohol among a larger population of young people, leading to increases in high-risk drinking. However, the actual trends suggest stabilization in patterns of regular drinking as well as patterns of binge drinking and drunkenness in Europe, except in UK and Eastern Europe. Where harmful drinking patterns do exist, they need to be specifically identified and urgently addressed. A targeted approach towards alcohol policy is needed with flexible strategies in line with the cultural differences in alcohol consumption. As part of this approach, it will be important to learn from those countries that have the healthiest pattern of drinking among young people and to identify ‘protective factors’ that could be ‘exported’ to others. Additional research is now required to further understand the motivations for drinking in the young population.

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