

Name of study: Correlates of change in adolescent alcohol consumption in Ireland: Implications for understanding influences and enhancing interventions

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Aim: to report on the changes that occurred in the use of alcohol by Dublin teens between 1984 and 1992 and to look at implications of findings for prevention programs.

Method: The administration of the 1984 survey was closely replicated in the 1992 survey. Schools in the Dublin area were randomly selected to participate; within each school all students from one class level participated in the survey. Students completed a pencil and paper questionnaire, in most cases without the presence of their teacher. A fictitious drug was included in the survey to determine the extent of over-reporting of drug use by students.

Results:

- general percentage of students who ever drank increased significantly at all age levels between 13 and 17;
- there were sharp age differences in percentage of drinkers between age 13 and 17 in both surveys;
- personal beliefs about the likelihood of possible consequences (i.e., harm health, get in trouble, become alcoholic) had decreased significantly between the first and second surveys;
- belief that ones drinking is accepted by others (i.e., parents, friends) – known as normative beliefs – had increased moderately in the second survey;
- likelihood of personal consequences (i.e., lying, damaged property, stolen) having occurred as a result of ones drinking had not increased.

Authors' Comments: The authors note that more Irish schools began to implement alcohol education in their curriculum at this time and that it appeared to be ineffective.

Reviewer's Comments: While student alcohol consumption increased significantly during this period, the number of problems or harms associated with the drinking did not. This raises an interesting question as to whether the alcohol education really was unsuccessful or not. It could be argued that there was an element of success, because even though more teens drank, there was not an increase in problems. It really comes down to what the aims of the prevention program are. When you have 90% of 17 year olds who have drank and 73% of them having been drunk, should the aim of alcohol education be to cut out drinking altogether or should it be reducing the harm or problems associated with drinking (e.g., don't use while playing sports, studying or engaging in sexual activity)?

The survey results also show how a declining sense of personal risk is associated with more drinking. Prevention programs needs to present balanced accurate information on the risks (and perceived benefits) of substance use and emphasize the current social risks (e.g., embarrassing behaviour) rather than the long term health risks.

The results also reinforce the importance of normative beliefs – the person's understanding of how others feel about drinking. The study, like many others, shows that as a sense of approval increases, so too does consumption. So, a promising prevention

strategy is to correct the misperceptions that young people often have about social approval of drinking (e.g., X number of people do not consume alcohol at all).