

Alcohol and Violence among Young Male Offenders in Scotland (1979 - 2009)

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This briefing summarises a research report of the same name by William McKinlay (Scottish Prison Service), Alasdair Forsyth and Furzana Khan (Glasgow Centre for the Study of Violence, Glasgow Caledonian University).

The reference for the full report is -

McKinlay, W., Forsyth, A.J.M. and Khan, F. (2009) *Alcohol and Violence among Young Male Offenders in Scotland (1979 - 2009)* (Scottish Prison Service). Available at www.sps.gov.uk/MultimediaGallery/b15f898a-e7f9-417b-8509-0b609a9fc0ac.doc.

Research Aims and Methods

The purpose of this research was to develop understanding of the use of alcohol, and violence, among male Young Offenders in Scotland. The research was commissioned by the Scottish Prison Service specifically to inform and support their desistance and violence reduction agenda.

The research is based on four studies carried out between 1979 and 2008:

1. A survey of Young Offenders' drinking conducted in 1979
2. A survey of Young Offenders' drinking and drug use conducted in 1996
3. A survey of Young Offenders' drinking, drug and weapon use conducted in 2007
4. Interviews with Young Offenders about the above issues conducted in 2008

Trends in Young Offenders drinking

The proportion of Young Offenders who stated that they consumed alcohol was higher in 2007 (90.6%) than in 1996 (74.0%), but the same as in 1979 (also 90.6%). However, among those who did drink the proportion who reported that they get "drunk daily" rose steadily from 7.3% (1979) to 22.6% (1996) to 40.1% (2007). This pattern of 'extreme' drinking by Young Offenders in the present era was confirmed by the interviews conducted in 2008.

Young Offenders and Violence

The proportion serving a sentence for any violent offence varied between 42.0% (1979), 23.1% (1996) and 73.0% (2007); those serving sentences for Group 1 Crimes (serious violent offences) varied between 22.3%, 10.0% and 53.4% respectively. Interviewed Young

Offenders, including those not currently in custody for a violent offence, were able to describe violent incidents which they had been involved in while in the community.

A majority, 63.2%, of the 2007 survey sample stated that they had “ever” carried a weapon and 61.4% stated that they had used a weapon. The 2008 interviews revealed a third category - weapon ‘owners’.

The set of respondents who admitted to carrying weapons was not co-extensive with the set of those who admitted using them. Many who carry had never used and many who have used, do not, and were not carrying. Of particular interest in this regard was bottle use, which the 2008 interviews implied may not have been considered as weapon use by many in the 2007 survey.

A majority, 65.7%, of the 2007 sample stated that they had been in a gang while in the community. Interviews revealed that gang membership could act as a barrier to the cessation of violent offending. These interviews also revealed that analogous group disorders, based on territorialism, could be a factor in parts of Scotland where overt gang membership was not acknowledged.

The Relationship between Alcohol and Violence

Among those who were drinkers in each survey: The proportion who considered that alcohol had contributed to their previous offending rose from 47.9% to 58.4% to 79.6%. Interviewed Young Offenders, including those not currently in custody for an alcohol-related offence, were all able to provide details of

offences they had committed under the influence of alcohol.

The proportion who had consumed alcohol prior to their current offence fell from 58.9% (1979) to only 41.3% (1996) before increasing to 81.3% (2007). In 2007 Buckfast tonic wine was consumed by 43.4% of those who were drinking prior to their offence. The proportion that blamed their current offence on drinking rose from 29.5% to 40.0% to 56.8%; those blaming alcohol not in association with other drugs rose from 22.5% (1996) to 36.3% (2007). All interviewees linked alcohol to their offending, in some cases to every one of their previous offences.

In contrast, the proportion that blamed illegal drugs fell from 40.1% (1996) to 30.1% (2007); those blaming illegal drugs not in association with alcohol fell from 21.7% (1996) to 9.7% (2007). Interviewed Young Offenders rarely attributed their offending, especially violence, to illegal drugs – the sole exception to this pattern was the drug diazepam (i.e. the benzodiazepine formerly marketed as Valium®).

Of those who blamed illegal drugs for their current offence, in the 2007 survey the most frequently cited drug was diazepam, which was usually blamed in conjunction with alcohol use. The 2008 interviews confirmed this pattern and indicated that illegal drug use in this population was more of an extension to their drinking behaviours than an alternative lifestyle choice.

A small group (around 10%) of the 2007 survey did show characteristics of problem drug use (e.g. recent heroin use, injection, acquisitive drug-related crime), however this group tended to live in

remote parts of Scotland and the core of offenders held very negative views towards dishonest 'junkies'.

Most (80.5%) of Young Offenders who had used a weapon to injure someone in the 2007 survey stated that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time (23.4% were under the influence of diazepam - again the most frequently blamed illegal drug and one usually blamed in conjunction with drinking). Accounts by interviewed Young Offenders implied that alcohol use (either on its own or in conjunction with diazepam) was a factor in turning weapon owners into weapon carriers and weapon carriers into weapon users.

This research found that in the present era the core of Young Offenders engage in frequent drunkenness, group disorder, weapon carrying and other violence. This is quite different to 1996 when drug-attributed non-violent crime was much more common, as was non-employment, and it should be stressed that the patterns reported here may change again in the future.

Policy and Practice Implications

There is a need to recognise the problem with alcohol, which would appear to be much greater among Young Offenders than are the problems from all illegal drug-related issues combined.

Despite their offences being alcohol-related many of those interviewed did not see themselves as having a problem which required intervention. They were not addicts, nor did they use opioids, many worked (and had "earned the right" to a drink).

Interventions should be tailored to suit this population. These should have a youthful focus (Young Offenders difficulties with alcohol pre-dated their arrival at the Young Offender's Institution by some years) and be tailored towards 'hazardous' or 'harmful' drinkers (i.e. intoxication) rather than towards dependency (i.e. addiction).

This research also highlighted the wider problems associated with Scotland's drinking culture, including an acceptance of extreme intoxication, drinking in risky settings, harmful patterns of potent beverage consumption, glassing injury, concurrent use of drugs and (in contrast to illegal drugs) a tendency in our society to equate problematic drinking with dependence, one which may help to meet some health goals but which will do little to reduce violent offending by young people.

Further Information

Further resources on violence, drugs and alcohol, as well as information on a range of other crime and justice topics, can be found at www.sccjr.ac.uk.