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COMMENTARY

Declining youth drinking: A matter of faith?

JONAS RANINEN^{1,2,3,4} , MICHAEL LIVINGSTON^{2,4,5} , JOHN HOLMES⁶ ,
JOHAN SVENSSON^{1,2,7}  & PETER LARM⁷ 

¹Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, Stockholm, Sweden, ²Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, ³School of Social Sciences, Unit of Social Work, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden, ⁴Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, ⁵National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Melbourne, Australia, ⁶School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, and ⁷Department of Public Health, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

Youth drinking has declined in many high-income countries for two decades. This development is still largely unexplained. Developing evidence and extending our understanding as to the mechanisms behind these changes is imperative for advising governments and policy makers on how to support and maintain the trends. Given the international scope of the trends, comparative studies have been suggested for improving our understanding of the development. In this commentary, we explore the patterns observed across several waves of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs between 1999 and 2019, and how these match-up with the World Values Survey. We found that the declines in youth drinking are limited to a smaller number of countries and that in Europe these are all found in two groups from the World Values Survey, protestant Europe and English-speaking countries. If the declines in youth drinking are systematic and limited to a smaller number of countries, this challenges some of the hypothesised drivers of this development, but can also help guide future research. [Raninen J, Livingston M, Holmes J, Svensson J, Larm P. Declining youth drinking: A matter of faith?. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2021]

Key words: alcohol, youth, change, European School survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

Alcohol consumption during adolescence contributes to a large share of the mortality and disease burden among youth [1]. Further, heavy drinking during adolescence is linked to a range of adult harms, including alcohol abuse [2], worse educational outcomes and higher rates of health and social problems [3,4].

Over the past two decades, there have been marked declines in youth drinking across a wide range of countries [5–7]. The decline began in the USA followed by Nordic countries and then Western Europe [8]. This development has puzzled researchers and the trends are still largely unexplained [9,10]. Hypothesised explanations include increased use of internet-based technologies, changed parenting, greater health consciousness, migration from abstemious cultures and better enforcement of laws related to underage drinking [5].

However, evidence to support these explanations is at best equivocal and at worst creates confusing paradoxes. For example, qualitative evidence highlight several mechanisms by which social media may be reducing drinking among young people, including fear of public shaming and time substitution [11], while other studies repeatedly find greater social media use is associated with more, not less, alcohol use at the individual level [12–14]. Trends in youth drinking have also been found to be decoupled from the drinking trend in the general adult population [15] and to be unrelated to changes in the price of alcohol [16].

Developing evidence and extending our understanding as to the mechanisms behind these changes are imperative for advising governments and policy makers on how to support and maintain the declines. Given

Jonas Raninen PhD, Senior Researcher, Michael Livingston PhD, Associate Professor, John Holmes PhD, Professor of Alcohol Policy, Johan Svensson PhD, Senior Researcher, Peter Larm PhD, Senior Lecturer. Correspondence to: Dr Jonas Raninen, The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), Box 70412, SE-107 25 Stockholm, Sweden. Tel: +46 73 931 31 64; E-mail: jonas.raninen@can.se

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the international scope of the trends, there have been calls for comparative studies across countries to help understand this development [17,18]. The European School survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has been identified as a rich and important source of information in this regard [5], since it uses a standardised data collection procedure and produces comparable estimates on drinking and use of other substances among 15- to 16-year-olds across many European countries over a long period of time. In 2015, the results showed that the prevalence of drinking declined between 2011 and 2015 in all countries included in the study. The results from the 2019 wave were released last year and we expected to see continuing declines in many countries. This was however not the case [19].

After a closer inspection of the countries included over the period 1999 and 2019, we can see that the declines in drinking are observed in a limited number of countries. The declines are most prominent in the Nordic countries (except Denmark). Outside the Nordic countries, only the Netherlands and Malta display declines in the prevalence of drinking of more than 10 percentage points. Ireland has been part of the ESPAD across many waves, but estimates are missing for both 1999 and 2003. If we instead calculate the difference between 1995 and 2019 for Ireland, the decline in prevalence of drinking comes to -18 percentage points [19]. We also know from other sources that there are marked declines in youth drinking in further other countries that do not participate in ESPAD, including Australia [20], the USA [21] and the UK [22].

We would like to make two major points here; first, that large declines in youth drinking are limited to a smaller number of countries than previously suggested. Second, that there might be some similarities and common factors across these countries that could help guide researchers to identify an explanation for this development.

One promising line of inquiry is that the regions and countries with the most prominent decline in drinking prevalence seem to cluster well together with the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map that the World Values Survey use [23]. In particular, these countries are all found in two groups, protestant Europe and English speaking countries [24], while countries from Orthodox or Catholic Europe do not appear to have any declines in youth drinking.

Countries from protestant Europe and English speaking countries are characterised by high scores on both secular-rational values and self-expression values meaning less religious importance and a focus on individuality rather than family (secular-rational) together with high tolerance, trust, emphasis on subjective well-being, civic

activism and self-expression rather than emphasising economic and physical security (self-expression) [23].

This observation is in line with that from recent qualitative studies of adolescent non-drinkers where authenticity and self-improvement have been identified as reasons not to drink alcohol [25]. Trust is a measure also repeatedly found to be associated with health behaviours [26] and higher trust has been found to be associated with lower drinking among adolescents [27]. Other studies have found that alcohol is losing its position as a marker for adulthood for today's adolescents [28]. This could suggest processes in these countries that are reshaping pathways into adulthood, with the decline in youth drinking merely a symptom of these broader changes. Other findings also show general declines in risk behaviours among adolescents [29], higher age of onset for all substance use [30] and declines in youth crime [31].

What are the implications of our points? If a major decline has only occurred in a limited number of countries, many more universal explanations that have been suggested, such as the digital revolution, [5] may not be valid, unless these changes have had distinct impacts in countries from protestant Europe and English speaking countries. Thus, a key to understand the decline may be to focus on changes during the past decades that have been especially strong among the youths in secular and self-expressed countries compared to other countries and changes common for these countries that might have pushed youth drinking to decline.

We have here provided the first observation that the decline in youth drinking might be systematic in its distribution across countries, as there are commonalities between those countries with a decline that might be useful in understanding trends in youth drinking. Future research needs to examine if there are interaction effects where certain trends and developments have different meanings and importance in different countries when it comes to their association with the decline in youth drinking. That is, are the changes observed in, for example parenting, limited to the same countries that have had a decline in youth drinking or do the changes in parenting practices instead differ in nature or in their effect as moderators or mediators of changes in alcohol use for the countries with a decline in youth drinking.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that none of the authors is in receipt of financial support or has any relationship that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to the content presented in the submitted manuscript.

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