

Patterns in alcohol-related violence:

exploring recent declines in alcohol-related violence in England and Wales

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Summary

- Figures from the UK Office for National Statistics (2021a) suggest that **alcohol-related violence in England and Wales has been declining** – both as a total figure (1,001,000 in 2009/10 to 525,000 in 2019/20) and as a proportion of all violent incidents (54% in 2009/10 to 42% in 2019/20).
- This decline remains **unexplained and generally unexamined** – however, there are existing bodies of research that might offer insight into this trend.
- This report examines possible explanations for the decline seen in alcohol-related violence – drawing on existing literature exploring: changing patterns in violence (e.g., Farrell et al. 2014), alcohol's relationship with violence (e.g., Graham & Livingston 2011), and the measurement of violence (e.g., Reiner 2016).
- **Changing patterns in youth drinking** might contribute to this violence decline. It is younger, rather than older age groups, who predominantly engage in violence in night-time economy settings (Finney 2004). Youth drinking in England has seen a recent downturn (e.g., Oldham et al. 2018), corresponding to some degree with declines in alcohol-related violence.
- A steeper decline in alcohol-related violence relative to violence overall appears to be accounted for by shifts in alcohol-related stranger and acquaintance violence. Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data show that the proportion of stranger and acquaintance violence incidents that were alcohol-related fell between 2009/10 and 2019/20, whilst the proportion of domestic violence incidents which were alcohol-related generally remained stable.
- It is possible **data artefacts such as counting errors** contained in national statistics form some part of the trend investigated here. While the CSEW is a widely respected data source (Tilley & Tseloni 2016), limitations in its capturing of violent incidents have been previously identified (e.g., Walby et al. 2016). It is important to consider the impact any such data artefact might have on alcohol-related violence trends – investigation of the production of these National Statistics should be undertaken to assess this.

By subjecting the explanations presented here to thorough investigation, future researchers might unpack this decline in violence further, and provide valuable data to policymakers working to address alcohol harm and reduce violence levels.

Introduction

Alcohol-related violence places a significant burden on members of the public and public resources. The most recent official statistics for England and Wales suggest that perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol in two fifths (42%) of all violent incidents recorded in 2019/20 (Office for National Statistics 2021a). This, along with other alcohol-related crime and social disorder, is estimated to cost the UK public £13 billion each year (Alcohol Health Alliance 2017). As such, levels of alcohol-related violence, and accurate estimation of these, are important to the work of policymakers and practitioners in public health and criminal justice fields.

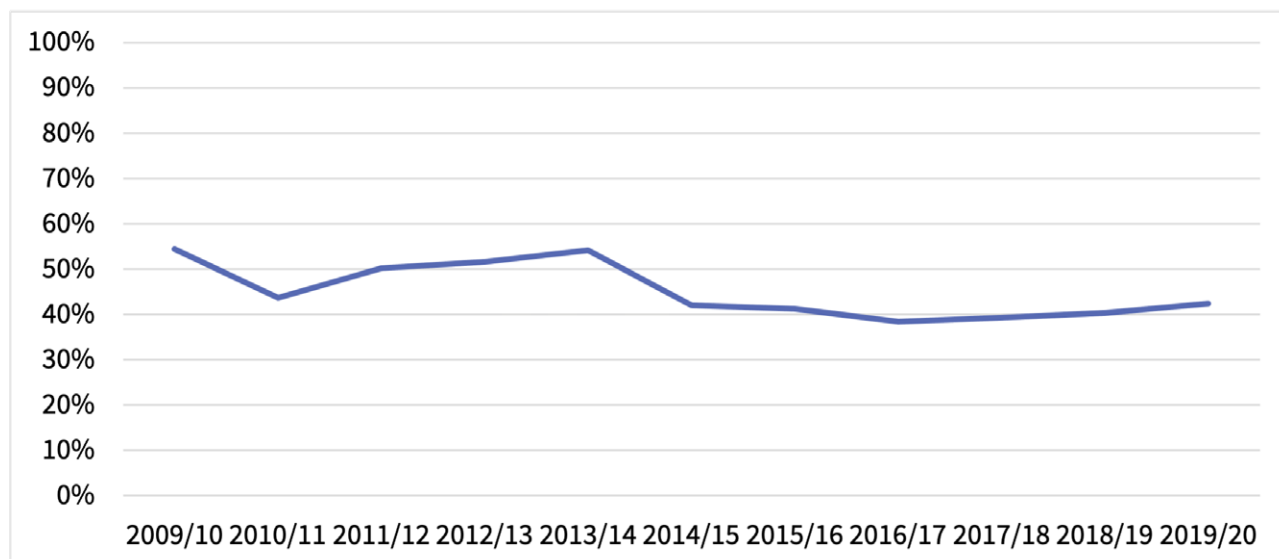
In England and Wales, alcohol-related violence figures are published by the UK Office for National Statistics and drawn from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). The CSEW is a widely respected victimisation survey (Tilley & Tseloni 2016), conducted each year across England and Wales. Interviewing around

35,000 adults annually, identified through random sampling of addresses (Office for National Statistics 2021b), the survey gathers data on victimisation experiences in the last 12 months.

England and Wales: the trends

CSEW figures published in recent years suggest that alcohol-related violence – incidents in which the victim believed the perpetrator to be under the influence of alcohol – in England and Wales has been declining. This decline is seen both as a total figure (falling from 1,001,000 incidents in 2009/10 to 525,000 incidents in 2019/20) and as a proportion of all violent incidents (54% in 2009/10 to 42% in 2019/20), see Figures 1 and 2 (Office for National Statistics 2021a).¹ This trend remains broadly under examined and unexplained.

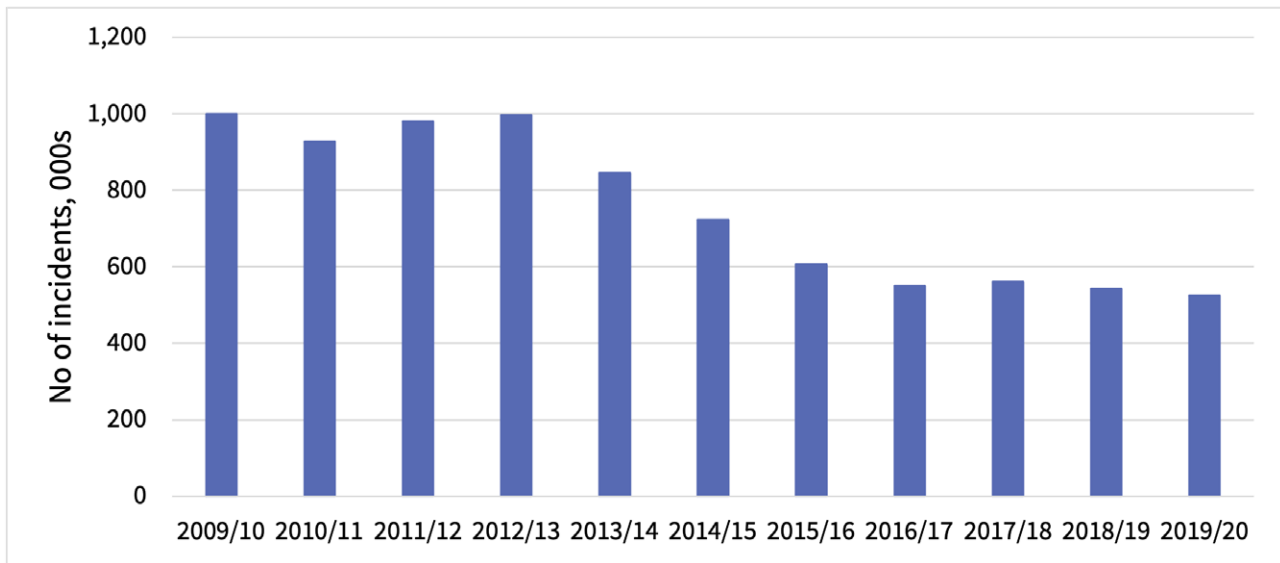
Figure 1: Proportion of violent incidents reported to the CSEW which were alcohol-related



Source: Office for National Statistics (2021a)

¹ Data are unavailable for 2020/21. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSEW shifted to a telephone survey design, and withdrew some survey items to facilitate this, including some regarding the alcohol-related nature of incidents (Office for National Statistics, 2021a).

Figure 2: Number of violent incidents reported to the CSEW which were alcohol-related

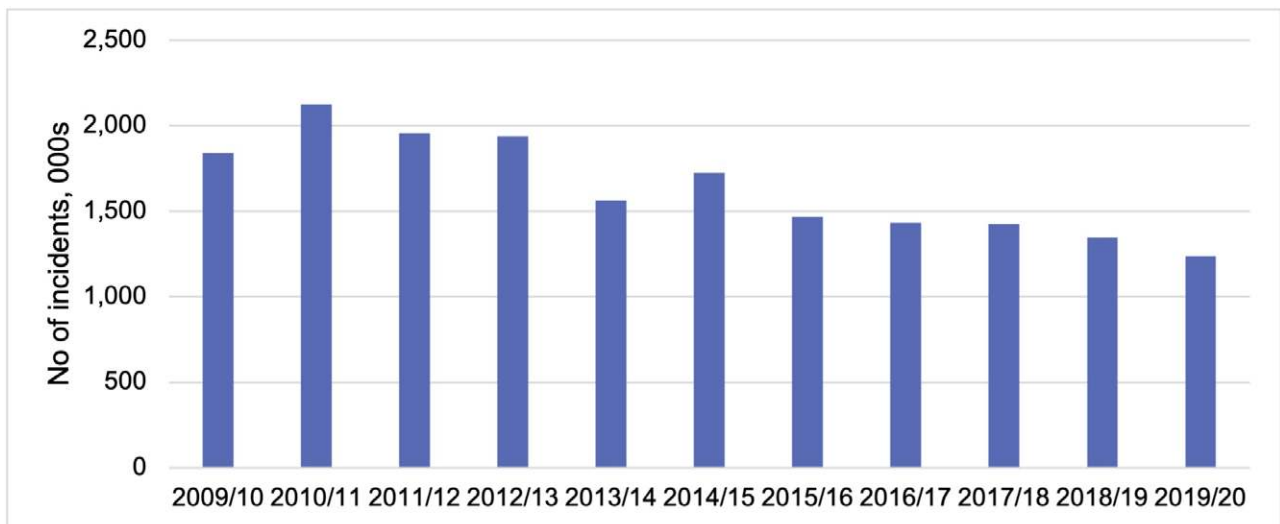


Source: Office for National Statistics (2021a)

This downward trend sits alongside a similar – although steadier and not as steep – decline in violence overall. Here, levels peaked in 2010/11 at 2,126,000 incidents and fell to lowest levels in 2019/20 at 1,239,000 incidents (see Figure 3) – a 33% decrease (Office for National Statistics 2021c). As Figure 1 shows, until 2013/14

alcohol-related violence generally accounted for at least half of all the violent incidents reported to the CSEW each year. In 2009/10, this proportion sat at 54%. However, in 2014/15, this proportion dropped to 42%, and has stayed generally stable since.

Figure 3: Number of violent incidents reported to the CSEW



Source: Office for National Statistics (2021c)

The decline seen in alcohol-related violence across the 2010s remains unexplained – this report presents an exploratory examination of this. While violence and alcohol-related violence in England and Wales are at lower levels than their historical peak, this is no reason to turn our attention from this topic. Not only does alcohol-related violence still account for more than half

a million violent incidents in England and Wales each year (Office for National Statistics 2021a), but in seeking to explain these trends we might identify levers policymakers and practitioners can exploit to reduce levels of violence further.



Explaining patterns in alcohol-related violence

While the decline seen in alcohol-related violence between 2009/10 and 2019/20 has yet to be examined, there are existing bodies of research that might offer insight into this trend – this report conducts a literature review of these, to scope theories that might explain reasons for the observed decline:

1. Changing patterns in violence

Changing patterns of violence across time and space have been a long-standing concern of criminologists. Many explanations for such shifts have been proposed and thoroughly dissected, and these may offer insight into this decline in alcohol-related violence. In particular, many have examined the ‘crime drop’ of the late twentieth century. The decreases in levels of violence as outlined in Figure 3 sit within a longer historical decline in violence and crime more broadly – beginning in the 1990s, many countries in the Global North witnessed significant declines in levels of many crime types including violence (Farrell et al. 2014). Some have termed this “the most important criminological phenomenon of modern times (Farrell et al. 2014 p. 421) and many have proposed and tested theoretical explanations for this decline (e.g., Bowling 1999; Roeder et al. 2015).

2. Alcohol’s relationship with violence

An association between alcohol consumption and violence – at an individual and population level – is well-established (Boles & Miotto 2003; Graham & Livingston 2011), with some evidence for a causal relationship (Leonard 2005; Lipsey et al. 2002). Many levers shaping this violence – including micro-level situational factors (like a “general acceptance, even positive endorsement, of violence” observed in some NTE spaces (Graham & Wells 2003 p. 561)) to macro-level pricing and availability drivers (World Health Organization 2011) – have been identified. Exploring the alcohol consumption



patterns surrounding this trend may draw out explanations for the violence decline seen.

3. The measurement of violence

Attempts to measure violence are subject to significant limitations – indeed, the ‘dark figure’ of crime which is not captured in official statistics is generally considered to be much greater than the crime rates which are reported (Reiner 2016). Some limitations are practical, such as inadequate recording practices within state agencies (for example, police-recorded crime statistics are no longer recognised as National Statistics in England and Wales (Secretary of State for the Home Department 2014)). Other limitations are introduced by the many decisions researchers and policymakers must make as they attempt to capture violence as a phenomenon. For example, until recently, reports of repeat violence victimisation from those interviewed in the CSEW were ‘capped’ in an attempt to protect against distortion of year-on-year trends. However, this was later found to critically under-count domestic violence – a type of violence where repeat victimisation is common (Walby et al. 2016). Work examining the measurement of violence in this way may provide explanations for some of the movement seen in official alcohol-related violence figures.

Testing theories

The suitability of any theories identified to explain the declines seen in alcohol-related violence will be assessed in two ways. First, taking a lead from Farrell et al. (2014) – who investigated the crime drop of the late twentieth century discussed previously – three tests will be applied that any theory examined here must pass:

1. The timing test: Does the timing of the fall in alcohol-related violence align with the explanation proposed for this decline?

2. The alcohol-related test: Alcohol-related violence is declining at a steeper rate than violence overall. While violence and alcohol-related violence no doubt share some drivers, this larger decline in alcohol-related violence means that for any theory to successfully explain this, it must account for steeper drops in alcohol-related violence than in violence overall.

3. The evidentiary support test: This is an emerging research area, and some theories are yet to be empirically examined. Fruitful avenues should not be discounted because of this. However, if evidence is available to support a given theory, this should be considered as a vote of confidence.

Following this, where possible, some initial secondary data analysis will be conducted to begin examining the theories put forward.

1. Changing patterns in violence

Various theories have been put forward to explain the dramatic decrease in levels of crime witnessed across many countries in the Global North in the 1990s. Farrell et al. (2014) summarised and examined 17 of the most prominent of these theories, and those which may have particular relevance to alcohol-related violence in England and Wales are outlined and assessed here:

a. Criminal justice system responses

Changes in policing and criminal justice system practices have been thoroughly investigated for any role they might play in violence declines (e.g., Roeder et al. 2015; Weisburd et al. 2014). Farrell et al. (2014) discuss the role criminal justice system interventions might play in the violence reductions seen beginning in the 1990s – they found limited evidence for the impact of increasing levels of imprisonment (through various North American and European comparisons) or police numbers (primarily through comparison of increasing police numbers and practice changes between US cities and the US with countries including England and Wales) on violence trends in general.

Might criminal justice interventions still impact on alcohol-related violence specifically? There is little evidence of any significant uptick in enforcement activity surrounding alcohol-related violence prior to or alongside the decline seen, suggesting criminal justice interventions might fail both the alcohol-related and the timing tests. The focus of criminal justice system responses to violence appear to have shifted in recent years in England and Wales. Whilst the late 1990s and early 2000s saw significant attention placed on the night-time economy and violence which occurred there (Hadfield et al. 2009), attention has since shifted to some degree to what recent governments have termed ‘serious violence’ – a definition which explicitly excludes alcohol-related violence (HM Government 2018).

Further, prior to the observed decline in alcohol-related violence, police gained new enforcement powers (directed at individuals, spaces, and premises) to manage alcohol-related night-time economy disorder (Hadfield et al. 2009). However, deployment of these powers has been inconsistent; for example, police have reported practical concerns surrounding new powers to give immediate fines for alcohol-related public disorder through Penalty Notices for Disorder, limiting their use (Hadfield et al. 2009).

Further though, even if the interventions outlined had been deployed with greater consistency, their focus has tended to be limited to targeting only individuals or ‘bad apple’ premises (Hadfield & Measham 2015). This goes against much of what has been identified as successful in violence reduction practice regarding population level action (Foster et al. 2017; World Health Organization 2011). These interventions also generally target alcohol-related violence in the night-time economy. While a very real aspect of alcohol-related violence, these policy interventions overlook a significant proportion of domestic violence incidents shown to be alcohol-related (e.g., Leonard 2005). For these reasons, it seems unlikely these interventions played a significant role in the decline in alcohol-related violence.

b. The securitization hypothesis

The securitization hypothesis suggests that as security practices have expanded across the twentieth century – the use of CCTV, car alarms, and similar interventions – the opportunities to commit crime have reduced, bringing levels down (Farrell et al. 2014). Some aspects of securitization, such as the car alarm, have little to do with alcohol-related violence. However, we might consider other interventions and their impact on this violence – security technology in night-time economy settings has

expanded including the use of devices such as breathalysers (Farrimond et al. 2018), while the adoption of toughened glassware reduces opportunity for alcohol-related injury (Shepherd 1998). It is possible such interventions could satisfy the alcohol-related test (through their placement in the night-time economy), but it is unclear whether the timelines align well.

For example, interventions such as CCTV networks in city centres have been in place since the 1990s (Graham et al. 1995), and it is unclear as to whether there has been any major innovation or scaling up of adoption in the last ten years to explain this recent downturn – this would need empirical examination to assess.



2. Alcohol’s relationship with violence

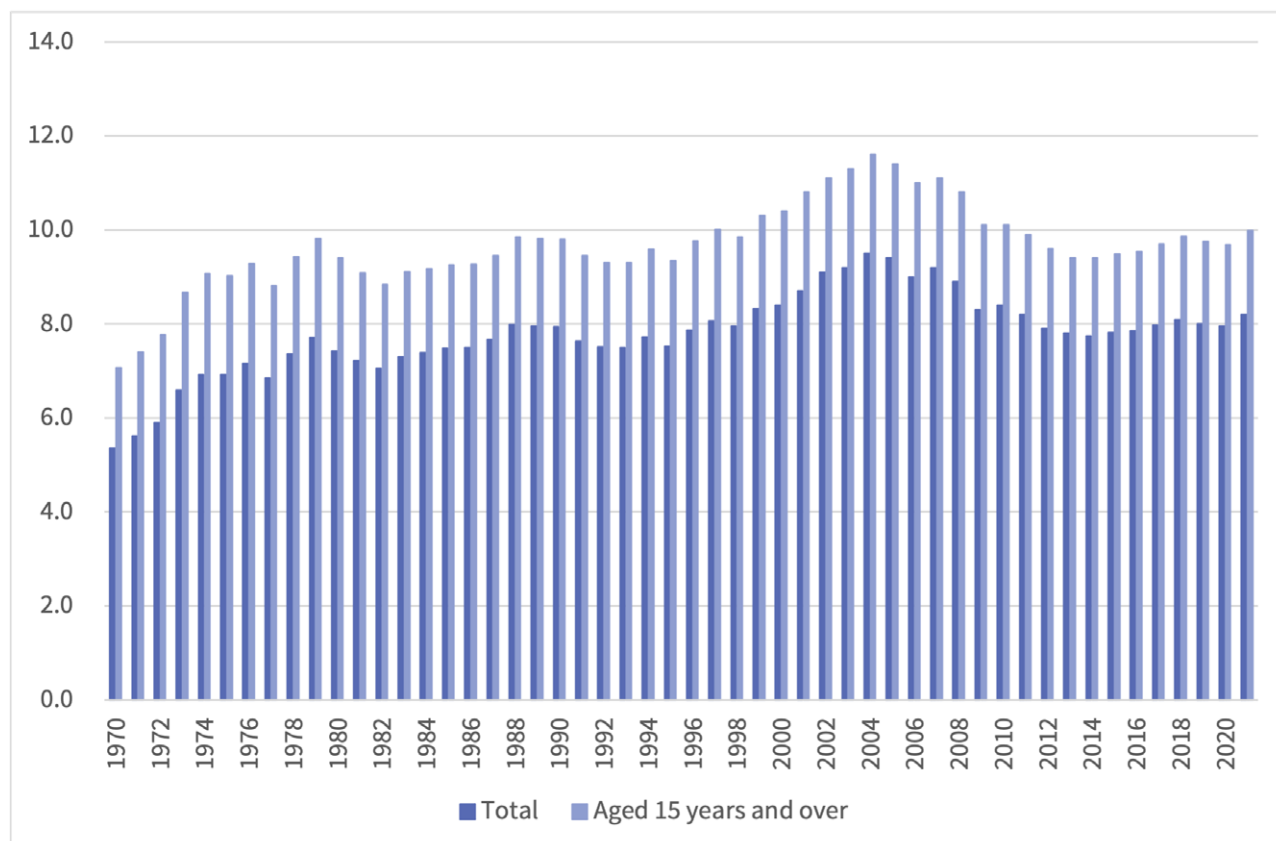
a. Overall consumption trends

Alcohol consumption is known to be associated with violence perpetration by individuals (Boles & Miotto 2003), with some evidence for a causal relationship (Leonard 2005; Lipsey et al. 2002). An independent association between population wide alcohol consumption and levels of violence has also been identified (e.g., Leonard 2005). Reviewing international population level studies examining alcohol consumption and levels of violence, Graham and Livingston concluded that: “these studies suggest that policies that reduce per-capita consumption in a society are likely to result in an indirect, possibly substantial, reduction in violence” (2011 p. 2). Changes in consumption patterns, therefore, might explain the decline in alcohol-related violence seen. Indeed, researchers examining violence declines in New York City during the

1990s found strong evidence to suggest changes in alcohol consumption explained part of these trends (Roeder et al. 2015).

Figure 4 shows alcohol consumption per adult in Great Britain since 1970. As can be seen here, there have been notable drops in consumption since these figures peaked in 2004. However, after 2014, population level consumption levelled off and is above 8 litres per annum per person today – this would suggest there has not been a recent, sustained decline in population wide alcohol consumption which could explain the changing patterns of violence seen. Because of this – and given the wealth of evidence linking alcohol consumption with violence at a population level discussed previously – it is worth considering whether there are consumption changes at a sub-group level that may explain the downturn.

Figure 4: Alcohol consumption (litres pure alcohol) for British people since 1970



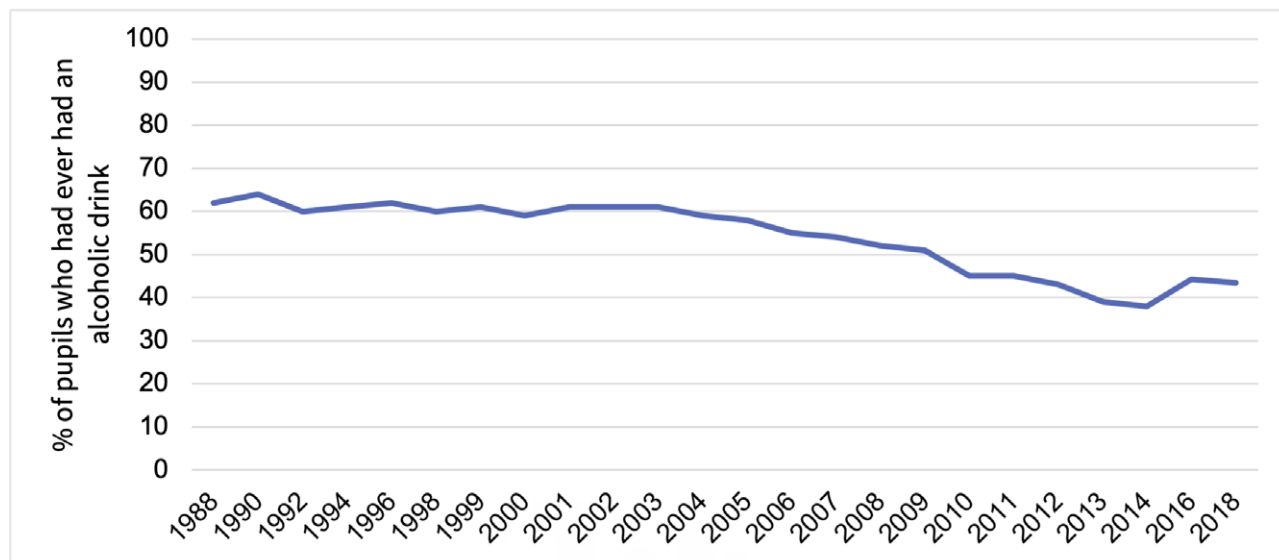
Source: The British Beer & Pub Association (2017, 2022) (all data presented prior to 2000 is taken from the 2017 edition).

b. Sub-group trends

Young people are drinking less. Underage drinking has been “in long-term decline” in England since 2003 (Bhattacharya 2016 p. 7), while the proportion of 16-24 year olds who

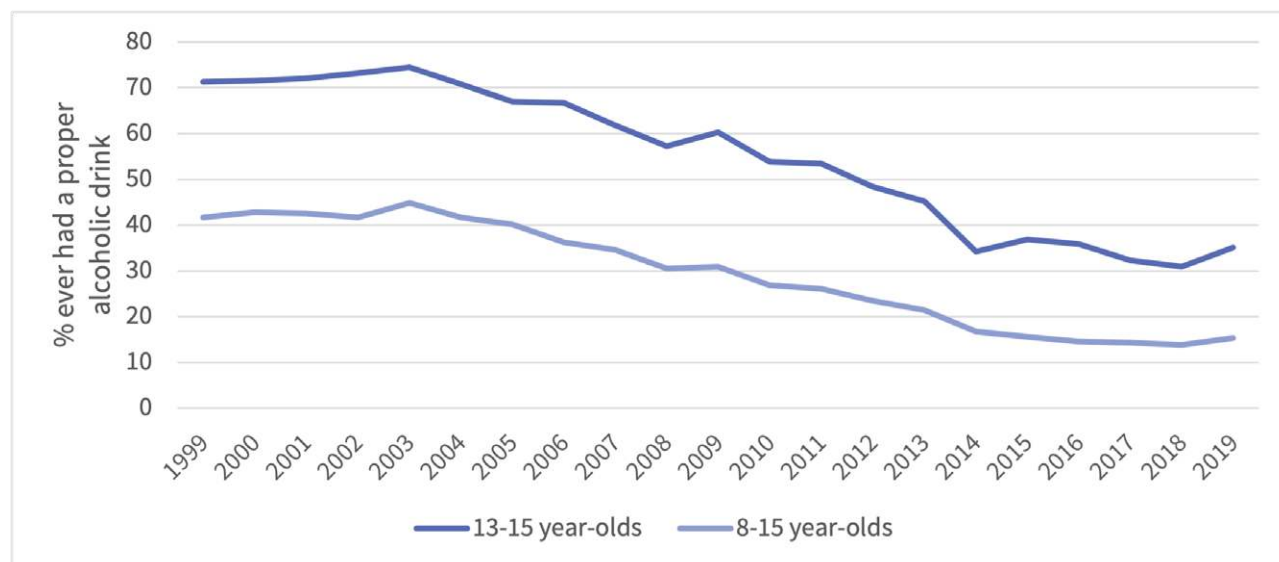
drank fell to 78% from 90% between 2001 and 2016 (Oldham et al. 2018). Those 16-24 year olds who are consuming alcohol are doing so “less often and in smaller quantities” (Oldham et al. 2018 p. 3).

Figure 5: Secondary school pupils (years 7 to 11) in England who have ever drunk alcohol



Source: NHS Digital (2019). Please note, data from 2016 onwards are not comparable with prior years.

Figure 6: Children (8-15 years old in England) who have ever drunk



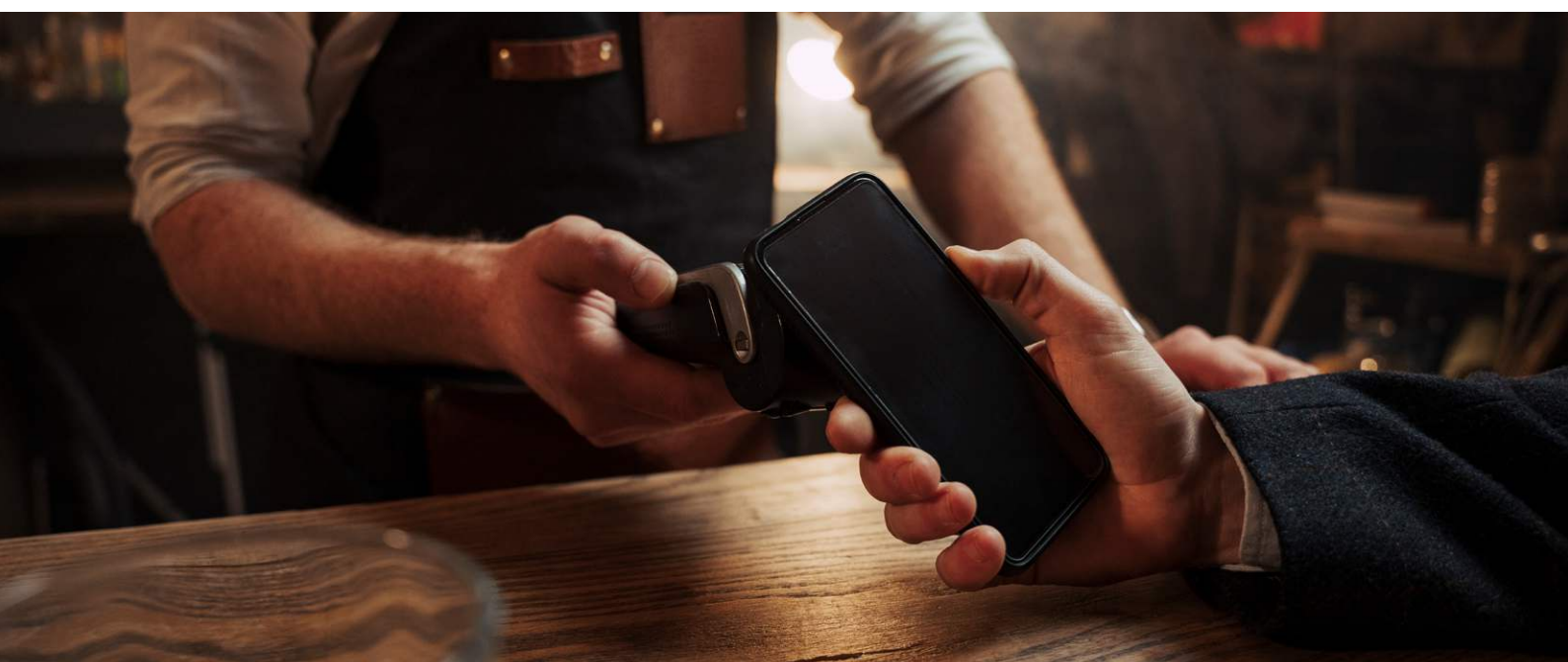
Source: NHS Digital (2020).

It is widely recognised that young people commit some types of crime at higher rates than older age groups, and it is common to refer to young people as ‘ageing out’ of offending. Drawing on self-report studies and administrative data, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports “the ‘peak’ ages at which [individuals] are most likely to be found guilty or cautioned are between 15 and 19” and that “criminal involvement... declines markedly once young people reach their 20s” (1996 p. 2). International data suggests a similar picture – Federal Bureau of Investigation figures show “peak age-crime involvement... is younger than 25 for all crimes reported in the FBI’s [Uniform Crime Reports] except gambling” (Ulmer & Steffensmeier 2014 p. 377).

Importantly here, night-time economy violence has been found to “typically [involve] young males” (Finney 2004, p. 1). Further, recent work examining youth drinking trends shows declines in consumption across all kinds of young drinkers, “[peaking] among heavy drinkers” (Oldham et al. 2020 p. 230) – it might be expected that reducing consumption amongst this group particularly would limit violent events, as intoxication increases the risk of engaging in such incidents (e.g., Dawson 1997).

Declines in youth drinking could have impacted violent crime trends, regardless of population-level trends in alcohol consumption. This theory satisfies the alcohol-related test. It also somewhat satisfies the timing test, with the steepest declines in underage and youth drinking beginning prior to falls in alcohol-related violence. However, as Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate, more recent data suggest these trends may be levelling off or reversing. Further, the ‘turning point’ for youth drinking trends appears to occur somewhere in the late 2000s, depending on which measure of this is consulted – as indicated in Figure 5, declines in underage drinking begin to accelerate in 2009 (Bhattacharya 2016). This is some years before rates of alcohol-related violence in England and Wales begin to fall. Given this, it is possible that while youth drinking trends may contribute to declines in alcohol-related violence, the reductions seen in both might also share some common cause (e.g., a more risk-averse generation (Kraus et al. 2020)).²

2 For fuller discussion of potential drivers of this youth drinking trend, see Bhattacharya (2016) and Oldham et al. (2018).



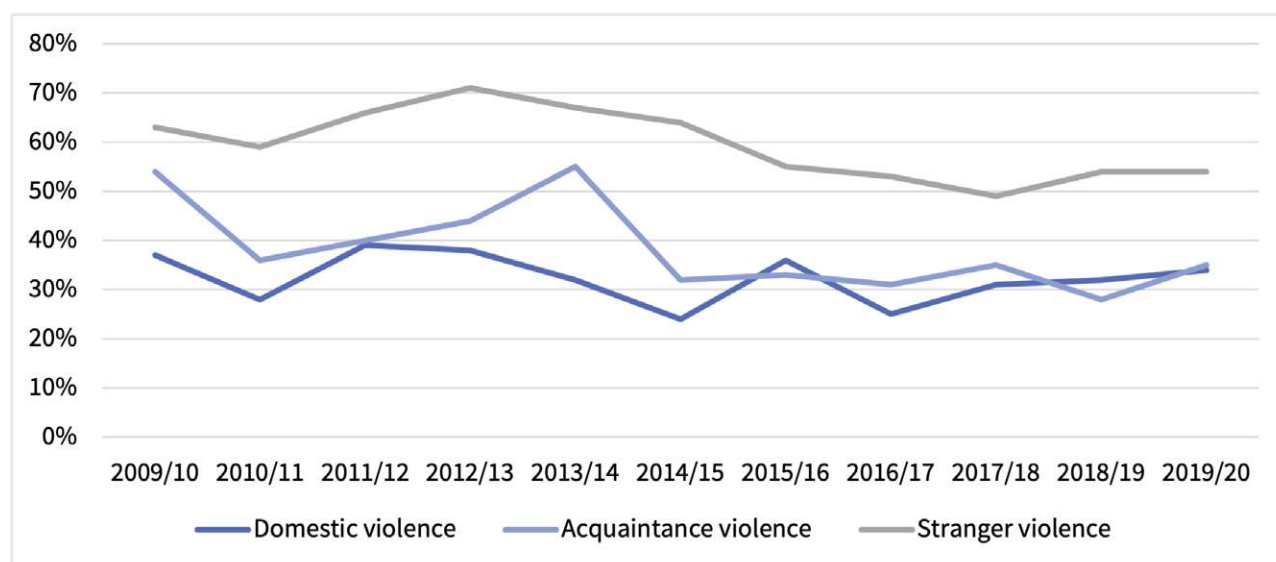
3. The measurement of violence

a. Patterns in subtypes of violence

Alcohol-related violence is a broad category – alcohol consumption has been linked at a population and individual level to the perpetration of many subtypes of violence (e.g., Graham & Livingston 2011, Leonard 2005). While there may be drivers shared across these subtypes, as some all-encompassing theories of violence have proposed (e.g., Collins 2008),

it is generally accepted that different violence subtypes – such as alcohol-related domestic violence – might be shaped by different drivers and contextual factors. Stranger violence, for example, is recognised to be common in night-time economy settings (Budd et al. 2003; World Health Organisation 2006). For this reason, overall trends in alcohol-related violence may be shaped by movements in one or some subtypes of this violence.

Figure 7: Proportion of violent incidents reported to the CSEW which were alcohol-related, by subtype



Source: Office for National Statistics (2021d)

Across the period, the proportion of incidents of stranger and acquaintance violence which were alcohol-related fell from 63% to 54% and 54% to 35% respectively. The proportion of domestic violence incidents which were alcohol-related, on the other hand, remained by comparison relatively stable across the period (from 37% to 34%). (Overall stranger and acquaintance violence incidence have also remained higher than domestic violence incidence across the period, see Office for National Statistics (2021e) for further detail). These shifts might suggest that movements in stranger and acquaintance alcohol-related violence contribute most

heavily to the decline seen in alcohol-related violence overall.

Declines in the proportion of stranger violence, and to a lesser extent declines in the proportion of acquaintance violence, which were recorded as alcohol-related might be linked to broad reductions in young people’s drinking. As noted, the age profile for night-time economy violence – a site typically associated with stranger violence (Budd et al. 2003; Graham & Wells 2003), and to a lesser degree, acquaintance violence (Levine et al. 2012) – skews young (Finney 2004).

Prior to examining patterns in these subtypes, some might have considered a steeper decline in alcohol-related violence relative to violence overall as evidence that alcohol-related violence is, in some way, resolving itself – that policy attention could be tuned solely to other forms of violence. However, the patterns identified here call this into question as there remains a consistent proportion of incidents of domestic violence that are alcohol-related and addressing these should not be discounted as a policy priority.

b. Counting error

It is possible data artefacts such as counting errors contained in official statistics form some part of the trend investigated here. The CSEW is a widely respected data source (Tilley & Tseloni 2016) designated as official statistics in England and Wales (National Statistics Authority 2014). However, as noted previously, recent research (Walby et al. 2016) has detailed how domestic violence incidents were, until recently, critically under-counted within the CSEW. Reports of repeat violence victimisation from those interviewed in the CSEW were ‘capped’ in order to protect against distortion of year-on-year trends, but this was later found to under-count domestic violence, a type of violence where repeat victimisation is common. This under-counting distorted official crime trends, with declines in overall violence reported when no such decline had occurred.

It is important to consider the impact any such data artefact might have on alcohol-related violence trends – a thorough investigation of the production of these National Statistics should be undertaken to assess this. One route through which such a data artefact might emerge is the gap in domestic violence reporting between the in-person and self-completion sections of the CSEW. Incidents of domestic violence are counted in two ways through the CSEW. Respondents are asked to report experiences of violence in a face-to-face interview – those described here as “perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner, or a family member” are recorded as domestic violence (Office for National Statistics

2021f p. 13). Here, respondents are also asked whether they believe the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol at the time of their attack. Data from these survey items is collated to produce the violence figures discussed in this report.

CSEW respondents also take part in ‘self-completion modules’ without an interviewer, answering questions on a computer - including one asking questions on any experiences of domestic abuse in the last year. This allows the Office for National Statistics to capture data on sensitive incidents which “victims will not be willing to disclose...in the context of a face-to-face personal interview” (Office for National Statistics 2021f p. 13). These reports do not form part of the violence figures discussed in this report, and respondents are not asked about the alcohol-related nature of any incident here. However, in 2019/20, only 10.3% of those who reported experiences of domestic violence (physical force) victimisation through this self-completion module also reported this in their face-to-face interview. This means the counts of domestic violence underpinning the alcohol-related violence figures discussed in this report “are an under-estimation of the true extent of this type of violence and as a result, the proportions of violence perpetrated by strangers and acquaintances will be over-estimated” (Office for National Statistics 2021f p. 13).

This may concern those monitoring alcohol-related violence trends. Domestic violence represents a minority of the alcohol-related incidents reported in face-to-face CSEW interviews, but as domestic violence overall is underreported here, there may be many more incidents of domestic violence taking place which are alcohol-related. It is not possible to assume that those incidents of domestic violence reported to only the self-completion module will be alcohol-related in the same proportion as those reported in face-to-face interviews. This means that while we know that reported levels of alcohol-related violence are underestimates, we cannot establish to what degree.

Conclusion

Drawing on research examining changing patterns in violence, alcohol's relationship with violence, and the measurement of violence, this report has identified possible explanations for the decline seen in alcohol-related violence between 2009/10 and 2019/20. Changing patterns in youth drinking are identified as a potential contributor to this violence decline. Further, declines in the proportions of stranger and acquaintance violence which were alcohol-related might contribute most heavily to the decline seen in alcohol-related violence overall. Declines in youth drinking might contribute to declines in these kinds of violence (as it is younger, rather than older age groups, who predominantly engage in violence in night-time economy settings (Finney 2004)). It is also possible data artefacts such as counting errors contained in National Statistics form some part of the trend investigated here. The under-reporting of domestic violence through the face-to-face CSEW interviews on which official alcohol-related violence statistics are based is of particular concern.

It is also necessary to reflect on the changes in CSEW data collection and survey design which took place during the pandemic. During this period respondents were interviewed by telephone using a reduced set of questions – as a result, data on alcohol-related violence were not published for 2020/21 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). As such, estimates for levels of alcohol-related violence beyond 2019/20 are yet to be made, hindering our ability to understand how the trends discussed here have evolved.

Even with the decreases in alcohol-related violence seen over the last decade, there remain more than a million violent incidents fuelled by alcohol each year (Office for National Statistics 2021a) – the reductions charted in this report should not make policymakers complacent. Indeed, it may be necessary to investigate shifts in subtypes of alcohol-related violence in more detail in future research, and to

monitor these changes over time. It should give pause to policymakers that present alongside overall declines is a much more consistent proportion of all domestic violence which can be considered alcohol-related, which remains unaddressed. While understanding the decline presented here is a valuable endeavour and may provide new insight for those seeking to reduce violence levels further, policymakers should not fail to reflect on the vast wealth of literature which already highlights highly effective violence reduction strategies. The World Health Organization (2011) reports how price and availability are highly responsive policy levers. Reducing alcohol consumption through population level public health policies is shown to lead to subsequent reductions in violence and harm (Alcohol Focus Scotland and Centre for Research on Environment Society and Health at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow 2018; Foster et al. 2017; Home Office 2011).

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