



drinkaware

The Sober Myth: Are Young Adults Really a Generation of Non-Drinkers?

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2023

Who are Drinkaware



Drinkaware is an independent charity which aims to reduce alcohol-related harm by helping people make better choices about their drinking.

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We achieve this by providing impartial, evidence-based information, advice and practical resources, raising awareness of alcohol and its harms and working collaboratively with partners.

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Founded in 2006 by the UK Government, the devolved administrations and representatives of the alcohol industry, Drinkaware is funded by unrestricted voluntary donations from more than 120 organisations. These include UK alcohol producers, retailers, supermarkets, venues, restaurant groups and sports associations.

How to cite this report

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Data

The data in this report is drawn from a series of Drinkaware Monitors which took place between 2017 and 2023.

The survey is carried out by YouGov. More information on the survey and methodology can be found [here](#).

Any differences between groups reported in this report are statistically significant using 95% confidence intervals (i.e. 5% significance level; p less than 0.05). This means we can be confident the differences are not down to chance.



52,199

responses were collected by
The Drinkaware Monitor
between 2017-2023

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The Drinkaware Monitor has collected 52,199 responses between 2017 and 2023. This includes 5,213 responses from young adults and 46,986 responses from adults aged 25 and over.

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See below for a full breakdown of the Drinkaware sample for each survey year:

Survey Year	Young adults (18 to 24)	Rest of population (25 and over)	Total
2017	630	5,544	6,174
2018	666	8,240	8,906
2019	143	2,002	2,145
2020	1,008	8,038	9,046
2021	1,041	8,096	9,137
2022	718	5,600	6,318
2023	1,007	9,466	10,473

“

This report will focus on Drinkaware Monitor data from young adults aged between 18 and 24 throughout.

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Any findings in this report will refer to data from the Drinkaware Monitor 2023 unless stated otherwise.

The 2023 monitor was made up of a similar proportion of men and women (49% and 51%) and a similar proportion of adults living in the most and least deprived areas (31% and 30%). Most young adults lived in England (84%) followed by Scotland (8%), Wales (5%) and Northern Ireland (3%).

This breakdown is consistent among previous Drinkaware Monitors with each survey weighted to be representative of all adults in the UK.

Executive summary

In recent years, there have been numerous reports around young adults, aged 18 to 24, being a generation of non-drinkers.^{1,2,3}



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However, despite having higher odds of non-drinking, data from the Drinkaware Monitor (2017 to 2023) shows young adults who do drink are more likely to binge drink and drink at high risk or possibly dependent levels compared to the rest of the population.

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The key findings from this report include:

The proportion of young adults who do not drink has increased from 14% in 2017 to 21% in 2023 while remaining relatively stable among the rest of the population (approx. 13%).

Young adult drinkers are less likely than the rest of the population to drink weekly or more often (46% vs 56%) and less likely to drink above the Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) low risk drinking guidelines (17% vs 20%).

Young adult drinkers are the age group most likely to binge drink in the UK (74% vs 63% of drinkers aged 25 and over). However, the prevalence of binge drinking has fallen for both groups since 2017 (from 82% among young adult drinkers and 66% among drinkers aged 25 and over).



1 in 5

young adults are non-drinkers.



Young adult drinkers are almost twice as likely to score high risk or possibly dependent on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) – an alcohol harm screening questionnaire – compared to the rest of the population (11% vs 6%).

Young adult drinkers are twice as likely to experience memory loss (40% vs 19%), three times more likely to need a drink in the morning (14% vs 4%) and twice as likely to fail to do what is usually expected of them (24% vs 12%) compared to drinkers aged 25 and over.

Young adult drinkers are more likely to drink on an evening or night out with friends compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (84% vs 74%) but less likely to drink at home alone (43% vs 52%).

Young adult drinkers are more likely to drink for coping (19% vs 13%) and conformity reasons (17% vs 8%) most of the time or always compared to drinkers aged 25 and over.

Young adults living in the most deprived areas are more likely to be possibly dependent on alcohol compared to young adults from the least deprived despite drinking similar amounts because they are more likely to suffer the symptoms of alcohol dependence and consequences from high risk drinking.

While there is a higher proportion of young adults abstaining from alcohol compared to any other age group, four in five (79%) young adults still drink alcohol. The findings in this report reveal that they are more likely to binge drink and score high risk or possibly dependent on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – an alcohol screening questionnaire – compared to older generations.



Therefore, to overlook young adults as a generation of non-drinkers may mask potentially worrying drinking habits and harm among this age group.



Any future national strategy to reduce alcohol harm developed by the Westminster Government should take the findings in this report into consideration and seek to prevent young adults from suffering the health consequences associated with alcohol consumption.

Introduction

The aim of this report is to explore the drinking behaviours of young adults aged between 18 and 24 to determine whether they really are a generation of non-drinkers.

It will do this through an analysis of Drinkaware's Monitor data to help understand the extent to which young adults drink alcohol and discover whether their drinking habits have changed in recent years compared to the rest of the UK population.



increase in non-drinkers aged 16 to 24 between 2005 and 2015.

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Young adults have been presented as a generation of non-drinkers with the increase in abstinence from alcohol among this group widely reported.^{4,5,6}

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One study discovered the rates of non-drinking among 16 to 24 year olds in England increased from 18% to 29% between 2005 and 2015 with significant increases observed among most sub-groups except smokers, ethnic minorities and young adults with poor mental health.⁷ Similar declines have been observed among underage drinkers as well.^{8,9}

For instance, the proportion of 15-year-old pupils in England who consumed alcohol in the last week declined from 24% in 2016 to 20% in 2021.¹⁰ An increase in non-drinking has also been observed internationally and has been associated with changes in parenting style, social media and health and fitness trends as well.^{11,12}

While the proportion of young adults who do not drink has increased, research also finds that young adults are drinking less often and drinking lower amounts of alcohol when they do drink.^{13,14} For instance, the proportion of young adults in England aged 16 to 24 consuming alcohol on five or more days a week declined from 4% in 2011 to 1% in 2019 and the proportion of young adults consuming more than 14 units each week declined by 42% during the same period (from 26% in 2011 to 15% in 2019).¹⁵ These findings show that young adults are reducing the total amount of alcohol they consume as well as becoming increasingly teetotal.ⁱ

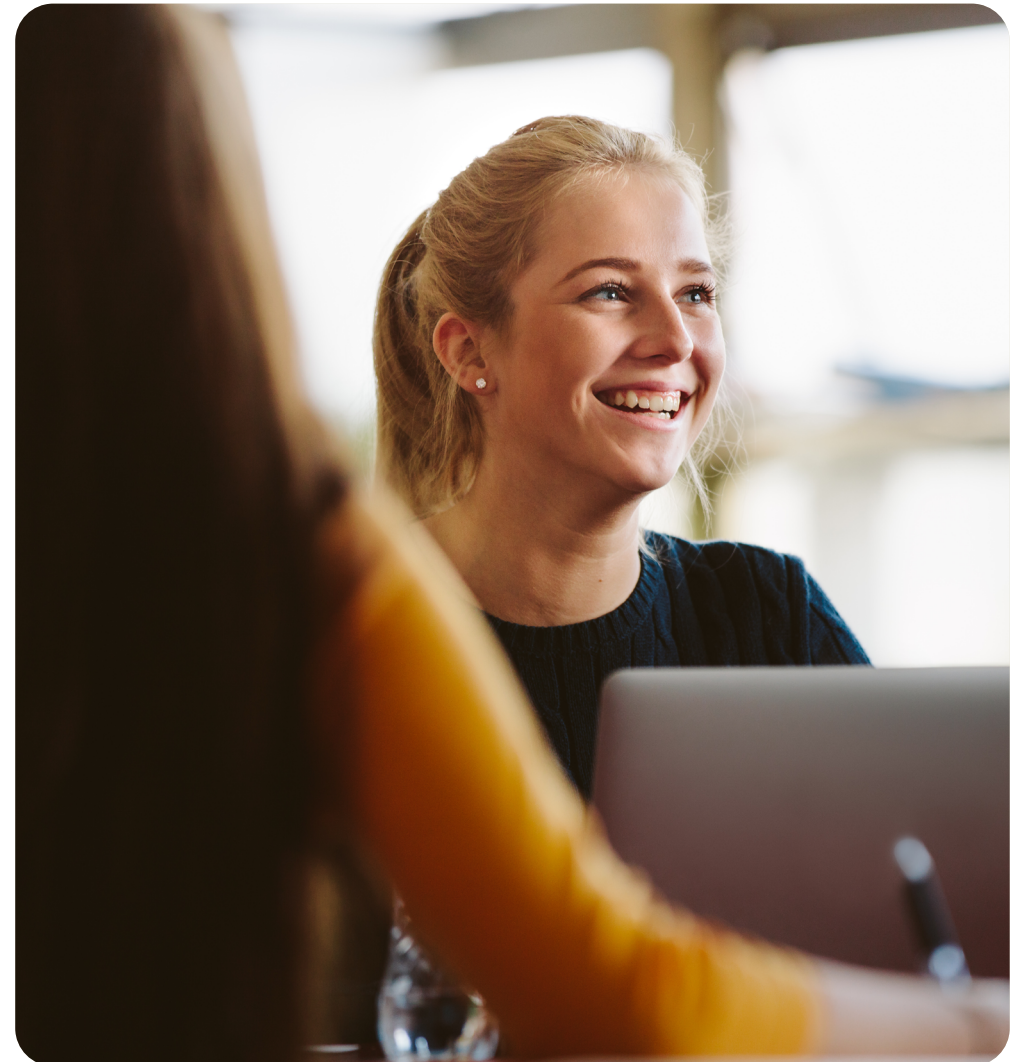


42%

decline in young adults

consuming more than 14 units each week between 2011 and 2019.

Despite evidence suggesting young adults may be drinking less than they have done historically, this does not necessarily tell the full story as alcohol consumption may have contributed to young adults being one of the groups most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶ For example, research indicates young adults were significantly affected by the social and economic consequences of lockdown restrictions and were more likely to experience issues with their mental health compared to other age groups, particularly young adults residing in the most deprived areas.^{17,18,19} Increased alcohol consumption has been identified as a risk factor for experiencing these issues during this period and may have contributed to the overall impact of lockdown restrictions on young adults.²⁰ This shows that alcohol consumption may have consequences for young adults, despite recent increases in non-drinking. This report explores how young adults' drinking patterns have changed over time to help to determine whether they really can be considered as a generation of non-drinkers.



ⁱ A term used to describe people who do not drink alcohol.

Young adults and alcohol

Young adults are more likely to be non-drinkers compared to the rest of the population



The Drinkaware Monitor finds that **one in five (21%) young adults in the UK** do not drink alcohol which is the highest proportion among any age group.ⁱⁱ

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Those young adults who do not drink are more likely to be foreign born, religious and belong to a lower social grade.ⁱⁱⁱ

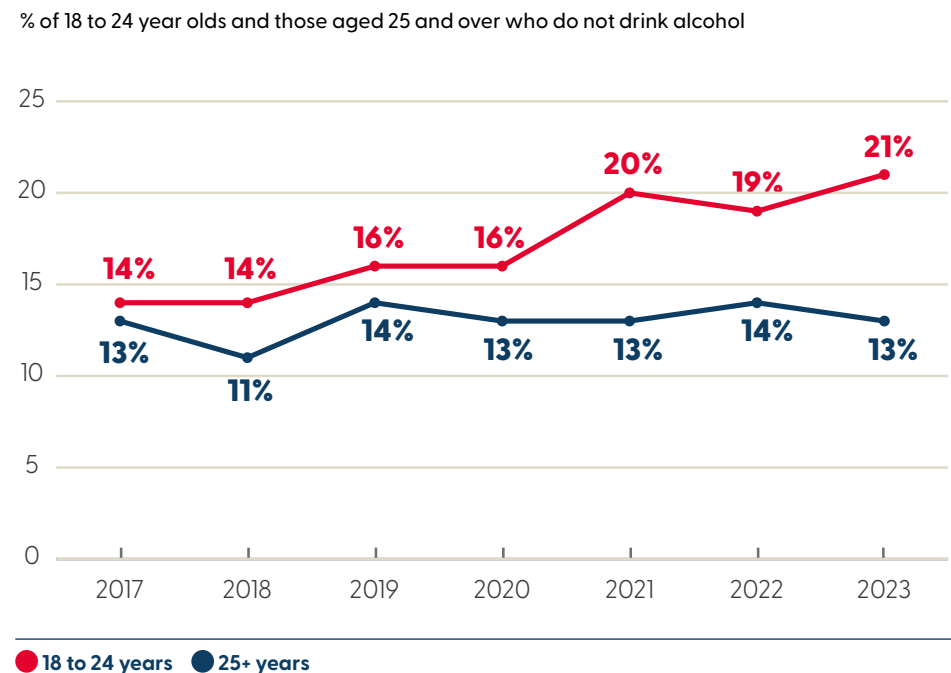
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The proportion of non-drinkers increased by 50% between 2017 (14%) and 2023 (21%) with the largest increase occurring during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 - 2021) (See Figure 1). This effect may be partly attributable to lockdown restrictions and limited opportunities for drinking,²¹ although the same trend was not observed among adults aged 25 and over whose rate of non-drinking remained consistent during the same period. This suggests there is something unique about the trend in non-drinking experienced by young adults.

ⁱⁱ 25 to 34 (13%); 35 to 44 (12%); 45 to 54 (13%); 55 to 64 (14%); 65 to 75 (13%); 76+ (14%)

ⁱⁱⁱ UK born (20%) vs Foreign born (30%); Religious (35%) vs Non-religious (15%); ABC1 Social grade (19%) vs C2DE Social grade (23%)

Figure 1: The proportion of young non-drinkers increased significantly between 2017 and 2023



Sample: All adults. Drinkaware Monitor 2017 (n=6,174); 2018 (n=8,906); 2019 (n=2,145); 2020 (n=9,046); 2021 (n=9,137); 2022 (n=6,318), 2023 (n=10,179)

Young adults are less likely to consume alcohol regularly or consume large amounts



While the rate of non-drinking among young adults has increased since 2017, **four in five (79%) young adults continue to consume alcohol.**

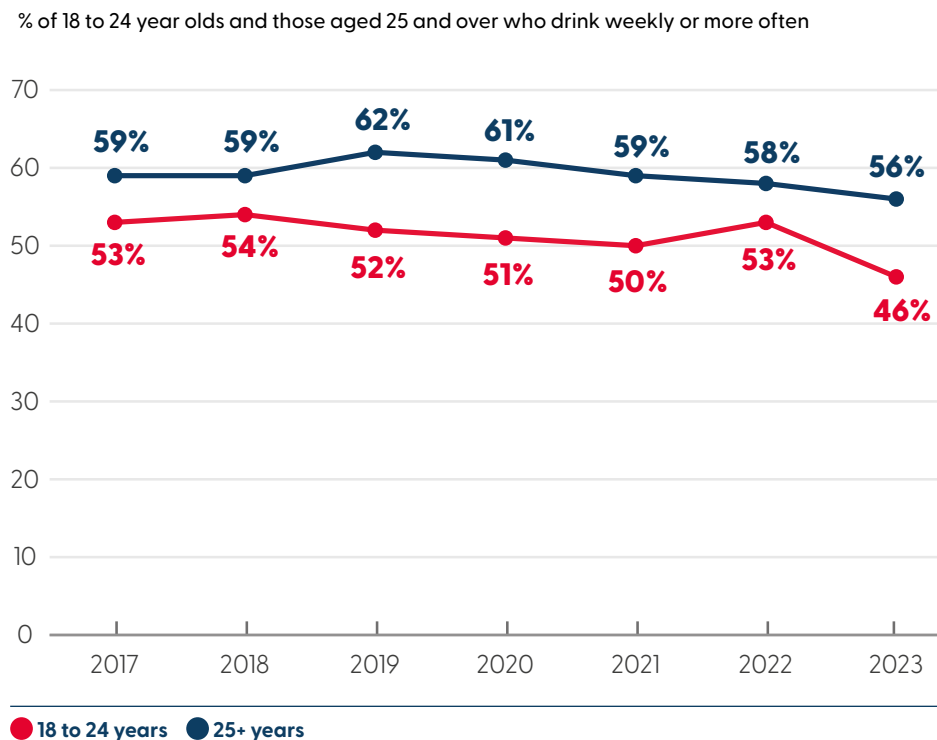
Research suggests they are more likely to drink smaller amounts and drink less often²² compared to the rest of the population. However, data from the Drinkaware Monitor indicates the proportion of drinkers who drink the most often^{iv} has remained relatively stable since 2017 even though they may be drinking less units than they have done in the past. Investigating these trends further can help determine whether young adults really can be considered a generation of non-drinkers.

Less than
50%

of young adult drinkers now **consume alcohol at least once a week**

Young adults are less likely to drink weekly or more often compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (56% vs 46%) (See Figure 2) and the proportion of young adults who drink this regularly has declined since 2017 (from 53% to 46%). This means less than half of young adult drinkers now consume alcohol at least once a week. Young adult drinkers are also less likely to drink on four or more days each week, compared to drinkers from the rest of the population (8% vs 19%). Despite this, the proportion of young adults who drink this regularly has remained relatively stable since 2017 (at around 9–8%). These findings somewhat support the literature which suggests young adults are drinking less often although the proportion of the most regular drinkers has remained consistent.

Figure 2: Young adults are less likely to drink regularly than the rest of the population



Sample: All adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2017 (n=5,427); 2018 (n=7,902); 2019 (n=1,860); 2020 (n=7,834); 2021 (n=7,911); 2022 (n=5,428), 2023 (n=9,035)

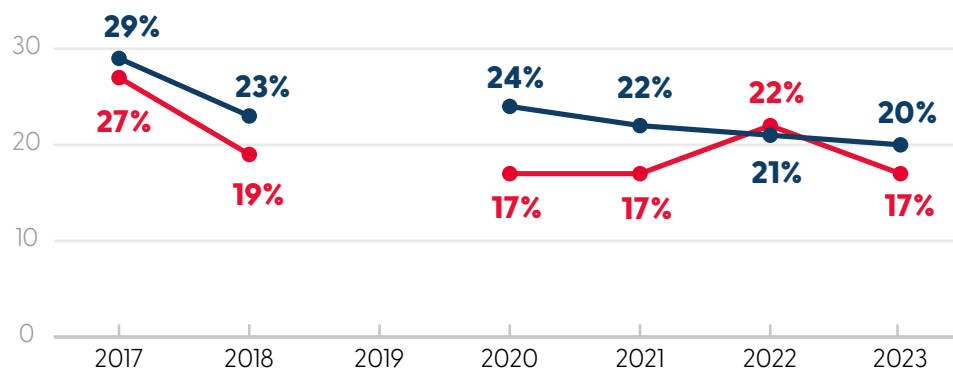
iv Those who drink on four or more days each week

In addition to being more likely to drink less often than the rest of the population, young adults are also less likely to consume more than the Chief Medical Officer's (CMOs) low risk drinking guidelines of 14 units each week (17% vs 20%) (as shown in Figure 3). Young men are more than twice as likely than young women to consume more than 14 units each week (23% vs 10%) and young adults who drink weekly or more often are more likely to drink this amount compared to young adults who do not drink weekly or more often (32% vs 3%).

Despite this, the proportion of all adults who drink more than 14 units each week has fallen since 2017 (from 27% to 17% among young adults and from 29% to 20% among the rest of the population). These trends also support the literature which suggests young adults are consuming smaller amounts of alcohol even though the reduction in alcohol consumption since 2017 is not necessarily a trend unique to this age group.

Figure 3: Young adults drink less units of alcohol than the rest of the population

% of 18 to 24 year olds and those aged 25 and over who drink more than the CMO's guidelines



● 18 to 24 years ● 25+ years

Sample: All adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2017 (n=5,427); 2018 (n=7,902); 2019 (n=1,860); 2020 (n=7,834); 2021 (n=7,911); 2022 (n=5,428) 2023 (n=9,035)



Did you know?



The Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) low risk drinking guidelines recommend drinking no more than 14 units each week, spread evenly across three days or more.



23%



10%

Young men are **more than twice as likely** than young women to consume more than 14 units each week.

Rates of binge drinking remain higher for young adults than the rest of the population

So far, the findings in this report demonstrate that young adults have the highest rates of non-drinking, they are less likely to drink regularly, and are more likely to drink lower amounts of alcohol compared to the rest of the population. However, to help understand their drinking behaviour further, it is also important to uncover the extent to which young adults consume their alcohol units in a single session. If young adults are saving their units for a single session, there may be high rates of binge drinking^v among this age group.

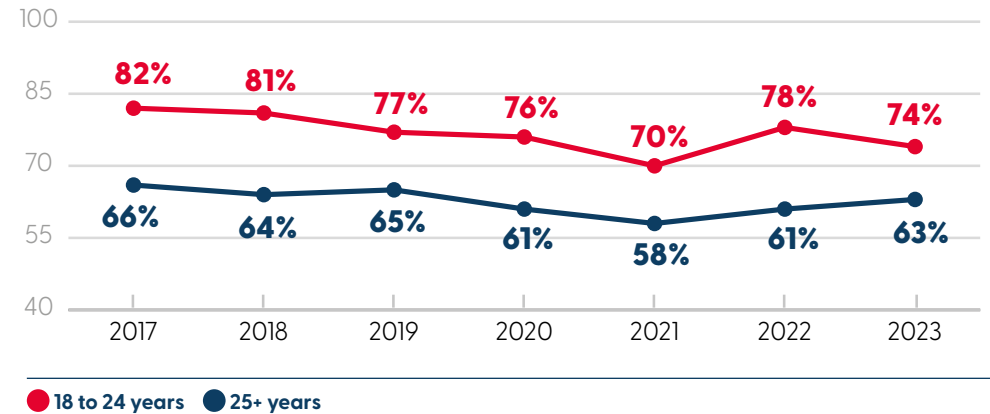
To ensure the health risks from consuming alcohol are low, it is best to never binge drink. This is because binge drinking can contribute to accidents or falls, which in extreme cases can lead to death, as well as alcohol poisoning, mental health issues, dependence, cancer and heart disease.²³ Young adults have been shown to have high rates of binge drinking in the UK.²⁴

However, data from the Drinkaware Monitor indicates the proportion of young adult drinkers who report binge drinking at least once in the previous year decreased from 82% to 74% between 2017 and 2023 (as shown in Figure 4).

“
Despite this reduction in binge drinking, young adults are still more likely than the rest of the population to binge drink (74% vs 63%), putting them at a higher risk of experiencing the short term consequences of alcohol consumption.
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Figure 4: Young adults are more likely to binge drink compared to the rest of the population

% of 18 to 24 year olds and those aged 25 and over who reported binge drinking at least once in the last year



Sample: All adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2017 (n=5,427); 2018 (n=7,902); 2019 (n=1,860); 2020 (n=7,834); 2021 (n=7,911); 2022 (n=5,428); 2023 (n=9,035)

While it may be the case that young adults are more likely to binge drink compared to older age groups, they are also more likely to binge drink at least once a month (32% vs 27%). Young adults who binge drink this regularly are around seven times more likely to consume more than 14 units each week (48% vs 7%) and five times more likely to drink on four or more days each week (27% vs 5%) compared to young drinkers who do not. However, while they are more likely to binge drink at least once a month, the proportion of

young drinkers who do has fallen, from 44% in 2017 to 32% in 2023 with a similar trend experienced among drinkers aged 25 and over (decreasing from 31% in 2017 to 27% in 2023). These findings show that while binge drinking rates are declining, young adults are still the age group most likely to binge drink in the UK and more likely to binge drink at least once a month, increasing their risk of experiencing alcohol-related harm.

^v Defined as 8 or more units in a single session for men, and 6 or more units for women.

Young adults are twice as likely than the rest of the population to drink at high risk or possible dependent levels

While young adults may be more likely to binge drink compared to the rest of the population, this still does not necessarily reveal the full extent to which young adults drink alcohol. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the drinking behaviours of young adults, we can look to the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)²⁵ which considers adverse or negative consequences of alcohol and symptoms of dependence.

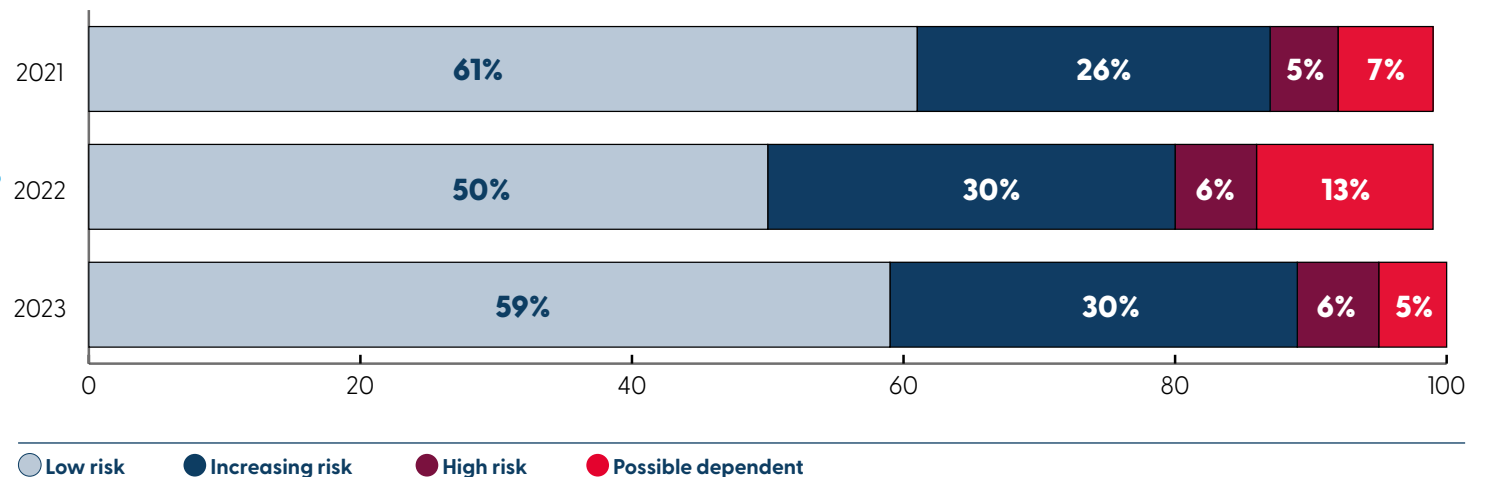
Overall, most young adult drinkers drink at low risk levels (59%). However, young adult drinkers are more likely to drink at increasing risk levels compared to the drinkers aged 25 and over (30% vs 26%) and are almost twice as likely to drink at high risk or possible dependent

levels (11% vs 6%). While the proportion of young adult drinkers scoring as high risk or possibly dependent has not changed significantly from 2021 (12%), it did increase to 19% in 2022 while remaining relatively stable among drinkers aged 25 and over (approx.

6-7%) (See Figure 5). These findings indicate that young adult drinkers may be more likely to suffer adverse or negative consequences from alcohol putting them at a higher risk of experiencing alcohol-related harm compared to the rest of the population.

Figure 5: Possible dependent drinking among young adults almost doubled from 2021 to 2022

% of 18 to 24 year olds who scored each AUDIT category between 2021 and 2023



Sample: All young adults who drink alcohol. The Drinkaware Monitor 2021 (n=854); 2022 (n=596); 2023 (n=802)

Did you know?



The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) was developed by the World Health Organisation as a simple method of screening for excessive drinking and to assist in brief assessment.

2022 Spotlight

In 2022, there were some interesting changes to the drinking habits of young adults. One theory for these trends could be that young adults were making up for lost time after lockdown restrictions came to an end.²⁶

The key findings from 2022 were:

- The proportion of young adult drinkers drinking above the Chief Medical Officers' low risk drinking guidelines of up to 14 units each week increased from 17% to 22% between 2021 and 2022 which meant young adult drinkers were just as likely as adult drinkers aged 25 and over to consume more than 14 units each week for the first time since 2017 (22% vs 21%).



Almost one in five young adults were drinking at high risk or possible dependent levels the year after the pandemic

- The proportion of young adult drinkers who binge drink had declined to 70% in 2021 but returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, rising to 78%. The proportion of drinkers aged 25 and over who binge drink remained lower than compared to before the pandemic (from 58% in 2021 to 61% in 2022).
- Possible dependence rates almost doubled after lockdown restrictions eased in 2022 with the proportion of young adult drinkers scoring possibly dependent on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) – an alcohol screening questionnaire – rising from 7% in 2021 to 13% in 2022. This meant almost one in five young adult drinkers were drinking at high risk or possible dependent levels in the year after the pandemic (19%).
- The proportion of young adult drinkers drinking at home alone weekly or more often increased even though bars and pubs reopened (from 13% in 2021 to 18% in 2022). Young adult drinkers also increased drinking in situations such as on an evening or night out with friends weekly or more often at higher rates than before the pandemic (9% in 2019 vs 16% in 2022).
- There was an increase in the proportion of young adult drinkers drinking for coping reasons most of the time or always after the end of lockdown restrictions (from 18% in 2021 to 23% in 2022) while remaining stable among the rest of the population (approx. 12-13%).

There has been an increase in the proportion of young adults experiencing memory loss since 2021

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) is a 10 question screening tool used to identify symptoms of alcohol dependence and consequences of high risk drinking.²⁷ To understand why young adults are more likely to drink at high risk or possible dependent levels, we can take a deeper look into how young adult drinkers respond to specific AUDIT questions (as shown in Figure 6).

“

Of most interest are the questions around memory loss; needing a drink; and failure to do what is usually expected due to the consumption of alcohol.

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Young adults are twice as likely to report having trouble remembering the night before after drinking in the last 12 months compared to the rest of the population (40% vs 19%). This increased from approximately one-third (34%) of young adult drinkers in 2021 which indicates there may be more young adults drinking to extreme levels since the COVID-19 pandemic. Drinkers aged 25 and over also reported an increase in memory loss after drinking alcohol (from 15% in 2021 to 19% in 2023) which suggests this trend is not unique to 18 to 24 year olds. However, drinkers aged 25 and over are significantly less likely to experience this outcome compared to young adult drinkers. Experiencing memory loss can be a particularly serious consequence from drinking alcohol and has been linked to an increased risk of suffering from injuries and other harms.²⁸ Young adults who do experience this harm are more likely to screen positive for anxiety or depression (51% vs 37%), binge

drink weekly or more often (22% vs 4%) and drink more than 14 units each week (32% vs 6%) compared to young adults with no experience of memory loss from drinking.



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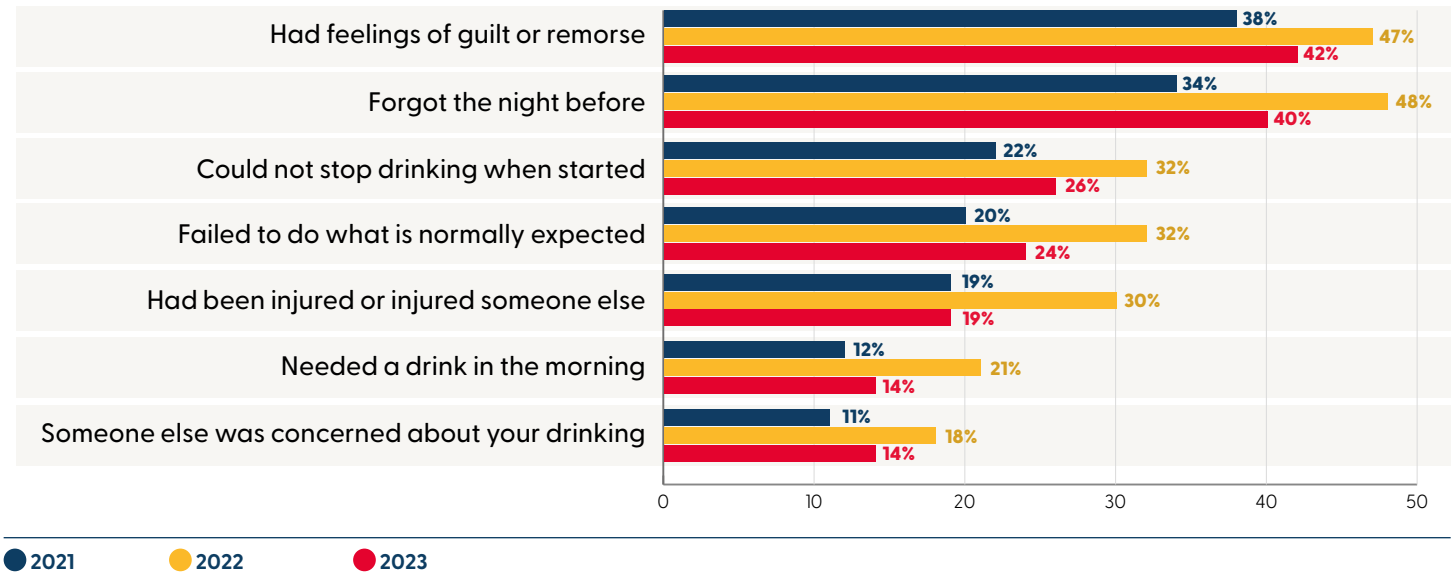
Around one in four young adults report failing to do what is usually expected of them after drinking alcohol which has increased significantly since 2021 (from 20% to 24% in 2023).

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While there was also a significant increase observed among drinkers aged 25 and over, young drinkers are over twice as likely to experience this consequence from alcohol consumption (24% vs 12%). Worryingly, young adults who have experienced this harm are more likely to have caring responsibilities (19% vs 6%) and more likely to have children under the age of 18 (12% vs 3%) compared to young drinkers who do not fail to do what is usually expected of them. This increase suggests more and more young adults are placing alcohol over potentially more important obligations which can have a detrimental impact on themselves or other people.

Figure 6: Two in five young adults experience memory loss from drinking

% of 18 to 24 year olds experiencing negative consequences and symptoms of alcohol dependence at least once in the last 12 months



Sample: All young adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2021 (n=854); 2022 (n=596), 2023 (n=802)

Over two in five young adults also experience feelings of guilt or remorse after drinking alcohol (42%). While this has remained relatively stable since 2021, young adults are almost twice as likely to experience this harm compared to the rest of the population (42% vs 23%). Young drinkers who experience this harm are more likely to report not being able to stop or control worrying (68% vs 53%) or feel down, depressed, or

hopeless (67% vs 51%) compared to young adults who do not experience feelings of guilt or remorse after drinking alcohol. These findings highlight the extent to which this outcome from drinking is linked to increased mental health problems, demonstrating another way in which young adults are more likely to be exposed to alcohol harm compared to the rest of the population.



1 in 4

young adult drinkers fail to do what is usually expected of them as a consequence from alcohol consumption.

Young adults drink in different situations and for different reasons compared to the rest of the population

The findings in this report demonstrate there may be higher rates of binge drinking and high risk or possible dependent drinking among young adults compared to the rest of the population.

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To investigate this further we can explore how the culture of drinking varies among young adults through looking at the occasions and the reasons why they drink alcohol.

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Did you know?

The proportion of all adult drinkers in the UK drinking at home alone weekly or more often increased from 21% in 2018 to 24% during the pandemic (2021)

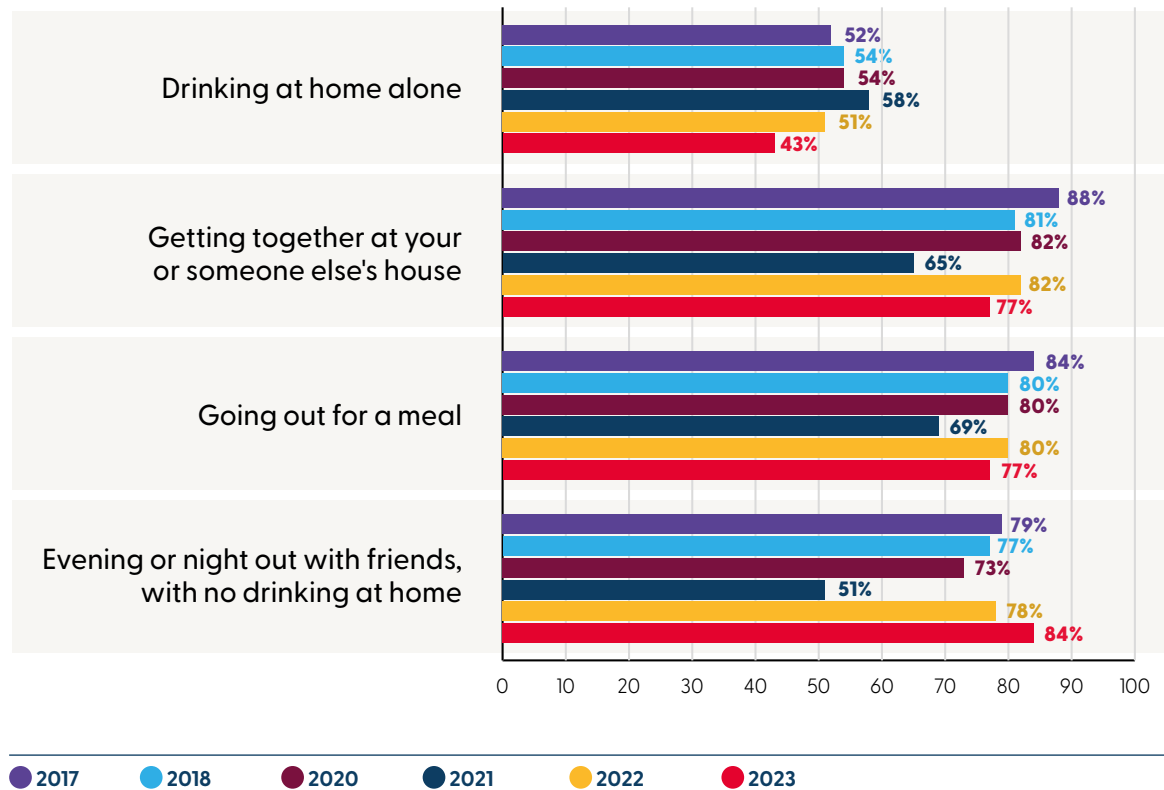
Young adults are most likely to drink alcohol on an evening or night out with their friends

Young drinkers are more likely to report drinking on an evening or night out with friends at least once in the previous year compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (84% and 74% respectively). They are also more likely to drink on this occasion regularly with 14% of young drinkers drinking on an evening or night out with friends weekly or more often compared to 7% of drinkers aged 25 and over. Young drinkers who report drinking on this occasion at least once in the previous year are four times more likely to binge drink weekly or more often (13% vs 3%) and almost twice as likely to score high risk or possibly dependent on the AUDIT (12% vs 7%) compared to young drinkers who have not. This suggests that drinking on an evening or night out may increase the risk of particular risky drinking behaviours which may help to explain why young adults are more likely to binge drink and drink at high risk or possibly dependent levels compared to the rest of the population.

While young adults are most likely to drink on an evening or night out with friends, they are less likely to report drinking at home alone in the previous 12 months compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (43% vs 52%). They are also less likely to drink on this occasion weekly or more often (9% vs 19%). Despite being less likely to drink alone at home compared to the rest of the population, this occasion for drinking may still have an impact on the drinking behaviours of some young adults. For example, young adults who do drink on these occasions are around three times more likely to binge drink weekly or more often (18% vs 6%) and almost seven times more likely to score high risk or possible dependent on the AUDIT (21% vs 3%) compared to young adults who never drink alcohol alone at home. This shows that while drinking at home alone is not the most common occasion for drinking among young adult drinkers, it is still associated with an increased risk of alcohol-related harm among this age group.

Figure 7: Young adults are most likely to drink when on an evening or night out

% of 18 to 24 year olds who drink on each occasion at least once in the last 12 months



Sample: All young adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2017 (n=673); 2018 (n=891); 2020 (n=852); 2021 (n=854); 2022 (n=596); 2023 (n=802)



of young drinkers drink on an evening or night out with friends.

One in five young adults regularly drink for reasons related to coping

People drink for different reasons, and these can be split into four different categories: enhancement (drinking to maintain or amplify positive affect), social (drinking to improve parties or gatherings), coping (drinking to avoid or dull negative affect), and conformity (drinking due to social pressure or a need to fit in). Exploring the reasons why young adults drink alcohol can also provide some insight as to why some young adult drinkers are more likely to display some risky drinking behaviours compared to the rest of the population.

Enhancement and social reasons are the most common reasons young adults report for drinking, and they are more likely to report drinking for these reasons regularly^{vi} than drinkers aged 25 and over (53% vs 37% and 52% vs 30% respectively). However, young adults are also more likely to regularly drink for reasons linked to coping and conformity (19% vs 13% and 17% vs 8% respectively).

^{vi} Adults who report drinking for these reasons most of the time or always

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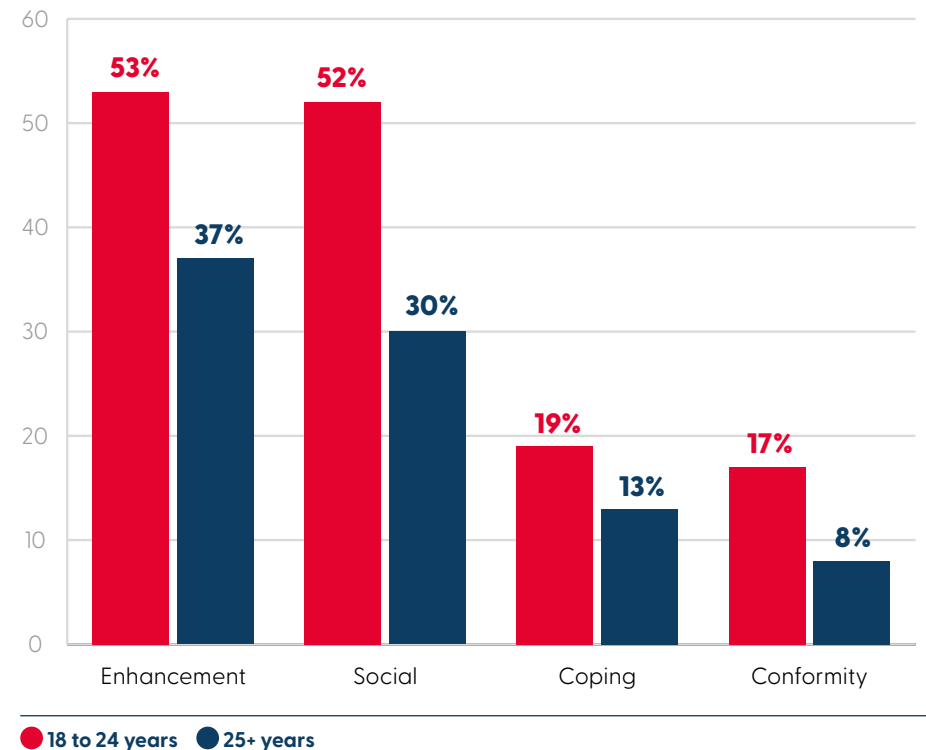
Coping reasons for drinking include drinking alcohol to forget about problems or to help relieve feelings of depression or anxiety.

”

One in five young adults regularly drink for coping reasons (19%). They are twice as likely to binge drink weekly or more often (21% vs 9%), and five times more likely to score high risk or possibly dependent on the AUDIT (31% vs 6%) compared to young adults who do not regularly drink for these reasons. This shows that risky drinking and motivations for drinking may be linked. Any increase in some of these reasons for drinking should be monitored closely as they may lead to an increase in alcohol-related harm.

Figure 8: One in five young adult drinkers regularly drink for reasons linked to coping

% of 18 to 24 year olds and those aged 25 and over who drink most of the time or always for the following reasons



Sample: All adults who drink alcohol. Drinkaware Monitor 2023 (n=9,023)

Young adults' drinking behaviour may have additional consequences to health and wellbeing

The findings in this report help uncover the drinking habits of young adults in the UK. While the proportion of young adults abstaining from alcohol has increased since 2017, they are still more likely to binge drink and score high risk or possibly dependent on the AUDIT compared to the rest of the population. Some of the harms associated with these drinking behaviours are explored further in this section.

Did you know?

Young adult drinkers are more likely to screen positive for anxiety or depression compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (43% vs 26%).



One of the harms associated with the drinking behaviours displayed by some young adults is poor mental health.²⁹ For instance, young adults who screen positive for anxiety or depression are more likely to binge drink weekly or more often (14% vs 10%) and score high risk or possibly dependent on the AUDIT (16% vs 7%) compared to young adults who do not. They are also more likely to report regular feelings of isolation or loneliness (25% vs 6% and 28% vs 7% respectively) and regularly drink to calm down (17% vs 8%), to be at ease with people (29% vs 20%) and to be more self-confident (30% vs 20%) compared to young adults who do not screen positive for anxiety or depression. These findings highlight the association between poor mental health and risky drinking which should be monitored closely due to the serious consequences this association could have.



One in three young adults who binge drink **take illegal drugs**.

Some of the drinking behaviours displayed by young adults are also associated with taking illegal drugs. In 2022, young adults who drank alcohol were almost 10 times more likely to take illegal drugs compared to young adults who did not (31% vs 3%). They were also three times more likely to take illegal drugs compared to drinkers aged 25 and over (31% vs 10%). The likelihood of taking illegal drugs increased among young binge drinkers and young adults drinking at high risk or possible dependent levels. For instance, one in three (36%) young binge drinkers took illegal drugs compared to 16% of young adults who did not binge drink; and three quarters (73% based on AUDIT) of young adults drinking at high risk or possible dependent levels took illegal drugs compared to 22% of young adults who were not. These findings highlight the association between illegal drug taking and alcohol consumption which may put young adults at a higher risk of experiencing harm compared to the rest of the population.

Another harm from the drinking behaviours of some 18 to 24 year olds is the impact their drinking could have on other people, particularly other young adults. Research shows that alcohol does not just cause harm to the individual drinker, it can cause harm to others as well.³⁰ For example, alcohol consumption has been shown to impact other people's mental health,³¹ it has links with violent crime,³² and it places a burden on public health services where resources could be better distributed to people who really need them.³³ In the UK, nearly one in three (32%) young adults show some concern about someone else's drinking, which is significantly higher compared to the rest of the population (25%). Almost half (44%) of young adults are concerned about a friend and over one third (36%) are concerned by a parent. Compared to the rest of the population, young adults are more likely to be concerned about the prevalence of memory loss experienced by someone else (23% vs 15%), the amount of people concerned about someone else's drinking (33% vs 24%) and the number of financial difficulties someone else was getting into (21% vs 13%).

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These findings show 18 to 24 year olds are at a greater risk of experiencing harm from someone else's drinking. Therefore, drinking behaviours among this age group and their impact on other people will need to be monitored closely.

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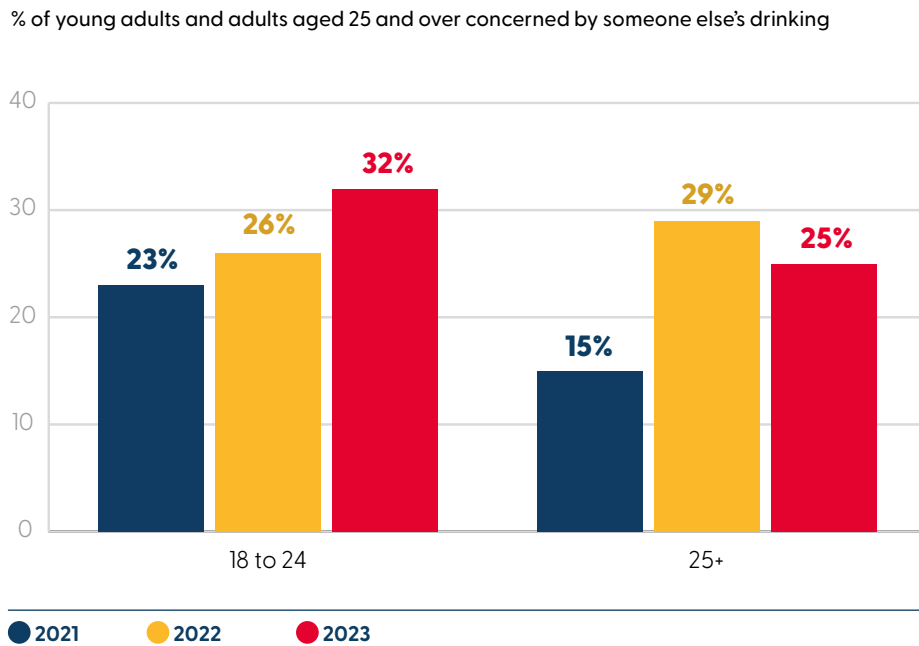
 **32%**
of young adults are worried
about someone else's drinking

Figure 9: The proportion of young adults worried by someone else's drinking has increased since 2021



Sample: All adults. The Drinkaware Monitor 2021 (n=9,137); 2022 (n=6,318); 2023 (n=10,473)



Young adults from more deprived areas are more likely to experience alcohol harm

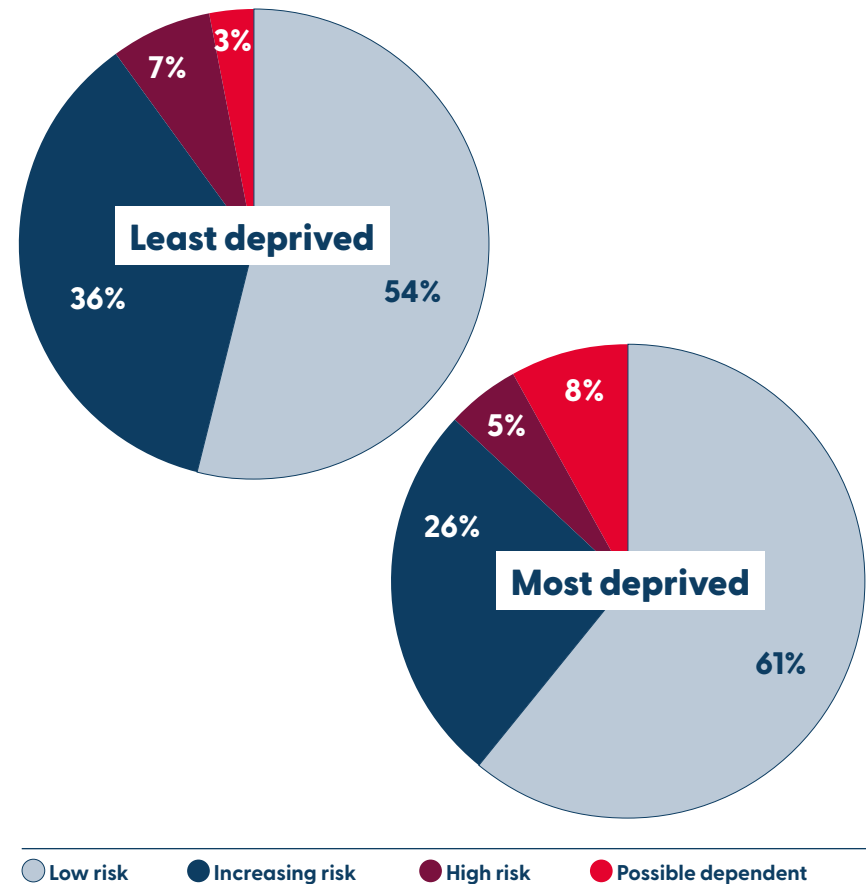
The alcohol harm paradox is a phenomenon where those from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience harm from alcohol despite drinking similar levels to those from the least deprived.³⁴ For example, there were 2,142 alcohol related hospital admissions^{vii} per 100,00 people in England in 2021/22 among those residing in the 10% most deprived areas compared to 1,466 per 100,00 residing in the 10% least deprived areas.³⁵ This is a similar trend across the rest of the UK³⁶ and demonstrates how alcohol may disproportionately affect people from more deprived backgrounds.

Young adults living in the most deprived areas^{viii} are just as likely to be non-drinkers (25% vs 22%), just as likely to consume more than 14 units each week (15% vs 17%) and just as likely to binge drink (70% vs 73%) compared to young adults living in the least deprived areas. This indicates there is not much difference between the drinking behaviours of young adults residing in the most and least deprived areas.

Despite this, young adult drinkers in the most deprived areas may be more likely to score possibly dependent on the AUDIT compared to those from the least deprived areas (8% vs 3%) (Figure 10). A deeper look into the AUDIT questions finds young adults living in the most deprived areas are 60% more likely to report having needed an alcoholic drink in the morning in the last year (17% vs 11%) and three times more likely to experience blackouts weekly or more often (7% vs 2%). These findings provide more evidence for the existence of the alcohol harm paradox, demonstrating that young adults living in the most deprived areas may be at a greater risk of suffering from alcohol-related harm.

Figure 10: Young adults from the most deprived areas are more likely to drink at possibly dependent levels

% 18 to 24 year olds from the least and most deprived areas by AUDIT risk levels



Sample: All young adults who drink alcohol. Least deprived (n=244); Most deprived (n=228)

vii A broad measure of hospital admissions where either the primary diagnosis (main reason for admission) or one of the secondary (contributory) diagnoses is an alcohol-related condition.

viii Index of Multiple Deprivation 1-3 (Most deprived); Index of Multiple Deprivation 8-10 (Least deprived)

Conclusion

The data from the Drinkaware Monitor presented in this report supports the positive trend in non-drinking among young adults in recent years which has led to them being regarded as a generation of non-drinkers. However, this does not reflect the full story when it comes to the drinking behaviours of 18 to 24 year olds in the UK. The findings in this report demonstrate that while young adults do generally tend to have higher rates of non-drinking, they are more likely to binge drink and more likely to drink at high risk or possible dependent levels compared to the rest of the population.

These behaviours may be driven by the occasions in which young adults drink and by some of the reasons for drinking. Abstinence from alcohol among young adults is receiving increasing academic study with numerous papers investigating these trends.^{37,38,39} However, as the findings in this paper demonstrate, there is still a need to acknowledge the consumption patterns of young adults who do drink as well.

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Young adults are not just a generation of non-drinkers. It is important to acknowledge this because of the implications their drinking may have on their health and wellbeing.

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For instance, binge drinking and drinking at high risk or possible dependent levels are associated with memory loss, poor mental health and taking illegal drugs which can all lead to serious consequences if not addressed. Therefore, the propensity for young adults to participate in risky drinking behaviours needs to be part of

the national conversation about the UK's drinking culture and any future alcohol strategy developed by the Westminster Government should seek to prevent young adults from suffering the health consequences associated with alcohol consumption.

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