

GENERAL-DIRECTORATE FOR INTERVENTION ON ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS AND  
DEPENDENCIES

# Young People, Alcohol and the Law.

*Uses, attitudes and legislation*

**Executive Summary**

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This study is part of a Program of Studies On the Application of the Provision, Sale and Use System of Alcohol Drinks in Public Places and Places Open to the Public aimed at enacting the provisions of the preamble and the established in Article 12 of Decree-Law 50/2013, of April the 16th, namely "the evaluation of alcohol use patterns by young people in general and teenagers in particular".

Its main goal is to characterize young people alcohol use patterns within the framework of the above mentioned legislative change. As such, and according to the opinion of the participants in the study, it aims to make available some indicators related to changes in those use patterns in the period after the publication of the law. In addition, and as a contribution for a more comprehensive reading, it includes information on factors that become mediators of the results production, namely law enforcement and knowledge/attitudes of young people towards it.

Of mixed type, the study includes both a quantitative component (survey by self-administered questionnaire) and a qualitative one (semi-structured interviews). The first gathers information from 1.501 youngsters, the second from 25. Fieldwork was conducted in May 2014 in five capitals of Mainland Portugal (NUTS II – «Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics»), a year after the publication of the Decree-Law.

From the integrated information of the two components, it is possible to say that the use of alcoholic drinks is quite evident amongst the young participants in the study, being, between May 2013 and May 2014, more commonly and frequently as age increases, especially from the age of 16, but with very relevant prevalence between the 10-15 years old, namely in ages from which provision, sale and use, in public or open to public places, are not legally permitted. It is noted that, whether or not spirits, prevalence, frequency and harmful use (drink up to be "happy", "binge" and severe intoxication) suffer a particularly significant increase in the transition between the 10-15 and 16-17 years old, reference period for the permission of provision, sale and use in public or open to public places.

This kind of use, in particular as regards the most harmful practices, is present both in familiar and peer group spheres, domains with great potential to influence ideas and behaviors over development. As almost half of the respondents say, "alcohol is fashionable".

The drinks most frequently used in the last 12 months are beer – more regularly – and spirits – for more people. 1 to 3 times per month is the most common use frequency of these drinks, which likely matches the social events frequency with others, once alcoholic drink use is seen as part of these events and enhancing the fun.

As a matter of fact and during last year, the most frequent places for drinks acquisition are conviviality contexts (bars, clubs, coffee houses), being beer the most cross-cut use in these contexts. Wine is more associated with dinners, and spirits with evenings out.

The beginning of use of alcoholic drinks tends to be early – it occurs especially between 13 and 15 years old –, below the minimum legal age and that is regarded as a natural and therefore expected experience. Often said as unpleasant, the experience must be persistently reiterated in order to get the taste of it. Indeed, the notion that alcoholic drinks use is a learning process is firmly present in interviewed young people speeches, namely with respect to alcoholic drinks use in order to get "happy" without being drunk. All levels of severe intoxication are considered undesirable, not only because they constitute unpleasant experiences but also because they jeopardize fun.

Thus, it is to note the perception that the younger and more inexperienced are those who are subject to deeper stages of alcoholic drinks noxiousness. In fact, quantitative data shows that the frequency of harmful uses is superior in recent users with 16-17 years old, whilst users between 19-24 years old are those who drink more often and do it "binge" way until they feel "happy", without being more severely drunk.

As regards the problems associated with alcoholic drinks use, it is to note that, in the last 12 months, a quarter of the young watch friends entering into an alcoholic coma. In the previous year, 10% experienced themselves this condition. There are some concerns as not being usual to call parents when children are intoxicated or not going to an emergency service in alcoholic coma situations. Finally, and taking into account young with driving license, it is to note the reference to drunk driving. This reference is at odds with the beliefs revealed about risks of driving under the influence of alcohol.

Crossing data from both components, qualitative and quantitative, on the youngsters perceptions on alcohol noxiousness, we have to consider the hypothesis that they tend to consider in general that alcohol is harmful mainly for pregnant, children and the more inexperienced and younger. Coherently with this harmful devaluation, health motives are among the less mentioned concerning alcoholic drinks use decrease.

A year after the legislative change, data collected is the first indicator that, during this period, a significant decrease of alcoholic drink use and harmful use patterns did not occur. Thus, with regard to the frequency of use evolution in the year before legislative change, the assessment of participants who used alcoholic beverages in the previous year is towards its maintenance, be it drink (whether or not spirits) or harmful uses. In this respect, on the use and harmful use prevalence and frequency in the transition between 10-15 and 16-17 years old and coherently with the reported evolution, it is noted that youngsters that used alcohol last year, report to a greater extend an increased use frequency, compared with the previous year.

With regard to the effects of legislation, this result should be considered on the light of some considerations on its implementation, and on the position of young people on the same legislation.

Thus, we see how, even though young people tend to be in favor of restrictive measures on the minimum legal age for access to alcohol, as a rule, they are unaware of the current legislation, placing the responsibility of its implementation in shops, and not feeling mobilized for its compliance and considering unlikely to suffer consequences for the non-compliance.

On the other hand, according to their perception and regardless of premises, there are no differences in the ease acquisition of alcoholic beverages in the period after legislative amendment. Indeed, half of young people surveyed reported already having undergone control practices by establishments. In turn, teenagers aged 16 report an increase on the ease of access and those aged 16/17 experienced control practices. In addition, young people adopting mechanisms to overcome barriers of access, get drinks in places where they know the control is lower, at home, or asking older friends to get it.

These results allow to suggest, how dissuasion of alcoholic beverages use should consider the deeply rooted character in social practices of the peer group, the importance of the promotion of fun and, moreover, the constraints on the implementation of the law that may compromise the results it intends to achieve. Finally, a factor of particular relevance to identify concerns the amount of time after the legislative amendment, reduced to the most widespread production effects in the behavior of young people.