

Alcohol sales to underage adolescents: an unobtrusive observational field study and evaluation of a police intervention

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Abstract

AIMS: The aims of this study were to assess the ease with which adolescents in the United Kingdom are able to buy alcohol, to obtain information concerning vendors' perceptions of alcohol sales to adolescents, and to evaluate a police intervention intended to reduce underage alcohol sales. **DESIGN, SETTING, SUBJECTS:** An unobtrusive naturalistic field study was conducted in two urban locations. Pairs of 13- and 16-year-old boys and girls were trained to attempt the purchase of different types of alcohol (alcopops, beer, cider, wine, spirits) from four different types of retail outlets (corner shops, off-licence, public houses and supermarkets), under the supervision of a researcher and typically a parent. The assessment was repeated, with the omission of the 13-year-old boys, following a police intervention in one of the performance sites, consisting of warning letters and visits to vendors, and the issue of a small number of police cautions. A total of 62 underage confederates in all attempted 470 test purchases in phase 1 and 348 in phase 2. Between the two waves of test purchases a sample (n = 95) of the same vendors was surveyed by telephone. **FINDINGS:** In phase 1, sales resulted from 88.1% of purchase attempts by 16-year-old girls, 77% of attempts by 16-year-old boys, 41.6% of 13-year-old girls and 4.1% of 13-year-old boys. These figures were generally comparable across locations, alcohol types and outlet types. Refusals were more likely when another vendor was present. Eighty per cent of sales to 16-year-olds and 65% of sales to 13-year-old girls were made without challenge. "Prove-It" ID cards were requested in fewer than 12% of purchase attempts in both age groups. Overall, there was no evidence that the police intervention reduced sales of alcohol to 16-year-olds. There was a hint that the intervention may have caused a very short-lasting decrease in sales to 13-year-old girls, but this was contained within an overall increase in sales to this group. Alcohol vendors reported that they rarely encountered underage customers or refused sale though 90% of vendors said that if they became suspicious, they would request ID. Only two vendors believed that they were likely to suffer adverse consequences if they sold alcohol to minors. **CONCLUSIONS:** These data suggest that 16-year-olds, and girls as young as 13, have little difficulty in purchasing alcohol, and that there is little difference between different types of outlets in their willingness to sell alcohol to minors. Vendors perceive little risk in selling alcohol to adolescents. The fact that the police intervention failed to decrease sales suggests that vendors do not change their behaviour in response to the threat of legal action.

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