

# **Rapid Appraisal of alcohol consumption, drinking behaviour and related problems among youth in Copenhagen**

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## **Executive Summary**

The report focuses on alcohol harm reduction and youth in Copenhagen and in particular on the problems related to alcohol consumption and youth as perceived by different stakeholders.

The report is the result of a rapid appraisal on alcohol, harm reduction, and youth in Copenhagen. The report forms part of a larger project initiated by IHRA (International Harm Reduction Association) on Alcohol and Harm Reduction in European Cities (for further information see [www.ihra.net](http://www.ihra.net)).

The report has a problem-oriented focus on alcohol consumption, habits and culture among the 11 – 24 years old. It identifies problems related to youth and alcohol consumption, how these problems are targeted by the Danish authorities, and in what areas new interventions or enhancement of current interventions could be valid. The report is based on research, public monitoring systems, laws and regulations, reports from public bodies and private organisations, newspapers, web-pages, and statements from key-persons representing: the trade business, door men, drinking venues and their owners, the public health Department in Copenhagen Municipality, out reach workers, preventive workers, the police, the SSP co-operation (School, Social service and Police), and of course young people.

## **Findings**

### *Drink and young people*

The report illustrates that young Danes begin drinking at a very early age, they drink larger quantities and more frequently than young people in most other European countries, and they drink with a clear focus on drunkenness.

Among the 15 – 16 year olds, drinking is the norm and abstinence is disapproved of. Even though alcohol consumption has decreased among 11 – 14 years old, young Danes still have early experiences with alcohol. The percentages of young people drinking more than the recommended maximum of 21 units of alcohol for men per week and 14 units for women per week reaches a peak when they are about 20 years. The consumption of Ready-to-drink (RTD) drinks is highest among the youngest (11 – 16 years old).

The problems related to alcohol consumption in the age group between 11 – 24 years is related to negative experiences as for example quarrelling, unprotected sex, problems with friends, reduced working capacity at work/school, destruction of clothes or possessions, and problems with parents. These problems predominate, rather than long-term health consequences. Even though Danish youth tend to focus on the positive effects of alcohol (such as relaxation, fun, etc.) and down play negative experiences, these are quite widespread experiences among Danish youth. Negative experiences are related to the amount of alcohol units consumed.

#### *Danish alcohol policy*

Danish policy on alcohol includes both laws and regulations in regard to alcohol as well as national and local alcohol political action plans. The *Governments Public Health Program* is as close as one can get to a national alcohol political action plan. Alcohol prevention is compulsory in primary schools. Traditionally Danish alcohol policy has been built on a tax and regulation policy combined with treatment and prevention. There are still taxes on alcohol, but today Denmark cannot be characterised as a country with high taxes on alcohol.

The Danish laws and regulations include: a minimum age for purchase of alcohol (16 years in retail, 18 years in drinking venues), drink-driving laws (one can drive a motor vehicle with a BAC level below 0.05 per cent), restrictions on liquor sales and outlets including opening hours and licenses to run a drinking venue, and marketing restrictions especially in relation to children and young people.

#### *Youth culture*

The report also includes a discussion on alcohol culture and youth. Young people drink on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights and are abstinent the rest of the week. Drinking is understood as a social act where young people bond and drinking alcohol is a sign of maturity. Young people exaggerate how much alcohol they consume and believe that their peers drink more than they actually.

Young people calculate their risks and have various forms of harm reducing strategies, as for example only drinking in the company of well-

known and trusted peers or intervening in peer drinking. Young Danes perceive and calculate risks when taking substances rather differently than authorities. For young people it is not a matter of taking substances or not, but how to take them and in what quantities. Young people calculate risks from their own experiences with substances and/or their friends' experiences. Lastly, many young people do not have any arrangements with their parents concerning alcohol. Research, however, show that parents can influence their children's alcohol use so that binge-drinking is decreased.

### *The City of Copenhagen*

Copenhagen is a city with a high percentage of young people. It has the most drinking venues pr capita and certain areas are busy and buzzing with life on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. The problems related to public space are different kinds of nuisance as for example noise around drinking venues, litter and stench.

### *Views of different stakeholders*

Another large bulk of the report focus on different stakeholders' perceptions of alcohol related problems in drinking locations, at home, and in educational institutions. The most important perceptions of the problems and risks relate to selling and serving to minors, serving to excessively drunken people, cheap alcohol promotions - like double-up, triple-up or "drink as much as you can", or slogans by used by drinking venues that promote positive images of being drunk.

### *Current interventions*

The last focus in the report is on prevention projects and strategies in Copenhagen. The report includes a list of all – to the authors' known – available prevention projects in Copenhagen with short descriptions of what they contain and whom they target.

In Copenhagen Municipality preventive work is organised by different bodies: Social centres, Public Health Copenhagen, SSP (School, Social Service, and Police), and the Crime Preventive Department Copenhagen Police. On a national level the National Board of Health distributes prevention policies and initiatives related to alcohol consumption. Prevention projects are in the report categorised as either educational material, lectures, out reach work, or engagement of drinking venues. Most of the preventive projects are aimed at young people. A few projects target parents and/or professionals.

Most preventive projects use educational material and much (perhaps too much?) preventive work has the form of written material. Lectures are offered by both professionals and as peer-education. Only a few projects engage in outreach work. Outreach work gives access to marginalized

youths who, otherwise, tend not to talk with adults about alcohol. It is crucial that outreach workers are skilled in how to deal with youths with alcohol and drug problems in order to construct a constructive relationship with the youth. Only one project of all the prevention projects engages the drinking venues.

### ***New interventions or enhancement of current interventions***

The suggestions for interventions take as a point of departure the laws and regulations present in Denmark as well as the way alcohol prevention is publicly organised. The mapping of what kind of new interventions could be welcomed as well as how current interventions could be enhanced is hence framed by how the structural and organisational situation is in Copenhagen at present. Some interventions that are either absent in Copenhagen/Denmark, others have been suggested by several different stakeholders.

Interventions can be aimed at different stakeholders in the field on a *structural*, *community*, and/or an *individual* level. The *different stakeholders* includes: the alcohol industry, trade organisations, drinking venue owners, politicians and policy makers, out reach workers, preventive workers, the police, the SSP co-operation, parents, and young people.

#### *Laws and regulations*

The *structural level* here defined as the laws and regulations related to alcohol sets some limits for marketing, selling, and serving of alcohol as well as how alcohol political action plans are formed. Different stakeholders do not mainly ask for stricter laws and regulations, but for seeing the need for better implementation of current laws and regulations.

Three issues have been underlined in the report: One is to avoid aggressive marketing of alcohol; another is to enhance responsible serving practices in drinking venues; and the third is to avoid minors buying alcohol. All three issues are mainly aimed at avoiding minors buying and drinking alcohol, avoiding serving to excessively drunk people, avoiding binge-drinking, and avoiding drinking alcohol being portrayed as something “cool”. Interventions could include:

- *Courses in responsible serving practices.* In general courses in responsible serving practices are not implemented in Denmark. The intervention could include co-operation between the public authorities, drinking venues, and trade organisations

- *Request for use of id-cards.* I.e. require young people to use id-cards (issued by the municipality) when buying alcohol. This intervention must include at least public authorities and retail shops.
- *Reduce aggressive marketing of alcohol I.* Interventions that reduce cheap alcohol promotions and inappropriate, but not illegal, slogans where alcohol consumption is portrayed as “cool”. Interventions could include a co-operation between public authorities, drinking venues, the trade organisation, and youth
- *Reduce aggressive marketing of alcohol II.* Consumption of RTD drinks is highest among the youngest (11 – 16 years old). Marketing of these drinks has been criticised. The intervention would be for the industry to market these products so that they appeal less to minors.

#### *Community level interventions*

The *community level* includes the way prevention initiatives are organised in the municipality (SSP co-operation, out reach workers, compulsory teaching in primary school about alcohol use, etc.), what kind of different (private) organisations participate in community prevention work, as well as the role of parents as a group.

Three issues have been underlined in the report: One is to involve parents more in prevention work; another is to train professionals in the field about youth culture and alcohol; a third is to focus more on alcohol and less on drugs, for example in internet-sites. These issues are all related to the avoidance of binge-drinking, drinking by minors, as well as to take seriously that Danish youth tend to focus on the positive effects of alcohol (relaxation, fun, etc.) and down play negative experiences even though problems in relation to drinking alcohol are widespread.

- *Engaging parents.* Interventions that have parents as a target group are important since research show that parents can influence their children’s alcohol use so that binge-drinking is decreased. Interventions could with advantage be made in co-operation between parents, children, professionals such as teachers, and municipal preventive workers.
- *Training of professionals.* The efficacy of prevention is related to whether professionals can get into constructive relationships with young people or not. The development of training to professionals must be seen as an enhancement of current interventions and could be done in co-operation with an external partner as for example CVU (Centre for more Advances Studies).

- *More focus on alcohol.* A good internet-site on alcohol aimed at young people could be a more broad intervention. Such an initiative could preferably enhance already existing internet-sites.

#### *Individual level interventions*

The *individual level* is understood as the youth, not only as individuals but also as youth culture. At this level most intervention projects focus on youth, and not parents, professionals, or others as has been suggested above. There are already a lot of projects offering prevention to youth.

New kinds of prevention or harm reducing initiatives targeting youth are however needed. They should take as a point of departure the role alcohol is actually playing in youth culture and what kind of perceptions are widespread in youth culture related to alcohol. In general young people should be involved in the development of new interventions, rather than them being just developed by experts or professionals.

- *Prevention strategies other than written material.* Prevention material using other kinds of media (internet, video, games, etc.) or involving young people in other ways than sitting in a classroom listening and discussing alcohol issues and problems should be welcomed.
- *Gendered interventions.* Interventions that take gender into account are important, especially in relation to male youth culture.
- *Reducing risks.* Interventions that focus on a reduction of negative experiences related to drinking alcohol, for example through the change of norms in peer groups.

Full report is available on: [www.crf-au.dk/publikationer](http://www.crf-au.dk/publikationer)

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