



Editorial

Declining Teenage Drinking: A Global Phenomenon?



In 2015, de Looze et al. published a summary of drinking trend data up to the 2010 wave of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study [1], identifying marked declines in adolescent drinking across the majority of participating countries. This sparked a substantial research effort examining international teenage drinking trends, identifying similarities and differences in drinking patterns, attempting to explain the sharp declines, and assessing their longer-term implications [2–4].

As this literature has grown, researchers have been increasingly careful to note that declines in teen drinking may only be a phenomenon in high-income countries (HICs), reflecting common cultural and socio-economic experiences [5]. Further, the clear evidence that the global alcohol industry has been focusing its attention on growing its markets in lower and middle-income countries (LMICs) [6,7] has raised the potential that declines in drinking in HICs are being offset by growth in relatively underdeveloped markets.

In this issue, an excellent paper by Smith et al. provides the first comprehensive attempt to assess recent drinking trends in LMICs and finds, contrary to expectation, that drinking has largely declined, in some cases quite markedly [8]. As with HICs, these trends are not uniform; in some countries and regions, increases in drinking prevalence among young teenagers raise real concerns about the need for prevention and policy interventions. But the general pattern is encouraging, suggesting that the major declines in teenage drinking that have been increasingly studied in HICs may be occurring in many LMICs as well.

Globalization's impacts on drinking are often discussed, both in terms of general cultural influence and in terms of the effects of a truly global alcohol and alcohol marketing industry. The increasing multinational alcohol industry has expanded its markets substantially in LMICs, where alcohol was traditionally less common, and there have been increasing concerns about the impacts of industry's global marketing efforts on youth drinking [6,9]. As early as 2001, Jernigan argued that "survey and anecdotal data from countries around the globe suggest that a culture of sporadic heavy or "binge" drinking among young people may be spreading from the developed to the developing countries." [10]. These data provide at least some

reassurance that globalization's impacts might work in reverse, with the large declines in teenage drinking seen since the early 2000s in Europe, the USA, Australia, the UK, Canada, and New Zealand reflected in countries like Jamaica, Samoa, and Uruguay.

This is not to say that the problem of youth drinking is solved. As the authors note, the prevalence of alcohol consumption among this young population remains high in many of the countries studied, and harms from alcohol globally remain one of the major contributors to the burden of disease for young people [11]. Ensuring effective alcohol policies are implemented in LMICs should remain a key priority for public health, but these broad global patterns are a good reminder that alcohol consumption and related harms are influenced by broader cultural and socio-economic factors beyond the reach of alcohol policy. Alcohol policies are clearly an effective means for reducing drinking among young people [12], but they are operating in a complex web of cultural and social factors that need to be better understood.

The data presented in Smith et al. also highlight the importance of reliable and regular monitoring systems [8]. The Global School-based Student Health Survey is a crucial supplement to the long-running and cross-national survey data available in HICs from key international projects [13,14]. Ensuring these data are available in an ongoing manner for a broader range of LMICs is critical to ensuring that we have the full picture of global youth drinking patterns and can respond appropriately. Changes in adolescent drinking have long-lasting implications for drinking in the population [15], and a global focus on the topic is crucial.

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