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## Abstainers and Drinkers – Two Sides of the Same Coin?

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### ABSTRACT

This commentary discusses a recently published literature review focussing on the growing trend of young people abstaining from drinking alcohol. Despite the recent increase in research on the decline in youth drinking, the review only identified 10 papers that explicitly examined abstainers. The inclusion criteria used thus excluded and overlooked the vast literature available on the decline in youth drinking. This commentary discusses the implications of this and raises the issue of how the adolescent abstainer should be viewed in research; is it a distinct social phenomenon with unique determinants or are abstainers merely the flip side of drinkers?

### KEYWORDS

Alcohol; youth; survey; change; drinking; ESPAD; HBSC

Over the past two decades there have been marked changes in adolescent alcohol use, with both declines in drinking and increases in non-drinking reported from a number of high-income countries (Arnarsson et al., 2018; Livingston, 2014; Raitasalo et al., 2018; Raninen et al., 2014). These changes are still largely unexplained (Ball et al., 2023; Pennay et al., 2015; Raninen et al., 2022) so against this background we welcome the initiative from the authors to systematically review the literature on abstainers (Corre et al., 2023). Increases in abstinence have been so marked that non-drinking has even become the majority behavior for young people in some countries (Raninen et al., 2021; Rossow et al., 2022), so an increased research focus on abstainers is important. We also welcome this as it counteracts the inclination toward a problem orientation that is common for alcohol research (Pape, 1995).

We were however quite surprised to read that only 10 papers had been included, and we feel that it is somewhat strange that the authors of this review (Corre et al., 2023) do not acknowledge the vast literature on the declines in youth drinking. Several review articles and reports on the topic have been published in recent years (see for example (Inchley et al., 2018; Pape et al., 2018; Vashishtha et al., 2019)). While the literature broadly focusses on declines in drinking, there is a lot to learn from this body of literature with respect to abstinence. For example, some key knowledge gaps and research needs identified in this review have been addressed, including cross-national analyses (De Looze et al., 2019; Raitasalo et al., 2020; Ramstedt et al., 2022; Vashishtha et al., 2020) using consistent measures. Indeed, there are already two major data sources that use harmonized questionnaires to measure youth drinking: the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) and the

Health Behavior of School aged Children (HBSC) and researchers have published widely using them. While there does remain a relative dearth of studies from lower- and middle-income countries, it is important that we do not spend time and energy gathering data we already have and rendering results on things we may already know.

The current review by Corre et al. (2023) and its explicit focus on abstaining did however get us thinking about the nature of drinking and abstinence among youth, or rather the behaviors of drinking and non-drinking. Are these inherently different from each other or are they merely each other's opposites? For instance, while most HBSC and ESPAD publications predicted the prevalence of lifetime and 30-day drinking, the reference category in these analyses was abstinence. Do studies of the predictors of drinking usefully inform our understanding of non-drinking? If we need new and additional studies to understand nondrinkers/abstainers this would imply that this behavior is something unique and different from the opposite of drinking.

Can we simply take the results of the growing literature on youth drinking and flip their results when we think about non-drinking, just like we do in the research literature on tobacco and cannabis use? The authors are not clear on this in their article, neither in arguing the need for the paper in the introduction, nor in concluding the findings in the discussion. We think that this is the key question arising from the article, and one question that is crucial for us researchers to understand moving forward, i.e., do we need to separate and distinguish the findings of nondrinkers from those of drinkers, or are they two sides of the same coin so that we can use and learn something from both? A recent paper on this using data from the adult population in Sweden implied that these are not especially separate phenomena or isolated sub-populations, but rather seem to

be one population with a shared social behavior (Raninen et al., 2022).

We talk about abstainers in the context of alcohol use, it is noteworthy that we do not use this word to describe young people who do not engage in other forms of substance use, such as tobacco and cannabis use. Plausibly, we study alcohol abstinence among young people because societal norms prescribe that alcohol use is still a widely accepted behavior and something that we expect that most will start with later. This in extension implies that we regard young people who do *not* engage in drinking as a special group (with some deficits), while this discussion is non-existing in the literature on tobacco and cannabis use, where we do not assume that everyone not using will start using at some point later on in life.

The literature is also showing that the decline in youth drinking has shifted the age of onset upwards (Keyes et al., 2019; Livingston et al., 2020) and has caused a displacement of consumption so that 17 year olds nowadays drink in a similar manner as 15 year olds did in the beginning of the millennium (Raninen et al., 2022). This would imply that the trends are more the result of a prolonged age of onset rather than abstinence being a newly established and solidified behavior that will accompany the youth as they grow older. Thus, many of those (currently) not drinking are future drinkers that have simply not yet started to drink. Is it then feasible to treat them as inherently different from the drinkers?

In summary, we think that it is important to shift from a problem-oriented focus on drinkers and focus more on the nondrinkers, as such the paper by Corre et al is a welcome contribution. We do however think its focus is narrow and wonder whether the authors of this review think anything can be learned about abstaining from the literature on adolescent drinkers, or if they believe that drinkers and nondrinkers are fundamentally different from each other?

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