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### *Alcohol use among 17-year-old students in Poland*

Underage drinking is an important public health issue in our country. The report from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) indicates that rates of Polish students drinking three times or more during the 30 days before the survey were on increase from 11% in 1995 to 31% in 1999 (5). So alarming a situation gave rise to design and conduct the research programme addressing the issue.

The article aims to increase the range of knowledge of alcohol use among young people in Poland concerning the frequency of drinking among 17-year-olds, their ages of initiation of alcohol use, and their preferences in alcoholic beverages. By focusing on a homogenous age group, the report describes differences in patterns of alcohol use across the sample taking into account a type of school respondents attended, their family environment, as well as their gender.

#### METHODS

The study was performed in 2001–2003 among the population of 17-year-olds of randomly chosen post-primary schools of three different types: general profile (GP), technical (T), and vocational (V). Among 15,000 individuals surveyed, there were 5,000 respondents (2,500 girls and 2,500 boys) from each type of school. The survey was conducted in capitals of voivodships, county towns, and communities. The selected group was representative for the whole population of young people at the age of 17 in Poland.

The designed questionnaire was partly categorized. It comprised both closed questions with a list of the limited number of answers to choose from and half-open questions which enabled to give the respondents their own replies. The questionnaire was composed of 16 questions and respondents were given 20 minutes to complete it. Each examined person received the questionnaire in their school and was requested to fill it in a classroom. The survey was anonymous. In order to analyze the obtained data, Microsoft Excel 97 was used.

#### RESULTS

**Family environment.** The majority of young people surveyed (71%) were brought up by both parents. Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents' families had their history of alcohol abuse. It was subjects' fathers who were problem drinkers in most cases. Over half of the respondents used disapproving expressions while referring to the relations between their parents (25% of them considered them to be very bad); the rest regarded them as good or fairly good. Over half of the respondents were of the opinion that the atmosphere at home was unfriendly (according to 25% of them it was very unfriendly). Most respondents characterized their fathers as aggressive (58%) and irascible (33%), whereas 17.5% of them – as warm-hearted and good-tempered.

Respondents' ambivalent feelings towards their mothers were particularly noticeable; the young people mostly described them as irritable (42.2%) but also as warm-hearted (30%).

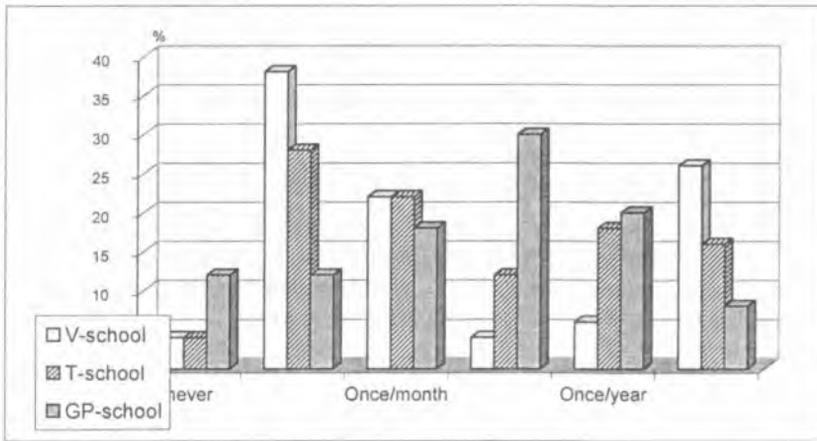


Fig. 1. Frequency of drinking among 17-year-olds from different types of schools

Frequency of alcohol use. Figure 1 presents the frequency of alcohol use for all types of the schools examined. Differences in the frequency of alcohol consumption among students from each type of school (especially V and GP) are observable: 64% of V-students, 44% of T-students, and 20% of GP-students reported that they often drank alcohol (i.e. once a week or more often). In most cases, male students reported more frequent alcohol use than their female peers.

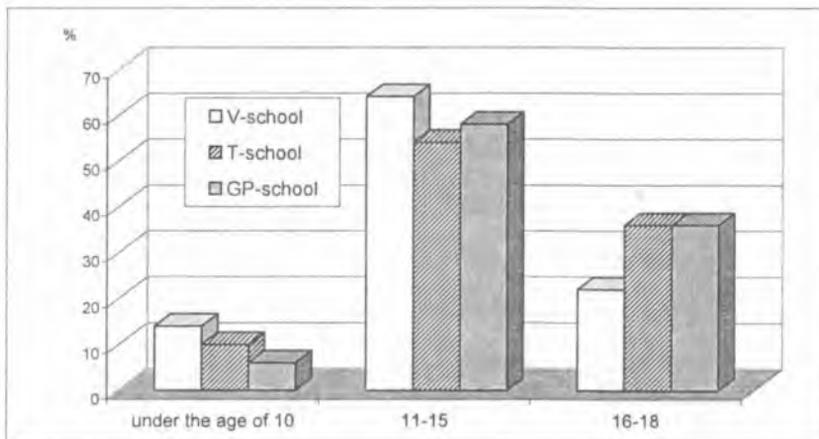


Fig. 2. Age of initiation of alcohol use among 17-year-olds from different types of schools

Age of initiation of alcohol use among Polish adolescents. The respondents were also inquired about the age of their first conscious use of alcohol. Figure 2 presents the age of the onset of drinking alcohol among the young people surveyed. According to the obtained data, V-students began drinking at the earliest age (64% of them before leaving primary school, incl. as many as 14% before the age of 10). The situation among T-students seems

to be somewhat better: while 54% of the subjects reported their first consumption of alcohol at primary school (incl. 10% before the age of 10), 36% of them drank after the age of 16. Similar rates were found among GP-students (58%, 6% and 36% respectively).

Additionally, the age of initiation of alcohol use between female and male students from the examined schools was compared. According to the results, 78% of girls and 97% of boys from V-schools had drunk alcohol for the first time at the age of 11 to 15. The gender gap at T-schools and GP-schools was more apparent (44% and 72% respectively) and there was no girl consuming alcohol before the age of 11.

*Type of alcohol preferred among Polish 17-year-olds.* As the data show, beer is the most popular alcoholic drink among adolescents from all types of schools in Poland. It was chosen by 70% of GP-students (76% of girls versus 80% of boys), 82% of T-students (92% versus 72% respectively), and 72% of V-students (60% versus 84% respectively). Compared to wine, spirits turned out to be more popular among the students surveyed: 10% of GP-students, 14% of T-students, and 20% of V-students preferred it as their most popular drink. The corresponding rates for wine were 10%, 2%, and 8% respectively.

## DISCUSSION

The presented results indicate that the population studied may be at risk of developing alcohol problems later in life. First of all, they started drinking, on average, early. Pre-adolescents who drink alcohol are likely to consume it in larger and larger amounts over time (9). As some epidemiologic analyses have shown, people with the onset of alcohol use at 14 and earlier may be prone to alcohol dependency approximately four times as frequently as those who begin drinking at age 20 and older (3). Moreover, drinking alcohol at an early age tends to precede the use of other drugs (7, 10).

Furthermore, considering the fact that the respondents were exposed to their parents' alcohol abuse as well as lack of warmth in their family lives, their family environment may influence the adolescents' drinking. It is family who plays an important role in shaping a child's future drinking behaviour both through the parents' behavioural example and through the ways in which the parents filter and interpret societal norms and values regarding alcohol use (6). On the other hand, problems of family life such as family disruption or conflict, and weak bonds among the members of a family may affect youth drinking (4).

School is another vital component of youths' social world. The analyses revealed differences between students from different types of school in terms of frequency and age of alcohol initiation. Some explanation has been offered by Paschall et al. (11). According to them, working adolescents do consume alcohol more often than those whose curriculum does not include vocational training; while being at work, they may come into contact with adult employees drinking in the workplace and be encouraged to do so. On the other hand, the European research *The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* has revealed the relationship between the frequency of youth drinking and students' school performance and their liking for their school (1). In other words, young people's attitudes to their schools seem to be more important than the type of school. Besides, it is peer groups who become a more significant influence during adolescence. That is why it is worth investigating whether patterns of passing spare time among the respondents studied differ greatly.

This research demonstrates also differences in drinking patterns of male and female teenagers as for frequency and initiation of alcohol use. The findings are in line with the literature (2, 13). This is related to common behaviour patterns (different for both sexes) observable among adults as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

The presented findings indicate that alcohol prevention should be initiated in the first years of children's education. It is recommended that school-based prevention programmes be combined with extracurricular as well as family-based and policy strategies, which help change the entire social and cultural environment where young people live in order to decrease alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems permanently (8). The considerable influence of the group on an individual during adolescence ought to be also taken into account. As O'Maley et al. (10) point out, most teenagers drink in order to experience pleasurable effects of alcohol, such as having a good time with friends. Therefore, the proposal of Paxton (12) to involve self-help groups spreading message of abstinence among their contemporaries seems to be particularly useful for preventive actions.

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## SUMMARY

The paper reports the findings of a nationwide survey of 15,000 17-year-olds conducted in Poland in 2001–2003. The main aim of the research was to study drinking practices among young people. A self-administered anonymous questionnaire was distributed to the sample. Respondents' frequency of drinking, their ages of initiation of alcohol use, and their preferences in alcoholic beverages were analysed. According to the results, both frequency and the age of initiation of alcohol use are associated with a type of school and sex of respondents. Beer is the most popular alcoholic drink among the sample studied.

## Spożycie alkoholu wśród 17-letnich uczniów w Polsce

Praca informuje o wynikach ogólnokrajowego badania 15,000 siedemnastolatków, przeprowadzonego w Polsce w latach 2001–2003. Głównym celem badania było zanalizowanie zwyczajów odnoszących się do picia alkoholu wśród młodych ludzi przy pomocy anonimowego kwestionariusza do samodzielnego wypełnienia. Analizowano częstotliwość picia badanych, wiek inicjacji alkoholowej oraz preferencje dotyczące napojów alkoholowych. Zgodnie z wynikami zarówno częstotliwość, jak i wiek inicjacji alkoholowej był związany z typem szkoły oraz picią badanych. Piwo jest najbardziej popularnym napojem alkoholowym w badanej próbie.