

Social norms and alcohol

It is known from research in psychology that we tend to make mistakes when it comes to understanding what other people think and do. This can be due to several reasons such as memory biases, or the media portraying certain groups as behaving in certain ways. These misinterpretations can lead to us perceiving groups in a stereotypical way, including the groups that we belong to ourselves. An example of this is the stereotype of students being heavy drinkers. It is true that some research suggests that both young people and students can be amongst the heaviest drinking groups in the UK and other countries, but this does not mean that behaviour such as binge drinking is typical of students. Research by [academics at Bournemouth University](#) has demonstrated for instance that the majority of students have 4 or fewer alcoholic drinks when they do drink[1], and do not binge drink on a regular basis[2]. This research has also confirmed that students do markedly overestimate how heavily and frequently other students drink alcohol – in other words the actual norms of alcohol consumption is much lower than the perceived norm.

The social norms approach targets these misperceptions and stereotypes by highlighting the positive action of most people in a community. The approach is different from many other education and information campaigns. It doesn't use fear tactics to try and scare people into changing; nor does it promote a message of what people should do. Instead it simply reflects to the population what the real norms amongst them are. For students and alcohol this would mean empowering people to make informed decision about their own alcohol use by giving them information on the actual alcohol norms on campus.

1. McAlaney, J. and W. Jenkins, *Perceived social norms of health behaviours and college engagement in British students*. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 2015: p. 1-15.
2. McAlaney, J., et al., *Personal and perceived peer use of and attitudes toward alcohol among university and college students in seven EU countries: Project SNIPE*. Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 2015. **76**(3): p. 430-8.