

Understanding drinking transitions during lockdown: social inequalities, alcohol and the COVID-19 pandemic

Dr Emily Nicholls, Lecturer in Sociology, University of York

SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar
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Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems ([SHAAP](#)) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network ([SARN](#)) are proud to host the lunchtime *Alcohol Occasionals* in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh ([RCPE](#)). The seminars showcase new and innovative research on alcohol-related topics and provide the opportunity for researchers, healthcare professionals, policymakers and members of the public to discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme is *alcohol and inequalities*. [Event reports](#) aim to capture the main discussion points and communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is responsible for the contents of this report, which are our interpretation.

Introducing the seminar, SARN Co-Chair, [Professor Carol Emslie](#), welcomed [Dr Emily Nicholls](#) ([@DrEmilyNicholls](#)) on behalf of SHAAP and SARN. Dr Nicholls thanked SHAAP/SARN for the invitation to present and acknowledged her co-researcher, [Dr Dominic Conroy](#) (University of East London).

Nicholls first explained that this research project ('Drinking in Lockdown') explored the experiences of UK drinkers during the pandemic, noting that whilst the main aim was not to explore social inequalities, the rich data provides interesting insights

into how people's relationship with drinking has changed and whose relationships are changing. Findings are emerging as analysis is ongoing.

Nicholls provided [background](#) on drinking, class, and social inequalities. In many societies around the world, higher alcohol consumption is seen in higher socio-economic status (SES) and higher educated groups – this is the case in the UK. However, alcohol-related health harms are typically higher in lower SES groups, despite in general drinking less – known as the 'alcohol harm paradox' (AHP). Various psychosocial factors are suggested to contribute to the AHP (see [event report](#) for Jennifer Boyd's AHP *Alcohol Occasional*), and many of these factors are likely to have been exacerbated during the pandemic because [research suggests](#) that the pandemic has widened existing social and health inequalities.

Next, **Nicholls** provided [background](#) on drinking during the pandemic – a complex picture, with conflicting studies and evidence still emerging. It seems there has been a [polarisation in drinking habits](#), with those who drank more heavily pre-pandemic more likely to be consuming more alcohol, and lighter drinkers more likely to have cut down further or stopped completely. However, there is a mixed picture for which groups (e.g., high vs. low SES) are drinking more/less.



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Then **Nicholls** [discussed](#) home drinking – drinking has moved to the home over the last few years/decades; the pandemic has only accelerated an existing trend. Despite home drinking being commonplace for years, research on home drinking is lacking.

Nicholls explained that the 'Drinking in Lockdown' project consisted of 12 one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and four household focus groups (interviewing pairs) undertaken online, with 20 current UK drinkers (age range: 26-65; gender-balanced; predominantly middle-class and white). The first interview was undertaken in mid-May, and the final interview in mid-August, i.e., between the first and second national lockdowns in England. Eight interviews and two

focus groups took place before pubs reopened on 4 July. There was an optional one week 'drinks diary', completed by 14 participants – this helped elicit further discussion during the interviews. Recruitment was via social media / email.

Nicholls shared headline findings, noting that analysis is on-going.

Home drinking: The home as both an enabler of and a constraint on drinking; alcohol revitalising familiar home environments; wanting the home to be 'alcohol-free'.

Drinking transitions: The role of alcohol pre-lockdown, during lockdown and possible post-lockdown transitions.

Key themes we explored further were:

Lockdown as an opportunity for 'growth' and self-development

Lockdown may be a 'teachable moment', allowing time for people to reflect on their drinking and the opportunity to experiment with dry periods or drinking less (without peer pressure to drink). For some, lockdown has been seen as a time for self-improvement, which includes cutting down on alcohol – mirroring Dry January research. However, being able to frame lockdown as a 'teachable moment' is likely to be classed, with those with greater access to resources (e.g., time, money, space) likely better able to frame lockdown in this way.

Precarity, stress and uncertainty as possible triggers for drinking

Participants highlighted links between stress and uncertainty (such as with employment) and drinking more. These links may have been compounded by social and health inequalities, such as limited mobility or health conditions.

Drawing on notions of class, taste, and luxury to justify drinking

There was evidence of participants justifying their changing consumption practices during lockdown as 'treats' and luxury purchases. This is akin to the 'home drinking habitus' of

middle-class drinkers, where, for example, drinking wine is seen as a source of 'cultural capital'.

Nicholls highlighted limitations of the study: the small number of (self-selected, that is, keen to take part, for whatever reason) participants who were predominantly middle-class, so the findings may not be generalisable; self-reporting (not always accurate); and that drink diaries provided only a 'snapshot' in time.

Nicholls also noted that it is difficult to assess the potential for long-term change – will we return to pre-COVID-19 drinking habits as lockdown eases?

Nicholls highlighted questions for future research, including:

- Is lockdown as a 'teachable moment' inherently classed?
- If drinking has increased due to stress/uncertainty, are those in more precarious circumstances disproportionately affected, facing (even more) harm, with an added health burden from drinking?
- How do issues of 'class' and 'taste' explain the rationalisation of drinking during lockdown?
- How have other social inequalities (such as gender and race) been experienced during the pandemic, and how has this impacted on drinking?

We then opened for discussion, which explored various issues, including: drinking settings and their pros/cons (for example, pubs may encourage drinking through promotions; however, pubs have limited opening hours, unlike the home); digital socialising and drinking (and the need for more research on this); questions about how the drinking of young people who binge drank pre-pandemic may have changed; the response of the alcohol industry to the pandemic, including home deliveries; and the impact of home-schooling on drinking.

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SHAAP Blog

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Read the article

Read a related journal article from Nicholls and Conroy.

