

The impact of alcohol on Policing in the North East

Balance - The North East Alcohol Office
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Introduction

There is a clear relationship between alcohol and crime. The North East's police officers have to deal with the problems caused by alcohol on a daily basis.

Half of all violent crime is alcohol-related¹ and studies show that as alcohol consumption increases, so does violent offending². People who drink before going out for the night are more likely to be involved in a fight and around half of all violent incidents take place at the weekend when binge drinking is at its peak². Alcohol is also linked with 39%¹ of domestic violence cases.

There is a massive financial burden placed upon the North East as a result of alcohol related crime and disorder. Work undertaken by Balance has shown that during 2010/11 more than £316m was spent dealing with an estimated 213,000 alcohol related crimes. This equates to £75.1m in Durham, £81.8m in Cleveland and £159.6m in Northumbria force areas.

Balance surveyed 1,100 frontline officers across the region's three forces to further understand alcohol's impact on the frontline and to gain their perceptions on the issue. A focus group was set up within each of the forces to allow for the viewpoints of officers to be explored and included.

¹ Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2011/12

² (2007) Alcohol nightlife and violence: the relative contributions of drinking before and during nights out to negative health and criminal justice outcomes. Bellis M et al.

Headline Findings

- All officers agree that alcohol contributes to domestic violence - 93% said that it has a 'large impact' and 7% said it has 'some impact'.
- A majority of officers (6 in 10) said alcohol related crime and disorder takes up at least half of their time while 1 in 10 say it constitutes 80 -100% of their workload.
- 97% feel at risk of physical assault when policing the night time economy (NTE).
- 1 in 5 officers have been subject to six or more alcohol related assaults during their career. Only 14% have never been subjected to an alcohol related assault.
- New recruits are always warned that they will probably be the victim of an alcohol related assault before the end of their first year in the force.
- Almost 9 in 10 officers believe cheap alcohol contributes to alcohol related crime and disorder.
- Incentives to work the NTE are wearing thin. Almost 9 in 10 said time off in lieu was unattractive and less than half said the offer of overtime pay was attractive. However, overtime is still sought after to deal with other issues.
- More than a third of officers are asked either every shift or most shifts to work additional hours in the NTE.
- Almost 8 in 10 officers felt working the NTE affected their work/life balance.
- More than 8 in 10 officers see proxy provision of alcohol to under 18s as having an impact on alcohol related crime and disorder.
- In the North East during 2010 there were an estimated 300 alcohol related road traffic accidents which resulted in 440 casualties, 70 of which resulted in death or serious injury. The estimated cost of a fatal road traffic accident on a British road is £1.8m.
- On a weekend evening shift nearly every single person being dealt with or arrested is intoxicated through alcohol misuse.
- Officers often have to deal with alcohol related anti-social behaviour from children as young as eleven years old.

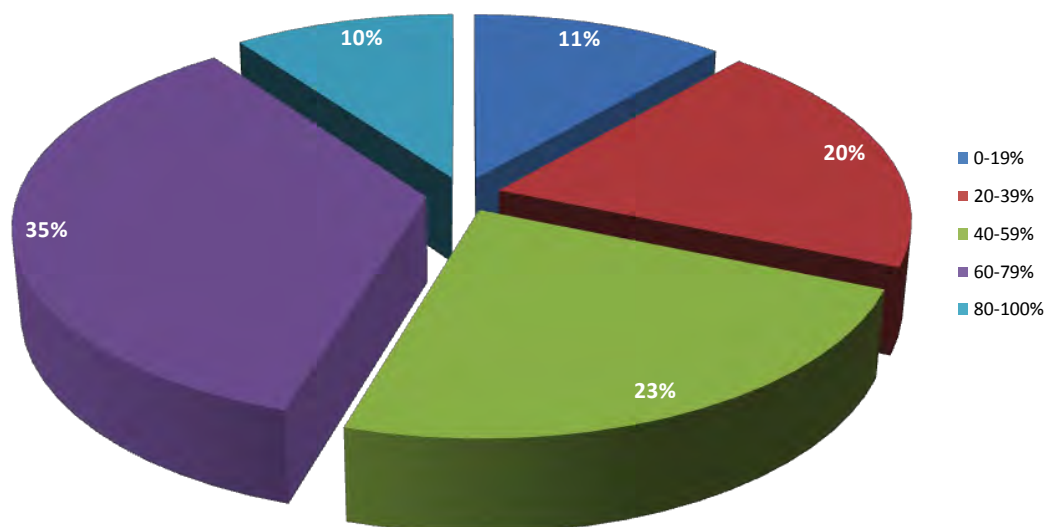
Police perceptions of alcohol related crime

The recording of alcohol related crime and incidents are not mandatory throughout the police service which makes it hard to accurately determine the impact that alcohol has on policing activity. The only point at which alcohol involvement is rigorously recorded is in the custody suite, as identifying intoxication forms part of the risk assessment process when a detainee is placed in a cell.

The impact of alcohol harm is far reaching. A sober individual is relatively easy to process, whereas an alcohol related arrest in the NTE can often take up cell space and police time until the next morning.

As can be seen in Figure 1, opinion is widely spread on the time taken up by alcohol related offending with 11% of officers stating it takes up 0-19% of their time and 10% stating that 80-100% of their workload is spent dealing with alcohol. Grouping the findings reveals that a majority of officers state that a majority of their time is taken up by alcohol with 60% perceiving the repercussions of alcohol related crime and disorder to take up at least 50% of their time.

□ **Figure 1: What percentage of your own overall workload do you think is taken up by dealing directly or indirectly with alcohol related incidences?**



Questions were put to each of the focus groups to further investigate these perceptions in relation to violent crime, domestic crime and crime in general. It was quite clear that the general consensus was one of alcohol having a massive impact on every aspect of policing and being a drain on resources which puts frontline officers at risk of assault and injury.

One of the main factors affecting the perception of alcohol related crime in the focus groups was to do with time and day of the week. During mid-week shifts officers reported experiencing very little, and in some cases, no alcohol related crime.

However, on a weekend evening shift nearly every single person being dealt with, or arrested, was intoxicated through alcohol misuse.

From the focus groups the perception of the percentage of violent crime being alcohol related ranged from 60% at the lowest to 90% at the highest, although one officer replied by saying “*pretty much all of it*”.

Officers in the focus groups regarded domestic violence as being very closely related to alcohol use. Some officers even declared that they couldn’t remember the last time that they went to a domestic incident where alcohol wasn’t involved. Officers pointed out that there are several couples in their area who are well known for alcohol related domestic call outs.

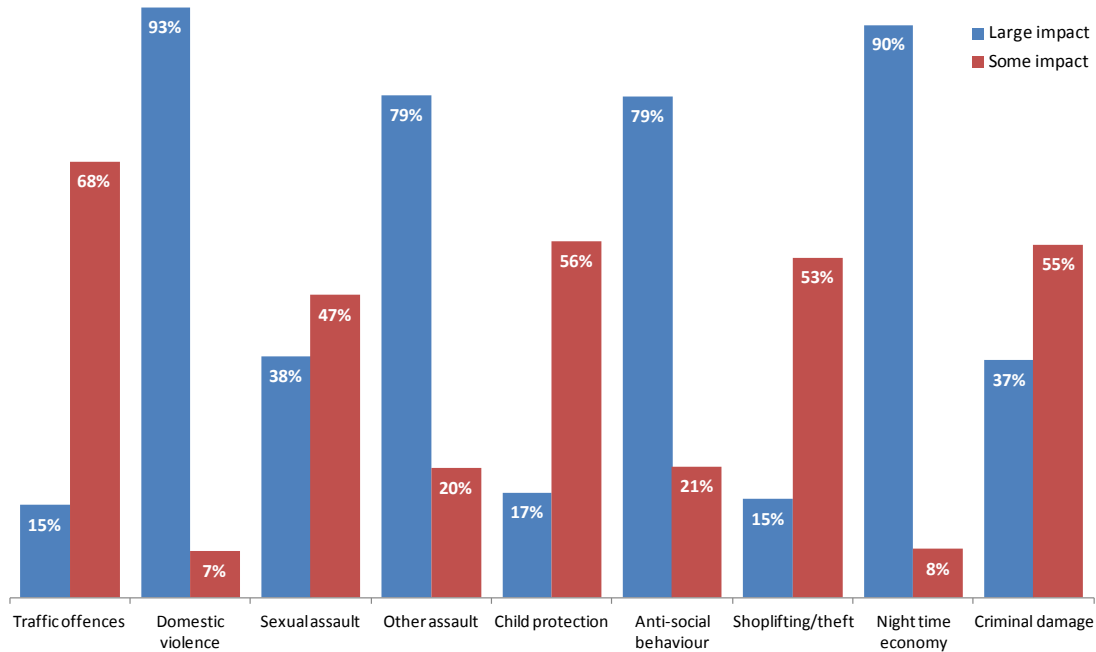
On average officers in the focus groups estimated that alcohol took up around 60-70% of their weekly workload. Once again perceptions varied across areas and also policing roles.

“We start picking up the pieces from 12 o’clock in the afternoon. I would estimate 90% of our workload is spent dealing with alcohol related jobs. People that are being arrested for drunk and disorderly on the evening have often also been arrested earlier in the day for shoplifting offences.”
City Centre Community Officer

Officers emphasised the hidden impact of alcohol describing how alcohol related offenders aren’t just locked up overnight, processed in the morning and released. Sometimes processing the offender and following up other issues linked to the crime can swallow two or three additional days. Depending upon the seriousness of the crime, an officer may also be required to provide evidence in court.

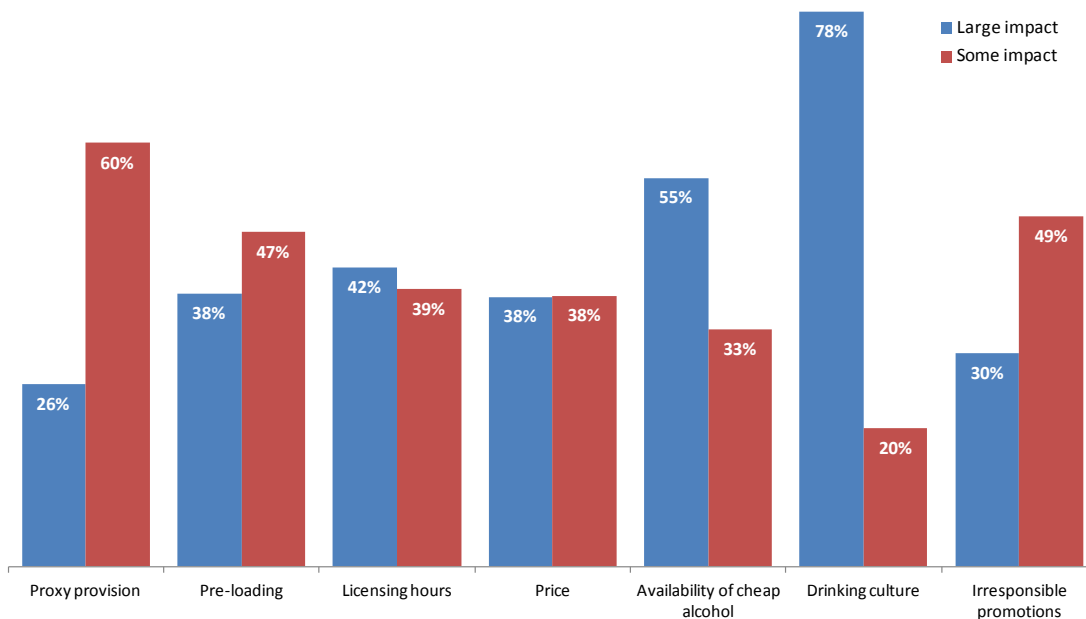
As shown in Figure 2, domestic violence was the area where officers felt alcohol presents the greatest problem with 93% stating it has a 'large impact' and 7% stating it has at least 'some impact'. Out of the 1,100 responses only one individual thought alcohol had 'no impact' on domestic violence. Offences in the NTE, anti-social behaviour and assault were the other crime types where alcohol is deemed by a significant majority to have a 'large impact'. Although, as can be seen, the majority of officers perceive alcohol to have at least 'some impact' on all of the crime types surveyed with shoplifting/theft' having the lowest association with a total of 68%.

□ **Figure 2: Alcohol plays a role in many different aspects of offending. In your experience or knowledge how much of an impact does alcohol have upon the following:**



The survey further explored some of the possible factors behind the association between alcohol and various crime types and asked officers what they thought contributed to alcohol related crime and disorder. As can be seen in Figure 3, officers placed the largest emphasis on the 'drinking culture' that is prevalent in today's society, with 78% saying it had a 'large impact' on alcohol related crime and disorder and 98% 'some impact'. The next most significant factor was deemed to be the availability of cheap alcohol which can be bought nearly anywhere at any time of the day or night with 55% saying this has a large impact and 33% 'some impact'.

□ **Figure 3: In your opinion what level of impact do the following factors contribute to alcohol related crime and disorder?**



Dealing with alcohol is 'all part of the job'

The police have a duty of care to the population they serve. The officers taking part in the focus groups clearly have to abide by their duty of care but at the same time find it frustrating and de-motivating dealing with people who have been drinking.

The problem of dealing with drunken people was described by one officer as *"babysitting people who can't deal with themselves after they've had a few drinks"*. Officers in the focus groups spoke of the frustration in attempting to gather reliable statements from witnesses who are intoxicated and are sometimes repeatedly putting themselves in unnecessary danger which then falls back onto the officers to deal with. Part of the police's role is to gather intelligence surrounding crime scenes and when victims, offenders and witnesses have all been drinking this becomes a difficult task to handle effectively.

"Police are often dispatched because somebody is drunk and lying in the road putting themselves and others at risk. There is often no-one else available to take these people to hospital so therefore the duty of care kicks in and police time is then wasted being a taxi service to A&E."

Neighbourhood Officer

The following are a selection of some of the real-life stories told within the focus groups that show the extent of the issues and the risks that call handlers and officers have to deal with on a daily basis.

The attention on alcohol related crime is often focused upon domestic issues or people being drunk and disorderly in the NTE. Road traffic police were however keen to raise the impact that alcohol has on the roads in the North East on both drivers and pedestrians.

"The estimated cost of a fatal RTA on a British road is £1.8 million."

Traffic Officer

It was estimated by the Department for Transport³ that in 2010 people driving over the legal alcohol limit caused 6,620 accidents which in turn resulted in 9,700 reported casualties or 5% of all road casualties. Of this total, 1,490 people were either killed or seriously injured. In the North East during 2010 there were an estimated 300 alcohol related accidents which resulted in 440 casualties, 70 of which resulted in death or serious injury.

"The 17-29 age group are the main offenders when it comes to drink driving, 30-39s are the next worst and then the figures start to tail off. A lot of drink driving that we see is a consequence of the morning after as opposed to catching people who have been drinking that same day."

Traffic Officer

³ <http://www.dft.gov.uk/statistics/tables/ras51019>

Dealing with these types of incidents has a stressful and emotional impact on police officers. However, they admit to soon becoming used to such situations.

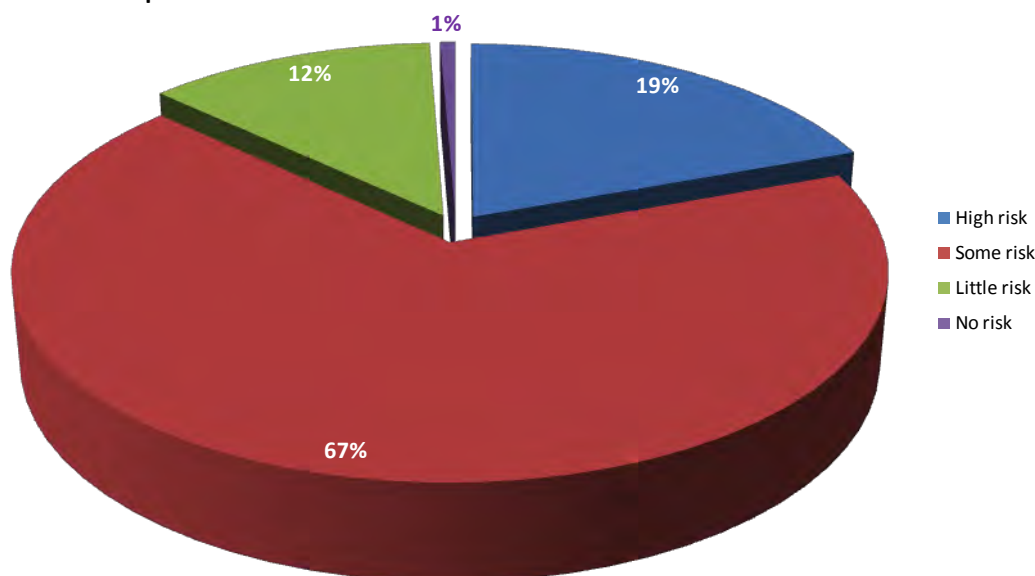
“No matter what you see there’s always someone who has seen something worse. Social services will always tell you it’s nothing compared to a house they were in last week.”

Neighbourhood Officer

Dealing with drunks is an everyday issue for frontline officers in the North East. However, the risk of assault is often at the back of an officer’s mind. Figure 4 shows how 87% of survey respondents felt either at 'high risk' or 'some risk' of being physically assaulted while on duty outside of the NTE.

□

Figure 4: How at risk do you feel in regards to being physically assaulted when dealing with drunken members of the public outside the NTE?



Frontline officers usually deal with alcohol related crime and disorder but they’re not the only employees of the police force involved. Control room call handlers deal with intoxicated members of the public and all the complications and stress that it entails. Call handlers are often the first point of contact for the public and it was described how determining the urgency of a call can sometimes be very complex. One call handler spoke of people *“playing the system”* and the repeated attempts to try and make officers prioritise one ‘emergency’ over another.

“I was called out to a distressed female in the first year of my service only to find that the urgent call had been put into control because the woman couldn’t fasten her skirt up whilst she was getting ready to go out for a night on the town. She had already been drinking and seemed to think it was perfectly reasonable to call me out.”

Community Officer

Incidents described in the focus groups evidenced how intoxication clearly makes people more likely to say whatever is necessary to get officers to attend situations, potentially forcing other people to wait when in need of urgent help. Call handlers in the focus groups also spoke of frequently receiving very confusing calls and not being able to make any sense as to the reason behind the call. This raises many complications as the call could easily be a drunken hoax but on the other hand it could be from someone who is in need of urgent assistance.

“People will often ring up and start the conversation by saying that they’ve only had one drink but quite clearly they can’t even string a conversation together. People put both themselves and others in danger through not being able to speak properly when they are drunk.”

Control Room Call Handler

The sobering side of the night time economy

Policing has changed dramatically over the past decade to accommodate the increase in consumption of alcohol due to factors including changes in the licensing law, increased affordability and availability. Police shift patterns have been altered to ensure that adequate staff resources are available on weekend evenings when demand due to the NTE is at its peak.

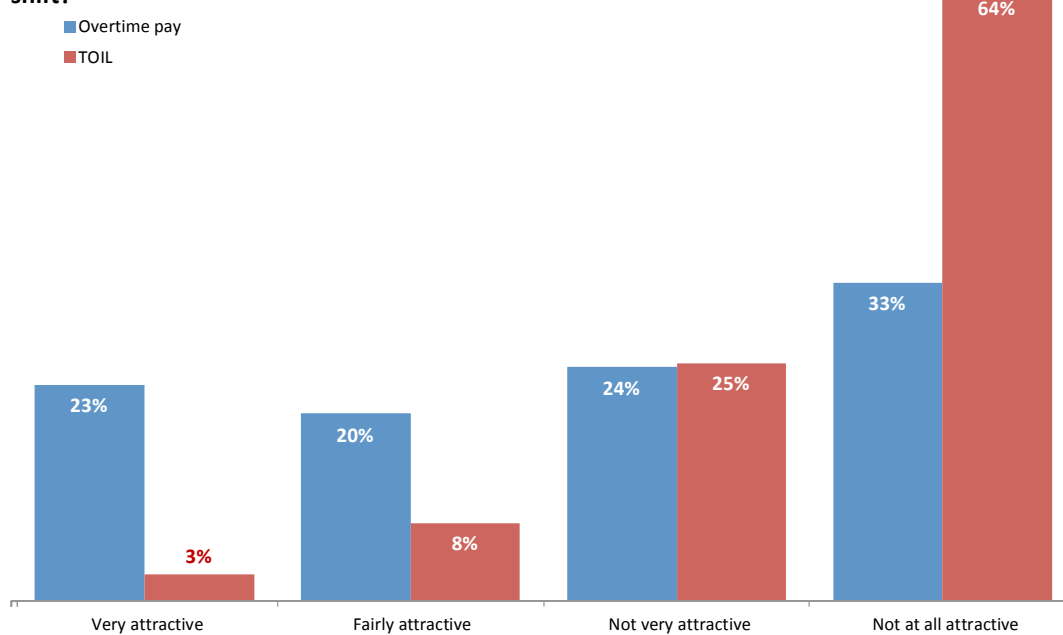
It was a commonly recurring theme in the focus groups that officers often find themselves under pressure to deal with drunks when out in the town and city centres on Friday and Saturday evenings, a situation which worsens into the early hours of the morning. Responses from the survey showed that 97% of officers felt at a 'high risk' or 'some risk' from being physically assaulted when policing the NTE.

Responses to the survey revealed that 38% of officers are asked either 'every shift' or 'most shifts' to work additional hours in the NTE.

The incentives offered to work the NTE are clearly wearing thin. Figure 5 shows how the incentive of time off in lieu (TOIL) is 'not very attractive' or 'not at all attractive' to a large majority (89%) of officers. The chart further shows that the offer of overtime pay is only attractive to a minority with 42% of respondents saying it was either 'very attractive' or 'fairly attractive'. On the other hand, interviews with strategic officers found that when overtime is offered to deal with other issues, such as metal theft, officers are queuing up at the door.

“Why would I want to work extra hours coming in to police drunks when I could be at home spending time with my wife?”
Community Officer

□ **Figure 5: How attractive is the incentive of overtime pay / time off in lieu to work back on a NTE shift?**



Responses to the survey showed that 77% of officers felt that working the NTE affected their work/life balance. Through further feedback given in all three of the focus groups it was clear that shift patterns required for policing the NTE are having an adverse impact on officers and subsequently their work life balance.

“For four days, including the weekend, I don’t get to see my family as I work nights, come back, sleep and then go back out to work at 4pm. It’s not always good sleep either as I’m often disrupted by noise in the house. If I’m lucky I may see my kids for an hour or two after school on a Friday and couple of hours at the weekend. Often they’re off doing other stuff on a weekend with their mum.”

Town Centre Officer

Assault in the workplace

Over the years officers have become desensitised to alcohol related crime and disorder. They take on the mindset that they will be putting themselves at an increased risk of assault whenever they are dealing with drunken members of the public. Officers talked of how in the past it was generally unheard of for police to leave the force until they retired but now this is no longer the case. There are many more threats and risks which have arisen through the prevalence of alcohol use that encourage officers to seek out alternative careers.

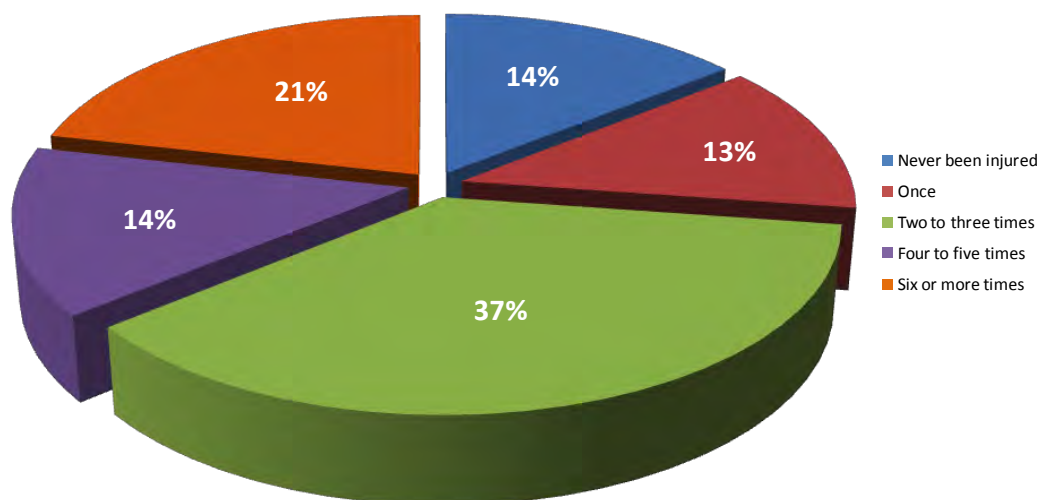
“I see it as a stress/risk factor. Alcohol may only account for 40% of our working day but it equates to 80% of the risk faced by policing duties.”

Community Officer

Responses from the survey displayed in Figure 6 shows that a high rate of injury is prevalent amongst officers with 21% having been subject to six or more alcohol related assaults during their career. Only 14% have never been subjected to an alcohol related assault.

Officers said it is rare for an arrest in the NTE not to be resisted and that new police recruits are always warned that they will probably be the victim of an alcohol related assault by the end of their first year in the force.

□ **Figure 6: Have you ever received an injury through dealing with drunken members of the public and if so on how many separate occasions?**



Male and female officers from all three focus groups spoke openly about verbal threats and violence directed towards them when attempting to arrest drunken people. Participants described how one female officer had her thumb dislocated when attempting to arrest a drunken male and a male officer was punched in the face.

Licensed premises

Licensing conditions and changes in the law were seen as a huge issue by officers in all three of the focus groups as they felt that these contribute significantly to the drinking culture. Alcohol is now so cheap and easily accessible this leads to greater levels of pre-loading and as a result people in the NTE are extremely intoxicated. 24 hour licensing has allowed people to go out later and stay out longer which means police have to work until the early hours of the morning every weekend. People can preload, go out at 10pm and carry on drinking for five hours should they choose.

“Policing has had to change because of the availability of alcohol. In the past, outlets were restricted but now it’s available on every street corner, in bars, supermarkets and petrol stations.”

Community Officer

There has been a noticeable change in culture over the past few decades around drinking in the NTE. For example, people taking alcohol into clubs is increasingly a problem as they drink more throughout the course of the evening.

One of the key elements to controlling problems within licensed premises is to control the people coming through the doors. Evidence coming out of the focus groups showed that licensed premises in the North East make a lot of effort with regard to entrance policy. Officers believe that the threat of police surveillance and possible walkthroughs mean that doormen are getting better at refusing entry to people who’ve had too much to drink. Police relationships with license holders also seem to go a long way towards resolving problems that frequently occur in the NTE. Schemes such as Best Bar None have greatly improved relationships but officers from all the focus groups admit that there is still much work to be done with both off and on-licence premises holders.

“Two manslaughters took place in this particular pub when the business was being run by the owners of the building. They have since had their personal licenses taken off them but they are still able to reopen the same premises, owning the business, but have it effectively under new management. Police are powerless to stop this from going through and we have no control over what the licensing act will or won’t allow. There needs to be a change in legislation around using the law and a more corporate approach to licensing issues within the force.”

Neighbourhood Officer

Alcohol and society

There is a mixed demographic across the North East with police officers experiencing alcohol related crime and disorder from people of every type of social background.

It is a concern that the social acceptance of alcohol within communities is becoming an ever increasing problem for police to be able to handle. Officers reported that they are regularly required to attend disturbances at the same addresses and one participant highlighted that they have a list of top ten addresses which are monitored on a regular basis in an attempt to deal with the problem pro-actively. Some of the more long serving officers in the focus group said that they are now beginning to see alcohol related offending replicated throughout successive generations of the same family.

“We’re dealing with their grandchildren now and every generation is worse than the last. Some of these people have nothing to lose. They don’t have any boundaries around acceptable behaviour or a desire to keep out of trouble with the police.”

Neighbourhood Officer

Proxy provision of alcohol to under 18s is also a major problem experienced by police across the whole of the North East with 85% seeing it as having at least 'some impact' on alcohol related crime and disorder. Officers often have to deal with alcohol related anti-social behaviour from children as young as eleven years old. The alcohol is usually provided by older family members or friends. Officers went on to say that there is a desperate need to block the source of alcohol for young people but they are frustrated as there is no easy way of doing this. As a consequence alcohol is believed to be the root cause of many underage anti-social behaviour and criminal damage incidents that are attended by the North East’s police officers. Officers in the focus groups agreed that more proactive approaches need to be taken towards issues such as underage drinking but it was harder for them to agree upon what the best approach would be.

“Often there will be groups of up to 30-40 kids... some are over 18 and will buy alcohol for the whole group. This leads to problems and ASB as young people who can’t handle alcohol have easy access to it.”

Neighbourhood Officer

One other social factor raised in the focus groups was the student population across the North East, with officers stating that it has a notable impact on policing issues. October fresher’s week is one of the busiest periods for frontline staff policing the city centre. Every year additional officers have to be drafted in to help with the vast increases in the number of alcohol related incidents. The problems with students continue throughout the rest of the year and frequently calls will be put in for anti-social behaviour in the early evening as groups of students are either walking into town or to house parties. Later into the evening police are having to deal with students for more serious crimes such as assault and criminal damage.

Conclusion

Frontline police officers see the drinking culture, price and availability of alcohol as a root cause for many of the problems that they deal with on a daily basis. From domestic violence through to shoplifting they are forced to experience the negative effects of alcohol and have a duty of care to deal with the damage it has upon both the victims and communities of the North East. The findings from this report clearly suggest that the impact is at an unacceptable level.

Even though the majority of officers are desensitised to alcohol related crime and disorder it still causes some individuals to leave the force in search of a more peaceful career where they aren't putting themselves at risk of stress, assault or injury.

There is a strong feeling that changes need to be made to existing laws to reign in the availability of alcohol.

The NTE is synonymous with alcohol and the extent of the problems faced by officers is becoming ever more unmanageable. As a result only a small minority of officers have never been physically injured in the line of duty. All the pressure caused by working late shifts, policing drunks and having poor quality sleep has left officers feeling fatigued and exasperated with the problems they are required to face and a large majority feel that alcohol related crime and disorder subsequently affects their time with family and friends.

Although the NTE is synonymous with alcohol, it should not be forgotten that alcohol impacts on policing, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and the extent of the problems faced by officers is becoming ever more unmanageable.