

## PRINT EDITION



Full contents    Subscribe  
Enlarge current cover  
Past issues/regional covers

## NEWS ANALYSIS

## POLITICS THIS WEEK

## BUSINESS THIS WEEK

## OPINION

Leaders  
Letters to the editor  
Blogs  
Columns  
Kallery

## WORLD

United States  
The Americas  
Asia  
Middle East & Africa  
Europe  
Britain  
International

Country Briefings  Go

Cities Guide  Go

## SPECIAL REPORTS

## BUSINESS

Management  
Business Education

## FINANCE &amp; ECONOMICS

Economics Focus  
Economics A-Z

## SCIENCE &amp; TECHNOLOGY

Technology Quarterly

## BOOKS &amp; ARTS

Style Guide

## PEOPLE

Obituary

## MARKETS &amp; DATA

Weekly Indicators  
Currencies  
Rankings  
Big Mac Index  
Chart Gallery

## DIVERSIONS

Correspondent's Diary

## RESEARCH TOOLS

## AUDIO

## DELIVERY OPTIONS

E-mail Newsletters  
Audio edition  
Mobile Edition  
RSS Feeds  
Screensaver

## CLASSIFIED ADS

## The Economist Group

Economist Intelligence Unit  
Economist Conferences  
The World In

10 minute check-in\*

To learn more click here

\* passengers with hand luggage only &amp; pre-printed boarding pass

LondonCityAirport  
An easier way to fly

## Britain

## Drunken British youngsters

## How to sober them up

Aug 23rd 2007

From *The Economist* print edition

## Rather than raising the drinking age, put up taxes

THE trams that glide through Croydon by day are evocative of continental Europe. The loud and sometimes violent drunkenness among the young people who roam this south London suburb on a Saturday night is all too British, however.

That Britons tend to drink too much is nothing new—Shakespeare's Iago lauds a nation "most potent in potting". But the debate about how to curb youthful drunkenness is gaining focus, in part because of recent reminders that the violence it produces can go beyond clumsy late-night scuffles. On August 17th three youths in Gateshead were convicted of beating a man into a month-long coma for refusing to buy alcohol for their underage friends. Peter Fahy, the chief constable of Cheshire, where a father of three was murdered on August 10th by youths, has suggested, among other things, raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 21 and banning alcohol consumption in public places.

These proposals sound plausible but they have drawbacks. Meg Hillier, a home office minister, dismissed the idea of raising the legal alcohol-buying age, noting that sensible drinkers between 18 and 21 would be penalised and that the current age limit is already being dodged. It would also put Britain out of line with international practice: the buying age is 18 in most of Europe, and as low as 16 in countries without much of a drink problem, such as Italy. In any case, binge-drinkers in their mid-twenties are also part of the problem.



As for banning drinking in public places, local authorities in Britain can already do this. Two particularly enthusiastic councils are Westminster in London and Brighton and Hove on the south coast, both of which have raucous night-time economies. Other councils apply the ban more selectively. As Ms Hillier points out, this flexibility is preferable to a blanket national ban.

An alternative to restrictive measures is to teach Britons more sensible drinking habits. After all, government campaigns and public-health advertisements played some role in the decline in smoking. But Ben Baumberg, a researcher at the Institute for Alcohol Studies, cautions against pinning too many hopes on this approach. By itself, he says, it will not revolutionise Britain's binge-drinking culture.

A surer solution is to raise the cost of alcohol by increasing taxes. Grant Thornton, an accountancy firm, points out that taxes on alcohol have fallen in real terms over the past decade, although they are still high by European standards. Intense competition between the pubs and bars in town centres has also pushed down prices. Drinkers stumble from one watering hole to the next in search of "happy hours" and other promotions. Supermarkets are also accused of selling alcoholic beverages as loss-leaders.

The government may be about to change course. Its previous strategy to counter excessive alcohol consumption was criticised for relying too heavily on voluntary action by the drinks industry. But ministers said in June that they would review the pricing and promotion of alcohol. Raising the cost of drinking is the best hope of making a Saturday night in Croydon more peaceful.

[Back to top »](#)

Advertisement

[Printable page](#)

[E-mail this](#)

[Bookmark](#)

## Related Items

From *The Economist*

Britain's wayward yoof  
Aug 16th 2007  
Britain's new drinking culture **E**  
Sep 28th 2006  
Anti-social behaviour **E**  
Nov 3rd 2005

## Country briefing

Britain

## More articles about...

Food and drink

## Websites

Britain's Department of Health and the Institute for Alcohol Studies discuss alcohol misuse.

Advertisement

For those who like their dates in leather.

Intelligent Life  
CFO  
Roll Call  
European Voice  
EuroFinance Conferences  
Economist Diaries and  
Business Gifts  
Reprints and Permissions

About

**Chevron** Human Energy™

Click images to solve puzzle

See video

**EIU** [onlinestore](#) »

Advertisement

**Jobs**

Chief Development Officer  
The Broad Institute  
The Broad Institute  
(www.broad.mit.edu)  
combines world-class  
aca....

**Business / Consumer**

#1 rated internet  
business looking for  
professional  
consultants. No  
previous technical  
experience required.

**Tenders**

#1 rated internet  
business looking for  
professional  
consultants No  
previous technical  
experience required.  
Be....

**Jobs**

European Trade  
Union Institute  
Research, Education  
and Health and  
Safety The  
ETUI-REHS, an  
institut....

**Business / Consumer**

#1 rated internet  
business looking for  
professional  
consultants. No  
previous technical  
experience required.

**Tenders**

Participation of a  
Private Partner...  
Agency for Foreign  
Investments of the  
Republic of  
Macedonia Pur....

Economist.com |  
About *The  
Economist* |  
Media Directory  
| Staff Books |  
Advertising info  
| Career  
opportunities |  
Contact us

Economist Newspaper Limited 2007. All rights reserved. [Advertising Info](#) | [Legal disclaimer](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Help](#)

**Sponsors' feature**



[www.economistshop.com](http://www.economistshop.com)

Copyright © The  
About sponsorship »