

## **UK MPs with extra work roles may be nearly three times as likely to be 'risky' drinkers**

*Those with 'probable' mental health issues may also be at heightened risk, survey suggests*

UK parliamentarians with additional work roles may be nearly three times as likely to be 'risky' drinkers as MPs without these extra obligations, suggest the results of a small survey, published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.\*

Those with 'probable' mental health issues may also be at more than double the risk, the findings suggest.

The health and social costs of alcohol in the UK add up to £21 billion a year. And 1 in 5 of all those admitted to hospital in the UK is drinking at harmful levels, while 1 in 10 is alcohol dependent.

The proportion of men and women who report drinking alcohol at least weekly has fallen sharply, but 28% of men and 14% of women still drink at potentially harmful levels, say the researchers.

High workload, job stress, and the use of alcohol to unwind after work are known risk factors, but it's not clear if these might also apply to UK parliamentarians.

The researchers therefore looked at the prevalence of risky drinking, defined as drinking at hazardous, harmful, or dependent levels, among UK MPs, with the aim of seeing if there might be any particular factors associated with this behaviour.

They invited all 650 MPs in the House of Commons to fill in an anonymous online survey in December 2016, using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). This aims to find out how much and how often respondents drink alcohol, and what happens afterwards--feelings of guilt or remorse, injury, blackouts, for example.

Answers were each scored from 0 to 4 and added to give a maximum score of 40. A score above 8 indicates risky drinking.

Responses were compared with those of the nationally representative 2014 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS), which provides data on the prevalence of treated and untreated mental health issues among English adults.

The GHQ-12, a validated health questionnaire, was used to assess the mental health of the responding MPs.

There's no formal threshold for identifying mental ill health in this questionnaire, but responses were scored and categorised as: no evidence of probable mental ill health; less than optimal mental health; or probable psychological disturbance or mental ill health.

Some 146 MPs responded to the online survey (response rate of 22.5%). Nearly two thirds (63%) were men and around half (51%) were older than 50.

Most (81%) respondents didn't work outside parliament and three quarters (77%) said they were unaware of the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service.

The responses showed that the rate of risky drinking was higher than that of the general population in England, but comparable with that of people with similar income and job status in the APMS.

MPs were also comparable to these groups in what they said about not being able to stop drinking once they started; failing to do what was normally expected because of drinking; and having no memory of the night before because of their drinking.

But, on average, compared with the general population, responding MPs were more likely to drink at least 4 times a week; to drink at least 10 units on a typical drinking day; to drink 6 or more units in any one session (binge drinking); and to say they felt guilty about their drinking.

MPs with additional roles outside parliament were nearly 3 times as likely to be risky drinkers while those with 'probable' mental illness were nearly 2.5 times as likely to do so. However, the overall numbers of those with extra roles or possible mental illness were relatively small, caution the researchers.

This is an observational study, and as such, can't establish cause, and the associations found are weakened by the small numbers of respondents.

Nevertheless, the researchers suggest that the low levels of participation may have been prompted by stigma or fear of being identified. And given the availability of alcohol in parliament in 30 bars, restaurants, and hospitality suites, with six bars open most evenings when MPs are voting or waiting to do so, the issue warrants further study, they add.

After all, MPs are also subject to increased scrutiny, stalking/harassment, online threats, long working hours and job insecurity, all of which can affect emotional wellbeing and likely use of alcohol, they point out.

"Given the considerable stigma associated with mental health problems, there is a need for MPs to be better informed about their own wellbeing service, to reduce stigma and improve help seeking within Parliament," they conclude.

#### **Notes for editors**

\*Since this research was carried out, two general elections have been held, changing the individuals in the House of Commons.