

24-hour drink law blamed for surge in sick days: Labour reform led to 500,000 hangovers

- **Round-the-clock drinking increased the number of patients hospitalised with alcohol-related complaints**
- **Binge-drinking is thought to have increased among young people**
- **The reforms also contributed to the decline of the traditional pubs**

By Steve Doughty

A study found Tony Blair liberalisation of the licensing laws in 2005 had a 'significant' impact on productivity.

Labour's 24-hour drinking laws have led to a boom in the number of workers taking days off work, research has shown.

More than half a million extra workers now go off sick with hangovers. A study found Tony Blair's liberalisation of the licensing laws in 2005 had a 'significant' impact on productivity.

On average, the reforms meant every employee did 26 fewer minutes of work a week. The damage was even greater in the public sector, where working time dropped by 33 minutes. Round-the-clock drinking has brought about a major increase in patients hospitalised with alcohol-related complaints.

The new laws are thought to have increased binge drinking among young people and contributed to the development of dangerous late-night drinking zones in towns and cities.

And they have helped to hasten the decline of traditional pubs – which are now closing at a rate of 30 a week.

Under Labour's licensing act, the 11pm closing time was swept away and pubs and bars were allowed to apply to stay open around the clock.

Many set new closing times at one or two in the morning. Ministers claimed this would put an end to trouble at 11pm.

The change was meant to help usher in a 'continental cafe culture' that would reduce bingeing and encourage a civilised attitude to alcohol.

By 2010, nearly 79,000 pubs and bars in England and Wales had seized the chance to extend their opening hours.

However the Lancaster University study concluded: 'The extension of drinking hours substantially affects worker absence behaviour.'

Researchers said: 'Our findings indicate that how governments regulate leisure activities, such as licensing hours, has the potential to affect workplace productivity.'

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'Long opening hours increased absenteeism. These effects were large: extending hours in England and Wales led to a 1.7 per cent increase in absenteeism.'

The findings were based on records from the Office for National Statistics Labour Force Survey between 1997, eight years before the licensing liberalisation, and 2008, three years afterwards. Between 2004 and 2008, worker absenteeism went up by 1.7 per cent, and an average worker went missing from his or her job for 26 minutes more each week.

In public sector jobs – already plagued by absenteeism – the extra time off added up to 33 minutes a week.

And the impact was greater among young workers, who saw a 1.9 per cent rise in so-called 'duvet days'. The paper said the figures 'demonstrate a causal effect of bar opening hours on worker absenteeism: longer hours increased absence'.

However, reforms introduced in Spain to reduce opening hours decreased absenteeism in Spanish factories and offices by 2 per cent, the academics said.

Home Secretary Theresa May has tried to curb the impact of Labour's drink laws by giving local councils powers to restrict late-night bar opening.

But David Cameron has abandoned plans to push up the cost of cheap supermarket drink with minimum alcohol pricing in the face of Cabinet opposition.