



## Like it loud? Exploring young people's attitudes to loud music and their hearing

RNID, July 2007

### Introduction

*"Too many people take their hearing for granted."  
(Southampton, female, age 22)*

One in seven people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing - that's nine million people. For many the hearing loss was preventable because it was caused by noise exposure. According to the World Health Organization [1997], exposure to excessive noise is the major avoidable cause of permanent hearing impairment worldwide.

Experts agree exposure to sounds above 85 dB(A) (see glossary) over time will damage hearing.

Since 1989 UK employees exposed to dangerous noise levels have been protected by legislation. This is not the case for young people exposed to dangerous noise levels in their leisure time. Music played at clubs, pubs, gigs, in cars, at home and on personal audio equipment can be well above 85 dB(A).

Four million young people in the UK are at risk of hearing damage from amplified music (Sadhra et al, 2002). Many of these young people do not know the very thing they love could be harming them so they are not taking any preventative measures. In the future, the UK could see a generation with hearing problems well before their time.

Hearing damage is cumulative and can lead to premature hearing loss, tinnitus and other hearing problems such as hyperacusis (see glossary). Once hearing damage occurs there is no cure - yet the damage is preventable.

In other areas of public health – diet, sex, smoking, alcohol, drugs, sunbathing – the public has been provided with information that allows them to make an informed choice. This is not the case with the dangers to hearing from over-exposure to loud music.

*"I don't think I know that much about how to protect them [ears]. I know like loudness is bad but, I don't know like, what all the ways of protecting your hearing long term are."  
(London, male, age 16)*

RNID believes today's generation has a right to know they are putting their hearing at risk and what they can do to protect themselves.

## About our report

This report summarises the results of two pieces of research RNID commissioned between November 2005 and April 2006 for our *Don't Lose The Music* campaign.

The aim of our research was to find out more about young people's awareness, attitudes and behaviours towards loud music and their hearing. We engaged directly with young people, through different research methods, to ensure young people themselves are at the forefront of our campaign plans and strategies.

### Quantitative research

In November 2005 Synovate Research, under the direction of RNID's social research and policy team, conducted 1,381 face-to-face surveys with 16 - 30 year olds from England, Scotland and Wales.

They asked questions about exposure to loud music, experiences of ringing in the ears and the use of hearing protection products. RNID's social research and policy team analysed the data and generated statistical findings.

### Qualitative research

Between April and May 2006, we conducted six qualitative focus groups across England and Scotland with 44 young people, again 16 - 30 year olds. The aim of the focus groups was to complement our quantitative research by finding out the explanations for individual choices, experiences and rationale.

RNID's social research and policy team devised, planned and conducted the focus groups. The quotations throughout this report are taken from these focus groups. Taken together the two pieces of research paint a clear picture about the risks young people are taking, arguably because of their lack of knowledge.

This report sets out what we think should be done to protect the hearing of those most at risk.

## What we can do

### The changes that need to happen

Many public, private and voluntary organisations can and should play a part in preventing young people from damaging their hearing. RNID believes the following steps need to be taken to promote the issue of noise as a public health issue, and to actively protect young people's hearing.

Individuals must take responsibility themselves for protecting their hearing but in order to do so, they need to be fully informed.

### Government

- Establish a recommended noise exposure level for audiences attending music venues and events.
- Educate young people about noise as a public health risk.

### Music industry

- Ensure chill out areas are open, and noise levels in chill out areas don't exceed 85 decibels
- Publish noise levels where they can be seen by staff and the public, and display simple signs that advise about hearing protection
- Provide suitable earplugs for free or make them available to buy

- Provide information about hearing protection via websites flyers, tickets, posters, tickets, programmes and other promotional materials
- Fully comply with Control of Noise at Work regulations that protect the hearing of their staff (many of whom are young people)
- A wider variety of music retailers should stock and promote reusable earplugs
- Earplugs manufacturers and retailers should actively market to, and target, young people

## The louder the better?

*“Some people might put it down to me being too young, but I mean, I just don’t think about it at all.”*

*(Glasgow, male, age 16)*

How loud is too loud? Could you tell what the decibel level in a club is? Most of us, including the young people we spoke to, could not answer these questions. Yet having the answers could help them protect their hearing.

Our research found music is an integral part of young people’s lives, and a large part of their social time is spent in places where loud music is played.

- 23% of respondents go to a gig once or twice a month or more.
- 56% of respondents go to a club once or twice a month.
- 55% of respondents visit a pub or bar where ‘you have to shout to be heard’ at least once a week.

Not only do young people visit these places frequently, they spend a long time there.

Of the 55% who go to pubs 76% typically stay between two and six hours. This is significant as we asked about ‘pubs where you have to shout to be heard’. If you are shouting to be heard by someone two metres away, the music could be loud enough to damage hearing if you stay for hours on end.

The most frequent visitors to clubs spend the most time there: 41% of those visit a club three or more times a week spend over four hours there.

Nightclub noise levels can be as high as an aircraft taking off – around 110 dB(A). Young people are exposing their hearing to dangerous noise levels for significant periods of time.

Young people who undertake one noisy activity are more likely to undertake others, risking their hearing even more. It is usual practice in the UK to visit a pub then go on to a club - 75% of respondents who go to a club three or more times a week also go to a pub or bar - where you need to shout to be heard - three or more times a week.

64% of the young people listening to an MP3 player for more than 21 hours a week go to a club, gig or pub in the same evening regularly or occasionally. But it is common knowledge that young people like loud music.

*“...it’s not something you have everyday standing next to a massive sub bass woofer thingy that makes your... your insides shake.”*

*(London, male, age 29)*

It was no surprise that when we asked if music was played too loud in various venues the majority disagreed.

- 88% disagreed that music was played too loudly at gigs/concerts
- 74% disagreed that music was played too loudly in clubs
- 70% disagreed that music was played too loudly in pubs and bars

But comments about 'volume acceptability' showed the issue is more complex:

***“... if it's a normal sort of sit down bar, you don't expect it to be pounding music, and a lot of people get annoyed... obviously, if its got a dance floor then you expect it to be a bit louder.”***  
**(London, female, age 22)**

Social noise levels have tripled since the 1980s (Smith et al, 2002) exposing us to more loud noise in more places than ever before. For the current generation, this is normal and they expect loud music in lots of social settings, unquestioningly associating it with a good time. But the assumption that young people want loud music at all times should be challenged.

***“I once went to a gig and, we paid £10 to get in and my friends left after half an hour because they couldn't handle it, because it was actually making them feel ill because it was that loud.”***  
**(London, male, age 20)**

Young people are assumed to be enormous risk-takers, but research shows that most are often anxious and cautious about risk taking (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). However they are often under-informed about loud music, so unable to make choices about the risk.

***“I don't think I know that much about how, to protect them [ears], I know loudness is bad but, I don't know, like, all the ways of protecting your hearing long term.”***  
**(London, male, age 16)**

Our participants had limited knowledge about their hearing and made misassumptions. Some believed the 'type of ear' - such as “superior”, “softer,” “weaker,” and “tough” ears and the “shape of your ears” caused hearing damage, not exposure to loud music.

Young people do not value their hearing so do not feel the need to protect it. Only 16% 'sometimes worried about losing their hearing'.

Many believed hearing loss was an inevitable part of old age, not something affected by their own behaviour. There is no cure for hearing loss or tinnitus, but some seem to be banking on one.

***“I'm perfectly willing to believe you know that at some point in time you know someone can find... cures for... hearing loss or what causes it and therefore prevent it but again... it's probably going to go with old age anyway.”***  
**(London, male, age 25)**

Similarly, only 34% thought hearing loss would affect their lives. In reality, the development of a hearing loss at any age hugely affects your personal, social and working life. As with many health risks, the people most likely to worry were those already experiencing a problem.

***“... my hearing's got worse recently, so now I've started to worry about it.”***  
**(London, female, age 18)**

For many participants the low prevalence of educational messages and awareness contributed to their limited understanding.

*“It’s ridiculous how you get signs saying ‘beware of the lasers’, ‘beware of the strobes’ and stuff like that... but, obviously the main thing that people are in these places to do is to listen to music, and... yeah, I mean some, most people won’t know what the equipment’s about, how loud it actually is or, anything.”*  
(Manchester, female, age 22)

Our participants are used to receiving public health messages about their lifestyles. As damage to hearing is not a widely known health issue and there is little government information on the issue, the risks are easily dismissed.

*“I think it depends where the information coming from doesn’t it? If it’s advertising you’re less likely to go with it, but if it’s official, I don’t know, if the government are telling you maybe... that carries more weight.”*  
(London, female, age 29)

In a King’s Fund (2004) survey about the role of government in promoting public health, 86% agreed that the government should ‘provide information and advice to enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices’.

### What we want to happen

The government should establish a recommended noise exposure level for audiences at music venues and events and educate young people about noise as a public health risk.

### Our advice to music fans

If you can't talk to people two metres away without shouting, the noise level could be dangerous over time so take precautions to protect your hearing.

## A noise hangover?

Temporary ringing in the ears or dull hearing after exposure to loud music indicates hearing has been put under stress. If this occurs regularly the result can be noise-induced hearing loss and/or tinnitus - both are irreparable.

Huge numbers of young people regularly experience the signs of hearing damage and do nothing to prevent it.

*“Yeah mine ring all the time after I’ve been somewhere that loud... you just expect it... it goes with the hangover.”*  
(Birmingham, male, age 30)

The human ear is an amazing, tiny and sensitive organ that can detect the tiniest of sounds - but it was not designed to withstand loud noise for long periods.

Sustained loud sound causes damage to tiny sensory cells in the inner ear that convey sound to the brain through the nerve of hearing. Once damaged, these cells are not replaced, leaving you unable to parts of the sound spectrum that lost cells would have picked up. Most people find their hearing gets worse as they get older, a condition called presbycusis.

If you have a noise-induced hearing loss and you develop presbycusis too, the combination can mean your hearing loss is worse than it would have been and will be

noticeable much earlier in life, having a huge impact on all aspects of personal, social and work life.

We asked young people if they had experienced ringing in the ears or dull hearing after a night out:

- 68% had experienced it after going to a gig or concert
- 70% had experienced it after a night out at a club
- 44% had experienced it after being in a pub or bar

The focus groups revealed that many participants had experienced ringing “the next day”, for “24 hours”, “two days” and “three days”. For some participants this prolonged ringing had an immediate effect on their lives.

***“Because I over-exposed myself to music at the weekend, [at] the beginning of the week... I find it hard to listen to things properly.”  
(Manchester, male, age 24)***

In the focus groups some young people said they had experienced ringing in the ears from “15”, “16” and “17” years old and believed that “it just goes away, you get up the next morning and it’s not there.”

As the ringing is not permanent, young people don’t worry about the long-term implications. For one participant, the experience of ringing in her ears was considered so temporary that it was of far less concern in comparison to aching feet from dancing.

***“My feet will... hurt in the evening and hurt the day after. When I have ringing ears, they only ring in the evening, by the morning when I wake up it’s fine, so really... I’d be more concerned about my feet ‘cause... it lasts longer.”  
(Southampton, female, age 21)***

58% did not think ringing ears or dull hearing was a warning sign of permanent damage. It is such a regular experience for many young people that it has become normal and is something to expect after a night out.

***“Well I don’t think it’s damaged my hearing... it doesn’t seem to be more than a temporary sort of issue... I’ve been involved in music for several years and my ears ring, that’s natural, that’s a natural reaction...”  
(Southampton, male, age 25)***

Worryingly, many participants thought ringing in their ears was a positive sign that their hearing had become resistant to hearing damage. In reality, those that think they have toughened their ears may already have suffered some damage.

Everybody’s hearing can be damaged by loud music and nobody can harden their ears against it. So, young people are regularly exposing themselves to high noise levels in their social lives and their hearing is being adversely affected.

The Licensing Act 2003 permits 24-hour opening, and as a normal night out in the UK includes a visit to a pub or bar then a club, young people are potentially clocking up dangerous noise doses.

## What we want to happen

The music industry should:

- Ensure chill out areas are open, and noise levels in chill out areas don’t exceed 85dB(A).

- Publish noise levels where they can be seen by staff and the public, and display simple signs that advise about hearing protection.
- Provide suitable earplugs for free or make them available to buy.
- Provide information about hearing protection through websites, flyers, posters, tickets, programmes and other promotional materials.
- Fully comply with Control of Noise at Work Regulations that protect the hearing of their staff (many of whom are young people).

### Our advice to music fans

- Use chill out areas to give your ears a rest.
- Avoid dancing or standing beside loud speakers.
- Wear earplugs designed for gigs/clubs if you go regularly.

## Glossary

### Earplug attenuation

How much a particular type of earplug will reduce the sound level reaching your ear. This should be given as a Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) in decibels on the packaging. Some earplugs will reduce high frequencies more than low frequencies.

### Decibel

The standard unit of noise measurement of the sound pressure level, often abbreviated to dB. The A-Weighted sound pressure level dB(A) denotes that the sound has been approximated to the response of the human ear.

### Earplugs

An object of soft material that is fitted into the opening of the outer ear in order to protect hearing. Different types of earplug reduce sound levels by different amounts and in various ways.

### Focus group

A representative group of people questioned together about their opinions.

### Hyperacusis

People with hyperacusis have an increased sensitivity to sounds. This means they feel pain or discomfort from certain sounds that most other people are able to tolerate. People with hyperacusis are not all affected by the same type of sounds.

### MP3 player

A device that organises, stores and plays digital music files. This report uses the term 'MP3 player' to refer to all types of digital audio equipment, including mobile phones.

### Noise

The word noise is often used to describe sound, more specifically sound that is loud, unpleasant, unexpected, or undesired.

### Presbycusis

The hearing loss many people experience in later life.

### Qualitative research

Involves analysis of data such as words (for example, from focus groups or interviews), pictures and/or objects.

## Quantitative research

Involves measurement and analysis of numerical data.

## Sound

Sound is the vibration of matter that can be perceived by the sense of hearing. When the vibrations reach the human ear, they are converted into nerve impulses that are sent to our brains, allowing us to understand what the sound is.

## Tinnitus

A medical term for sounds that people hear in one ear, both ears or in their head. These sounds do not come from outside the head, although they may sound as if they do. Tinnitus sounds can take a variety of forms such as buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing or a range of other sounds.

## Young people

This report uses the term young people to describe 16 to 30 year olds.

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