Binge-drinking, anarchy on the streets, parental neglect and a government in denial. The Conservative party’s indictment of Britain’s ‘broken society’ would have been familiar to William Hogarth as he engraved ‘Gin Lane’, his own vivid indictment of mid-18th century London, argues historian Professor Peter Borsay of Aberystwyth University, in a new History & Policy paper published today.

In *Binge drinking and moral panics: historical parallels?* Professor Borsay explores the parallels between the early-18th century Gin Craze and contemporary binge-drinking culture. He argues that direct comparisons between drinking behaviour then and now have been overdrawn, but highlights how media-constructed moral panics have characterised both episodes and come to symbolise wider anxieties about social breakdown.

Professor Borsay said:
“Media, public and political concern about problem-drinking is not new and the alcoholic excesses of past generations are well chronicled. At first glance, the parallels between the 18th century Gin Craze and contemporary binge-drinking appear striking. But it is not drinking behaviour that merits the comparison, but the moral panics that characterised both periods, fuelled by pressure groups, the media and perceptions of government complacency.

‘Then, as now, problem-drinking was one of many behaviours described as ‘out of control’ and illustrative of a ‘broken society’. I would question whether today’s policymakers are dealing with a dramatic new phenomenon that requires immediate action to avert social collapse, or rather an endemic feature of our society that is resistant to quick-fix solutions. The Gin Craze was finally brought under control with a combination of increased tax and licensing fees and restrictions on retail outlets. No doubt concerted action by the government and police could bring a similar end to binge-drinking today, but whether this would produce
an overall drop in alcohol consumption and other social problems and a more disciplined and conformist youth remains questionable."

Professor Borsay identifies the following similarities between the Gin Craze and binge-drinking:

- Both are media-driven moral panics, with reforming campaigners playing a leading role in elevating the ‘problem’ to a ‘crisis’;
- In both episodes, women’s behaviour and family breakdown are a focus of attention;
- Problem-drinking is depicted as both a public and an urban phenomenon; and
- Reports describe the disintegration of the fabric of society alongside government inaction and complacency.

But he also highlights important differences and cautions against drawing crude comparisons:

- In the 18th century, young people were depicted as the victims of their binge-drinking parents’ neglect, but today their own binge-drinking is the main focus for concern;
- During the Gin Craze, it was not binge-drinking per se that was criticised – the consumption of large amounts of British beer was considered both acceptable and patriotic – but specifically gin consumption;
- The women portrayed in Gin Lane are not 18th century ladettes, but wives and mothers, seen to be sacrificing their children’s welfare to Mother Gin; and
- 18th century gin-drinking was a persistent pastime of the poor, rather than the carnivalesque display of conspicuous consumption that now characterises Britain’s streets at weekends.

Notes to editors:

1. You can preview Peter Borsay’s History & Policy paper, *Binge drinking and moral panics: historical parallels?*, and view Hogarth’s prints ‘Beer Street’ and ‘Gin Lane’, on the History & Policy website. If you would like to reproduce the Hogarth prints, please email mel.porter@sas.ac.uk.

2. Peter Borsay is Professor of History at Aberystwyth University. He has published widely on 18th century urban and cultural history. His most recent book is *A History of Leisure: the British experience since 1500* (Palgrave, 2006).
3. By the 1720s, around 2.5 million gallons of gin were being produced annually in London - it was claimed each Londoner was consuming roughly a pint a week - and in the 1740s, production peaked at around 7-8 million gallons. William Hogarth’s ‘before and after’ prints ‘Beer Street’ and ‘Gin Lane’ encapsulated the moral and social concerns raised by the Gin Craze. Hogarth was one of many articulate, middle-class Londoners who were deeply concerned about the moral health of society and campaigned for government action, harnessing the new-found potential of the media. The prints were published to coincide with the start of the new parliamentary session in 1751 and were widely and cheaply available, contributing to the passage of legislation that year to control gin consumption.

4. History & Policy is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. It was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.

5. For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact: Mel Porter, External Relations Officer, History & Policy, tel: 020 7862 8768, email: mel.porter@sas.ac.uk.