

UK PRESS RELEASE

UK in ‘premier league’ for binge-drinking, says landmark European report

UK adults and adolescents are among the top binge-drinkers in Europe, according to the first-ever comprehensive EU-wide report on alcohol released this Thursday.

The report, funded by the European Commission and written by the UK-based Institute of Alcohol Studies, shows that:

- The UK are one of the top bingeing nations in western Europe, binge-drinking 28 times per year on average – about once every 13 days.
- UK adolescents are also the third-worst binge-drinkers in the EU, with more than a quarter 15-16 olds binge-drinking 3-or-more times in the last month.

Yet the main message of the report – commissioned to provide the evidence base for the EU’s alcohol strategy due later this year – is the scale of alcohol-related harm *across the EU*:

- Alcohol is public health enemy #3, behind only tobacco and high blood pressure, and ahead of obesity, lack of exercise or illicit drugs.
- Many people suffer due to someone else’s’ drinking – including 5-9 million children living in families damaged by alcohol and the 10,000 ‘innocent’ deaths that occur to bystanders or passengers from drink-drivers.
- Alcohol is also estimated to cost Europe €125 billion – equivalent to over €650 for every household each year.

The report concludes with a series of 52 recommendations in areas ranging as widely from taxation to education to research, setting out the areas that the scientific evidence suggests the Commission should act on in its forthcoming strategy.

- Professor Christine Godfrey, Professor of Health Economics at the Centre for Health Economics at the University of York, said:

“This is the best estimate yet conducted showing the scale of the social costs of alcohol in Europe. But more importantly, the report shows that cost-effective policies are available, and that predictions of catastrophic job losses for implementing effective policies are much overstated.”

- Dr Anderson, lead author of the report and international public health expert, said:

“What really makes the need for action so urgent is that we know ‘what works’ in reducing this toll. What we now need is just to get on with it.”

The rest of this media pack includes:

1. *Other key findings from the UK and Europe*
2. *Notes to editors*
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UK DATA FROM THE REPORT

Binge-Drinking – chapter 4

- The UK are one of the **top bingeing nations** in western Europe, binge-drinking 28 times per year on average – about once every 13 days. This puts us third out of the 15 pre-2004 EU countries, and is four-times as much as the Italians.
- Binge-drinking in **young people** (15-16 year olds) also shows the UK as the third-worst in 2003 (27% had binge-drunk 3 or more times in the last month), but this time out of 20 countries from across the EU. This is over three times as much as in the lowest-bingeing country, Hungary.
- **Over the last 10 years**, binge-drinking in UK girls has increased to the second-highest level in Europe, while binge-drinking in boys has stayed relatively constant. Only the UK, Ireland and Finland show girls bingeing or getting drunk more than boys on any measure.
- UK drinkers drink relatively rarely **with meals**, with only about one-quarter drinking ‘only or mainly when eating’ (compared to more than half in countries like Sweden and Italy). However, 18-29 year old Brits are much more likely to drink with the evening meal than older Brits, surprisingly drinking with the evening meal as much as young Italians and more than young French people.
- **Drinking levels** in the UK both per person (13 litres of pure alcohol) and per drinker (15 litres) are around the EU average level (15 litres per year).

Violence – chapter 6

- People in the UK are *not* more likely to associate **alcohol and violence** than people in other countries – for example, just over half of Britons believe that ‘anyone may become violent after drinking too much’, but nearly two-thirds believe this in France and nearly three-quarters believe this in Italy.

Economics – chapter 3

- The UK is the top spirits **exporting country** in the world by value, and the second-largest exporter of alcoholic drinks overall.
- People in the UK **spend more on alcohol** than most other Europeans do – they spend about the same (adjusted for purchasing power) as Belgium and Sweden, and are behind only Denmark and particularly Ireland.

Policies on alcohol – chapter 9

- The **average effective tax rate** in the UK is the fourth-highest in the study countries at just under €2000 per litre of pure alcohol (adjusted for purchasing power). However, the final price of alcohol compared to other goods in the UK is only 15th of 30 comparison countries.
- Looking across a range of **policies on alcohol**, the UK scores 10 out of a possible 20 for the strength of its policies, again making it 15th out of 30 countries studied. However, the UK is one of only three countries that legally allows drivers to have as much as 80mg% in their blood.

ALCOHOL IN EUROPE: KEY FACTS

The Social Cost of Alcohol

- The **total social cost** of alcohol in Europe was estimated to be €125 billion in 2003 – equivalent to €650 per household per year, and roughly the same level as recently estimated for tobacco.
- Alcohol causes a cost in many **different areas of human life** – from the workplace (€59bn, including the cost of early deaths) to healthcare & treatment (€22bn) to crime (€33bn) to traffic accident damage (€10bn).
- If we place a value on alcohol-related **pain, suffering and life itself** on top of these material losses, then we get a much higher figure ranging between €150-700 billion each year, depending on how life itself is valued.

Alcohol and Jobs

- Alcohol is a **major industry** in the EU, with drinks production accounting for three-quarters of a million jobs (with many more linked to alcohol indirectly) and the alcohol trade contributing €9billion to the goods account balance.
- But this does not necessarily mean that effective policies will lead to **job losses**:
 - There is only a weak and inconsistent link between trends in drinking levels on the one hand, and trends in **jobs linked to alcohol** on the other.
 - More importantly, if people spend less money on alcohol they have more money to **spend on other things**. For example, when the World Bank looked at this for tobacco, they found that countries like the US would see *more jobs* in the long-term if tobacco vanished overnight.

Total Health Impact

- Alcohol is responsible for 7.4% of all ill-health and early death in the EU after taking account of any benefits to health, which makes it the **third most important cause** behind tobacco and high blood pressure and ahead of factors like overweight, high cholesterol and illicit drugs.
- Alcohol is responsible for **115,000 deaths** in people who die before the age of 70 (after taking into account any health benefits), and is the leading cause of death in young men in the EU.
- Alcohol is a cause of harm to **others than the drinker**, including some 60,000 underweight births, 5-9 million children living in families adversely affected by alcohol, 10,000 traffic deaths to people other than the driver, and 2,000 murders in the European Union each year.
- Alcohol causes **inequalities in health** both between and within countries, leading to an estimated 90 extra deaths per 100,000 men and 60 extra deaths per 100,000 women in the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004, compared to the 15 pre-2004 EU countries.

Young People

- Nearly all **15-16 year old students** (>90%) have drunk alcohol at some point in their life. The average amount drunk on a single occasion by 15-16 year olds is over 60g of alcohol (equivalent to nearly four pints of beer), while more than 1 in 6 (18%) have 'binged'¹ three or more times in the last month.
- **The trend in youth drinking** has been for binge-drinking to rise, with most countries showing an increase between 1995 and 2003. In the older EU countries, this increase mainly happened between 1995 and 1999 with more varied patterns since, while the newer countries are still seeing further rises.
- While there has been a lot of concern over **girls' drinking** in Europe, boys continue to drink more and get drunk more often than girls, with little reduction in the *absolute* size of the difference between boys and girls.

Adult Men and Women

- While many adults do not drink high levels of consumption and do not binge-drink, the **number of risky drinkers** is still high in the EU – 40 million EU15 citizens report 'drinking too much' monthly and 100 million (1 in 3) binge-drink¹ at least once in a month.
- Similarly, while 266 million adults drink alcohol at relatively lower risk levels, over 58 million adults (15%) drink more than this, including 20 million (6%) **drinking at harmful levels**.² 23 million Europeans (5% of men, 1% of women) are **dependent** on alcohol in any one year.
- While many people hold strong **stereotypes** about different countries in Europe, the differences between countries, and particularly between northern and southern Europe, are less than is commonly thought. For example, beer is increasingly drunk in southern Europe and wine in northern Europe. People in Spain now drink more of their alcohol in the form of beer than in wine, while people in Greece and Spain drink more spirits than people in Sweden & Norway.

'What Works' in Reducing Harm

- Although politically popular – and a human right – the effectiveness of **education and public awareness campaigns** in reducing the harm done by alcohol is low. This means that they are *not an alternative* to more effective measures.
- Alcohol **taxation** has consistently been found to be an effective way to reduce the harm done by alcohol, and has a particularly strong effect on younger people and heavier drinkers. If alcohol taxes were used to raise the price of alcohol in the EU by 10%, over 9,000 deaths would be prevented during the following year and approximately €13bn of extra revenues would be gained.
- Based firmly on the evidence, the report concludes by making a series of **recommendations** in 10 key policy areas (available in full in the summary of the report): (1) defining an alcoholic beverage; (2) creating the evidence base; (3) preparing and implementing plans; (4) cross-border support; (5) drinking and driving; (6) education and public awareness; (7) labelling; (8) regulating the market; (9) drinking environments; and (10) brief advice for heavy drinkers.

¹ Defined as drinking 5 or more drinks on a single occasion

² 'Low-risk' = <20g (women) or 40g (men) per day; 'harmful' = >40g (women) or 60g (men)

Notes to editors

1. *The report 'Alcohol in Europe: a public health perspective' was written by Dr Peter Anderson and Ben Baumberg, funded by a grant from the European Commission. It represents the views of its authors and not that of the Commission itself.*
2. *Released alongside the report are the results of a peer-review process with scientists nominated by the alcohol industry as well as national governments. This follows an unprecedented process of stakeholder consultation and peer review for a health report, with representatives of the alcohol industry consulted more often than governments and NGOs combined.*
3. *Requests for interviews or further questions should be made through the Institute of Alcohol Studies Public Affairs officer Emilie Rapley at info@ias.org.uk or 0207 222 4001*
4. *For further details about the Institute of Alcohol Studies or for a link to the full report (including recommendations), please visit www.ias.org.uk*
5. *Professor Godfrey is a member of the Institute of Alcohol Studies' scientific advisory board and is Professor of Health Economics at the Centre for Health Economics, University of York. For more details, together with a full list of scientific advisers to the Institute, please visit www.ias.org.uk/advisers*

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Dr. Anderson is an international expert on alcohol and tobacco policy. He was trained as a general practitioner and a specialist in public health medicine at the University of Oxford and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in England. His doctoral thesis was on the risk of alcohol. Having worked for eight years as the World Health Organization's European alcohol and tobacco policy adviser between 1992 and 2000, he now works as an international consultant employed on projects financed by the European Commission, the World Health Organization and several national and regional governmental organizations throughout the world. He holds honorary appointments in public health and primary care at the Universities of Oxford in England and Nijmegen in the Netherlands. He is the European Editor for the journal *Drug and Alcohol Review*, has over 120 publications in international scientific journals and is the author or editor of 18 books on alcohol, tobacco and other public health issues.

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Ben Baumberg has been researching alcohol issues and speaking to the media about alcohol for the Institute of Alcohol Studies since 2004. Prior to this he worked on alcohol policy and other issues for various Members of Parliament at Westminster, England. He was originally trained in Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge University, and is currently combining IAS work with continued studies in Social Policy and Research Methods at the London School of Economics. Particular interests in the alcohol field include world and European trade law, economic contributions to policymaking, the interaction of social trends and drinking habits, and socioeconomic differentials in alcohol consumption and harm.