



A British Liver Trust report into the unit price of alcohol in retail outlets in February 2008



**A binge for the
cost of a
sandwich**



Fighting liver disease

Registered charity No. 298858

Cheap alcohol is costing us dear

Foreword

The British Liver Trust has compiled this report to illustrate how cheap alcohol is to buy in the UK today.

Taking a snapshot of a day when cheap alcohol was headline news (21 February 2008), the British Liver Trust has conducted a brief piece of basic research in the Hampshire market town of Ringwood to see how cheaply alcohol is sold and just how common cheap pricing is. On this day the BMA launched its own comprehensive and damning report, *Alcohol misuse: tackling the UK epidemic* which, amongst other measures, calls for control of price and availability, responsible retailing and industry practices, measures to reduce drink-driving, education and health promotion, early intervention and treatment of alcohol misuse and international cooperation on alcohol control.

We found alcohol commonly available everywhere at 25p per unit of alcohol. This means that a binge drink (six units for women; eight units for men) costs as little as the price of our daily sandwich. Shockingly, the price of alcohol can be as low as 15.8p per unit, meaning that a binge drink can be bought for less than a £1.

We have heard statistics about alcohol until they wash over us. Twenty four major health groups, including pre-eminent bodies such as the Royal College of Physicians, have come together as the Alcohol Health Alliance to urge action on alcohol due to the harm that it is causing to the nation's health. On p.16 it can be seen that liver disease is the fifth largest killer in the UK and it is dramatically on the rise. In 2004, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit estimated that 22,000 deaths per annum are related to alcohol. This compares with around 14,380 deaths per annum from road traffic accidents.

Respected medical journal The Lancet has published evidence demonstrating that alcohol is one of the most harmful drugs in use in the UK today. Alcohol ranks fifth, ahead of many illegal drugs and even ahead of tobacco. This indicates that it is important to take a public policy approach based on protecting people's health rather than just on law enforcement. It also raises the question of treatment. If you suffer from a drug addiction, you have a 67% chance of being offered treatment; if you have an alcohol problem, that chance drops dramatically to 6.7%.



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Why? Society pays the price of drug-related harm in terms of criminality, encouraging us as a society to pay the price for drug treatment services. In contrast, alcohol-related harm is absorbed largely by the individual and their close circle of family and friends. Alcohol is a problem which affects many people yet has stayed out in the cold.

The Prime Minister has a golden opportunity to ride the wave of public opinion about alcohol and its adverse affects on families and society as a whole. No-one needs to buy alcohol at 15.8p per unit, and the ability for individuals to be able to do so is sending out a statement which has significant repercussions for us all.

Young people, it is widely acknowledged, are a significant part of the problem. In a recent local school visit by British Liver Trust staff, 70% of the youngsters put their hands up to a question asking whether they had drunk alcohol in the past week. When questioned, few understood the longer term results of doing so to their livers. We do not know whether, like other developing organs, young people's livers can take less assault by toxins than an adult liver. We don't know whether the government's sensible drinking limits should be decreased for young people. We do know that adults as young as 18 years are arriving in liver units with alcohol related cirrhosis, a disease which was traditionally associated with men in their 60's who are chronic drinkers.

The 'solving' or lessening of the impact of excessive alcohol consumption in the UK is a jigsaw puzzle with many components. Individuals must play their part, just as they must think about the food they eat and the exercise that they take. As a society we should send some signals about the acceptability of consuming excessive quantities of booze. Surely raising the price to a minimum cost per unit of alcohol - and making sure that that minimum cost is not eroded over time by inflation, by index-linking it – would be a sensible way forward. Tesco has publicly indicated it's willingness to step forward and play the game – surely we should take them at face value and ask all retailers to come to the table with responsible retailing of alcohol?



Alison Rogers
Chief Executive
British Liver Trust



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Red Square Ice Blueberry 70CL

£1.78

£2.54 per l

This is a guide price



General

Further Description	A SWEET DRINK WITH A PLEASING FRUITY BLUEBERRY FLAVOUR Premixed alcoholic blueberry flavoured drink with Red Square Vodka. Not for sale to anyone under 18 years of age.
Country of Origin	UNITED KINGDOM
Packaging	Bottle
Pack Size	70 cl

Alcohol

Alcohol By Volume percentage	5.1
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Ingredients

Ingredients	Carbonated Water, Cane Sugar Syrup, Vodka 12.3% (abv), Citric Acid, Flavourings
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Red Square Ice at Asda

Price: £1.78 for 700ml

Price per litre: £2.67

abv*: 5.1%

Price per unit: 52p

*abv = alcohol by volume. The abv indicates how many units there are in a litre, i.e. 6% abv means there are 6 units in a litre.

Alcopops are not the cheapest form of alcohol in terms of price per unit. However, for sweet and non-alcohol tasting products which some say are designed to appeal to young adults, especially girls, perhaps 50p per unit, or £2 to £3 for enough alcohol for a young girl to 'binge', is a pocket money item that is far too accessible.



Sainsbury's offer on Stella Artois Save 50% was £14.99 now £7.49

Price: £7.49 for 4.95 litres (15 x 330ml bottles)

Price per litre: £1.51

abv: 5.2%

Price per unit: 29p

Stella is a 'premium' branded product which is frequently featured in supermarket leaflet drops and TV advertising campaigns, often at substantially discounted or half price offers. In Sainsbury's it was priced at 50% discount and worked out at 29p per unit. It is not just the own brands which are cheap for consumers.

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Waitrose Cape Grace Red Wine

Price: £20.46 for 4.5 litres (6 x 75cl bottles)

Price per litre: £4.54

abv: 14%

Price per unit: 32p

Wine is not the cheapest form of alcohol. However, its increased strength over years ago and cut-price case offers make it cheap to consume in quantity. This red wine at Waitrose was further discounted to £20.46 for a case of six working out at around 32p per unit. If 25% of the middle classes are drinking at hazardous or harmful levels, there is certainly no price barrier to stop them doing so in the supermarket of the middle classes.



Waitrose London Dry Gin

Price: £17.99 for 1.5 litre bottle

Price per litre: £12.00

abv: 40%

Price per unit: £0.30p

Own brand fortified spirits of any make are cheap and cheerful. Waitrose's own brand of London Gin works out at just 30p per unit.

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Sainsbury's French Brandy

Price: £6.46 for 70cl

Price per litre: £9.23

abv: 36%

Price per unit: 25p

Own brand fortified spirits of any make are cheap and cheerful. Sainsbury's own brand of French Brandy is only 25p per unit.

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Tesco value lager

Price: 88p for 1.76 litres (4 x 440ml can)

Price per litre: 50p

abv: 2%

Price per unit: 25p

The major retailers we looked at on 21 February (whether in store or online) all had own brand 'value' lagers for sale in 4 packs of 440ml for 88p. These low cost, low strength – 2% abv – alcohol packs deliver 3.5 units per pack and work out at 25p per unit.



Tesco Strong Dry Cider

Price: £2.67 for 3 litres

Price per litre: 89p

abv: 5.3%

Price per unit: 16.8p

Tesco's own brand strong dry cider is sold in a 3 litre bottle at £2.67. It is 5.3% proof. For youngsters buying this cider (or having it bought for them by adults, outrageously) to drink on the village green, a whole bottle delivers a massive 15.9 units – or over three times a typical binge drink for less than £3.00. That works out at 16.8p per unit.

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Devon Village cider

Price: £2.39 for 3 litres

Price per litre: 79p

abv: 5%

Price per unit: 15.8p

Devon Village – cleverly redolent of days gone by and innocent rural pleasures, we thought – was our survey’s bargain basement winner. Found at local newsagent/grocers “McColls Booze Buster”, it pipped supermarkets’ own brand ciders to the post at a stunningly low 15.8p per unit. Supermarkets – especially the major players – have a disproportionately large impact on alcohol consumption in the UK because of the increasingly large share of the grocery market they own, but they are clearly not alone in discounting alcohol.

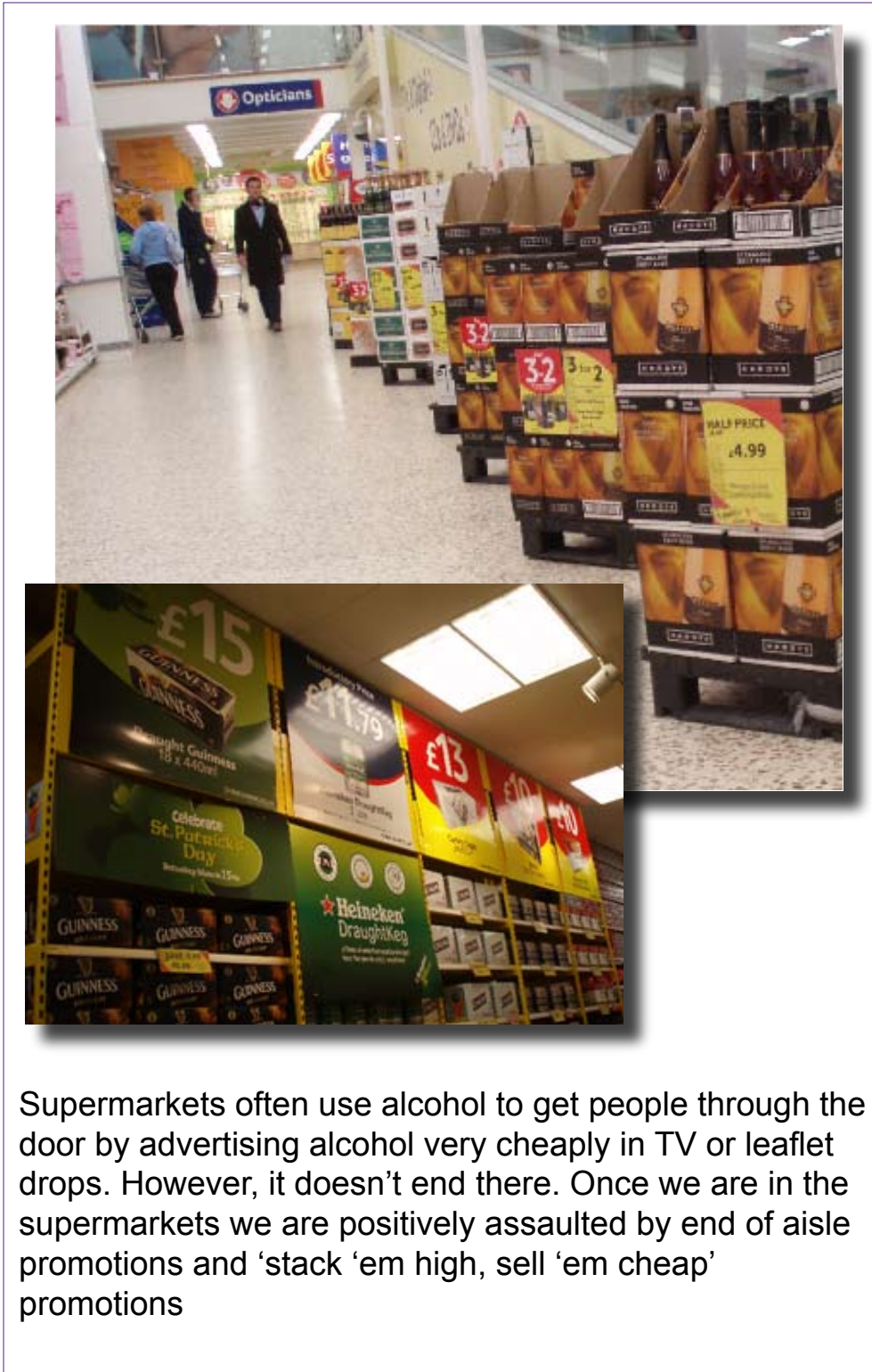
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Responsible retailing?

Stack 'em high



Supermarkets often use alcohol to get people through the door by advertising alcohol very cheaply in TV or leaflet drops. However, it doesn't end there. Once we are in the supermarkets we are positively assaulted by end of aisle promotions and 'stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap' promotions

Responsible retailing?

3 for the price of 2



Off licences also share irresponsible retailing practices. Threshers sells a substantial number of its wines on '3 for the price of 2' offers. The wine works out as being very expensive at a single bottle price. The three for the price of two brings it back into 'normal' price range. This creates a very strong pressure to buy three bottles, rather than one. Tesco's end of aisle promotions feature extremely prominently and clearly induce additional sales.

Responsible retailing?

Selling alcohol alongside 'ready meals'



It has become common practice to sell wine alongside the ready meals in the 'grab and go' fridges. It sends a subliminal message to the busy worker/shopper who is buying ready meals at the end of the day: that they might like to, and it is indeed normal to, consume some alcohol alongside their evening meal. 'Go on – you've had a hard day – you deserve it!'

The impact of cheap alcohol

- Four people every hour admitted to hospital with alcoholic liver disease
- Alcohol relates to over 60 different medical conditions
- Comparison of per capita consumption among adults aged 15 and over shows the UK to be among the heaviest alcohol consuming countries in Europe.
- Nearly 8 million people in England drink at harmful and hazardous levels.
- An estimated £6.30 a week is spent by UK households on alcohol bought at large supermarket chains or off-licence outlets.
- A drinker is 13 times more likely to develop liver disease if they drink at a harmful level.
- The total annual societal cost of alcohol misuse in England is estimated at £55.1 billion.
- The affordability of alcohol in the UK has increased by 65% between 1980 and 2006. In the corresponding period, per capita alcohol consumption of those aged 15 and over increased from 9.4 to 10.9 litres of pure alcohol.
- It has been estimated that a 10% increase in alcohol prices would lead to a 10% fall in consumption.

“The strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm in the UK has seen an over-reliance on popular but ineffective policies, as well as liberalisation of the major drivers of alcohol consumption: availability and price.”

Professor Sir Charles George
Chair, Board of Science, British Medical Association

(Quote from foreword in the BMA report - Alcohol misuse: tackling the UK epidemic. February 2008.)

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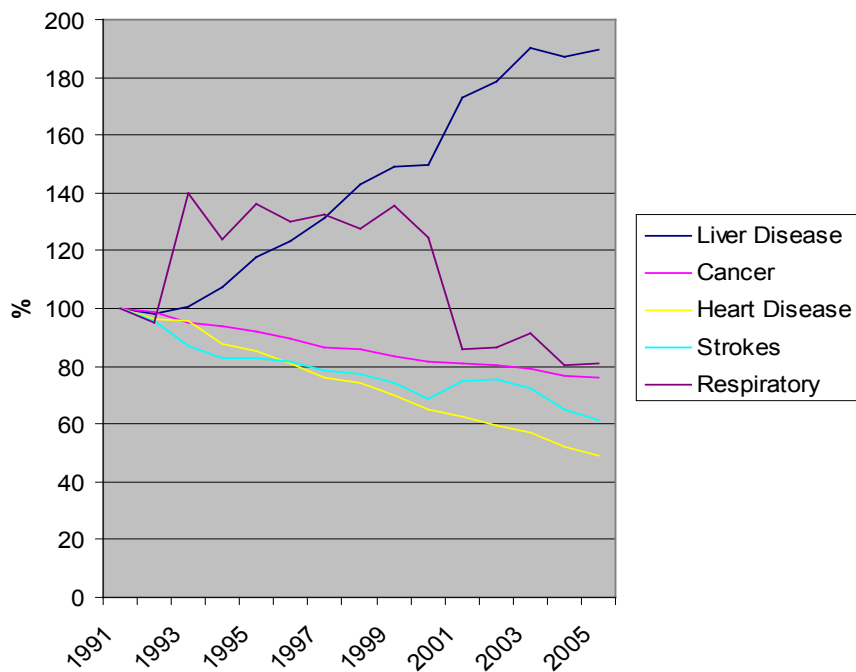
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Liver disease is the 5th largest killer in the UK.

The first four disease areas (cancer, heart, respiratory and strokes) are all on the decrease. Alarmingly, liver disease is the only one on the rise.

A graph to show the percentage change in the top five mortality rates compared to figures in 1991



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Data taken from the Office of National Statistics www.statistics.gov.uk



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Action needed now

Almost every major health body has suggested that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity and should not be sold as such.

Looking back

Over the last 10 or 15 years we have rolled back the boundaries on the sale of alcohol. Not only has alcohol become progressively cheaper, but we have also changed the way that it is retailed.

- We used to have closing times in pubs which ensured that there was a 'cut off' to alcohol consumption – now we have 24-hour licensed premises.
- We used to have supermarket aisles with the alcohol areas closed off outside certain hours
- We used not to sell alcohol in garages
- Children and young people could not afford to buy alcohol with their pocket money – now they regularly can, and do.

Is this the right direction? Isn't it time for change?

Isn't stopping the sale of alcohol at 16p per unit the first 'no-brainer?' Why are we so reluctant to legislate to ensure that alcohol cannot be retailed at less than a minimum unit price of say 40p or even 50p? Raising duty on alcohol in the next budget is a good opportunity, but only legislation can stop all retailers selling alcohol as a loss-leader.

Cheap and readily available alcohol makes a lethal combination that we just can't afford any longer.

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The British Liver Trust

The British Liver Trust is the only national charity in the UK dedicated to helping everyone affected by liver disease through support, information and research.

The British Liver Trust was founded in 1988 by a group of leading hepatologists and patients. It is Britain's only national liver disease charity for adults, existing to improve the lives of people suffering from liver disease, of which there are over 100 different forms.

The Trust's key roles are in education, support and research. It operates a comprehensive website and a helpline and distributes a wide range of information leaflets to individuals and healthcare professionals. In addition, it serves as a point of contact for support groups nationwide as well as co-ordinating funding and providing support for research.

The British Liver Trust has a significant role to play in the future health of the UK. While liver disease can be linked to genetic disorders, abnormalities in the immune system and even the medicines we take, much of the increasing incidence of liver disease stems from lifestyle trends – relating to alcohol, obesity and viral hepatitis.

Liver disease is the fifth biggest killer in the UK and is the only one out of the five on the rise with no government plan to tackle it. Treatments, research and liver services remain severely under-resourced.

The Trust's most urgent priorities are to raise the profile of liver disease in line with this disturbing increase, encourage prevention, and achieve greater recognition, better support and wider understanding for all people with liver disease.

The logo consists of the words "BRITISH LIVER TRUST" in a white, sans-serif font, stacked vertically and enclosed within a white rectangular border. The background of the logo is a dark red color.

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