

ALCOHOL PURCHASE AGE LIMITS IN EUROPE



The European Alcohol Policy Alliance (EUROCARE) is an alliance of non-governmental and public health organisations with 57 member organisations across 25 European countries advocating prevention and reduction of alcohol related harm in Europe. Member organisations are involved in advocacy and research, as well as in the provision of information and training on alcohol issues and the service for people whose lives are affected by alcohol problems.

The mission of Eurocare is to promote policies to prevent and reduce alcohol related harm, through advocacy in Europe. The message, in regard to alcohol consumption is “**less is better**”.

This report was written in collaboration with Eurocare’s member Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS), UK.



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1. INTRODUCTION. WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO BE PROTECTED FROM ALCOHOL?

Alcohol is a potent psychoactive drug whose consumption even in small quantities can lead to negative outcomes. With this in mind, the 1995 World Health Organisation (WHO) European Charter on Alcohol declared:

All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcohol.¹

Adolescents who drink alcohol are at greater risk of brain damage than adult drinkers, and children who drink alcohol are more likely to develop problems such as dependency in later life.

There is an established body of evidence that alcohol can have particularly destructive effects on physiological and psychological development during childhood. According to a report by Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP), there is some evidence that alcohol-associated brain structural effects are more pronounced in adolescents than in young adults because the adolescent brain has a different and largely greater sensitivity to alcohol than the adult brain.

As adolescence is both a critical stage of development of the human brain, exposure to addictive substances like alcohol can have the potential to delay or disrupt cognitive control development or desensitise reward processing, establishing patterns and processes which leave young people predisposed to riskier behaviour or substance misuse.²

A Finnish study supports the possibility of a causal link between childhood drinking and adult alcohol misuse. Its long-term follow-up of children until middle age found that for both males and females, early onset of drinking (i.e. at or before the age of 14) was a significant risk factor for heavier drinking, binge drinking and for experiencing symptoms of alcohol dependence in adulthood. The authors concluded that delaying the initiation of drinking from early to late adolescence is therefore an important goal for prevention efforts.³

A 2009 report produced by the then Chief Medical Officer of England, Sir Liam Donaldson listed a range of potentially adverse consequences (illustrated below), concluding that **an alcohol-free childhood was “the healthiest and best option” for a child’s development.**

¹ World Health Organisation Europe (WHO Europe) (December 1995), ‘[European Charter on Alcohol, 1995](#)’.

² [Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems](#) (SHAAP) (October 2014), ‘[Alcohol and the developing adolescent brain](#)’

³ Pitkänen, T., Lyyra, A-L., & Pulkkinen, L. (2005), ‘*Age of onset of drinking and the use of alcohol in adulthood: a follow-up study from age 8-42 for females and males*’, *Addiction*, 100, pp. 652–661).

Adverse consequences of drinking alcohol for children and young people ⁴

- Adolescents who misuse alcohol are more likely to suffer from side effects including appetite changes, weight loss, eczema, headaches and sleep disturbance.
- The most common impacts of alcohol intoxication are vomiting and coma.
- Young people are not immune to the chronic diseases and conditions associated with excess alcohol consumption in adults, and deaths from liver disease are now occurring at younger ages.
- Adolescents and young people who drink and drive, or allow themselves to be carried by a drink driver, are more likely to be involved in a car accident.
- Adolescents and young people who drink alcohol are more likely to sustain an injury, often as a result of an assault.
- Alcohol abuse in adolescence, during a developmentally sensitive period, poses a particular danger to the emerging brain faculties of executive functioning and long-term memory.
- Adolescents are likely to be more vulnerable than adults to both subtle brain damage and long-lasting cognitive deficits following alcohol exposure.
- Alcohol may increase feelings of depression.
- Stress/anxiety-based drinking is associated with long-term and more severe negative outcomes.
- There is a relationship between adolescent alcohol use and mental health problems.
- Alcohol consumption during an evening may affect a child's performance at school on the following day, since it takes time to metabolise alcohol and this process varies depending on the dose of alcohol that was consumed and differing metabolic capacity.
- There are associations between alcohol consumption and subsequent behaviour with peers and friends. Excessive alcohol use can be detrimental to a young person being able to maintain friendships, particularly if the consumption levels are higher than among the peer group generally.
- Alcohol consumption can have a detrimental effect on young people's short-term educational performance.
- Alcohol consumption by young people, particularly students, is more likely to make them vulnerable to being the victims of crime.
- Alcohol may make some young people more likely to display aggressive behaviour, although it is likely that other factors such as their personality and family life will play a role.
- Alcohol consumption is associated with: not using a condom during a young person's first sexual encounter; an increased likelihood of having sex and at a younger age; unprotected sex; teenage pregnancy; and the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

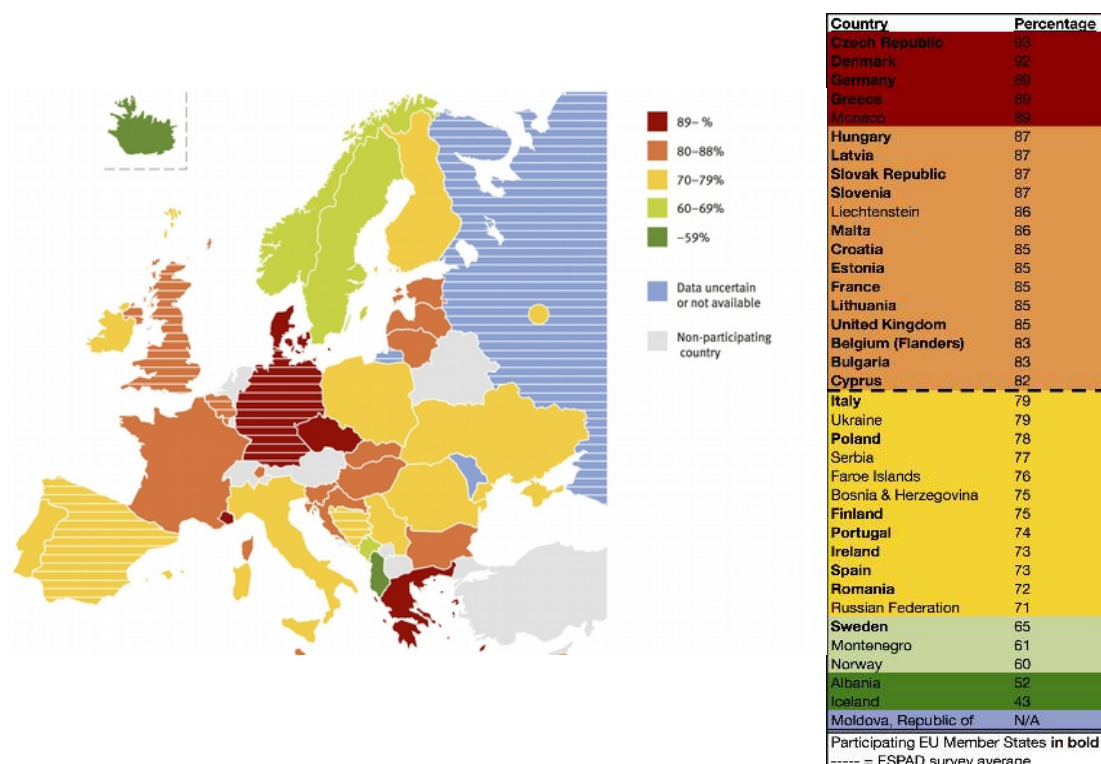
⁴ Donaldson, Sir Liam (December 2009), '[*Guidance on the Consumption of Alcohol by Children and Young People*](#)', Department of Health, based on Newbury-Birch et al (2008)., '*The Impact of Alcohol Consumption On Young People: A Review of Reviews*', University of Newcastle

2. UNDERAGE DRINKING IN EUROPE

Europe is the heaviest drinking region in the world and levels of alcohol consumption amongst EU children are high compared to other regions. Surveys focused exclusively on underage drinking provide the most reliable trend data on the alcohol consumption habits of adolescents over the last decade. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs (ESPAD) comprises the most reliable comparison data in Europe.

Levels of underage drinking within the EU are high by international standards. In all but one of the participating ESPAD countries in 2011, 70% or more of the students reported having drunk alcohol at least once during their lifetime, and 79% did so in the last 12 months (see illustration below).

Frequency of use of any alcoholic beverage during the last 12 months ⁵

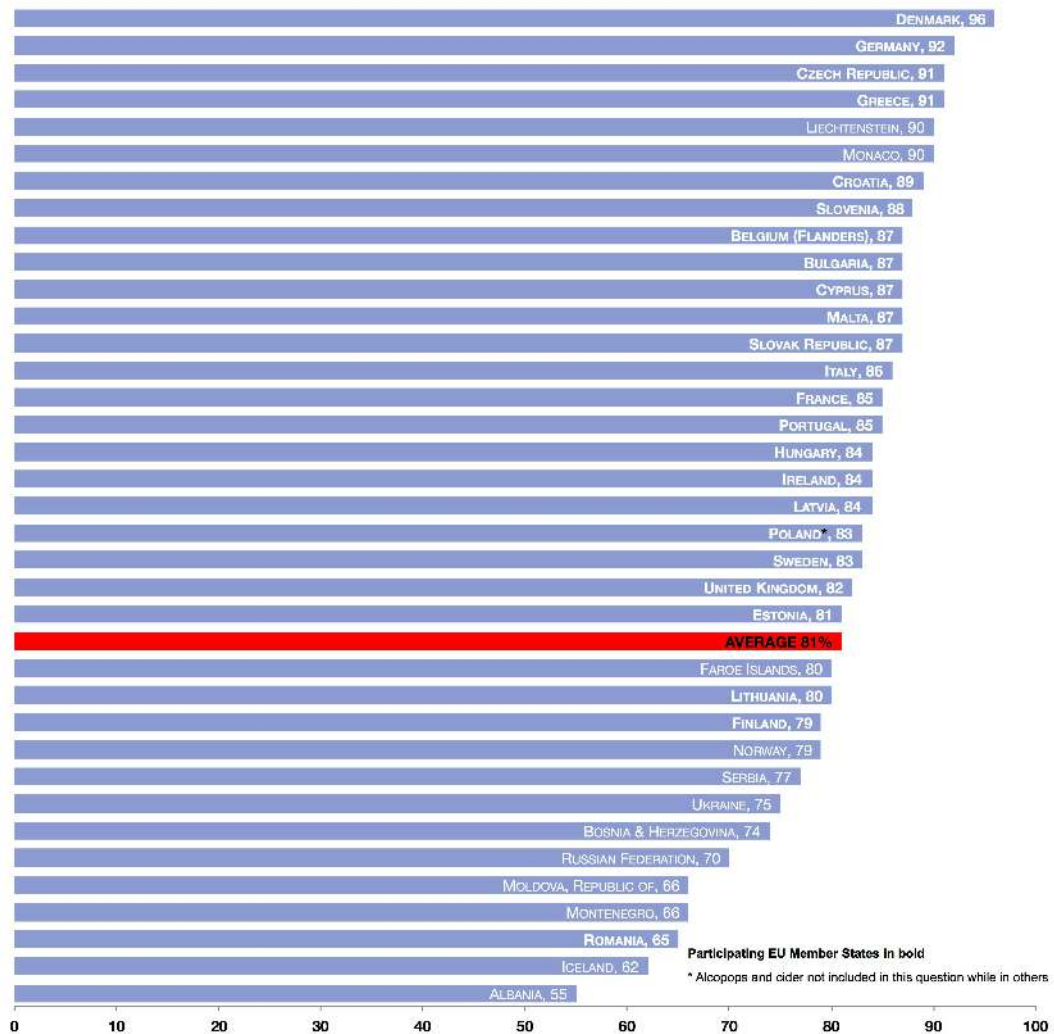


According to the ESPAD survey, alcohol is perceived to be easily available even though there are laws in many countries that should restrict access for young people. On average, four in five students (81%) find it fairly or very easy to obtain an alcoholic beverage. The majority of respondents believe this is the case in every one of the 36 participating countries to the survey, with at least 90% stating so in six of them: Monaco, Liechtenstein, Greece, Czech Republic, Germany and Denmark (see below).⁶

⁵ European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs (2011), adapted from Table 9 and Chart 2a

⁶ European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs (2011), adapted from Table 5a

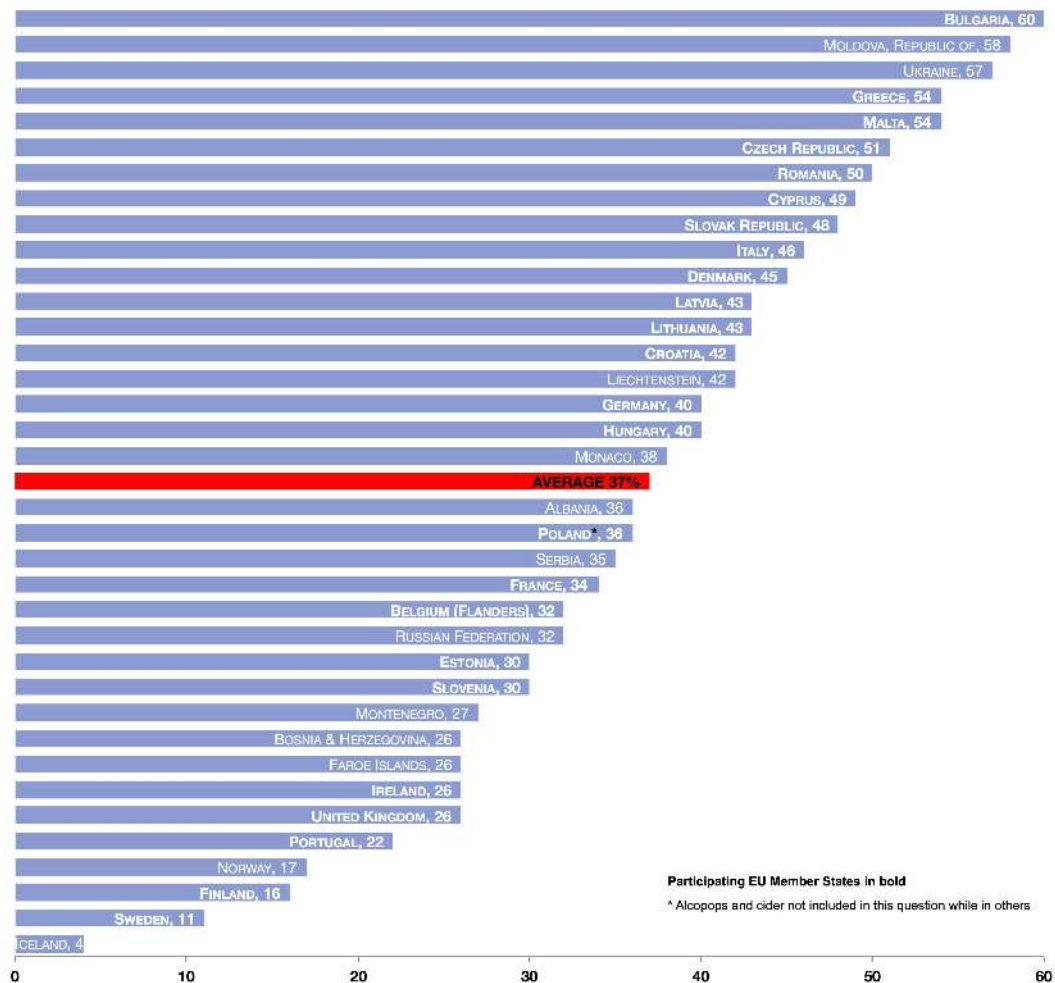
Perceived availability of alcoholic beverages: Percentages responding “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain



Clear differences between countries emerge as regards the actual purchase of alcoholic beverages. For example, about six in ten students in Bulgaria, Malta and Ukraine had bought alcohol in a shop in the past 30 days while only 4% had done so in Iceland and 11-17% in the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden (below).⁷

⁷ European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs (2011), adapted from Table 6a

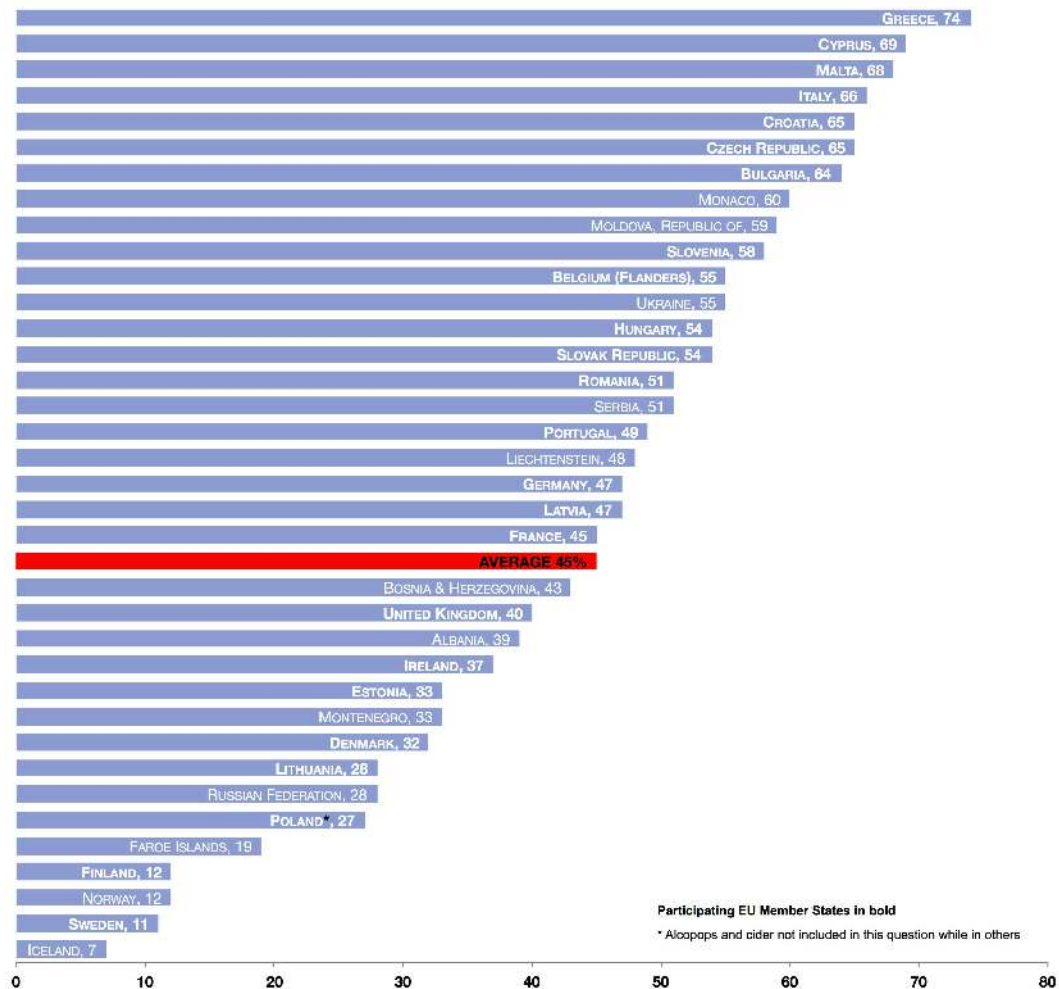
Purchase of alcoholic beverages during the last 30 days in a store for own consumption, percentages



Young people from the Nordic countries (Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Faroe Islands) were also least likely to indulge in on-premise alcohol consumption; 7-19% of adolescents reported drinking in public establishments in the last 30 days. At the other end of the scale, three in four Greeks (74%) had drunk alcohol in bar, disco, etc., and high proportions were also found in Cyprus and Malta (about 68%) (below).⁸

⁸ European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs (2011), adapted from Table 7a

Consumption of alcoholic beverages etc (on-premise) during the last 30 days, percentages



3. EVIDENCE OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MINIMUM PURCHASE AGE RESTRICTIONS

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends regulating the availability of alcoholic beverages, including through a minimum legal purchase age, as one of the leading best buy interventions to reduce harmful drinking and thus the burden of noncommunicable diseases.⁹

A review of 132 studies published between 1960 and 1999 found very strong evidence that changes in minimum drinking-age laws can have substantial effects on drinking among young people and alcohol-related harm, particularly in relation to road traffic accidents. These effects can often be seen years after young people reach the legal drinking age.¹⁰ The authors' analysis led them to conclude that, compared to a wide range of other programs and efforts to reduce drinking among high school students, college students, and other teenagers, increasing the legal age for purchase and consumption of alcohol to 21 appears to have been the most effective strategy.

However, it is clear that the benefits of a higher drinking age are only realised if the law is enforced. For example, an evaluation of data collected from the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) concluded that the enactment and enforcement of the national uniform age 21 years minimum drinking age law was responsible for a 19% net decrease in fatal crashes involving young drinking drivers.¹¹

4. AGE RESTRICTIONS ON ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN EUROPE: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE THEY SET?

The most common alcohol minimum purchasing age in the European Region is 18 years old. Although legal restrictions on the age at which young people may purchase alcohol vary widely from country to country, ranging typically from 16 to 20 years of age depending on the beverage type and outlet, almost all countries legally restrict these sales.

⁹ WHO Europe (2014), '[European status report on alcohol and health 2014: Availability of alcohol](#)', p. 1

¹⁰ Wagenaar AC, Toomey TL. (2000), '*Alcohol policy: gaps between legislative action and current research*', Contemporary Drug Problems, 27, pp. 681–733).

¹¹ Voas RB, Tippetts AS. (1999), '*Relationship of alcohol safety laws to drinking drivers in fatal crashes*', Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in Babor T., et al (2010)., '*Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity*', Oxford University Press, 2nd ed, p. 139

Minimum age purchase restrictions in Europe ¹²

COUNTRY	MINIMUM PURCHASE AGE (YEARS)		ADDITIONAL INFO
	On-premises sales (serving)	Off-premises sales (selling)	
Austria	16 (beer and wine), 16/18 (spirits)	16 (beer and wine), 16/18 (spirits)	6 of the 9 states in Austria have 18 years of age for spirits and spirits-based mixed drinks
Belgium	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	Illegal since 2010 to sell, serve or offer distilled alcohol beverages to anyone under the age of 18.
Bulgaria	18	18	The 2005 Health Act prohibits the sale of alcohol to persons under 18 years of age, but not their consumption
Croatia	18	18	
Cyprus	17	17	
Czech Republic	18	18	
Denmark	18	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	Off-premises sales of spirits below 16.5%ABV allowed to those at least 16 years of age
Estonia	18	18	
Finland	18	18 (beer and wine), 20 (spirits)	
France	18	18	No explicitly stated consumption age, but selling alcohol to a minor (under 18) is illegal. This age was raised from 16 to 18 in July 2009
Germany	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	Exception: If the individual is 14 and accompanied by a Custodial Person which permits the minor to consume or buy fermented alcoholic drinks (e.g.: beer, wine or cider)
Greece	18	18	In 2008, the consumption of alcoholic beverages was prohibited for minors in public. However, the law does not apply to private events or private premises
Hungary	18	18	
Ireland	18	18	
Italy	18	18	The minimum age for selling alcohol was raised to 18 years of age in November 2012 (Resolution No. 18512 of 4 February 2013)
Latvia	18	18	
Lithuania	18	18	
Luxembourg	16	16	
Malta	17	17	Must provide identification upon request
Netherlands	18	18	The legal age for purchasing low-alcoholic beverages was raised on 1 January 2014, from 16 to 18 for all alcoholic beverages. Minors can legally drink alcohol as long as it is provided to free of charge, such as minors sharing a beer with their parents or friends
Norway	18 (beer and wine), 20 (spirits)	18 (beer and wine), 20 (spirits)	
Poland	18	18	Must be supported with identification upon request
Portugal	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	Minimum purchase age for spirits increased to 18 in February 2013
Romania	18	18	
Slovak Republic	18	18	
Slovenia	18	18	
Spain	16/18	16/18	Although the Governing Council gave the green light to a new law banning alcohol consumption below 18, the new legislation is still pending in period, open to amendments of the parliamentary groups
Sweden	18	18 (beer), 20 (wine and spirits)	Beer with alcohol content below 3.5% may be sold off-premise to those aged 18 years and older
United Kingdom	18	18	In the UK (Scotland), beer, cider, wine and perry can be served to 16-17-year-olds who are consuming a meal. In England, 16-17-year-olds can drink beer, cider or wine with a meal at a table in a bar or restaurant if they are accompanied by a person aged 18 years or over
Albania	18	18	
Bosnia & Herzegovina	18	18	
Iceland	20	20	
Monaco	18	18	
Montenegro	18	18	
Norway	18 (beer and wine), 20 (spirits)	18 (beer and wine), 20 (spirits)	
Russian Federation	18	18	
Serbia	18	18	
Switzerland	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	16 (beer and wine), 18 (spirits)	

EU Member States in bold

¹² WHO Europe (2014), ‘[European status report on alcohol and health 2014: Availability of alcohol](#)’, p. 4; Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), ‘[Alcohol policy regulation in Europe](#)’, Switzerland; Young people and alcohol, ‘[Législation: Vente et consommation d’alcool en Belgique](#)’, Belgium; Bulgarian Ministry of Health, ‘[LAW ON HEALTH \(2005\)](#)’; <http://legifrance.gouv.fr/>, ‘[Law on Public Health](#)’; Notice, ‘[LAW 3730/2008 – Protecting minors from tobacco and alcoholic beverages, and other provisions](#)’; Ministry of Health, ‘[Decree-Law of 13 September 2012, n. 158](#)’, Italy

5. IMPLEMENTATION AND ENFORCEMENT OF MINIMUM PURCHASE PURCHASE AGE LAWS

A study by the Dutch Institute for Alcohol Policy (STAP) found that one of the most effective instruments to increase compliance with minimum purchase age laws is organised and regular enforcement. This was exemplified by the Swedish STAD project, which showed that enhanced enforcement, training for bar personnel and creating public support can lead to a compliance level of 93% among retailers.¹³

Legally enforced minimum purchase age

According to World Health Organisation Europe, a licensing system for the sale of alcohol allows for control, since infringement of the laws can be punished by revocation of the licence.¹⁴

In Great Britain, the protection of children from harm is one of the four objectives of the Licensing Act 2003, and active enforcement of a minimum purchase age is one of the ways in which this objective is met. Local authorities, including the police service, work in partnership to ensure licensed premises comply with legislation.

This involves monitoring and performing test purchases on licensed premises suspected of illegal activity such as underage selling and proxy sales (illegal purchases for someone who is underage or intoxicated).

As a criminal offence, the purchase of alcohol by a person under the age of 18 carries a fine of up to £5,000. The sale of alcohol to underage persons is punishable by either a maximum fine of £20,000 (for persistent offenders), or suspension of a licence, or a closure order.

Age verification schemes

Some countries seek to restrict the sale of alcohol by placing the burden of responsibility on to the vendor. For instance, in Poland, Article 15 of the *ACT of 26th October 1982 on Upbringing in Sobriety and Counteracting Alcoholism* states that “in case of doubts to whether a customer is of legal drinking age [18 years old], persons serving or selling alcoholic beverages shall be entitled to demand a document confirming their age from the customer.”¹⁵

In Great Britain, in addition to the minimum legal purchasing age of 18 years, vendors are eligible to participate in the *Challenge 25* scheme, whereby customers attempting to buy alcoholic beverages are

¹³ Dutch Institute for Alcohol Policy (STAP) (October 2013), ‘[New European overview shows that alcohol age limit of 18 is widely accepted, but lacks compliance in many countries](#)’

¹⁴ WHO Europe (September 2009), ‘[Evidence for the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm](#)’, p. 64

¹⁵ Pregnancy without alcohol, ‘[Journal of Laws 1982 No. 35 item 230 ACT of 26th October 1982 on Upbringing in Sobriety and Counteracting Alcoholism](#)’, Poland

asked to prove their age if in the retailer's opinion they look under 25 even though the law states they must be a minimum of 18. Many supermarket and off-licence chains display *Challenge 25* notices stating that they will not serve persons who look under 21 without ID.

Participation in the scheme is voluntary. The sales practices of participating retailers are subject to examination by the regulatory agency Trading Standards, who can test purchase the retailing of alcohol to underaged customers. Failure to adhere to the rules could result in a licence review, a heavy fine and – for repeat offenders – suspension of your licence.¹⁶

Responsible beverage server training

Responsible beverage service training is intended to decrease the number of illegal alcohol sales to underage youth and intoxicated patrons through education programs that: help managers and servers/sellers understand state, community, and establishment-level alcohol policies and potential consequences for failing to comply with such policies (e.g., criminal or civil liability, job loss) and provide the necessary skills to comply with these policies. An ideal policy would mandate training, would apply to all employees of all new and existing on- and off-premises alcohol establishments, and would be supported by tough sanctions for sales to underage youth or sales to intoxicated patrons.

Examples of such training programmes are included in commitments made to the European Alcohol and Health Forum, such as: Delhaize Group retailers in Belgium training and equipping their staff with the tools to identify attempts by minors to illegal purchase alcohol over-the-counter;¹⁷ and SAB Miller's digital age verification procedure on its online platforms;¹⁸ and Some initiatives operate beyond the alcohol industry to the hospitality sector in general. For example, the Finnish Hospitality Association (FHA) is committed to enforcing age limits for selling and serving of alcoholic beverages among its 6,000 outlets.¹⁹

Test purchasing and mystery shopping

Monitoring compliance of minimum purchase age laws can be done using test purchasing or 'mystery shopper' schemes, whereby underage consumers attempt to buy alcohol from retailers, and record incidents of success and/or failure to do so. Such schemes can provide evidence to inform punitive action against retailers for breaking the law.

Over the last decade, Switzerland has developed a sophisticated take on mystery shopping or test purchasing to check whether sellers or servers of alcoholic beverages were compliant with the country's minimum legal purchase age. In 2008, the Federal Office of Public Health and the Swiss Alcohol Board create a guide to foster the standardisation of practices and data, and to ensure that the procedure is legal and ethical. Local nongovernmental organizations were mandated to hire and train adolescents (usually between the ages of 14 and 17 years) to visit supermarkets, restaurants, service station shops and so on and try to buy alcoholic beverages.

¹⁶ [Challenge 25](#), website

¹⁷ European Alcohol and Health Forum, '[Commitment details](#)', Delhaize Group Belgium

¹⁸ European Alcohol and Health Forum, '[Commitment details](#)', SABMiller

¹⁹ European Alcohol and Health Forum, '[Commitment details](#)', Finnish Hospitality Association (FHA)

Test purchases were started in one canton (region) in 2000. In 2011, test purchasing was regularly carried out in 25 out of the 26 cantons.

The annual number of test purchases rose from 85 in 2000 to 5518 in 2011 and the percentage of successful purchases dropped from 83.5% to 30.4%, respectively. In 2000, only 3.5% of the mystery shoppers were asked to show their ID, whereas in 2010, almost 80% were asked their age or had to identify themselves.²⁰

State monopolies

Government monopolies on the sale of alcohol can reduce alcohol-related harm among young people. One such example is where the state sets up shops where it can deliberately impose higher minimum age restrictions on the purchase of alcohol by law. This is the case in Sweden, where higher strength alcoholic beverages are sold to those over 20 years of age in state-owned *Systembolaget* shops.

The sole purpose of *Systembolaget* shops is “to minimise alcohol-related problems by selling alcohol in a responsible way, without [the] profit motive”.²¹

A similar monopoly system exists in Norway, the *Vinmonopolet*, which was created to be the only beverage retailer allowed to sell beverages with an alcohol content above 4.75%ABV throughout the entire country.

Awareness programmes for young people

Public information programmes can help raise awareness of and educate young people about harmful alcohol consumption and the consequences of buying alcohol illegally before the legal age. The prominent Europe-wide example of this is the Alcohol Policy Youth Network (APYN), which “aims to develop and support effective alcohol policy to assure healthy lifestyles and environments for young people”.²²

It does this by holding conferences bringing together hundreds of young people from various youth organisations across Europe and beyond to work together on the topic of alcohol, alcohol prevention and advocacy among youth through a combination of workshops, plenaries and social programmes.²³

²⁰ WHO Europe (2014), [‘European status report on alcohol and health 2014: Availability of alcohol’](#), p. 6

²¹ Systembolaget, [‘This is Systembolaget’](#)

²² Alcohol Policy Youth Network (APYN), [‘Mission’](#)

²³ European Alcohol and Health Forum, [‘Commitment details’](#), Alcohol Policy Youth Network

6. LIMITATIONS

Age-of-sale discrepancies between beverage types

Some countries (e.g. Denmark) set higher minimum age purchase restrictions for distilled alcoholic beverages (i.e. spirits), as opposed to drinks made solely by the process of fermentation.

One reason why higher minimum age purchase restrictions are set for spirits (and sometimes wine) than for beer is chemical; the distillation process ensures that spirits are normally produced at a higher pure alcohol volume than fermented alcohols such as beer.

Another reason may be the manner in which spirits are consumed, usually more rapidly than beer or wine, and regularly in the form of “shots”.

However, alcohol, regardless of volume strength, can still have a detrimental impact on human cognitive development throughout childhood. As SHAAP’s review of alcohol and the adolescent brain states, there is clear evidence of a likely causal association between alcohol use in adolescence and structural changes to the brain, which can affect cognitive development into the mid-twenties.²⁴ Therefore, a teenager who is able to substitute a strong alcoholic beverage for another one of a weaker content will not eliminate the risk of doing themselves significant harm.

Cross-border issues undermining policies

A technical report on the affordability of alcohol in the European Union investigated cross-border purchases of alcoholic beverages using three case studies: Sweden, Denmark and Germany; Finland and Estonia; and United Kingdom and France.²⁵

The authors of the report made several findings:

1. Alcohol purchased abroad can be a large fraction of total alcohol consumption. In Sweden as a whole, nearly a fifth of the alcohol consumed has been purchased abroad. In border regions, this percentage is even higher. In Finland the volume of alcohol purchased abroad contributes to approximately 14% of total alcohol consumption.
2. Cross-border purchases affect the tax revenues that can be collected by national tax authorities. In the UK it is estimated that £150 million of tax revenues are lost due to cross-border purchases. In Finland and Denmark, this triggered a reduction in domestic taxes, to protect the tax basis and trade.
3. There is a strong effect between the reduction of controls on imports for personal use and an increase in cross-border purchasing.
4. There is strong evidence that increased cross-border purchasing led to an increase in consumption in Finland and Sweden; thus consumers have not just replaced their existing alcohol consumption with cheaper alcohol, but also increased their total alcohol consumption levels.
5. It is evident that lower taxation in neighbouring countries, typically reflected in lower prices, attracts cross-border shoppers and effectively reduces the average price of alcohol in a country. This effect is reinforced when countries reduce their excise duty rates to protect their tax base, which further reduces the price of alcoholic beverages.

²⁴ SHAAP (October 2014), ‘[Alcohol and the developing adolescent brain](#)’, p. 11

²⁵ RAND Europe, ‘[The affordability of alcoholic beverages in the European Union](#)’ pp. 61–85

Age-of-sale and cross-border purchasing: a Canadian problem

Cross-border purchasing is also a problem in Canada, where Alberta, Manitoba, and Québec set their minimum purchase ages at 18, while the rest of Canada sets the age at 19. In 2009, members of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (JUST) raised concerns over minimum purchase age laws, remarking that they are only effective if they are strictly *and consistently* enforced in all situations. However, significant numbers of young people cross provincial or territorial boundaries to take advantage of less restrictive regulations in neighbouring jurisdictions, especially at certain border points where alcohol outlets and licensed establishments cluster to meet the demand from cross-border customers.

To reduce the practice of cross-border drinking and driving, the Committee recommended that the provinces be encouraged to harmonise their respective minimum legal drinking ages.²⁶

²⁶ Parliament of Canada (2009), '[*ENDING ALCOHOL-IMPAIRED DRIVING: A COMMON APPROACH*](#)', Committee Report, Committee on Justice and Human Rights

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most effective policies for curbing the prevalence of underage drinking across Europe is a minimum legal purchase age, as recommended by WHO. There is an established body of evidence that proves the crucial importance of enforcing this legislation. Among the English National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's (NICE) recommendations for preventing harmful drinking is a provision to ensure sufficient resources are available to prevent underage sales, including funding for the appropriate authorities to identify and take action against premises that regularly sell alcohol to people who are underage.²⁷

The strict enforcement of minimum purchase age legislation actively aims to deter both sellers and buyers of alcoholic beverages from behaving irresponsibly with alcohol. The Swiss mystery shopping case study and the pan-European evaluation of age limit alcohol policies STAP are two examples of the positive relationship between enforcement and compliance among alcohol retailers. However, compliance with the legal age limits is a problem in many Member States. Exchanging good practices and strategies between enforcement experts of different countries is a very important step in the efforts to reduce the total burden of underage drinking across Europe.

Nations must also be aware of cross-border purchases of alcoholic beverages. The examples of Sweden/Denmark/Germany, Finland/Estonia, and UK/France prove the importance of coordinating policies and resources to prevent underage drinking legislation set by one country being undermined by another.

The example of Canada raises the additional problem of potential discrepancies in minimum legal purchase ages between state borders. In Europe, the most average (median) alcohol minimum purchasing age is 18 years old. But some countries (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain) still set the minimum age at 16. The European Union can use its legislative powers to raise the minimum age to 18 for all Member States using a Harmonisation Directive, bringing all countries into line with what is the most commonly accepted minimum age at which alcohol can be legally bought.

²⁷ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (June 2010), '[Alcohol-use disorders: preventing harmful drinking](#)'