

## **Summary of Alcohol pricing and purchasing among heavy drinkers in Edinburgh and Glasgow: Current trends and implications for pricing policies report**

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The study looked at the purchasing behaviour of individuals with alcohol-related conditions in NHS settings in Glasgow and Edinburgh. It examined the relationship between heavy drinking and price and deprivation in each city and analysed the effect of current and proposed legislation on their drinking behaviours.

The study was funded by Alcohol Research UK and the Chief Scientists Office.

### **Key Findings**

Off-sales accounted for 95% of alcohol purchases. Of this, 85.2% of units were sold at less than the recommended minimum unit price of 50p per unit. 70.8% of participants also smoked.

In the UK as a whole, the largest proportion of alcohol units were sold at 35-44.9p per unit; in contrast, among the study's sample, the largest proportion of drinks were purchased within the 15-19.9p and 35-39.9p per unit brands.

Using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, participants were ranked into quintiles, to measure the impact of deprivation on drinking behaviours.

- Quintile one (most deprived) accounted for the majority of participants and contained the highest proportion of exclusively off-sales purchasers.
- Quintile three had the **highest mean consumption** and highest percentage of units purchased in on-sale setting, the lowest percentage of exclusively off-sales purchasers, and the highest expenditure.

Deprivation is very important in relation to alcohol-related harm. The findings are consistent with the 'Glasgow Effect', whereby harms are more acutely experienced in areas of higher deprivation, even when consumption patterns are similar.

The impact of the introduction of a 50p MUP would be predominantly felt amongst those drinking cheap cider and vodka. Heavy drinkers of beer and wine would be less affected, as they already purchase a proportion of their alcohol at or above the 50p MUP.

### **Gender**

In general, males drank significantly more alcohol than females, although this pattern was not repeated in quintiles three and five. Vodka, white cider and white wine were particularly popular with women, both in terms of number of drinkers and total units consumed.

- For women, there are two important factors which influence the relationship between alcohol consumption and harm – increased deprivation and living in Glasgow rather than Edinburgh, displaying clear evidence of the 'Glasgow Effect'.

### **Influence of Price and existing policy**

The price of alcohol had a significant impact on the lives of the participants in the study, with the majority prioritising sourcing and accessing cheap alcohol. Despite the economic crisis and recent benefit changes, the majority were still able to maintain their level of consumption, especially when this concerned cheaper drinks.

- Abolishing multi-buy promotions had not had an effect on purchase and consumption. The researchers conclude that such multi-buy deals may be out with the budget of their participants, and so they do not benefit from them. In many cases, when purchasing beer, participants would have paid more than 50p per unit as they were unable to access such offers/promotions.

The study reported a lack of understanding of the concept of MUP among participants. Many participants had not fully recognised that, under the legislation, they would pay 50p for each unit of alcohol consumed, and so the higher the number of units consumed, the greater the overall cost. MUP would have an immediate impact on this group who have high purchase frequency and high expenditure due to the large quantities purchased. This effect would be further amplified for white cider and cheap vodka drinkers.

Overall, the study reported that participants felt that existing or proposed changes to alcohol policy/legislation would not help them reduce consumption, but the introduction of MUP might help to reduce the likelihood of young people developing the same patterns of hazardous drinking.

Issues of 'density of outlets' and 'ubiquity' were also reported. Participants felt that the constant exposure to and high availability of alcohol hampered attempts to change their drinking behaviour and was responsible to an extent for the maintenance of their behaviours.

### ***Policy Implications***

#### **The findings of the study add some weight to the argument for MUP:**

- Alcohol sold at less than 50p per unit makes up a significant proportion of the alcohol consumed by heavy drinkers.
- MUP would remove trading down practices, particularly for cheap ciders.

The proposed MUP level of 50p should be revised/reviewed to ensure that the desired impact on consumption patterns is achieved. Within the sample, many drinkers already regularly paid more than 50p per unit for beer and wine purchased from off-sales.

One issue of concern was a lack of understanding of MUP and other alcohol policies amongst study participants. Alcohol is an addictive substance and the immediate removal of cheap alcohol is likely to have an impact on heavy drinkers.

- The example highlighted in the study of participants taking measures to ensure they have access to enough alcohol following the introduction of restricted trading times demonstrates a need to ensure key support for alcohol services is available prior to and following the introduction of MUP.
- Thus, the negative impacts of policy developments on heavy drinkers need to be considered in advance of policy changes/developments.

The study reported that 70% of participants also smoked and both alcohol and cigarettes have a negative impact on health.

- Given the addictive nature of both products, the study argues that the introduction of MUP may have the unintended consequence of requiring heavy drinkers on the lowest income to choose between smoking and alcohol.