

Attitudes towards alcohol in Scotland: results from the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents findings based on a set of questions exploring attitudes to alcohol which were included in the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) Survey. SSA is an annual survey of social and political attitudes in Scotland. Run by ScotCen Social Research since 1999, it provides a reliable and robust picture of changing public opinion over time. Interviews with a representative sample of the Scottish population were conducted between June and October 2013, with 1,497 interviews being achieved.

The questions on alcohol were funded by the Scottish Government and managed by NHS Health Scotland, with the aims of tracking changes in attitudes to drinking alcohol since 2004 and 2007 (when previous alcohol modules were included) and providing a baseline picture of public attitudes to minimum unit pricing (MUP) in Scotland.

In particular, the report addresses the following key questions:

- How aware are people of the unit content of alcoholic drinks and the sensible drinking guidelines?
- What do people in Scotland think about alcohol and drinking, and how have their views changed over time?
- How do views about alcohol and drinking relate to drinking behaviour?
- How important is the social context of drinking to perceptions of different drinking behaviours?
- To what extent are people in favour of minimum unit pricing?

Awareness and understanding of the unit content of different drinks and the sensible drinking guidelines

In 2013, around half of adults in Scotland correctly identified the number of units in a pint of beer, measure of spirits or a glass of wine (47-51%). A smaller proportion (18%) knew the correct number of units in a bottle of wine. Around half (49-53%) did not know the correct number of units in the drinks. Public awareness of the unit content of different alcoholic drinks has changed little over time.

A similar proportion of men and women (42% and 43% respectively) correctly identified the recommended daily alcohol limits for their gender (3 to 4 units for men and 2 to 3 units for women). Awareness of the recommended daily limit for men increased between 2007 and 2013 (from 34% to 39% of adults). One in five people in 2013 correctly identified the recommended minimum number of alcohol-free days per week as two.

Attitudes to alcohol and drinking

Many adults in Scotland recognised the potentially harmful nature of alcohol. Sixty percent thought it was the drug causing the most problems in Scotland (up from 46% in 2004), and 84% thought it caused either 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot of harm in Scotland.' Additionally, most people also disapproved of excessive drinking: only 19% thought that 'getting drunk is a perfectly acceptable thing to do on weekends', whilst 13% thought that 'there's nothing wrong with people my age getting drunk regularly'. Although attitudes to getting drunk have not changed significantly overall since 2004, there has been a drop in the proportion of young people aged 18-29 agreeing that getting drunk at weekends is acceptable (from 53% in 2004 to 40% in 2013).

Views on whether it is possible to enjoy a night out in the pub without alcohol have changed very little over time with 77%, in 2013, agreeing that it's possible to do so. There has, however, been a small but significant increase in the proportion of people who think 'it is easier to enjoy a social event if you've had a drink' (from 35% in 2004 to 39% in 2013). There is also evidence of some shift in attitudes to non-drinking over time. The proportion of drinkers reporting that people would think it odd if they didn't drink at all, increased by ten percentage points between 2007 and 2013 (from 31% to 41%). These increases were observed across all age groups. Non-drinkers' views on how others perceive their behaviour have not changed significantly since 2004. In 2013, over four in ten (44%) non-drinkers perceived that others thought it odd that they abstain from drinking alcohol.

Alongside age, attitudes towards alcohol and drinking play an important part in understanding drinking behaviour in Scotland. In 2013, the groups of people who were more likely than others to be higher risk drinkers were those who:

- agreed that 'it is easier to enjoy a social event if you've had a drink' (69% compared with 26% of those who disagreed)
- had more permissive attitudes to getting drunk (74% compared with 33% of those who held less liberal attitudes)^a
- agreed that others would think it odd if they didn't drink (68% compared with 46% of those who disagreed).

The role of social context in how people perceive drinking behaviour

It is apparent that adults in Scotland discriminate between different types of drinking behaviour. There was a strong consensus that harmful drinking, irrespective of context, is a 'very' or 'quite serious' problem (mentioned by 92% to 96%). A majority of people also thought that both hazardous (77% and 84%) and binge drinking (66%

^a This is based on a score variable combining answers to two questions about the acceptability of getting drunk, ('Getting drunk is a perfectly acceptable thing to do on weekends' and 'Nothing wrong with people my age getting drunk regularly'). Based on their scores, participants were classified as 'more liberal' (score of 2-5), medium (score of 6-7) and 'less liberal' (score of 8-10).

and 84%) were problematic. There was widespread recognition of the long-term health consequences of harmful, hazardous and binge drinking.

However, a sizeable proportion of the population did not see a problem with binge or hazardous drinking. For example, 33% thought that a student binge drinking was 'not very' or 'not serious at all,' whilst 21% the same of a retired person drinking at hazardous levels.

Whilst context made little difference to views about the seriousness of harmful or hazardous drinking, it did appear to matter to how people viewed binge drinking. Views on binge drinking were more permissive when being done by a young student, compared with a middle-aged person with family responsibilities.

Attitudes to minimum unit pricing

To assess how the public view minimum unit pricing (MUP), participants were asked the following question in 2013:

'One idea for trying to reduce problem drinking is to have a minimum price for different alcoholic drinks. The price would be based on how much alcohol is in each drink. In principle, how much are you in favour or against this idea?'

Views on MUP were contrasting in 2013, with a slightly higher percentage in support of the policy (41%) than opposing it (35%). Around one in five people (22%) were neither for nor against the idea of having a minimum price for alcohol. Support for the policy also varied across different groups in society. Women, those with higher educational attainment and lower risk drinkers and non-drinkers^b were all more likely than others to be in favour of MUP. Support for the policy was also higher among those who thought alcohol caused 'a great deal' of harm in Scotland and those who thought the amount people drink in Scotland is something we should all be concerned about.

To determine why people were supportive of the policy, those in favour were presented with a list of potential reasons for being in support and were asked to choose all that applied to them.^c The most commonly mentioned were tackling health problems (mentioned by 61% of those in favour of the policy), stopping young people from drinking too much (mentioned by 60%) and tackling problem behaviour from drinking (mentioned by 58%).

^b Drinking behaviour was measured using the AUDIT-C tool. Non-drinkers are defined as not drinking alcohol at all. Lower risk drinking is defined as an AUDIT-C score of 1-3 for women and 1-4 for men; higher risk drinking is defined as a score of 4 or more for women and 5 or more for men. See Annex A for more details on how drinking behaviour was measured in the survey.

^c Participants who said they were in favour of MUP were presented with a card listing possible reasons people might be in favour of the policy and were asked to choose all that were relevant to them.

Reasons for opposing the policy were also varied,^d with some of the most commonly mentioned relating to a concern about the ability of the policy to influence drinking behaviour (61% thought that 'if people want to drink, they will whatever the price' and 52% thought that the policy 'won't make any difference to heavy drinkers'). Fifty one percent thought it 'punishes everyone for what some drinkers do' and 36% thought it 'should be up to individuals how they spend their money'.

Most people (between 55% and 66% depending on the drink type) thought that the proposed minimum prices which would be applied to beer, wine and vodka were 'about right,' and few thought they were 'too high' (12%) or 'too low' (12-16% depending on the drink type). Additionally, most (65%) said current prices did not restrict the amount of alcohol they wanted to buy and around half (46%) agreed that 'supermarkets sell too much alcohol at very cheap prices.'

Conclusion

The findings from the 2013 SSA suggest some positive changes since 2004 in relation to views on the problematic nature of alcohol relative to other drugs and the views of young people on the acceptability of getting drunk. However, there have been simultaneous increases in the proportion of adults reporting that people would think it odd if they didn't drink at all, suggesting some scope to tackle these perceptions about non-drinking in future health campaigns.

Views on MUP were divided, with slightly more in favour of the policy than against it. Yet, when asked about the proposed prices, the majority (between 55% and 66%) thought they were 'about right'. Consequently, there may be scope to increase public awareness of the potential key impacts of minimum pricing, particularly the evidence which suggests that the impact on those who drink moderately or responsibly is expected to be minimal, whereas those who are heavy drinkers of cheap and high strength alcohol will be affected the most.

Policy makers might wish to consider strategies for raising awareness of the likely impact of MUP and to consider how best to translate these to the public in a way that is accessible and easily understood. It will also be important to continue to monitor attitudes over time and explore how they relate to alcohol and drinking in Scotland.

^d Participants who said they were against MUP were presented with a card listing possible reasons people might oppose policy and were asked to choose all that were relevant to them.