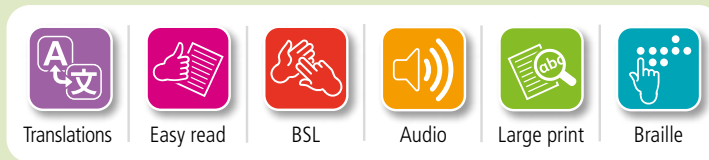




# Public attitudes to Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for alcohol in Scotland

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## Key points

- The purpose of this short report is to investigate public attitudes to minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol in 2019 and to compare these to pre-MUP attitudes. It forms part of the Monitoring and Evaluating Scotland's Alcohol Strategy (MESAS) evaluation of MUP.
- Data were drawn from the 2013, 2015 and 2019 waves of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. The same questions on MUP were asked in each wave.
- Analysis involved descriptive graphics, supported where appropriate by statistical testing.
- Attitudes to MUP were generally more favourable than negative in each wave. In 2019, for example, 49.8% were in favour compared to only 27.6% being against.
- The proportion in favour increased between 2015 (41.3%) and 2019 (49.8%) – the same time frame in which MUP was introduced. Note, however, that the data used do not allow us to say whether or not this was due to the introduction of MUP or any of its effects.
- Analysis by social groups using the 2019 data showed that each sub-group (by deprivation quintile, sex, and age) had higher proportions in favour of MUP than against.

# Introduction

Minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol was implemented in Scotland on 1 May 2018.<sup>1</sup> MUP is a strength-based price floor for alcoholic drinks, meaning that licensed premises cannot sell an alcoholic drink for less than a certain price, determined by the alcohol-by-volume (ABV) percentage of the drink. The price floor in Scotland is 50 pence per unit (ppu) of alcohol.

Public Health Scotland (formerly NHS Health Scotland) was commissioned by the Scottish Government to coordinate an extensive portfolio of research evaluating various effects of MUP, with studies contributed to and led by Public Health Scotland, academic institutions and research consultancies. The evaluation has four outcome areas:

- 1 Implementation and compliance
- 2 Alcoholic drinks industry
- 3 Consumption
- 4 Health and social harms.

More information on the MUP evaluation is available on the [Public Health Scotland website](#).<sup>2</sup>

This study sits under the implementation and compliance outcome area and was conducted by Public Health Scotland, with data commissioned from ScotGen. The purpose of the study was to analyse public attitudes to MUP. The aims were to assess attitudes to MUP after it was introduced, to compare these to pre-MUP attitudes, and to assess if different social groups have different attitudes to MUP.

## Data and methods

Data are from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSAS), carried out by the research consultancy ScotCen. SSAS uses random probability sampling to achieve a representative sample of the Scottish adult population.<sup>3</sup> It is conducted on an annual or biannual basis and aims to recruit between 1,200 and 1,500 Scottish adults each wave. This study compares data from the 2019 SSAS wave to previous waves from 2013 and 2015. The number of respondents varied, with 1,497 in 2013 (54.6% response rate); 1,288 in 2015 (46.1% response rate); and 1,022 in 2019 (41.0% response rate). The sample size in 2019 was smaller than 1,200 because data collection, which was scheduled to take place in 2019/20, was delayed due to the pre-election period for the 2019 Westminster elections, and then terminated early due to the coronavirus pandemic and associated physical distancing requirements.

While there is a consistent set of core questions across most SSAS surveys, additional questions can be added through a commissioning process. The questions on attitudes to MUP used in this report were commissioned by NHS Health Scotland in 2013 and 2019, and by the Scottish Government in 2015. Questions on attitudes to MUP in each wave were:

- a) How much are you in favour or against [MUP]?
- b) If in favour, what is your main reason for saying that you are in favour?
- c) And what is your second reason for saying that you are in favour?
- d) If against, what is your main reason for saying that you are against?
- e) And what is your second reason for saying that you are against?

For question a) ('How much are you in favour or against [MUP]?') respondents could choose one of six answers: 'strongly in favour', 'somewhat in favour', 'neither in favour nor against', 'somewhat against', 'strongly against', and 'don't know'. For questions b) through d), respondents were

given a list of closed responses to choose from (detailed in the [Findings](#) section below).

Females represented 51.9% of the sample. The average age was 55.1 years for males and 53.7 years for females. Some sex-age groupings were somewhat under-represented, such as females aged 16–19 years. In general, however, the sample mostly reflects the Scottish population's age-sex distribution for adults.<sup>4</sup> Further, deprivation quintiles were approximately even. The 2019 sample was similar to previous samples in terms of the proportions in social groups defined by sex, age and deprivation. Due to the sample being predominantly of white ethnicity and reporting no disability, analysis by ethnicity and disability was not possible. There was no information on sexuality.

The main analytical approach of this study was to use descriptive statistics and graphics\*, with formal statistical tests to support the descriptive analysis. Statistical tests were used to investigate whether the differences over time or between groups were statistically significant, rather than to generate effect estimates. A Wilcoxon rank sum test was used to compare MUP responses in 2019 to 2015, and ordinal logistic regression was used to test if social groupings (for example deprivation, sex, age) explained variation in MUP attitudes.

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\* Unless otherwise specified, graphs used between 99.7% and 100% of responses, as refused responses were omitted due to negligible proportions (<0.3%, never more than N=3).

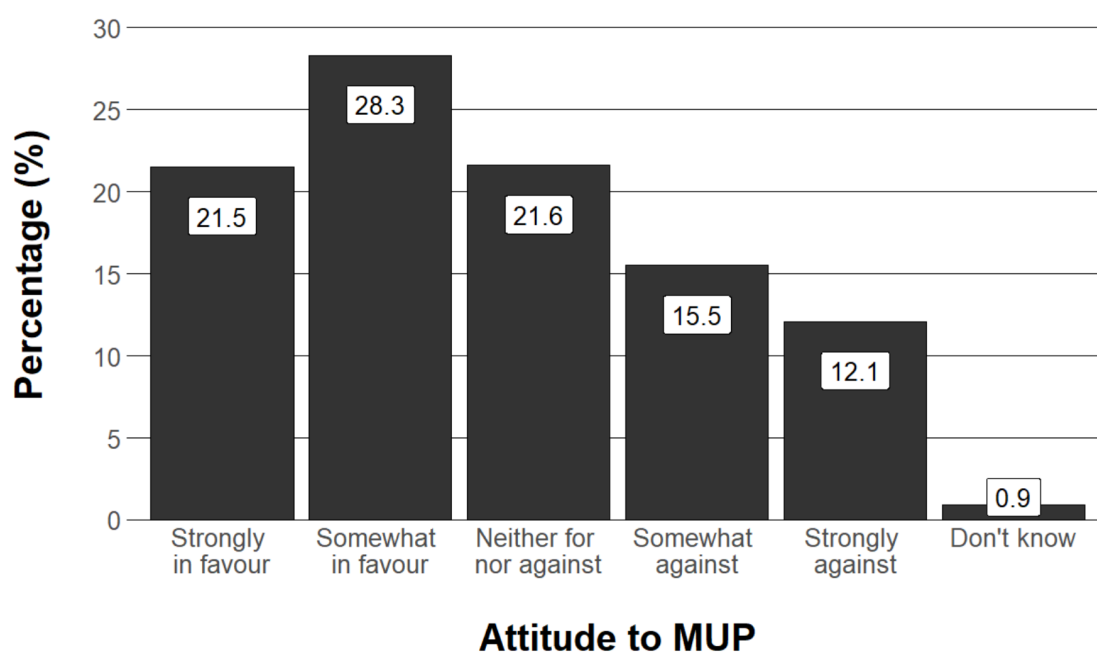
## Findings

This section looks at attitudes to MUP in 2019, compares 2019 attitudes to pre-MUP, and investigates attitudes in different social groups.

### Attitudes to MUP in 2019

More respondents were in favour of MUP (49.8%) than against (27.6%). As per Figure 1 below, 21.5% were strongly in favour and 28.3% were somewhat in favour, while 12.1% were strongly against and 15.5% were somewhat against. The remainder were either of a neutral opinion (21.6% said they were neither for nor against) or said that they did not know (0.9%).

**Figure 1: Attitudes to MUP, 2019**

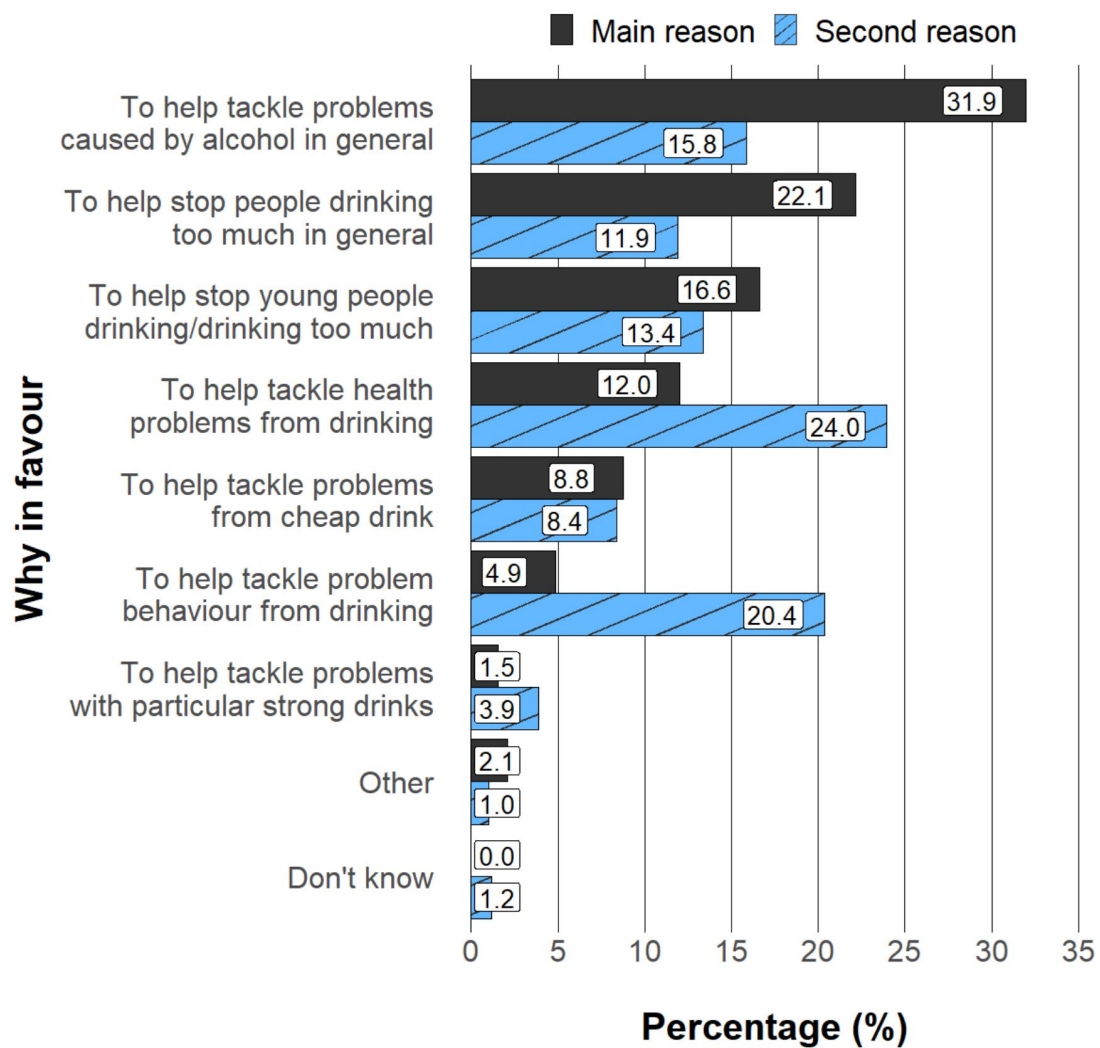


Respondents who were in favour of or against MUP were then asked to choose a main and a second reason for their response from a list of closed responses. For the 49.8% who were in favour of MUP (Figure 1), the most common main reason was 'To help tackle problems caused by alcohol in



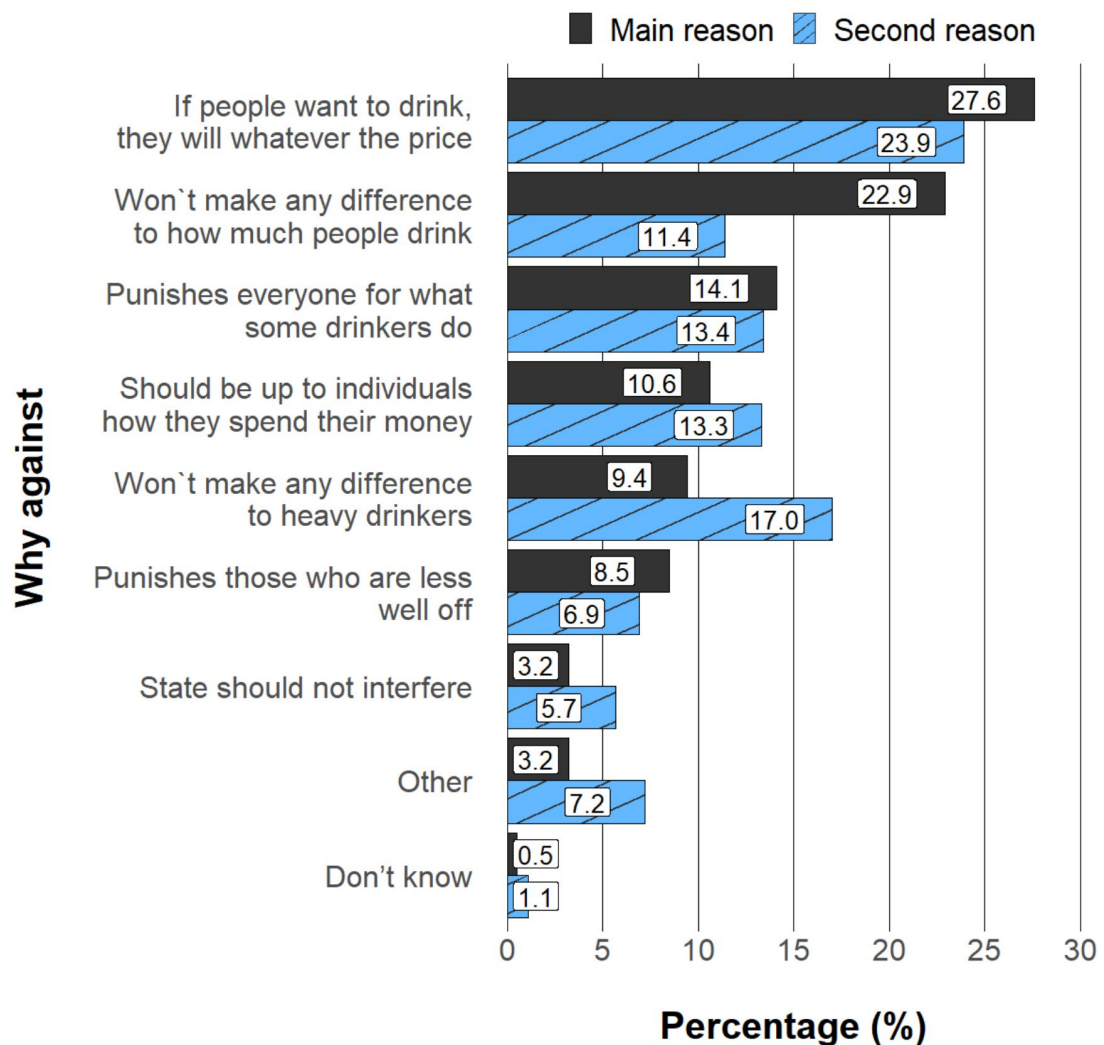
general' (31.9%), followed by 'To help stop people drinking too much in general' (22.1%), and 'To help stop young people drinking/drinking too much' (16.6%). For the second reason, the most common was 'To help tackle health problems from drinking' (24.0%), followed by 'To help tackle problem behaviour from drinking' (20.4%).

**Figure 2: Reason for being in favour of MUP, 2019**



For the 27.6% who were against MUP (Figure 1), the most common main reason was 'If people want to drink, they will whatever the price' (27.6%), followed by '[MUP] won't make any difference to how much people drink' (22.9%), and '[MUP] punishes everyone for what some drinkers do' (14.1%). The most common second reason was 'If people want to drink, they will whatever the price' (23.9%), followed by '[MUP] won't make any difference to heavy drinkers' (17.0%).

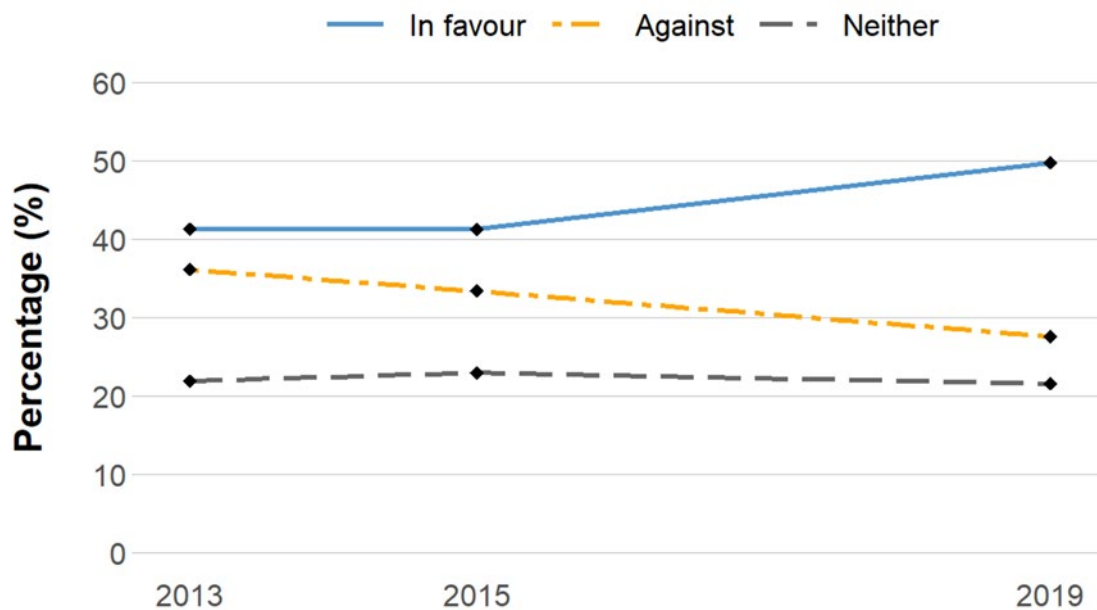
**Figure 3: Reasons for being against MUP, 2019**



## Comparison with pre-MUP attitudes

In each survey (2013, 2015, 2019), more respondents were in favour of MUP than against. However, attitudes have become more favourable to MUP over time (Figure 4).<sup>\*</sup> Levels in 2013 and 2015 were very similar; however, in 2015 only 41.3% of respondents were in favour of MUP compared to 49.8% in 2019. Similarly, 33.4% were against MUP in 2015, compared to 27.6% in 2019. Statistical analysis suggested that the observed difference between attitudes to MUP in 2015 and 2019 was unlikely to have arisen due to chance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

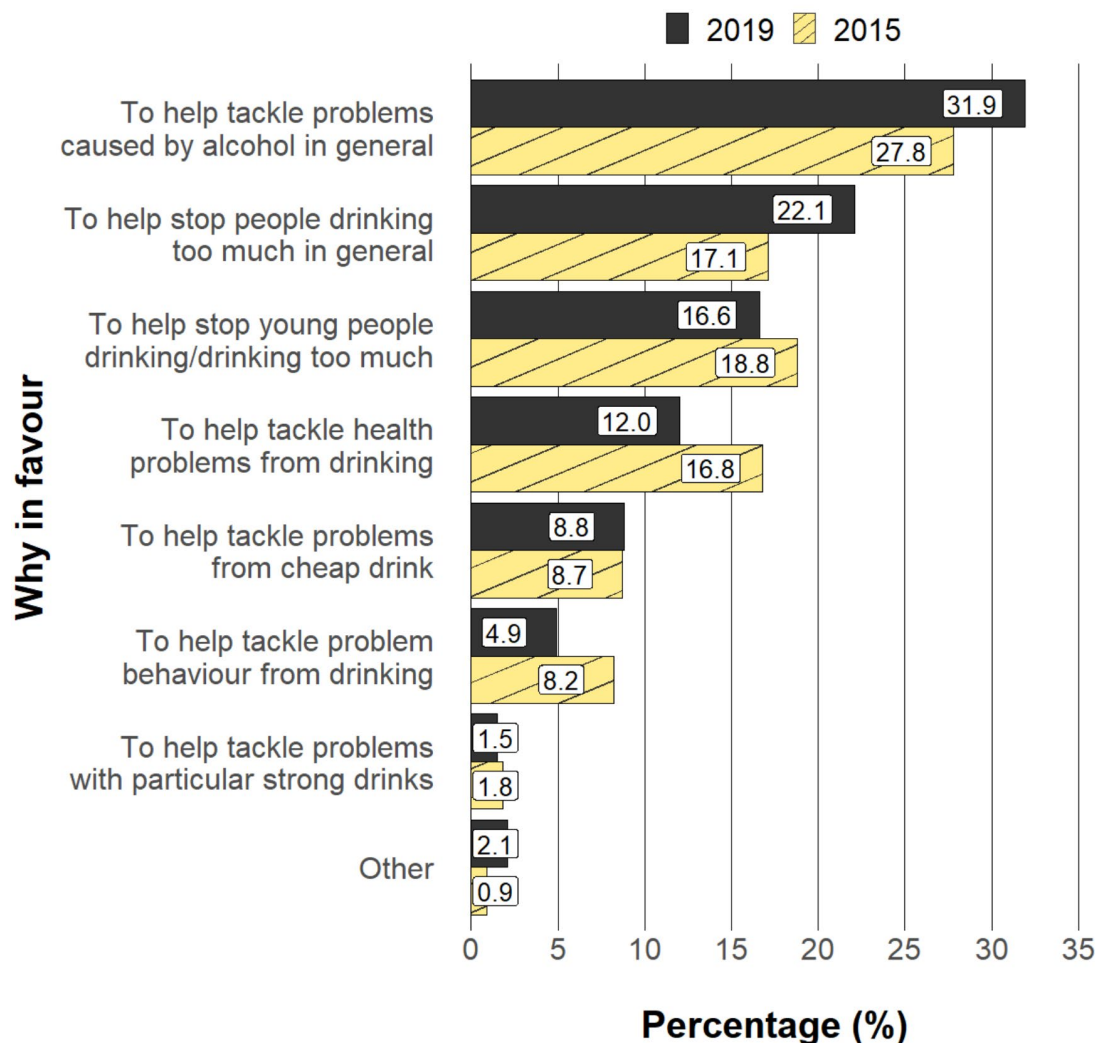
**Figure 4: Attitudes to MUP before and after implementation**



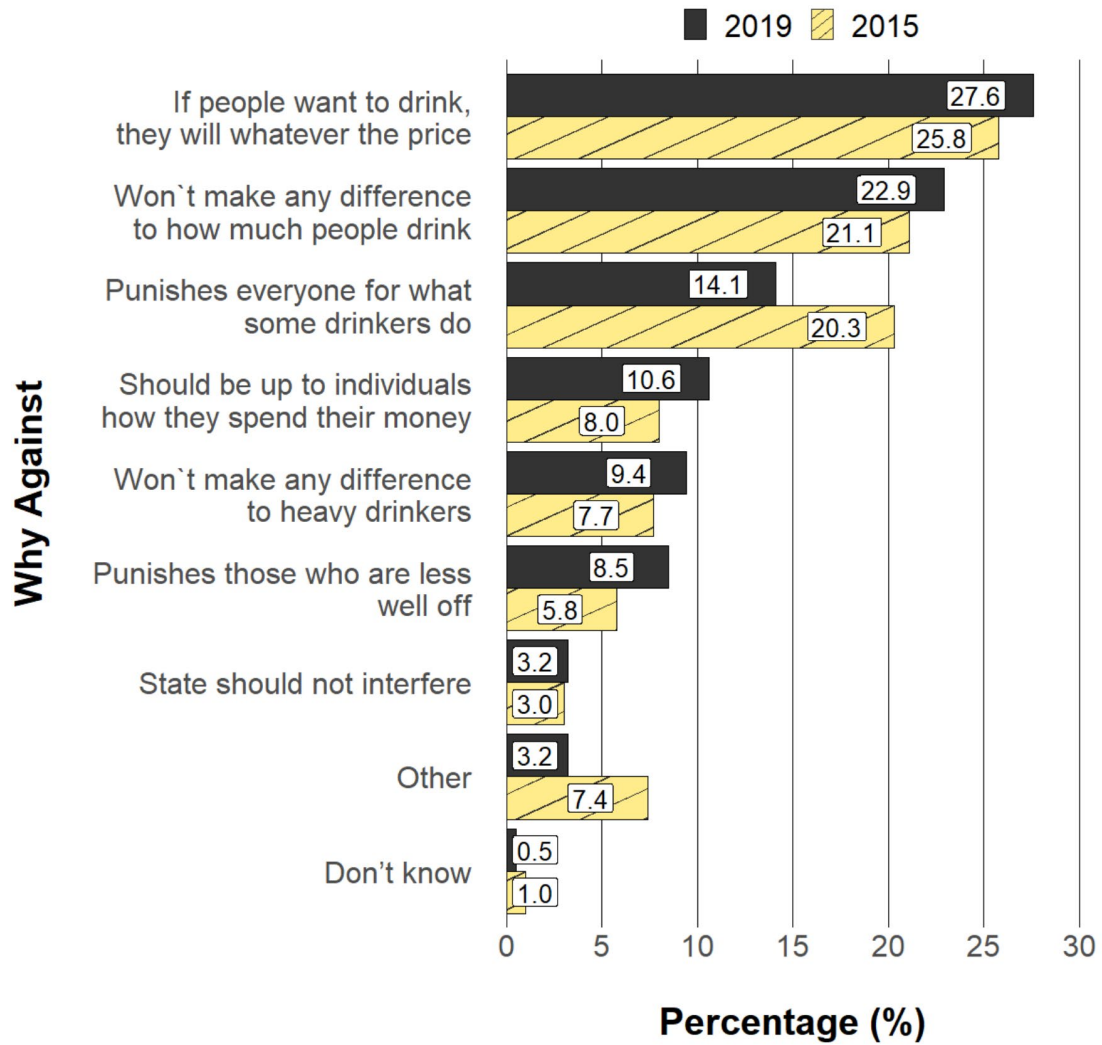
<sup>\*</sup> 'Don't know' responses were omitted (after reweighting: 1.3% in 2013; 1.9% in 2015; 0.9% in 2019).

When asked why they were in favour of or against MUP, respondents were given the same closed responses in 2015 as in 2019. The 2015 results for the main reason for MUP (Figure 5) and main reason against (Figure 6) were similar to 2019, indicating that, while attitudes to MUP may have become more favourable between 2015 and 2019, the reasons for respondents being in favour or against have stayed proportionate.

**Figure 5: The ‘main reason’ respondents were in favour of MUP, 2019 compared to 2015**



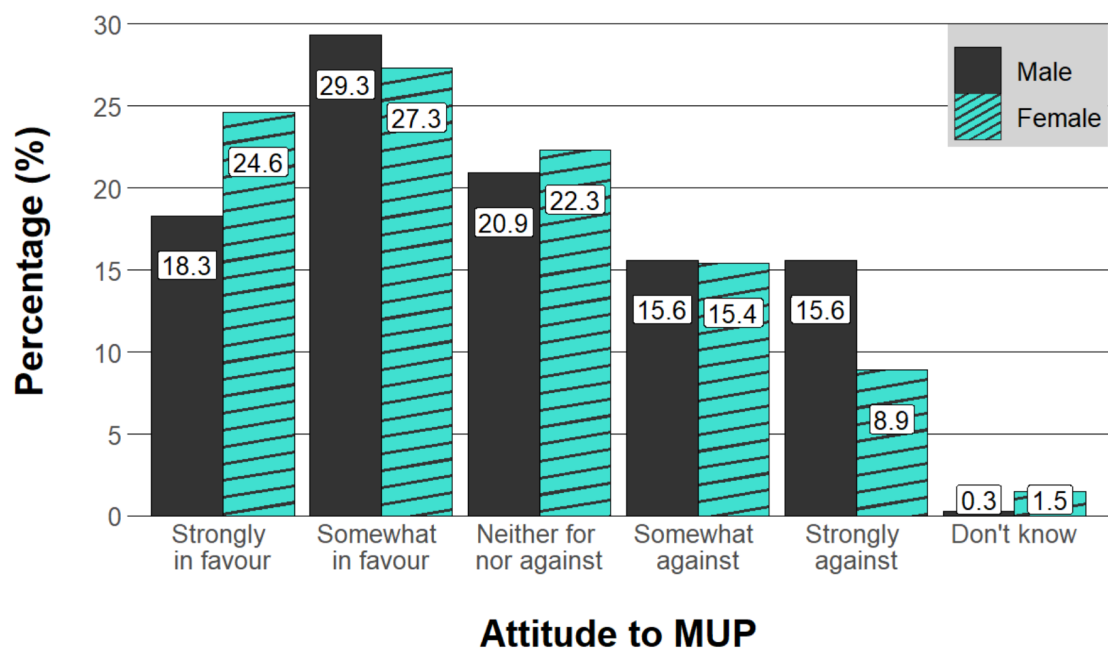
**Figure 6: The ‘main reason’ respondents were against MUP, 2019 compared to 2015**



## Attitudes by sex in 2019

In 2019 both men and women had higher proportions in favour of MUP than against, with 47.6% of men and 51.9% of women in favour and 31.2% and 24.3%, respectively, against (Figure 7). Statistical testing indicated that the difference between men and women was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.43$ ).

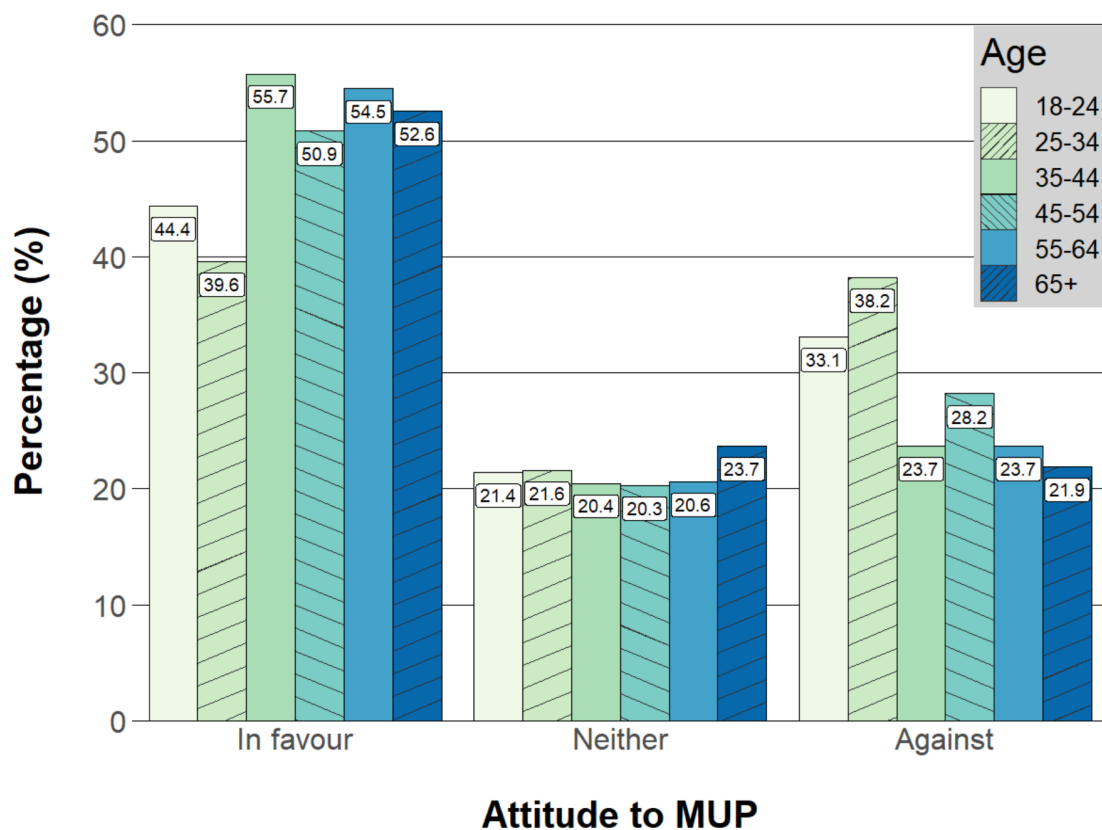
Figure 7: Attitudes to MUP by sex, 2019



## Attitudes by age in 2019

Figure 8\* below uses mostly ten-year age groupings and collapses attitudes into 'in favour', 'against' and 'neither'. All age groups had greater proportions in favour of MUP than against. Age groups over 35 years all had between 50.9% and 55.7% in favour of MUP. The youngest age groups, while still more in favour than against, were the least in favour of MUP (44.4% of the 18–24-year age group and 39.6% of the 25–34-year age group). The relationship between age and attitudes to MUP (that older ages are more likely to be more in favour of MUP) was statistically significant ( $p = 0.04$ ).

**Figure 8: Attitudes to MUP by age group, 2019**

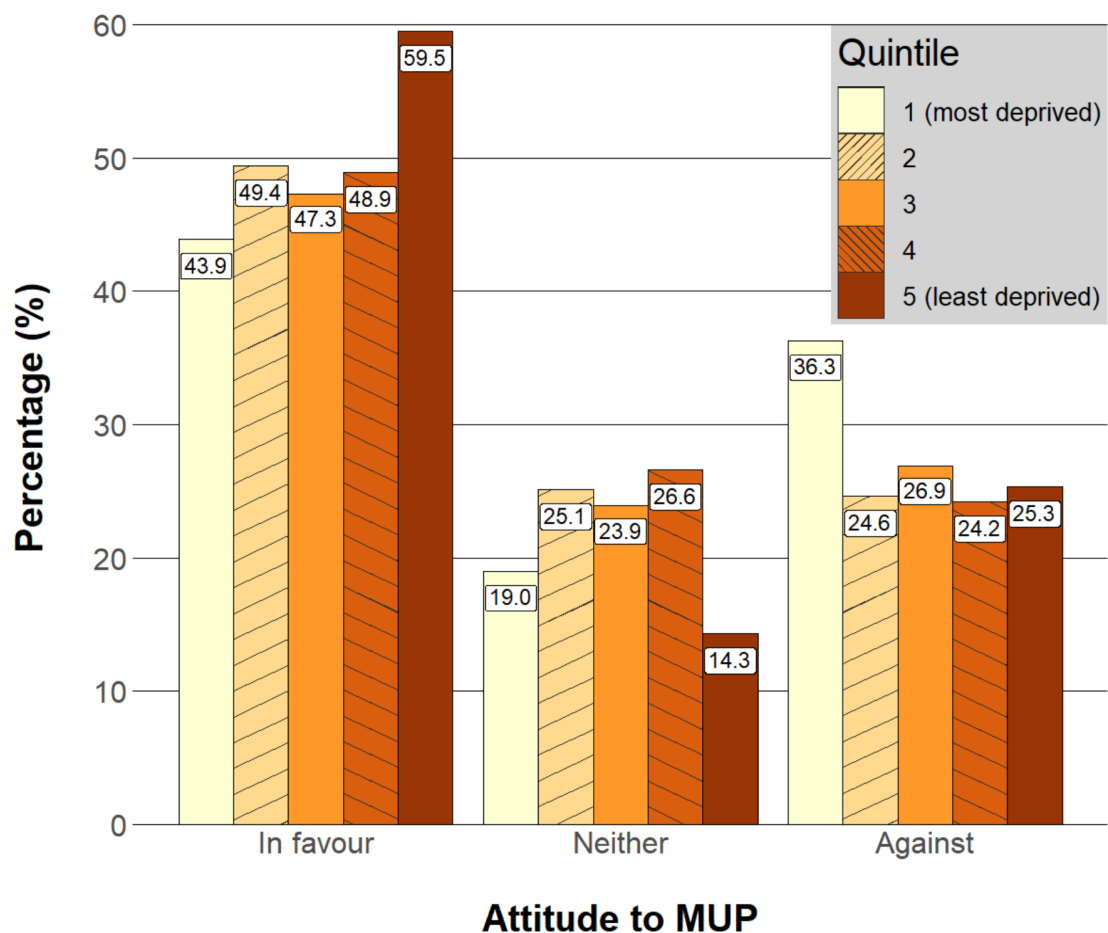


\* 'Don't know' responses for Figure 8 and Figure 9 were omitted (0.9% reweighted).

## Attitudes by deprivation in 2019

When the sample was analysed by area of deprivation, using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), each quintile of deprivation was more in favour of MUP than against (Figure 9). There was some indication that increased deprivation was associated with being against MUP – the most deprived quintile (quintile 1) had the lowest proportion in favour (43.9%), and the least deprived quintile (quintile 5) had the highest proportion in favour (59.5%). The other quintiles had similar proportions in between the two extremes (quintile 2: 49.4%; quintile 3: 47.3%; quintile 4: 48.9%). However, this relationship between SIMD and attitudes to MUP (that the least deprived quintile had the most favourable attitudes and the most deprived quintile had the least favourable attitudes) was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.18$ ).

**Figure 9: Attitudes to MUP by deprivation quintile, 2019**





# Discussion

## Key findings

- In 2019, respondents were almost twice as likely to be in favour of MUP (49.8%) than to be against it (27.6%).
- Comparing public attitudes to MUP in 2015 (41.3% in favour, 33.4% against) to 2019 suggests that attitudes have become more favourable during the same time frame in which MUP was implemented.
- The most common reasons for being in favour of MUP were concerned with alcohol as a problem in Scotland in general.
- The most common reasons for being against MUP were concerned with whether or not MUP will work in reducing alcohol-related harm.
- Reasons for being for or against MUP tended not to change over time.
- All sub-groups by deprivation, sex, and age had more in favour of MUP than against.

## Strengths and limitations

This study used data on attitudes to MUP from representative samples of Scottish adults from both before and after the implementation of the policy. The same methods were used to analyse these different samples. As such, this study was well suited to provide an understanding of public attitudes to MUP. There were limitations, however. For example, closed responses for questions on why respondents were for or against MUP could fail to capture important reasons. Further, it is impossible to know if the results would have been different if the intended sample size had been met in 2019. Moreover, while the sample size was sufficient for analysis by some social groups, it was insufficient for others (such as ethnicity). A final and important limitation is that these data alone cannot be used to attribute any causal effect of the implementation or subsequent effects of MUP on attitudes to MUP.

## Interpretation of findings

There are a number of possible explanations for why attitudes to MUP are favourable in general in 2019, and more favourable in 2019 than in 2015 or 2013. One possible explanation is that understanding of the legislation may have improved over time, particularly since MUP was implemented, and people now know what it means for them. This could have helped change attitudes by reducing confusion and uncertainty associated with the legislation.

Another possible explanation is that some anticipated negative consequences have not been observed. For example, some individuals who may have been against the price floor may have been worried that the alcohol products they purchase could have become more expensive, only to see that this did not happen (MUP in Scotland, by design, only impacted those products being sold at cheap prices relative to their strength and was unlikely to impact on prices in the on-trade). This is perhaps supported by the finding that the proportion of those against MUP who said that the main reason they were against the policy was because it 'punishes everyone for what some drinkers do' declined notably from 20.3% to 14.1%.

A further explanation could involve how MUP has been taken on in other places. It is possible that the increasing implementation of forms of MUP elsewhere (for example Wales, Australia) could make attitudes towards MUP in Scotland more favourable, for example, by making Scotland appear to be more of a leader and less of an outlier.

Another possible explanation is that, while the evaluation for MUP is still in its earlier stages (less than 18 months old at the time of recruitment of the SSAS 2019 sample), it has uncovered little evidence of unintended negative consequences, for example, on the alcohol industry (effects on revenue have been small, with no instances of store closures or reduced staff numbers<sup>5</sup>). Instead, the MUP evaluation has demonstrated that MUP has reduced alcohol

consumption at a population level in the first year after implementation.<sup>6</sup>  
Public dissemination of such findings could feasibly influence public attitudes.

## **Conclusions**

This study indicates that the public is generally more in favour of MUP than against it in 2019, and that attitudes appear more favourable between 2015 and 2019 – the same time frame in which MUP was implemented.

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