



# The Impact of Minimum Unit Pricing on Young People in Northern Ireland

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Substance misuse is one of the greatest health crises facing our young people today and the situation continues to deteriorate at pace. The case study highlighted that 40 per cent of young people presenting at addiction services misused alcohol and this is having a major impact on lives, families, communities and society. Education still has an important role, but we recommend the implementation of a **Minimum Unit Price** in Northern Ireland (NI) at **50 pence per unit** as a policy proven reduce alcohol misuse and its harms.

### Relationship between alcohol and price

The research analysing the relationship between alcohol price and consumption by young people has suggested that there is both a significant negative relationship and young people are particularly price sensitive. The influencing factors behind this are the lack of disposable income, and the fact that young heavy drinkers are not addicted or not so addicted that they are not price sensitive. Two UK studies concluded there was a strong relationship between rising alcohol prices and decreasing consumption amongst young people. There is also evidence that binge drinking is highly price sensitive: Keng and Huffman (2007, p. 46) concluded that increases in alcohol prices decreased the occasions of binge drinking and therefore leading to fewer young people becoming binge drinkers.

We use the Scottish definition of Minimum Unit Pricing that it is a 'floor price for a unit of alcohol, currently 50 pence per unit. This means alcohol cannot legally be sold for lower than that. The more alcohol a drink contains, the stronger it is and therefore the higher the minimum unit price' (Scottish Government, 2018).

### Potential and Evidence-based Successes

#### **Reduced Alcohol Consumption**

The University of Sheffield conducted a comprehensive modelling study of the potential impact of Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) in NI. They projected that a MUP of 50p could lead to a 5.7 per cent reduction in alcohol consumption per adult. This would be even higher for young people as they are more likely to have lower incomes and to binge drink, and so the reduction

could be as high as 8.6 per cent. The case study highlighted that the majority of people who misuse substances are in poverty. There would be a projected 9.4 per cent decrease in consumption for those in poverty compared to only 4.7 per cent of those not in poverty. MUP specifically targets those who are most at risk of misusing substances (Angus *et al.* 2014).

Table 1: University of Sheffield’s projected fall in alcohol purchasing in NI after MUP introduction

The modelling highlights that MUP will be effective at reducing consumption

Alcohol Type	Projected Percentage Decrease in Amount Purchased
Off-trade beer	37.8
Off-trade cider	1.5
Off-trade spirits	10.1
On-trade beer	8.4

amongst young people as the drinks they predominantly consume are disproportionately affected. Binge drinkers between the ages of 18-24 are more likely to purchase off-trade beer, cider, spirits and on-trade beer. (Wechsler et al, 2000, p. 28). 67 per cent of young people drink these four types of alcohol, 40 per cent consume on-trade beer, and as Table 1 indicates the projected purchasing following a MUP of 50p imposed will fall substantially (Angus *et al.* 2014).

While the above are projections, there is robust evidence from Scotland and Canada proving that MUP is an effective tool. In the immediate months following the introduction of MUP, there was a 7.6 per cent decrease in the amount of alcohol purchased in Scotland every week, including young people. This equates to a reduction of 1.2 units of alcohol consumed per adult per week. There is evidence in Scotland that consumption of off-trade ciders, beers and spirits has fallen by 21.9, 4 and 6.2 per cent respectively in the first year after the

introduction of MUP, more than any other type of alcoholic beverage (Robinson *et al.* 2020). Interviews conducted with young people in Scotland revealed that some were price sensitive and reduced their consumption of alcohol as a result of MUP. The specific experience of a 15-year-old girl showed that she had a limited budget for alcohol and since the introduction of MUP was unable to buy the same amount of alcohol as she had previously (Iconic Consulting, 2019). The Scottish findings are particularly important for NI as we are culturally very similar in many aspects but particularly with respect to drinking culture. There has been a similar effect in Saskatchewan, Canada where the introduction of MUP led to an 8 per cent decrease in alcohol consumption (Beeston *et al.* 2020, p. 3395).

### Reduction in Alcohol-Related Harms

Table 2: Projected Savings following implementation of MUP

	Savings after one year	Savings after 20 years
Health Service	£0.7m	£155.6m
Criminal Justice System	£7.8m	£115m
Worker absenteeism	£3.1m	45.6m

Source: Angus *et al.* 2014

The impact of MUP on alcohol-related harms is anticipated to be significant. Based on the case study data, after the implementation of MUP there would be 951 fewer young people admitted to hospital per year and fewer substance-related deaths. There are projected to be four less intentional self-harm deaths and 16 less road traffic accident deaths per year. Crime is also expected to dramatically decrease by over 5,000 offences per year (Angus *et al.* 2014). Table 2 reveals the budget savings that can be made in the health service, criminal

justice and wider system

Source: Youth Suicide: Markowitz *et al.* 2003, p. 45  
All other harms: Stockwell *et al.* 2015, p. 631

economy. This demonstrates the considerable benefit MUP will be to NI.

<b>Alcohol-Related Harm</b>	<b>Percentage Decrease after Rise in the Price of Alcohol</b>
Youth Suicide	2.4-5
Hospital Admissions	8.95
Admissions for Chronic Conditions e.g. Cirrhosis and Cancer	9.2
Crime	9.4
Alcohol-related Traffic Collisions	18.8
Violent Crimes Against Persons	9.2

Table 3 reveals Canada has experienced a significant reduction in alcohol-related harms since the implementation of MUP. One of the key problems identified in the case study was the prevalence of substance misuse in young people who committed suicide in NI and the data from Canada was collected from studying suicides amongst young people aged between 10-24. This evidence clearly shows the impact MUP will have on reducing alcohol-related harms in NI such as less hospitalisations, less crime and less avoidable, early deaths.

### **Reduction in Illegal Drug Use**

There is a fear that alcohol and illegal drugs are substitutes and that increasing the price of alcohol will push people towards drugs like cannabis. Surprisingly, research has proven the opposite and alcohol and illegal drugs are complements. A 1998 study showed, in the US, when the beer tax was doubled the frequency of cannabis use decreased by 11.4 per cent. In the mid-1990s there was a survey conducted of households in the US and in areas where alcohol prices were higher, cannabis use was significantly lower (Subbaraman, 2016, pp 1401-2). This clearly demonstrates that by tackling the problem of alcohol misuse, issues

with other harsher substances can be dealt with simultaneously. In addition, a study in Edinburgh showed there was no evidence of young drinkers substituting harsher drugs for alcohol or turning to criminal means to acquire alcohol (Beeston *et al.* 2020, p. 3395). This evidence demonstrates that this policy can be very effective at reducing illegal drug use amongst young people

### Potential Obstacles

MUP will not solve all of NI's problems with substance misuse and there will be obstacles to its effectiveness. Scottish anecdotal evidence suggests education may be needed concurrently with MUP to tackle the more important factors than price influencing alcohol use in young people such as friends and family, identity, mental health and life circumstances. One youth worker from Scotland stated that 'The most important influence is their peers... MUP does not feature on the list at all' and one 16-year-old male said that he started drinking because everyone else was and cited he felt 'peer pressure' (Iconic Consulting, 2019, p. 44). For many it was part of their identity of becoming an adult and one youth worker claimed that 'it is just a natural, to them, really normal thing' (Iconic Consulting, 2019, p. 48). Chief Executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland, Alison Douglas, commented that this was a 'concerning insight into the lives [of teenagers] ... and shows that the cost of alcohol is only one factor' (Douglas, 2019). It will be important for MUP to work in conjunction with education programmes around peer pressure and mental health, and stricter licensing laws if MUP is to have the maximum impact.

A MUP of greater than 50p may be more effective at reducing consumption as interviews with young people in Scotland showed that they were not substantially negatively impacted by a 50 pence per unit increase. One young person in Scotland claimed that their favourite drink would have to increase from £5 to £20 for them to stop buying it (Iconic

Consulting, 2019). However, it is important to consider the impact a higher MUP would have on responsible moderate drinkers and the alcohol industry.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, it is our firm recommendation that a MUP of 50 pence per unit should be introduced in NI. This inexpensive policy, projected to cost £272,0000, has been highly effective at decreasing alcohol consumption amongst young people and has significantly reduced the harms associated with alcohol such as hospital admissions, crime and worker absenteeism (Home Office, 2012). It is also a double-edged sword, tackling both alcohol and illegal drug misuse. While MUP will not be the silver bullet that solves NI's substance misuse problems, it will go a long way in reducing substance misuse amongst young people and the devastating harms that are affecting lives, communities and our society.

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