

Ireland and its Drink Problem: The Immediate Adverse Effects of Binge Drinking in Ireland

A O'Farrell

Background

The drinking of alcohol is an integral part of many societies and often plays a major role in social, cultural and sporting activities. However, alcohol is also a drug and its misuse represents one of the leading causes of preventable death, illness and injury¹.

Alcohol Consumption in Ireland

In recent years there has been a dramatic rise in per capita alcohol consumption in Ireland (Figure 1). Within the EU Ireland ranks second only to Luxembourg in per capita consumption of alcohol¹. This increase in consumption has been linked with increased affluence, the relative decline in alcohol taxes and greater access to alcohol¹

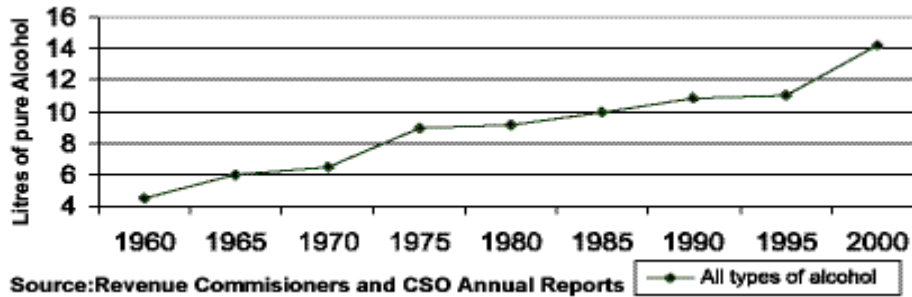


Figure 1: Consumption of alcohol per adult (15 yrs and over) in litres of pure alcohol, Ireland 1960 - 2000

Drinking Patterns in Ireland

Drinking patterns vary greatly within the EU. In some countries, such as Italy, the majority of the population drink moderately more than 3 times a week whereas in Ireland, frequent drinking is much less prevalent (Figure 2). This finding suggests that drinkers in Ireland whilst drinking less often, are drinking larger amounts on occasion compared to other EU countries. This pattern of drinking large amounts of alcohol on occasion is commonly referred to as binge drinking where binge drinking is defined for men as drinking more than 6 drinks in a row (or 70g of pure alcohol) and for women as drinking more than 5 drinks in a row (50g of pure alcohol) per occasion/session.

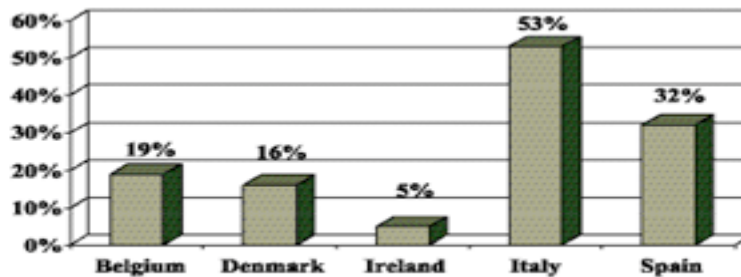


Figure 2: Proportion of frequent drinkers (3-4 times per week) among drinking population in selected European Countries.

A national lifestyle survey (SLAN)² published in 1999 showed that binge drinking was common in Ireland and this pattern of binge drinking was more common among younger age groups (18 to 24 yr olds) than among the older age groups (Figure 3).

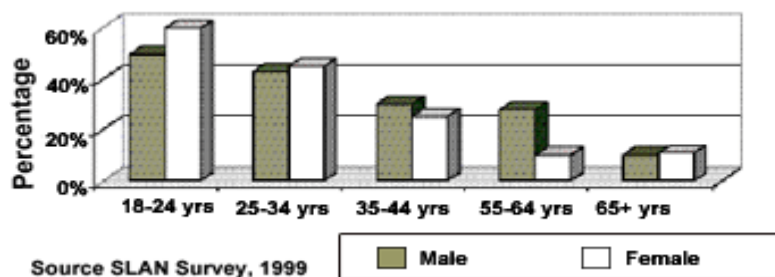


Figure 3: Binge drinking (>70g men or >50g women pure alcohol) per session for those aged 18 years or older.

A recent survey carried out on a sample of the Irish drinking population aged 18 years and over, showed that out of 100 drinking events, 58 end up in binge drinking for men and 30 end up in binge drinking for women³. This finding suggests that among those consuming alcohol in Ireland, binge drinking is the norm among men and occurs in about a third of cases for women.

The acute effect of this binge drinking is evident most weekends in every city and town across Ireland where the sight of inebriated teenagers on the streets on Friday and Saturday nights is commonplace. The acute adverse effects of this pattern of binge drinking are also having a powerful knock-on effect on our health services.

Alcohol Related Hospital Attendances and Hospital Admissions

A pilot study of alcohol related attendance in the A&E department at a large general hospital in Ireland showed that alcohol was a factor for one in four (25%) of those in attendance at the A&E department⁴. A recent Irish study on hospital in-patient emergency admissions to acute hospitals showed that alcohol intoxication was also having an effect on in-patient hospital emergency admissions. This study showed that the proportion of in-patient admissions with an alcohol intoxication diagnosis recorded increased by almost 80% between 1997 and 2001⁵.

Alcohol Related Road Traffic Accidents

In Ireland, alcohol is estimated to be causally associated with at least 30% of all road accidents and 40% of all fatal road accidents⁶. Although there has been a decrease in the number of people killed and injured in road accidents in Ireland since 1997, the number of people killed during the time period most associated with drink driving (9pm to 4am) has not substantially decreased⁶. In 2000, approximately 10,500 detections for driving offences were made by the Gardai and 93% of these detections were over the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level for driving⁶.

Alcohol Related Suicides

Alcohol has been implicated as a contributory factor in suicides⁷. It appears that the impulsive nature of some suicides may be facilitated by alcohol consumption. Studies have also shown a positive association between per capita alcohol consumption and population suicide rates in several countries⁸⁻⁹.

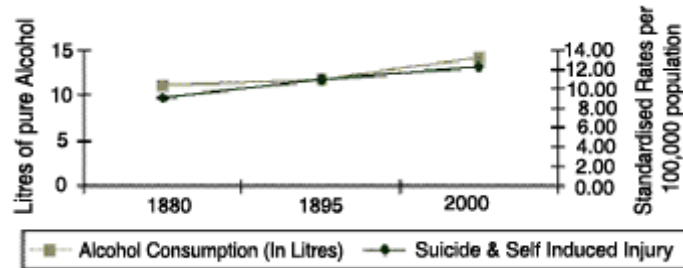


Figure 4:
Comparison of trends in alcohol consumption per adult and suicide mortality in Ireland 1990 - 2000

In Ireland there has been a sharp increase in male suicides among the 15-29 age group¹⁰ and this increase mirrors the increase in alcohol consumption seen in Ireland over the same time period (Figure 4).

Alcohol Related Violence

Alcohol is implicated as a causal factor in violent assault in two ways: alcohol is a risk factor for becoming a victim of assault and alcohol is a risk factor in committing an assault. In Ireland there has been a steady increase since 1995 in assaults and public order offences, and a nationwide survey carried out in 1997 by the Garda Research Unit showed that in 88% of public order cases, alcohol or drugs was a factor and in 48% of offences against the person, alcohol or drugs was a factor. Of particular concern is the 370% increase in intoxication in public places among teenagers since 1996¹¹.

Alcohol Related Sexual Violence and Rape

Alcohol is also a risk factor associated with being a victim and a perpetrator of sexual assault. Studies have shown that approximately 50% of all perpetrators of sexual assault reported that they were drinking alcohol at the time of the assault¹²⁻¹³. Similarly, approximately 50% of all victims of sexual assault report that they were drinking alcohol at the time of the assault¹²⁻¹³. Figures from the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU) at the Rotunda hospital show that there has been more than a four-fold increase in the number of requests by women attending the unit for the staff to determine whether they had been sexually assaulted. According to the Director of the unit, Dr Mary Holohan many of the women attending the unit believed that their drink had been spiked with some date-rape drug. However, the toxicology report only ever detected large quantities of alcohol, suggesting that alcohol is the most common date-rape drug in Ireland today.

Conclusions

Although this review was limited to some of the immediate and acute affects of alcohol abuse in Ireland it has nonetheless shown that the adverse effects of acute alcohol abuse extend beyond physical health issues and into social issues. Many of these acute problems arise due to the adverse effect of the unhealthy binge drinking pattern in Ireland. Therefore, for an alcohol policy to be effective, the pattern of drinking among Irish drinkers and, in particular, among young Irish drinkers will have to be considered.

Acknowledgements

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