

Unrecorded alcohol: what the evidence tells us

Snapshot series on alcohol control policies and practice

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Brief at- a-glance

The problem

An estimated 25% of worldwide alcohol consumption is unrecorded, meaning not taxed and is outside the usual system of governmental control, such as home or informally produced alcohol -legal or illegal, smuggled alcohol, surrogate alcohol which is alcohol not intended for human consumption or alcohol obtained through cross-border shopping, which is recorded in a different jurisdiction. In addition to concerns around unregulated availability and generally higher affordability due to the lack of taxes, unrecorded alcohol may contain toxic ingredients such as methanol that could lead to poisoning and even death. However, recent evidence suggests that most of the harm derived from unrecorded alcohol is caused by hazardous drinking patterns and not by its quality. Unrecorded alcohol can undermine the impact of cost-effective alcohol control interventions if not specific measures are taken.

The evidence

Although unrecorded alcohol is often discussed as one crucial challenge when describing the alcohol policy landscape, it includes various subgroups, each of which ranges in importance and harm between countries. The usually cheaper price of this type of alcohol, its appeal to consumers from low socioeconomic status and people with underlying alcohol use disorders, irregular labelling and thus often unknown ethanol percentage by volume and the presence of potentially toxic compounds as well as a complex interplay of these factors is what can make unrecorded alcohol potentially more harmful than regulated alcohol. Although the various dimensions of harm are increasingly better understood, the policy options for regulating

unrecorded alcohol require tailoring to a given context in consideration of the cultural and social aspects involved. Recent evidence highlights that to regulate recorded and unrecorded alcohol production and consumption effective measures exist and does not indicate possible substitution effects.

The know-how

Understanding country experiences in developing control policies to contend with unrecorded alcohol can help to inform governments' future policy decisions. Experiences from China, Kenya, and the Russian Federation speak to the types of policies that may be used to curb harm from unrecorded alcohol. While the case of the Pan-American region highlights the need to gather additional information on unrecorded alcohol.

The next steps

Policy- and decision-makers could pursue the development of contextualized policy approaches to curbing the production and consumption of unrecorded alcohol as well as working with other decision-makers on regional approaches that can combat the cross-border implications of policies addressing unrecorded alcohol. Civil society, community-based organizations, researchers and research institutions could focus on moving forward new methods for documenting the rates of production and consumption of unrecorded alcohol in settings where this work has yet to take shape. In addition, researcher and research institutions can work with government policy- and decision-makers evaluate the implementation of policies to address unrecorded alcohol.

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Related resources

[Webinar recording](#) | [Event description](#) | [Programme](#)

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About the series

This Snapshot is part of a series of briefs tackling critical issues related to the determinants driving the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol consumption and how it affects people and their communities. The series aims to facilitate evidence and experience-informed conversations on key topics relevant to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the noncommunicable diseases targets in the context of the WHO Global Strategy for reducing the harmful use of alcohol and its global action plan. Each brief is the result of a global, multistakeholder conversation convened by the Less Alcohol Unit, part of the WHO Department of Health Promotion. The topics of the series emerged in response to blind spots in the current policy conversations. The approach and length of the Snapshots do not fully describe the complexities of each topic nor do the illustrative country experiences. The series is a conversation-starter rather than normative guidance. Relevant WHO resources are provided to explore the subject in more depth.

The series is intended for a wide audience, including professionals working in public health and local and national alcohol policy focal points, policy-makers, government officials, researchers, civil society groups, consumer associations, the mass media and people new to alcohol research or practice.

What is a health promotion approach to reducing alcohol consumption?

Drinking has multidimensional connotations. Robust and growing evidence demonstrates that cultural, social and religious norms influence alcohol consumption – acceptability, ease of purchase (availability) and price (affordability). Addressing this multidimensional causality chain requires a portfolio of health promotion interventions to moderate the determinants driving alcohol consumption and, in turn, enable populations to increase control over and improve their health to realize their full potential.

Determinants driving the consumption of alcohol

	Acceptability	Availability	Affordability
			
Public health objectives	Protect consumers	Promote healthier settings	Build resilient societies
	Raising awareness, e.g. labelling	Mediating licensing, e.g. outlet density and location, online sales	Increasing prices, excise taxes and moderating other fiscal measures, reducing and ending financial incentives and subsidies
Health promotion interventions	Banning or comprehensively restricting alcohol marketing, advertising, sponsorships and promotion	Promoting healthy settings and pro-health environment, e.g. schools, stadiums	Tackling unrecorded alcohol
	Addressing commercial determinants and conflict of interests		

How are the briefs developed?

The briefs result from a quick scanning of the recent evidence on the topic, insights from leading experts, consultation with selected countries and discussions that took place during webinars convened to create a platform to match evidence, practice and policies. Each webinar, attended by more than 100 participants, took place over 1.5 hours in English, Russian and Spanish. Between 8 and 10 speakers were invited to participate in each webinar, engaging global experts, officials from governments, academia, civil society and other United Nations agencies. Participants also engaged in the webinar by posting questions, sharing experiences and resources. The snapshot has been reviewed by the respective speakers – the contributors to each brief – to confirm the completeness and accuracy of the

Interested in other topics?

Visit the *Less Alcohol webpage* for other briefs in this series and forthcoming webinars. During 2021, topics including alcohol consumption and socioeconomic inequalities, unrecorded alcohol, conflicts of interest, labelling, digital marketing and per capita alcohol consumption have been explored. If you have a suggestion for a topic that has yet to be explored, contact our team at lessalcohol@who.int.

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