Issue Briefing #1

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION &
ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS

Higher overall levels of alcohol consumption are strongly correlated to higher levels of alcohol-related problems. Therefore, in order to reduce those problems, communities need to reduce average per capita alcohol consumption through population-wide measures (such as regulation of alcohol availability and taxation) in addition to efforts targeted at high-risk subpopulations.

Decades of research have led to a consensus among alcohol experts – including public health bodies such as the World Health Organization1 - regarding this principle:

• “Rising per capita alcohol consumption levels invariably lead to rising rates of alcohol-related mortality and other alcohol-related adverse effects.” 2

• “When alcohol levels increase in any given society, there tends to be an increase in the prevalence of heavy drinkers, defined in terms of high annual alcohol intake.” 3

• “… in order to be complete, a sensible prevention strategy needs to include measures aimed both at the general level of consumption in society and at drinking patterns in a more qualitative sense …” 4

Relevant research includes:

• An analysis of the relationship between per capita alcohol consumption and mortality in 25 European countries found that a change in average consumption of 1 liter (1.06 qts.) of absolute alcohol would result in a 1.3% change in the overall mortality rate, up or down. 5

• A study of the 48 contiguous states from the period of 1979-1988 found a close correlation between per capita consumption and violent crime rates. 6

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1 Cf. World Health Organization (2008)
2 Plant, Plant, & Green (2007), p. 152
• Overall beer and wine consumption levels were found to be significantly related to alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes in a study of the state of Michigan. 7

• Overall alcohol consumption has been positively correlated with suicide rates in the US, 8 France, 9 Hungary, 10 Norway & Sweden, 11 Finland, 12 and Denmark. 13 Another US study found a connection between suicide rates and distilled spirits sales, but not beer or wine sales. 14

Several “natural experiments” have also verified the relationship between overall consumption and alcohol-related problems:

• In the Soviet Union from 1984 to 1987, under the alcohol control campaign of President Gorbachev, “estimated total alcohol consumption fell by about 25 percent” and “age-adjusted male deaths from circulatory disease fell by 9 percent.” After the campaign was discontinued, from 1987 to 1993 overall alcohol consumption rose by approximately 36 percent with a corresponding increase in the circulatory disease death rate of 29 percent. 15

• When wine was rationed during the German occupation of Paris in 1940-1945, the death rate for cirrhosis fell by an astounding 80%. 16 (In spite of industry and media efforts to portray wine as a type of health food, 17 France continues to experience rates of liver cirrhosis that are much higher than the US, Canada, and Northern Europe due to higher per capita consumption of alcohol. 18)

• Strikes in the state monopoly liquor stores in Finland in 1972 and 1985 each led to reductions in alcohol consumption by about 30%. During the strike, drunkenness arrests were halved. “At the same time, the number of drinking and driving offenses fell by about one-fourth, and violent crimes and other alcohol-related crimes decreased by one-fifth.” 19

• While the American Prohibition experiment failed due to lack of public support and the stimulation of an illegal market, 20 it did succeed in sharply curtailing alcohol-related morbidity and mortality, including liver cirrhosis and neuropsychiatric conditions. 21 This suggests that more measured and reasonable limitations on accessibility would have beneficial effects. 22

6 Cook & Moore (1993)
7 Wagenaar (1984)
8 Wasserman (1989); Rusk, et al. (1986)
9 Norström (1995)
10 Skog & Elekes (1993)
11 Norström (1988); Rossow (1993)
12 Mäkelä (1996)
13 Skog (1993)
15 Rehm, Grøn, Sempos & Trevisan (2003), p. 43
16 Ledermann (1956)
17 E.g. American Public Health Association (1993); Simini (2000)
18 Ramstedt (2001); Norström & Ramstedt (2005)
19 Osterberg (1993)
20 Cook (2007)
21 Dills & Miron (2003); Miron & Zwiebel (1991)
22 Cook (2007)
References:


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