



Alcohol: A commercial driver of crime

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) was established in 2003 and is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in campaigning, advocacy, research and information provision.

Our work involves providing information on alcohol-related issues, creating awareness of alcohol-related harm and offering policy solutions with the potential to reduce that harm, with a particular emphasis on the implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018.

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Relationship between alcohol and crime

Alcohol and crime have a closely interconnected relationship, with alcohol consumption being a contributing factor to crime and antisocial behaviour. Alcohol plays a key role in crimes such as public order offences, domestic violence, assault and murder, as well as rape and sexual assault.[1] It is not always possible to tell the exact number of crimes caused due to alcohol use, but studies have estimated that between 30% and 65% of assaults, disorderly conduct, public order, and other social code incidents are associated with alcohol-use.[2]

Indeed, President of the District Court, Justice Paul Kelly, previously stated that “If alcohol disappeared overnight, the courts could close down.”[3] He further elaborated that alcohol “cuts across almost the entire range of offences; it’s behind most public order, assaults and criminal damage, it’s probably behind 80% of family law, has a huge impact in childcare and, obviously, there’s drunk driving.”

However, harmful alcohol use is not simply a matter of individual responsibility. The impact of alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour has a ripple effect, extending beyond those directly affected and impacts entire communities, society, and the economy. Furthermore, it has a pernicious effect on people’s perceptions of safety and security, especially in our town centres and city centres.

Many studies have demonstrated significant, and positive, associations between alcohol consumption and rates of criminal violence, and we can say with some confidence that more drinking tends to result in more violence, and less drinking tends to result in less violence.[4]

Facts

As outlined in research by the Institute of Alcohol Studies, there is strong evidence of an association between alcohol availability and violence – “that is to say, as opportunities (in space and in time) to purchase alcohol increase, so do levels of violence”.^[5] The Health Research Board estimates that between 30% and 65% of assaults, disorderly conduct, public order, and other social code incidents are associated with alcohol-use.

If we take the median figure from HRB estimates, 47.5%, it is broadly in line with WHO findings which indicate that between one-third and one-half of perpetrators had consumed alcohol prior to a violent incident; individual country estimates were USA 35%, South Africa 44%, England and Wales 45% and China 50%.^[6]

Assaults, disorderly conduct, public order, and other social code incidents



■ Alcohol related ■ Non-alcohol related

What's the cost of alcohol-related crime?

The costs of alcohol related crime are multifaceted, and the costs are not just the direct costs to the criminal justice system in terms of policing, prison and the courts, there are also additional, indirect costs such as lost productivity for businesses and costs specific to victims. These costs can include injury and trauma-related costs, as well as costs related to property. Indeed, research 'Examining the Social and Economic Costs of Alcohol Use in Australia' found that costs to the victims of crime were the largest cost of alcohol related crime, followed by prisons costs, and then policing costs.[7]

Analysis cited by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the review of expenditure and performance in the area of drug and alcohol use estimated that 29% of the costs associated with alcohol harm are related to crime.[8]

The OECD estimates that for Ireland the costs of alcohol harm are of the order of about 1.9% of GDP[9] which tallies with research cited by the World Health Organisation that in high income countries alcohol harm amounts to up 2.5% of GDP.[10] Therefore, for Ireland the cost of alcohol harm would equate to approximately €9.6bn-€12bn annually. These costs relate to health care, crime, traffic crashes and loss of productivity with crime around 11% of the total. Applying this analysis to Ireland suggests that **alcohol related crime in costs the state €1-1.3bn annually.**

What about alcohol-related violence in the home?

Alcohol-related crimes that take place in the home, particularly those associated with domestic abuse, can often go unreported and unaccounted for in calculations of the economic and even human costs of crime. However, we know from research that a “higher density of alcohol retailers is associated with greater incidences of violence, assault, and domestic violence”.^[11] Indeed, international research shows that density is “positively associated with rates of assault hospital admissions”.^[12]

In Ireland, 73% of the population live within 300 metres of a licenced premises, with the number of off-licences increasing by 95% from 2003 to 2021.^[13] This means Ireland has a growing trend in home drinking, with close to 50% of all alcohol bought in Ireland now purchased on the off trade.^[14] It is also the case that changes in alcohol availability has a significant impact on domestic violence. For example, a two-hour reduction in late-night trading hours in the New South Wales, Australia, was found to reduce reports of domestic violence by 29%.^[15]

Alcohol can never be used as excuse for criminality, and this is especially true with incidents of domestic and gender-based violence. Research shows that, in incidences of domestic abuse, it appears the role of alcohol is one of a facilitative nature, a contributing cause.^[16] Research from Australia found that alcohol is involved in about 30-40% of both intimate partner and family violence.

Similarly, national research on domestic abuse in intimate partner relationships found that alcohol was a trigger for abusive behaviour in 34% of cases.^[17] In addition, past research found that alcohol was a factor in up to 70% of cases of domestic violence against women. ^[18] Therefore, we can see that alcohol is an accelerating factor in terms of domestic and gender-based violence.

What is the role of alcohol in rape and sexual assaults?

Alcohol is never an excuse or an explanation for rape or sexual assault. Yet, alcohol consumption is sometimes disgracefully used to blame victims or to diminish the responsibility of perpetrators. It must be unequivocally stated that sexual violence is never the victim's fault, and therefore the responsibility for assault always lies with the perpetrator, under any circumstances.[19]

Nevertheless, alcohol is consistently found in a high proportion of those who perpetrate sexual assault.[20] The Rape Crisis Network Ireland has said that alcohol is the most common drug used in sexual assaults. The Rape and Justice in Ireland Report found that 76% of all rape defendants had been drinking at the time of the alleged offence.[21]

Drink driving

Alcohol impairment impacts road safety and the crime of driving while over the Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) limit is a major factor in road collisions and fatalities on the road. Previous research commissioned by the Department of Health estimates that road traffic accidents caused by drink driving account for 11% of the total cost of alcohol related harm in the State.[22] While recent analysis of coronial data found that, where a toxicology result was available, more than one-third of road user fatalities in Ireland had been drinking prior to the incident.[23] Indeed, in 2022 there were 5,527 incidents of drink driving recorded[24] and new research from the RSA shows that one in 10 Irish motorists have driven after consuming alcohol in the last 12 months.[25]

Alcohol and youth crime

Alcohol is a factor in a significant proportion of youth crimes.[26] A 2021 report noted that alcohol and/or drug use was often the main offence that brought young people into contact with An Garda Síochána and subsequently to Probation Services.

Research from the HRB outlined that 86% of probation services clients aged 18-24 years reported alcohol and/or drug use, and alcohol was linked to the crime committed by 38% of those referred.[27] Garda figures indicate that annually around 3% of 12- to 17-year-olds commit an offence. These offences tend to be public order in nature and associated with alcohol and drug use. [28]

However, many other criminal offences are also committed by young people when drinking. A survey conducted by the Probation Service found the majority of young people referred to its services had a history of alcohol or drug use.[29] Alcohol was the substance most misused on a weekly basis and the link between substance use and crime was highlighted.[30]



Data and underestimation of role of alcohol in crime

Alcohol is a significant risk factor when it comes to crime. Alcohol plays a key role in crimes such as public order offences, domestic violence, assault and murder, as well as rape and sexual assault.[31] This is in addition to offences that are obviously alcohol-related, such as driving under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, the impact of alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour has a ripple effect, extending beyond those directly affected and impacts entire communities, society, and the economy. Indeed, it has a pernicious effect on people's perceptions of safety and security, especially in our town centres and city centres.

Nevertheless, the impact of alcohol in crime is underestimated. Many people state that they do not report crimes to the Gardaí, particularly offences that can be considered of a minor nature, such as damage to property, noise, and intimidating behaviour.[32] It is also difficult to assess the impact of alcohol and crime due to the insufficient collection of high-quality data and the unreliability of collected data.[33]

People who drink more likely to commit crimes and criticise cultural approach to alcohol and crime

Alcohol is a significant risk factor when it comes to crime. However, while the role of alcohol in a wide range of crimes has been extensively documented and evidenced, it is not a simple cause and effect relationship. Most people who drink do not commit offences or become involved in anti-social or violent behaviour. However, what is clear is that alcohol consumption, particularly in large volumes, is a significant risk factor for violence and anti-social behaviour.

Taking action on alcohol and crime

Given that more drinking tends to result in more violence, and less drinking tends to result in less violence, it is clear that alcohol reduction strategies are the first defence against alcohol-related crime. If we reduce alcohol consumption through controls on price, marketing and availability, there will be a corresponding reduction in alcohol-related crime. Therefore, reducing alcohol consumption and reducing alcohol-related crime should be key goals of government. Central to this is reaching the modest government target of 9.1 litres of pure alcohol per capita that was set in 2013.[34] Unfortunately, this target to be achieved by 2020 has been missed, and government needs to reaffirm itself to meeting this target with momentum and urgency.[35]

Without reliable, comprehensive, and consistent data collection across multiple areas, it is impossible to truly understand the cost and impact of alcohol-related crime on the public purse, on the economy, and on society. Detailed research is needed into alcohol related crime, incorporating the cause and effect of alcohol related harm and crime. Such research is a necessity for policy makers in devising harm and crime-reduction strategies aimed at eliminating alcohol related crime in the interest of public health and safety.

Alcohol Action Ireland believes the government must introduce the Cardiff Model for violence prevention.[36] This public health approach to violence prevention entails four steps, namely:

1. Systematically collecting data on the magnitude, characteristics, and consequences of violence;
2. Conducting research to establish the factors that increase or decrease the risk for violence;
3. Use information from steps one and two to design, implement and evaluate interventions; and,
4. Implementing interventions shown in step three to be effective, and widely disseminating prevention information.

Finally, and most importantly, Alcohol Action Ireland believes there is an urgent need for a dedicated Office for Alcohol Harm Reduction to drive this, and other key areas of alcohol policy, in order to reduce crime, support public health, save the State billions in taxpayers money wasted dealing with the consequences of alcohol harm, and generally improve Irish society and the economy.

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