



Seasonality of alcohol consumption and associated harms

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Summary

Alcohol consumption in the population is found to vary through the months of the year, with increased consumption, including sporadic heavy drinking occasions, occurring during holidays, festivals, large sports events, and public holidays – such as Christmas, Easter, St. Patrick’s Day, and the summer holidays.[1] This seasonality in consumption has a harmful, knock-on effect on public health, hospitals and Emergency Departments, crime and violence, drink driving and road traffic collisions, suicide and self-harm, and domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence.

Alcohol Action Ireland believes government policy must be cognisant of the seasonal dynamics of alcohol consumption and associated harms and respond accordingly and consistently.

Recommendations

- **AAI recommends:** the urgent implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act (PHAA) and that there be no reversal or deviation from the set timeline of May 2026 for the commencement of Section 12 of the legislation regarding health labels on alcohol products.[2]
- **AAI recommends:** that alcohol be included in strategies aimed at tackling issues such as crime, domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence, and suicide and self-harm reduction.
- **AAI recommends:** the development of a cross governmental strategy on alcohol, which includes actions on reducing alcohol consumption, such as online alcohol advertising.
- **AAI recommends:** the Department of Health and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media develop guidelines to address the issue of sponsorship of sports, festivals and other activities by alcohol providers, as was committed to being completed by 2022 under the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025.

- **AAI recommends:** evidence-based reforms to address alcohol availability and access, including regulations on licenced premises density, operating hours, online sales, and advertising.
- **AAI recommends:** that Gardai should be given the resources to significantly increase the level of road-side alcohol testing.
- **AAI recommends:** that AAI alcohol treatment should be facilitated when people are caught drink driving to ensure the individual has the opportunity to receive treatment and education that will help reduce the numbers reoffending.
- **AAI recommends:** the introduction of alcohol ignition interlock systems to address drink driving, attempt to reduce road fatalities, and try to protect public health and safety.
- **AAI recommends:** the need for a comprehensive alcohol strategy which deals with all all matters pertaining to alcohol and which provides guidance to the Gardaí, the HSE, and others for dealing with the seasonality of alcohol consumption.
- **AAI recommends:** that consumption reduction should form part of the new strategy on suicide reduction which the Department of Health is currently working on.
- **AAI recommends:** the implementation of the World Health Organisation (WHO) 'Best Buys', controls on pricing, marketing and availability, to reduce whole-of-population alcohol consumption, and thereby reduce consumption and harm around public holidays, Christmas, summer, large sports events, and festivals.
- **AAI recommends:** the improvement of the collection of data on alcohol and crime so government and policy makers can understand the true impact of alcohol on society, the criminal justice system, the economy, and the necessary solutions needed.

About us

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. Our overarching goal is to achieve a reduction in consumption of alcohol and the consequent health and social harms which alcohol causes in society.

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Introduction

Despite recent reductions in alcohol consumption volumes in the State, drinking levels and patterns remain problematic, especially when measured against modest government and Health Service Executive (HSE) targets. There is still a high level of consumption across the population, at 9.9 litres per capita over the age of 15 years.[3] This is 10% above the modest reduction target of 9.1 litres per capita which was set by government in 2013, to be achieved by 2020.[4] Very concerningly it is 40% above the level if the adult population who consume alcohol stayed within the current HSE lower risk drinking guidelines. These guidelines are acknowledged as being very high compared to other jurisdictions and are currently being examined for revision.

From a health perspective, at least 5% of hospital beds are in use daily[5] and up to 30% of Emergency Department presentations are caused by alcohol consumption.[6] It has devastating impacts on mental health with national research indicating that alcohol may be a factor in close to half of all suicides.[7] Additionally, we also know that four people lose their lives every single day because of alcohol related illnesses.[8]

The outworking of this high level of consumption are the associated harms that alcohol causes. We know that alcohol seriously impacts health services, workplace productivity and is a critical factor in multiple crimes. It costs the state at least €12 billion annually but is feted as integral to our society.[9]

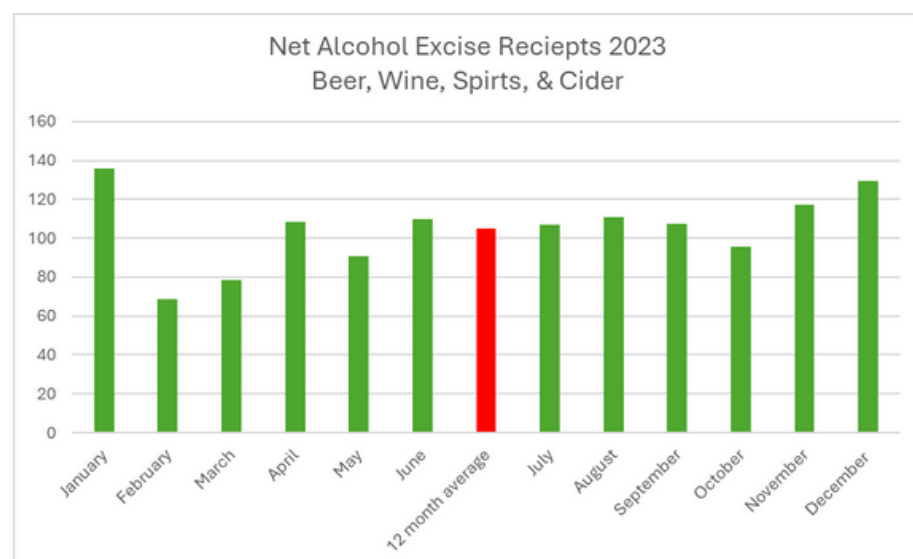
Furthermore, the role of alcohol as a gateway drug to other drug use cannot be understated. Problem use of more than one drug, polydrug use, is often driven by alcohol. The 2019-20 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey found that alcohol was the drug most commonly used with cannabis, cocaine, and ecstasy. [10] Indeed, the same research from the Health Research Board found that 84.9% of lifetime users of cocaine also used alcohol on the occasion of first use. [11] While in 2022, among new cases presenting for treatment with polydrug use, alcohol (50.5%) was the most common additional substance.[12]

Unfortunately, what is less well known are the seasonal variations of alcohol consumption and alcohol harm. Therefore, this paper will look at the seasonality in alcohol consumption and alcohol harm, and what can be done to reduce both.

Seasonal variations in alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption in the population is found to vary through the months of the year, with increased consumption including sporadic heavy drinking occasions occurring during holidays, festivals and public holidays – such as Christmas, Easter, St. Patrick’s Day and the summer months.[13] A tendency of more people reporting alcohol use in the summer compared to the winter months, both in terms of frequency of drinking episodes and number of alcohol units consumed per episode, has been found in the United States, the Netherlands, Scotland and Estonia.[14] Research from Scotland also found that annual seasonality in alcohol use is highest in December and during the summer.[15] Meanwhile several research papers have shown alcohol to be a common feature of public holidays.[16] [17] [18]

In the Irish context, research published in 2017 showed alcohol consumption to be most strongly associated with the Christmas holiday period, including New Year’s Eve and Day, St. Patrick’s Day, and Easter Sunday.[19] Revenue data on monthly net alcohol excise receipts for 2023 reinforce the seasonality of alcohol use as December, June, July, and August all show higher than average[20] net alcohol excise receipts.[21]



Indeed, research from the University of Sheffield has also pointed to a seasonal pattern in off-trade prices in Ireland, where the pre-Christmas discounting of alcohol plays a significant role.[22] The reason the seasonality of alcohol use is of interest is because we know the risk of alcohol related harm increases with increased consumption. 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.[23]

Therefore, this seasonality in consumption has a harmful, knock-on effect on public health, crime and violence, drink driving and road traffic collisions, suicide and self-harm, and domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. Below we will look at the harm caused by seasonally increased consumption, such as over the Christmas period, public holidays, and during large sports events, and what can be done to reduce this.

Seasonality of alcohol consumption and its impact on the health service

Alcohol consumption has a huge impact on ED admissions, with up to almost 3 in 10 ED presentations caused by alcohol consumption.[24] International research from Australia revealed that ambulance callouts surge by an average of 24% around public holidays, large sports events, the end of summer, and the Christmas period.[25] The same study found that the alcohol industry was flooding social media with alcohol ads at these times of high harms.[26]

This points to the importance of controls on alcohol advertising. In Ireland we are still waiting for the implementation of controls on the content of alcohol advertising to be implemented, over six years after the passage of the legislation allowing for this important measure in the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018.

“ Domestic research has shown that public holidays, sporting events and music festivals are the most common events to result in increased alcohol-related presentations to emergency departments.”

Domestic research has shown that public holidays, sporting events and music festivals, are the most common events to result in increased alcohol-related presentations to EDs.[27] The interactive literature review of 23 articles describing 46 events also found that the day prior to public holidays and large sporting events also saw an increase in alcohol-related presentations. A research paper, 'The paradox of public holidays: Hospital-treated self-harm and associated factors', found that public holidays in Ireland are associated with an elevated number of self-harm presentations to hospital, with presentations to hospital involving alcohol significantly increased on these days.[28]

The study revealed that self-harm presentations during public holidays had a 24% increased risk of involving alcohol consumption compared to all other days and this effect was most pronounced during the Christmas period.[29] Such findings should form an important part of the new strategy on suicide reduction which the Department of Health is currently working on.[30]

Therefore, the consumption of alcohol around public holidays, sports events, and music festivals is cause for continued efforts to direct public health and emergency care strategies to prevent or minimize alcohol-related harm.[31] A key strategy in this regard is Section 12 of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. This groundbreaking section of the PHAA mandates that health warnings must appear on alcohol products from May 2026 through the labelling of alcohol products and notices in licensed premises.[32]

The warnings are intended to inform the public of the very real danger of alcohol consumption, especially the danger of alcohol consumption when pregnant, the direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers, the quantity in grams of alcohol contained in the container concerned, the energy value expressed in kilojoules and kilocalories contained in the container concerned, and the details of a website providing public health information in relation to alcohol consumption. [33]



An illustration of how alcohol health information labels look

Seasonality of alcohol consumption and its impact on 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.[34]

As we have seen, the Christmas period, public holidays, and large sports events, amongst others, see

increased alcohol consumption, and thereby increased harms. In 2023, Revenue's monthly net excise receipts for alcohol averaged €105m per month, however, for December that figure was €129.6m, reinforcing the scale of increased consumption over the Christmas period.

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.[35] Indeed, research from Australia found significant increases in emergency department assault presentations on New Year's Day, as well as public holidays, and that the number of assaults recorded by emergency departments always increases the day before a public holiday (with the exception of Christmas Eve) and in terms of social occasions, assaults rise on the last working day before Christmas and St Patrick's Day – particularly among men and young people.[36]

“ 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.”

Alcohol is not, and never will be, an excuse or explanation for domestic violence. However, it is a known commercial driver of domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence (DSGBV). Research shows that, in incidences of domestic abuse, it appears the role of alcohol is one of a facilitative nature, a contributing cause. [37] We know that cases of domestic abuse and violence increase dramatically over the Christmas holidays. Indeed, a total of 1,600 reports of domestic violence were made over Christmas week 2024, representing an all-time high in incidents in a seven-day period.[38] Gardaí revealed that they usually receive about 1,200 calls regarding domestic violence each week but that this number spikes over the Christmas holidays, as well as other public holidays and Easter.[39]

In Ireland, 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. While in Britain, 39% of all violent crime involves alcohol, which figures show can rise during the festive period.[40]

Sport and alcohol also have a complicated relationship. In Britain, the association between alcohol, sport events, and domestic violence prompted the Home Office to highlight the link during the 2006 World Cup.[41] Further research of the Home Office analysis found that domestic violence increased in the case of a definite win or lose result for the England men's team.[42] Moreover, police forces around the world have identified surges in domestic abuse reports following big sports events in national and international competitions. [43]



70%

Past research found alcohol to be a factor in up to 70% of cases of domestic violence against women [44]

Seasonality of alcohol consumption and its impact on drink driving & road collisions

Alcohol impairment impacts road safety and drink driving is a major factor in road collisions and fatalities on the road. Recent analysis of coronial data (2015-2019) 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. [45]

International research has shown that since the early 1990s, the rate of drinking and driving and the decline in serious road crash injuries that are alcohol-related appears to have plateaued at approximately 10% on average globally,[46] and research from the RSA shows that one in 10 Irish motorists have driven after consuming alcohol in the last 12 months.[47] Indeed, despite the known high level of drink driving, Ireland has lowest level of roadside breath testing in the EU.[48]

“ RSA research shows that one in 10 Irish motorists have driven after consuming alcohol in the last 12 months.

Despite the known high level of drink driving, Ireland has lowest level of roadside breath testing in the EU.”

Gardaí consistently point to increased incidents of drink driving during public holidays. Indeed, over St. Patrick's weekend 2023, 136 drivers were arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol. This compelled Gardaí to launch a 2024 St Patrick's bank holiday road safety appeal. However, two months later, over the 2024 May bank holiday weekend, one driver was arrested each hour for intoxicated driving.[49]

There were similarly high levels of drink driving over Christmas 2024, with 260 people arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs[50] while the St. Patrick's weekend 2025 saw 214 motorists caught driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.[51]

Conclusion and recommendations

As outlined, alcohol consumption in the population is found to vary through the months of the year, with increased consumption, including sporadic heavy drinking occasions, occurring during holidays, festivals, large sports events, and public holidays – such as Christmas, Easter, St. Patrick’s Day, or the summer holidays.[52] This seasonality in consumption has a harmful, knock-on effect on public health, crime and violence, drink driving and road traffic collisions, suicide and self-harm, and domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. Therefore, government policy must be cognisant of these dynamics and respond accordingly and consistently.

This means that alcohol must be included in strategies aimed at tackling issues such as domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence and suicide and self-harm reduction, to name but two. Additionally, there is a clear need for a cross-governmental strategy on alcohol, which includes actions on reducing alcohol consumption, such as online alcohol advertising, enforcement of existing measures, as well as providing for the necessary services to address the harms arising from alcohol.

“ There is a clear need for a cross-governmental strategy on alcohol, which includes actions on reducing alcohol consumption as well as providing for the necessary services to address the harms arising from alcohol.”

Given all that is known about sporadic heavy drinking occasions and associated harms, such as around large sports events and festivals, it is concerning to see temporary licences being granted for sports facilities to sell alcohol, as has recently happened for the Connacht v Munster rugby game at MacHale Park, Castlebar.[53] Similarly, there are also issues in relation to the granting of temporary licences, against the wishes of local residents, for music events and festivals which take place over bank holiday weekends.[54]

These situations are exacerbated by the failure of the Department of Health and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to develop guidelines to address the issue of sponsorship of sports, festivals and other

activities by alcohol providers, as was committed to being completed by 2022 under the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021–2025. While oftentimes on public holidays, such as St. Patrick's Day, or around large sports events, the Gardaí ask off licences not to sell alcohol, or ask pubs to close during certain timeframes. It is unfair to leave this function to frontline Gardaí.

AAI believes that evidence-based reforms to address availability and access, including regulations on licenced premises density, operating hours, online sales, and advertising, should be set down in primary legislation. Therefore, it is essential that concerns such as these are addressed and incorporated into any revision of licensing regulations in the Sale of Alcohol Bill, which is still only at general scheme stage, before it progresses any further.

Moreover, Gardaí should also be given the resources to significantly increase the level of road-side alcohol testing. Given the high level of intoxication noted in drink driving convictions,[55] and the scale of drink driving which occurs around public holidays and Christmas, AAI believe access to treatment should be facilitated when people are caught driving to ensure the individual has the opportunity to receive treatment and education that will help reduce the numbers reoffending. Similarly, we believe the introduction of alcohol ignition interlock systems offers the opportunity to address drink driving, attempt to reduce road fatalities, and try to protect public health and safety.

In the run up to the 2025 St Patrick's Day bank holiday weekend, the Minister for Health stated: "I'm very focused on a bank holiday coming up at St Patrick's Day, which... coincides with one of the largest public order spikes that we see... and to make sure that there is appropriate cover from senior decision makers and their supporting teams in every hospital around the country.". In response to this the Minister sought to make arrangements to have more senior decision makers on duty. However, as with Gardaí making ad-hoc arrangements and asking for off-licences to restrict sales hours, there is a need for a comprehensive alcohol strategy which deals with all these measures and provides guidance to the Gardaí, the HSE, and others.

Furthermore, it is clear that alcohol consumption reduction should form part of the new strategy on suicide reduction which the Department of Health is currently working on, given that we know that self-harm presentations during public holidays have a 24% increased risk of involving alcohol consumption compared to all other days. Implementing the World Health Organisation (WHO) 'Best Buys', controls on pricing, marketing and availability, is essential to reducing whole-of-population alcohol consumption, thereby reducing consumption

and harm around public holidays, Christmas, summer, large sports events, to name but a few. Furthermore, there is a need to adopt clear primary objectives in relation to alcohol regulation and licencing around these sensitive periods to prevent crime and DSGBV, alongside existing objectives around alcohol harm reduction. AAI believes the collection of data on alcohol and crime must be improved if we are to understand the true impact of alcohol on society, the criminal justice system, the economy, and the necessary solutions needed.

Finally, AAI is convinced the public have a right to know the harms associated with alcohol consumption. Therefore, there can be no reversal or deviation from the set timeline for Section 12 of the PHAA regarding health labels on alcohol products from May 2026.[56] The public have a right to know the danger of alcohol consumption when pregnant, the direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers, the quantity in grams of alcohol contained in the container concerned, the energy value expressed in kilojoules and kilocalories contained in the container concerned, and the details of a website providing public health information in relation to alcohol consumption.[57]

World Health Organisation's 'Best Buys' are policy solutions that are highly cost-effective, evidence-based, and yield a significant return on investment for governments to adopt



Increase excise taxes on alcoholic beverages

PRICE



Enact and enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising (across multiple types of media)

MARKETING



Enact and enforce restrictions on the physical availability of retailed alcohol (via reduced hours of sale)

AVAILABILITY

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