

Alcohol Action Ireland: Written Submission to the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration on the ‘*Prevention of Unprovoked [One-Punch] Assaults and Sentencing Frameworks for such assaults.*

1 Oct 2026

Summary

Alcohol and crime and violence have a closely interconnected relationship, with alcohol consumption being a contributing factor to crime, violence, 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

While alcohol use is neither necessary nor sufficient for violence to occur, many studies have demonstrated significant, and positive, associations between alcohol consumption and rates of criminal violence, and we can say with confidence that more drinking tends to result in more violence, and less drinking tends to result in less violence.² Indeed, laboratory studies have shown that alcohol increases aggression.^{3 4} For example, it increases the willingness with which individuals will administer electric shocks to others.^{5 6} Such research is important when analysing the nature of unprovoked, one-punch assaults, especially late at night.

In this context it is important to consider Ireland’s overall high level of alcohol consumption, rising youth drinking rates and highly concerning levels of binge drinking, particularly among young men.

Availability of alcohol is one of the main determinants of alcohol use and alcohol-related harm, and the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies restrictions on availability as among the most effective and cost-effective measures to reduce that harm.⁷ However in Ireland alcohol is very widely available with three quarters of the population living within 300m of an alcohol outlet⁸.

International and Irish evidence consistently shows that increasing trading hours and density of licensed premises leads to more alcohol-related crime, violence and public disorder, while reducing late-night trading lowers rates of violence.

Yet, addressing alcohol use remains an underutilised strategy in the violence prevention field; indeed, relatively few prevention efforts intentionally address alcohol use or draw on effective strategies from the alcohol field.⁹ This is especially true of unprovoked assaults. Therefore, this submission will set out the national and international evidence on alcohol use and violence and make a series of recommendations for the Irish context, showing how action on availability, affordability and advertising can reduce the frequency and severity of violence on our streets and in the home.¹⁰

Recommendations:

1. Set a cap on the maximum density of alcohol outlets in town/city locations.
 2. Reduce alcohol trading hours including off-license hours.
 3. Introduce specific education programmes in schools/colleges/youth schemes/workplace/media highlighting risks around alcohol and violence.
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1. Alcohol and crime

Alcohol is a major driver of crime in Ireland. As District Court President Justice Paul Kelly has observed, alcohol is implicated in the vast majority of public order offences, assaults, criminal damage, family law cases, and drink driving.¹¹

Key facts:

- Between 30–65% of assaults, disorderly conduct, and public order incidents are linked to alcohol;¹²
- Alcohol is a risk factor for domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence;¹³
- Department of Justice analysis indicates 29% of the costs of alcohol harm relate to crime.¹⁴

Internationally, the WHO released a comprehensive report reinforcing the public health considerations in relation to the sale of alcohol.¹⁵ The paper states that communities with more alcohol establishments tend to have higher rates of alcohol consumption, violent crime, suicides, alcohol-related hospitalisations and deaths and traffic collisions.¹⁶

It also notes, among many other salient points, alcohol licensing and establishment density are associated with a range of harms, including crime and violence.

2. One-punch assaults

One-punch assaults are characterised by a single severe blow to the head causing the victim to lose consciousness, resulting in a secondary impact between the head and surrounding environment.¹⁷ Such impacts may result in brain injury leading to fatality or permanent neurological impairment.¹⁸ Detailed research shows that one-punch assaults often occur in the context of alcohol-fuelled antisocial behaviour.¹⁹ Indeed, a study of such assaults in Australia revealed that alcohol increases the risk of both victimisation behaviours and violent offending.²⁰

According to Dr Chris Luke, who spent decades working as a consultant in emergency medicine in Ireland and Britain, many one punch assault cases in Ireland go unrecorded. Dr Luke has stated: “I have no doubt that there are dozens of one-punch attacks every year in the Republic that we’re missing. We have very flimsy figures. They look proactively for them in Australia. And they have a very sophisticated data capture system in terms of violence and trauma.”²¹

As highlighted, some of the best studies in this area are international, and much recent research comes from Australia. That research shows alcohol plays an outsized role in unprovoked, one-punch assaults. Between 2012 and 2018 there were 80 one punch fatalities in Australia, with a total of 169 fatalities from 2000 to 2023. Importantly, for policy makers, this research indicates that illicit drugs detections were rare and alcohol remains the most commonly detected drug in victims.²²

This tallies with other research which found that 80% of single punch cases were young males under the influence of alcohol or drugs who were involved in violent altercations at licenced premises.²³ Interestingly, despite assertions from the alcohol industry that many assaults in Australia were linked to illegal “party” drugs, most cases reviewed involved solely alcohol.²⁴ Further research into one-punch assaults in Australia revealed the over-consumption of alcohol to be a major contributing factor to these incidents, especially among young people.²⁵

Further research which analysed 287 convictions for one-punch incidents over a 30-year period in Australia, from 1990 to 2020, found that nearly all perpetrators are male and with a median age of 26 years.²⁶ The same study noted most incidents (65%) analysed occurred in public places, predominantly between 6 pm and 6 am, with alcohol being a factor in 39% of cases, illicit drugs in less than 2%, and no substance abuse was reported in nearly 20%.²⁷ This tallies with similar research which puts the role of alcohol as high as 66% in one-punch assaults.²⁸ Indeed, the role of alcohol in Australia is a longstanding public health concern, given its ease of accessibility as well as its ability to reduce the control of emotions often leading to violence.²⁹

In the Irish context this is concerning given the accessibility of alcohol in this country coupled with the fact youth drinking (15-24 years olds) has surged by 12%, from 66% to 78%, in the past decade, with binge drinking the norm for this cohort (64%). Even more concerning in the context of this submission is that young men, aged 15-24, are the group most likely to binge drink on a typical drinking occasion, followed by those aged 25-34.³⁰

3. Evidence in relation to the role of licencing hours

Availability and accessibility of alcohol are the main determinants of alcohol use and alcohol-related harm, including violence, as outlined in the WHO’s SAFER initiative.³¹ The WHO has consistently identified restrictions on alcohol availability as a highly effective and cost effective ‘best-buy’ for the prevention and reduction of alcohol harm.

3.1 International Evidence

Internationally, a wealth of studies have demonstrated a link between the provision of alcohol and the occurrence of crime, violence, and disorder in the nighttime economy, particularly in town and city centres.³² International evidence is overwhelmingly clear that any changes in the number and density of licensed premises, as well as permitted trading hours, are associated with changes in the patterns of alcohol related harms, such as violent disorder.³³ It is commonly believed in Ireland that because European cities have liberal laws around licensed premises, they don’t have problems with alcohol and violence. This is not the case.

The Licensing Act 2003 in England enabled staggered closing times and one of the stated aims of the Act was to reduce violence and disorder at fixed, peak closing times. Research

demonstrated that there was no change in overall levels of violence, that violence was shifted later into the night and for most hospitals, admissions relating to alcohol increased.³⁴

A study in Norway found that each additional one-hour extension to opening hours of licensed premises was associated with a 16% increase in violent crime.³⁵ A one-hour extension in trading hours in parts of Amsterdam led to a 34% increase in alcohol related injuries requiring hospital treatment³⁶, while in the USA increases in the density of alcohol outlets has been linked to increased levels of domestic violence.³⁷ On this very island a 17% increase in alcohol related crime followed Northern Ireland's extension of licensing hours in October 2021.³⁸ While research from the experiences of Perth, Australia, revealed that extending opening hours by an hour contributed to an increase in crime, violence and intoxicated driving.³⁹

3.2 National Evidence

An Gardaí Síochána have regularly highlighted increases in alcohol-related offences which often fluctuate relative to the buoyancy of the night-time economy.⁴⁰ In 2017, Gardaí reported that public drunkenness offences in Dublin were 40% higher than in 2016, and that public-order crime had increased 14%.⁴¹ In 2019, Deputy Commissioner Twomey, said that the number of crimes against the person, including assaults, increases in the summer months, which he believed was related to the consumption of alcohol.⁴²

We already know policing the night-time economy within built up town and city centres is a resource intensive job.⁴³ Gardaí in Ireland are already under significant pressure as numbers remain below strength and issues surrounding recruitment and retention continue to place extra workload, stress and pressure on their members.⁴⁴ This has coincided with an escalation of assaults on Gardaí and intimidation.⁴⁵ Therefore, in the context of addressing unprovoked, one-punch assaults, any extension of licencing hours will undoubtedly see an increase in violence and result in additional pressure on Gardaí.⁴⁶ Indeed, the service articulated such concerns in their submission to the Oireachtas Justice Committee Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Sale of Alcohol Bill.⁴⁷

These concerns were further reinforced in private meetings with the Department of Justice where Gardaí revealed their belief that any proposed licencing changes “will present a serious issue from a resource and rostering perspective. AGS said that there are insufficient resources to deal with the existing situation of 2.30am closing times as it is and said this will exacerbate the demands on an already overwhelmed force.”⁴⁸ Indeed, An Garda Síochána were unequivocal that more public order and associated issues would be the inevitable consequence of the proposed licencing changes.⁴⁹

However, Ireland already has evidence that extending licensing hours results in more crime and violence. It is of note that after licensing hours on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays were extended in 2000, a significant increase in alcohol-related crime was recorded and the Commission on Liquor Licensing recommended that the extended hours on Thursdays should be discontinued.⁵⁰ This was done in 2003.

	2000	2001
Section 4: Intoxication in a Public Place	14,687	17,805
Section 5: Disorderly Conduct in a Public Place	2,341	2,924
Section 6: Threatening, Abusive or Insulting Behaviour	14,251	15,718

Fig. 1: The number of public order offences, pre and post licencing hours extension, in cases in which proceedings were taken.⁵¹

These changes extending licencing brought about a stark escalation in alcohol related crime – a 16.5% increase overall,⁵² which matches comparable international data. Doubtless, any extension in licencing hours would again see a similar increase in alcohol related crime and violence across Ireland.

4. Reducing licensing hours

However, the inverse is also the case and reductions in licencing hours leads to less harm. Studies in Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand have demonstrated that reducing late night opening hours substantially reduces rates of violence.⁵³ Analysis of stronger licencing controls in certain districts in Sydney saw assault cases reduce by as much as 52.8% in some areas.⁵⁴

Concern for public safety in the face of alcohol related crime and violence has been the catalyst for similar licencing restrictions in several countries. Earlier this year the Croatian city of Split banned the sale of alcohol in shops from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. in a measure the city's Mayor described as a concrete solution to growing problems linked to alcohol consumption, public disorder and the wellbeing of young people.⁵⁵ This move follows similar licencing restrictions in Warsaw, Poland where restrictions on late-night alcohol sales in some of the city's districts have been piloted. The move sees alcohol sales banned between 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. at grocery stores or gas stations. The restrictions follow similar moves in other Polish cities, towns, and districts as approximately 180 municipalities introduced similar measures since 2018.⁵⁶

Similarly, several districts in the Belgium capital of Brussels have seen curbs on public drinking late at night in a bid to tackle anti-social behaviour.⁵⁷ Latvia, however, has gone a step further in their attempts to reduce violence and support public health by condensing hours of sale to between 10am and 8pm from Monday to Saturday, and from 10am to 6pm on Sundays.⁵⁸

In Spain, across the Balearic islands of Ibiza and Majorca, significantly tougher licencing was enacted between 2020 and 2024.⁵⁹ Changes in licencing now means drinking on public streets is prohibited, happy hours, pub crawls and two-for-one drink offers are banned, and it is prohibited to sell alcohol in shops between 9.30pm and 8am.⁶⁰ Penalties for breaching restrictions range from fines of €750 to €3,000.⁶¹ The stated aim of the new restrictions is to curb binge drinking and reduce anti-social behaviour.

Further evidence supporting the use of licencing as a policy lever to reduce unprovoked, one-punch assaults will be explored in the conclusion of this submission.

5. Evidence in relation to density of alcohol outlets

In November 2022, the World Health Organisation released a comprehensive report reinforcing the public health considerations in relation to the sale of alcohol.⁶² The report notes that areas with more alcohol establishments tend to see a higher consumption of alcohol and related burdens such as violence.

A study from New Zealand demonstrated that greater geographic access to alcohol outlets was associated with increased levels of serious violent offending.⁶³ Indeed, increased density of alcohol outlets is associated with increased levels of alcohol harm and in particular studies have shown increased levels of domestic violence.⁶⁴

6. Proven policy solutions

Thankfully, there are proven policy solutions to reduce crime, violence, and one-punch assaults.

Comprehensive Australian research found restrictions on alcohol trading hours to be successful in reducing violence outside pubs and nightclubs by 37%.⁶⁵ Further research from the country reinforced this and its success was acknowledged, even by nightclub owners, to improve safety of patrons and allowed for 'the development of better business strategies to increase patron numbers'.⁶⁶ Conversely, research also suggests liberalising the availability of alcohol can lead to increased consumption and, therefore, problems such as crime and violence.⁶⁷

Reviews of trends towards tougher sentencing for violent crime have regularly found indications that, especially for alcohol-fuelled violence, measures such as restricting the trading hours of licensed premises and funding education programmes on the impact and dangers of violence may prove the most effective in the long run.

Similarly, Australian states have looked to legislatively address the issue of alcohol-related capacity impairment and the responsibility for violence that is related to alcohol.⁶⁸ This reflects the view that the choice to become intoxicated should not lead to reduced culpability, and that self-induced intoxication is no excuse for violence.⁶⁹

It is worth noting that The Law Reform Commission, in its final report on 'Homicide: murder and involuntary manslaughter' in Ireland, published on 29 January 2008, analysed legislation and sentencing as it pertains to one-punch assaults and put forward a series of recommendations and suggestions.⁷⁰ However, these proposals have never been implemented.

While accepting that the issue of unprovoked, one-punch assaults must be addressed, any solutions need to approach the issue as the multi-factorial problem that it is. As such, proposed solutions should include education programmes that warn young people about the dangers of violence, and simultaneous restrictions on licencing hours and premises density.⁷¹

Wider restrictions on alcohol use especially measures in relation to affordability of alcohol and the marketing of alcohol must also be considered given their linkage to Ireland's high levels of alcohol consumption and binge drinking.

7. Recommendations:

1. Set a cap on the maximum density of alcohol outlets in town/city locations.
2. Reduce alcohol trading hours including off-license hours.
3. Introduce specific education programmes in schools/colleges/youth schemes/workplace/media highlighting risks around alcohol and violence.

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