

UPDATED

EXPANDED

YOUTH DRINKING

IN IRELAND



WHAT'S THE REAL PICTURE?

January 2026

About us

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) 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 effective advocacy, campaigning and policy research.

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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YOUTH DRINKING

...in focus...



While drinking among young people aged 15–24 declined from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, since 2015 that downward trend has been reversing.



Alcohol consumption levels for young people aged 15-24 have surged 12%, from 66% to 78%, in the decade 2016 to 2025.



The decline in consumption since the highs of the 2000s was driven by younger adolescents, particularly those under 17 - who should not be drinking anyway.



Every year approximately 50,000 children start drinking in Ireland. Starting to drink alcohol as a child, which is the norm rather than the exception in Ireland, is a known risk factor for later dependency.



Hazardous drinking, including binge drinking, is commonplace (64%) among young people and one in three young drinkers has an Alcohol Use Disorder.



In 2019 young people in Ireland were, on average, 16.6 years old when they have their first alcoholic drink. In 2002 that number was 15.6 years.



While young people are delaying alcohol initiation, once they begin drinking they consume alcohol significantly above the national average (78% vs 71%).



In 2016, 16% of all deaths in Europe among 15- to 19-year-olds were attributable to alcohol, while for 20- to 24-year-olds, this figure was 23%.

YOUTH DRINKING

... recommendations ...



The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 must be implemented in full – including the rollout of alcohol health information labelling from its delayed date of 2028.

Minimum Unit Pricing must be updated in line with the Consumer Price Index so as to maintain its public health value.



The lacuna in the law which allows advertising of zero-alcohol products, using the identical branding of the master brand alcohol product, must be closed.

A new target to reduce alcohol consumption to within the HSE lower-risk drinking guidelines should be set – 6.1 litres per capita.



There needs to be coherent policy across government with, for example, increases in excise duties annually in line with inflation, no increases in licensing hours and venues, plus enforcement of existing legislation on drink driving and the serving of alcohol to minors and those intoxicated.



The Department of Justice must begin data collection around home deliveries of alcohol, ensure enforcement of the law, and develop legislation to close the lacunas in the law which allow minors access alcohol through home delivery services.



Regulation around social media and video sharing platforms needs to shift from “remove harm when you find it” to “prove that your system prevents harm” which must include alcohol marketing to young people.



Treatment services must be improved and increased, and must also be properly included in the new National Drugs Strategy, with the strategy reflecting that it is Ireland’s largest problem drug.



Summary

Youth drinking in Ireland has attracted considerable attention over many decades. The data presented in this report is drawn from a number of national and international sources. It points to significant improvements in some respects including an increase in the average age at which young people start drinking and an improvement in Ireland's position compared with EU averages.

However, while drinking among young people declined from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, since 2015, that downward trend has reversed with consumption by 15-24 year-olds increasing from 66% in 2016 to 78% in 2025. What is also clear is that when drinking is initiated it is accompanied by high levels of particularly risky and hazardous consumption - 64% regularly binge drink and one in three young drinkers has an Alcohol Use Disorder.

“

We've seen some evidence of a slight delay in onset of drinking by Irish children but the pattern of drinking tends to be high-risk once drinking does start. There is still a hard core of parents who insist that providing alcohol to their 15- and 16-year-old children is a good idea in spite of the evidence that it is in fact harmful, but the number of parents who recognise the folly of this permissive approach is growing. The unrelenting exposure of children to alcohol advertising and sponsorship does, though, mean that parents who do the right thing are swimming against a tide of more negative influence.”

Prof Bobby Smyth,

Clinical Professor Dept of Public Health & Primary Care, TCD

In recent years a narrative has emerged that youth drinking is perhaps no longer an issue in Ireland. However, the data shows that youth alcohol consumption has surged in the last decade with little or no political or media scrutiny of this trend or its impact. A close analysis of the facts indicates that alcohol remains Ireland's largest drug problem both for young people and the wider population, with significant health impacts such as rising levels of alcohol-related hospitalisations among young people and half of young driver fatalities having an alcohol component.

It is the norm in Ireland for underage drinking, with 50,000 children starting to drink annually with consequent impact on their current and future health. This is not surprising given the saturation levels of alcohol marketing to which they are exposed, particularly online. But fundamentally, this is a breach of children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is not inevitable that alcohol harm to youth and wider society should be experienced at high levels in Ireland. The report points to inexpensive, proven

policy measures which can be taken to address these issues including the full implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act (2018) and coherent approaches to alcohol across government such as increases in excise duties to keep pace with inflation and enforcement of existing legislation on drink driving and the supply of alcohol to children.

What is needed is acknowledgement of the issues and determined action to address them against the relentless pressure of the alcohol industry which profits hugely at the expense of our youth.

In 2024, Ireland's alcohol use per drinker aged 15 years or older was:



<https://alcoholireland.ie/facts-about-alcohol/how-much-do-we-drink/>

Youth drinking in Ireland

Alcohol is the most commonly used substance among young people in Europe and is most commonly the first substance used by children.[1] Alcohol is so deeply entrenched in our lives that it is easy to discount the health and social damage caused or exacerbated by drinking alcohol.[2] However, alcohol consumption among young people is a particular public health concern for government and policy makers as it carries significant health risks.[3]

Research from the Netherlands found indications that alcohol consumption can have a negative effect on brain development in adolescents and young adults and entails a risk of later Alcohol Use Disorder.[4] There is also extensive evidence that drinking alcohol as a child, which is the norm rather than the exception in Ireland, is more likely to lead to heavy episodic drinking and is a known risk factor for later alcohol dependency.[5]

Adolescent drinking has declined from significant highs across many developed countries from the turn of the century,[6] and in Ireland, use declined among young people aged 15–24 years from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. However, since 2015 that downward trend has been reversing. Healthy Ireland Survey data shows that youth drinking has surged over the past decade, with consumption now at 78%.

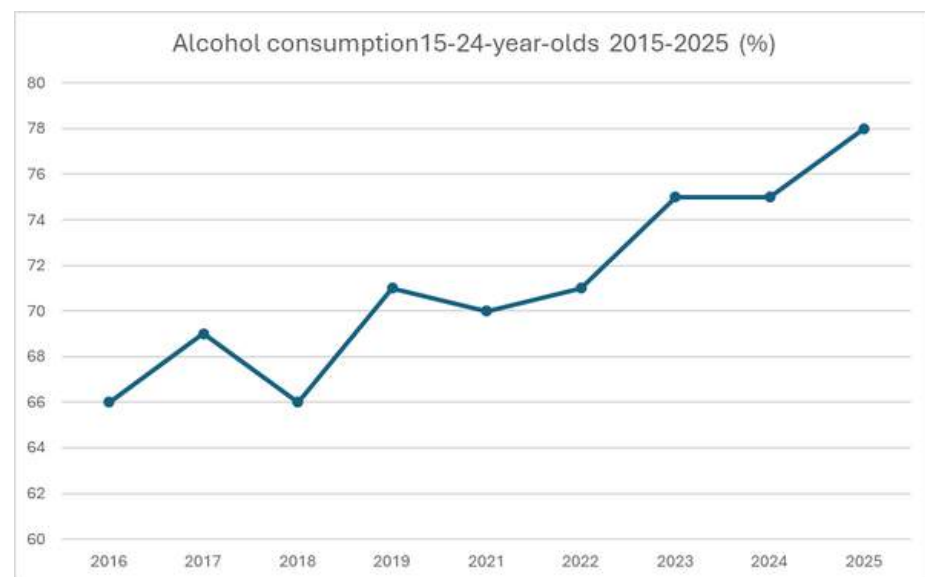
While previous analyses of changes in adolescent drinking have emphasised the wide reach of the changes and their near coincidence in time across developed countries, research reinforces that efforts to explain recent trends in adolescent drinking should consider factors specific to countries.[7] This is especially true in the context of Ireland and the implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act in 2018 (PHAA) – Ireland's first piece of legislation to incorporate World Health Organisation's policy 'best buys' for addressing alcohol consumption – i.e. some modest controls on price, marketing and availability.

As will be shown, fluctuations in alcohol use among young people in Ireland is complex, multifaceted, and not a straight line. Not only has use been increasing over the past decade but harmful consumption patterns, such as hazardous drinking and binge drinking, have also been rising. There is also evidence that the decrease experienced between the mid-2000s and 2010s may be temporary rather than permanent. In order to understand these fluctuations, it is important to look at youth drinking in a holistic manner incorporating the wider social, economic, and political landscape.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in relation to youth alcohol consumption, recent comprehensive research reinforced the value of reducing,

and delaying, alcohol consumption as a means of not only addressing alcohol use, but also drug use. In 'Polysubstance use in early adulthood and associated factors in the Republic of Ireland', Brennan, Mongan, Doyle, et. al. found that factors contributing to early alcohol use may be important targets for interventions aimed at reducing polysubstance use.[8] Therefore, the strong association between drug use and early alcohol use found in the research underscores the importance of reducing youth alcohol consumption.[9]

Finally, we will outline the proven policy actions which are necessary to reduce alcohol consumption at a population level. Such measures are not only beneficial for reducing youth drinking, but for consumption across the board.



Graph 1: Alcohol consumption amongst 15–24-year-olds (2016–2025) as recorded by Healthy Ireland Survey*, with alcohol consumption levels increasing from 66% in 2016 to 78% in 2025

2016: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2016-re-issue.pdf>

2017: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2017.pdf>

2018: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2018-d08308c6-c790-458f-afc2-f3f8c288e64b.pdf>

2019: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34287/1/HRB_Irish_National_Drug_and_Alcohol_Survey_2019_20.pdf

2021: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-report-2021.pdf>

2022: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-report-2022.pdf>

2023: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2023.pdf>

2024: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-survey-summary-report-2024.pdf>

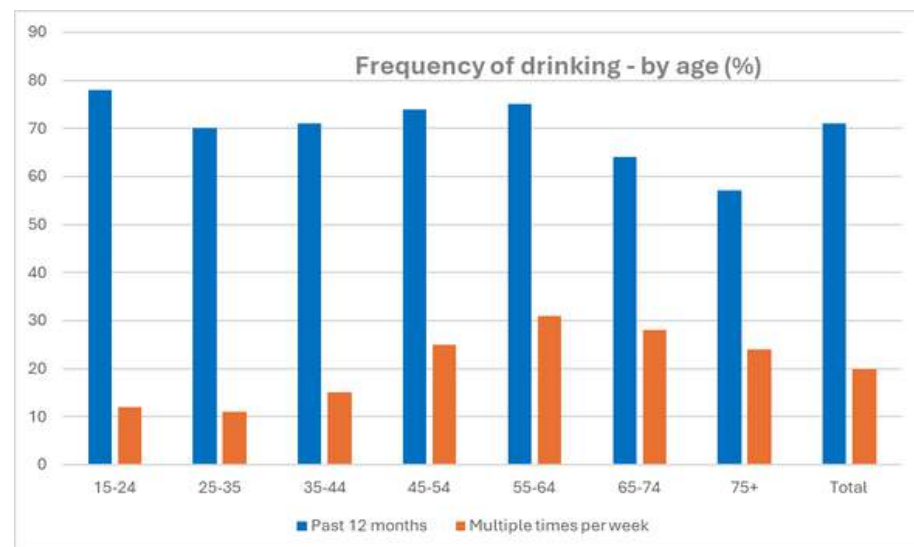
2025: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2b9f909b/Healthy_Ireland_Summary_Report_2025_Web_07.11.2025.pdf

* In 2019 Healthy Ireland data on alcohol was collected through the National Drug and Alcohol Survey, while in 2020 the Healthy Ireland Survey was cancelled due to Covid19.

Are young people drinking less?

In Ireland, alcohol use declined among young people aged 15–24 years from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. However, as Graph 1 shows, since 2016 that trend has reversed. Healthy Ireland Survey data shows that youth drinking has surged over the past decade, with consumption now at 78%.

Alcohol is the most commonly used substance among young people in Ireland with consumption levels for those aged 15-24 standing at 78% – the highest across all age groups nationally. Such consumption levels remain problematic for several reasons; firstly, the level has increased from 66% in 2016[10] to 78% in 2025,[11] binge drinking remains stubbornly high, and more worryingly, a significant proportion of this age category should not be drinking at all.



Graph 2: Healthy Ireland Survey 2025 – frequency of drinking - by age (%) [12]

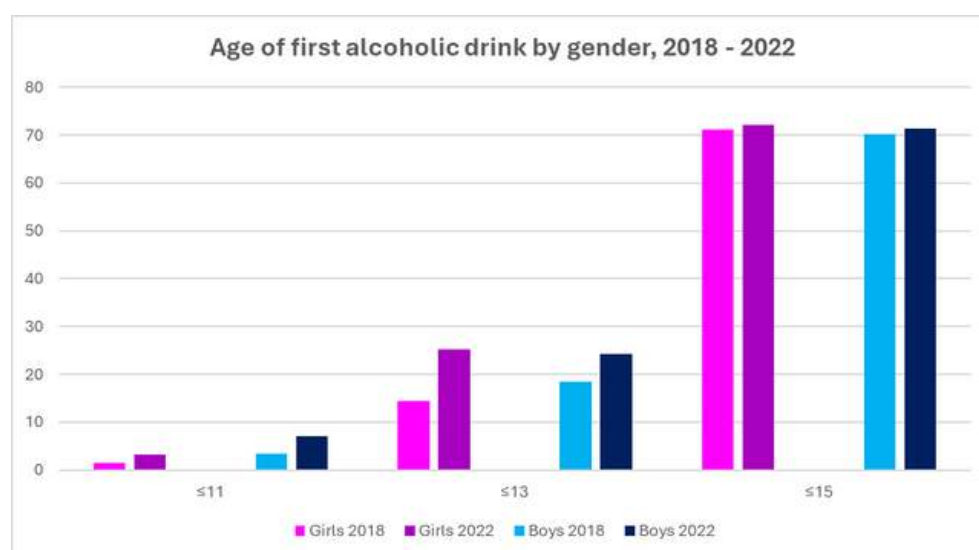
How young people drink

Alcohol is the most commonly used substance among young people in Europe and is most commonly the first substance used by children.[13] Healthy Ireland data for 2025 indicates 78% of 15-24 years consume alcohol. For comparison, the most recent Health Research Board data, published in 2025, indicates just one-fifth (20.8%) of young people aged 15–24 years reported using an illegal drug in the last year, and 9.2% reported use in the last month.[14]

It is so deeply entrenched in our lives that it is easy to discount the health and social damage caused or exacerbated by drinking alcohol.[15] The World Health Organisation has long recognised the damaging impact of alcohol and the level of alcohol related mortality among young people; in 2016 across Europe, 16% of all-cause mortality among 15- to 19-year-olds was attributable to alcohol, while for 20–24-year-olds, this was 23%.[16]

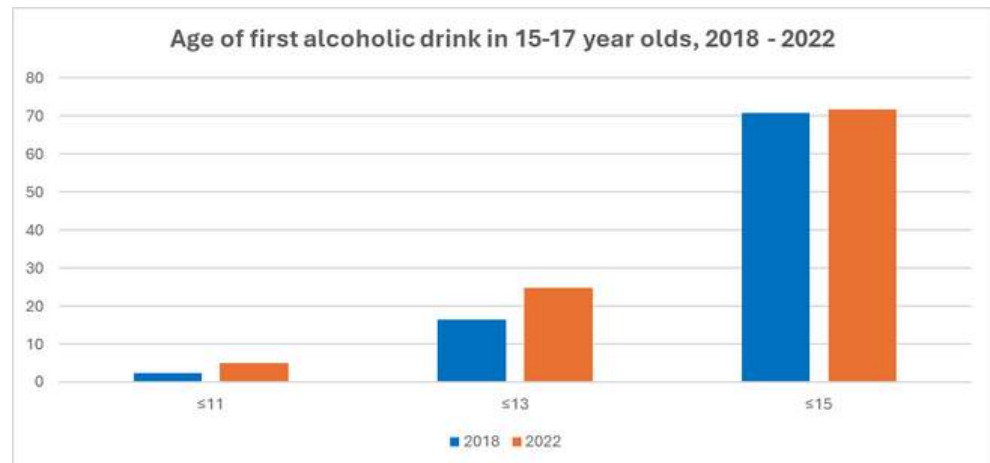
This means that a substantial proportion of deaths among young people in 2016 occurred because of alcohol. Despite the legal age for the purchase and sale of alcohol being 18 years in Ireland, many children and young people begin using alcohol much earlier and the WHO has identified alcohol use among this age category as a health priority.[17]

Every year approximately 50,000 children start drinking in Ireland.[18] This can pose a serious risk to their health and well-being as alcohol is an age-restricted,



Graph 3: The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study - Percentage of 15-17 year olds who reported ever having had an alcoholic drink and who reported that they tried their first alcoholic drink, by gender: 2018 – 2022 [21]

toxic substance associated with a range of health conditions, diseases and injuries.[19] Starting to drink alcohol as a child, which is the norm rather than the exception in Ireland, is more likely to lead to heavy episodic drinking and is a known risk factor for later dependency.[20]

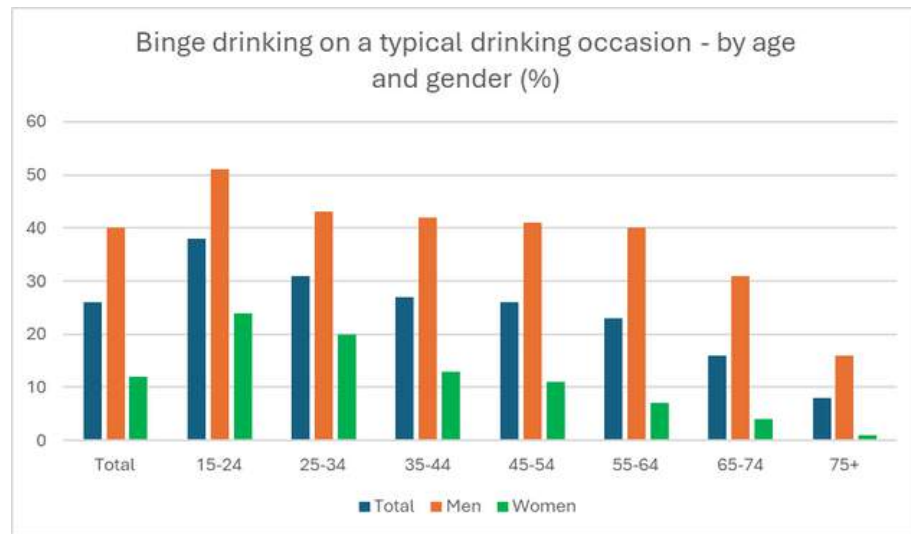


Graph 4: The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study - Age of first alcoholic drink in 15-17 year olds who reported ever having had an alcoholic drink, by age 2018 – 2022 [25]

A 2022 HRB survey revealed that young people in Ireland are, on average, 16.6 years old[22] when they have their first alcoholic drink. Meanwhile data from My World and Growing Up in Ireland surveys found that, in 2019, 89% had consumed alcohol by the age of 17/18 [23] and that by 20 that figure increased to 96%, with 93% reporting that they currently drink alcohol [24].

While young people are delaying alcohol initiation, once they begin drinking they consume alcohol at a rate significantly above the national average (78% vs 71%); equally worrying, however, are consumption patterns where hazardous drinking, including binge drinking, is commonplace.[26] As previously outlined, starting to drink alcohol as a child is more likely to lead to heavy episodic drinking and is a known risk factor for later dependency. Therefore, it is little wonder that hazardous drinking is found to be commonplace (64%) among those aged 15–24 years,[27] binge drinking stands at 38%, and one in three young drinkers has an alcohol use disorder – almost 260,000 young people.[28][29]

Unfortunately, as per Graph 5, binge drinking remains stubbornly high among young people, especially young men aged 15-24, who are the group most likely to binge drink on a typical drinking occasion. More than half of adolescents and young men in this age group binge on a typical drinking occasion.[30]



Graph 5: The Healthy Ireland Survey 2025 - Binge drinking on a typical occasion by age and gender (%) [11]

World Health Organisation's 'Best Buys' are policy solutions to reduce population-level alcohol consumption 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 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

Are changes in youth drinking patterns temporary or permanent?

Recent years have seen some changes in drinking behaviours with some young people delaying alcohol initiation or choosing not to drink. However, for many who do start drinking, a pattern of hazardous drinking emerges, often with harmful consequences.[31] Given the surge in youth drinking over the past decade, combined with problematic consumption patterns, it is important to look beyond the numbers and towards the underlying reasons for consumption pattern changes and assess whether these can be considered temporary or permanent.

The HRB proposed several theories as to why some young people are forgoing alcohol or delaying alcohol initiation. One hypothesis, in terms of children and teenagers, was changes in parenting styles and relationships. As parents become more aware of, and concerned about, protecting their children from alcohol-related harms, there is increased monitoring and control of alcohol use.[32]

Census 2022 told us that over 440,000 young adults were living with their parents, up 13% from Census 2016. This accounts for 41% of people aged between 18 and 34.[33] Therefore, the possibility that alcohol use patterns are being altered by the restraining effect of living at home, extended adolescence, and restricted independence cannot be discounted.[34] However, there are findings from the Planet Youth survey indicating that just over one third of teens surveyed are provided by alcohol from their parents.[35] Teenagers that get alcohol from a parent are getting drunk at two and half times the rate of those that don't.[36]

Other suggestions proposed include cultural shifts, increasing immigration in many high-income countries from communities that do not drink alcohol, and competing activities that do not involve alcohol, such as schoolwork, competitive sports, and gaming and social media use.[37] Research indicates that attitudes towards alcohol have also changed among young people themselves, with some young people more conscientiousness about education and physical and mental health, while others do not view alcohol as an important aspect of their social lives, with a resultant normalisation of non-drinking.[38]

Nevertheless, while consumption has reduced from a high of 89% in 2002, to a low of 66% in 2016, the trend since the mid-2010s has been upwards with Healthy Ireland Survey data showing a 12% surge in youth drinking between 2016 and 2025, with consumption now standing at 78% for 15-24-year-olds. Indeed, there is further evidence from industry and academics that youth

drinking patterns remain broadly the same as previous generations, or that where changed, such patterns are driven by temporary factors.

The drinks company Diageo has suggested that young people are wrongly perceived to be less interested in alcohol with its Global Consumer Planning Director quoted as saying “A lot of people talk about Gen Z(*) being a cohort that is moving away from alcohol. Our data tells us otherwise. While they drink socially a little less frequently than other cohorts, they do so very enthusiastically.”.[39] The director further stated, “Gen Z is super-committed to socialising” with alcohol a “very significant and enthusiastic part of that”. [40]

Furthermore, a new survey from IWSR, a global alcohol data specialist, found that young people’s drinking has increased, putting its alcohol consumption in line with that of other generations.[41] According to the COO Consumer Insights at IWSR “Alcohol usage among LDA [legal drinking age] and Gen Z adults has increased significantly from April 2023 lows, and there is evidence that the propensity to go out and spend more is recovering among this group – challenging the received wisdom that this generation is ‘abandoning’ alcohol.”[42]

According to IWSR’s Bevtrac findings, there has been a marked increase in alcohol participation levels among Gen Z consumers compared to two years ago: in April 2023, 66% of Gen Z consumers in the top 15 markets said they had consumed alcohol in the past six months; in March 2025, this figure rose to 73%. The research identifies several other Gen Z trends for alcohol, including a greater willingness to explore and maintain wider repertoires among multiple drink categories; above-average engagement with spirits; a more relaxed stance on sustained moderation; and a greater inclination to frequent the on-trade.[43]

The increase in consumption identified by the Bevtrac findings has been partly driven by demand for ready-to-drink (RTD) products. The definition of RTDs varies, but nowadays it typically refers to drinks made using spirits which are sold in a prepared form, ready for consumption. As part of their Global Trends Report 2025, IWSR revealed that volumes of RTD cocktails/long drinks are forecast to double globally between 2019 and 2029, with the US expected to soar by up to 400%.[44]

RTDs include products such as BuzzBalls, single-serve ready-to-drink cocktails, as well as alcopops like Smirnoff Ice. Such is the demand for RTD products amongst young people that Bacardi Breezer, the alcopop, which was discontinued in 2015, has been rebranded and relaunched.[45] Indeed, not to be left behind, in Britain, ‘The Royal Collection Trust’, a charitable department of the British royal household, recently added a RTD gin and tonic to its spirits range.[46]

The interim chief executive of Diageo, Nik Jhangiani, summed up the situation recently when he said there was a “huge opportunity” to win over Generation Z

as the multinational alcohol producer noted a boom in demand for premixed cocktails and alcopops.[47] Elaborating further, he said that young people who were drinking for the first time were doing so by consuming RTD spirits and cocktails, reversing a previous trend where younger generations were introduced to alcohol through beer.[48]

The interim CEO was adamant that Diageo would not be left behind and would meet the increased demand for alcohol amongst young people. He said that Diageo had once been a leader in alcopops through its Smirnoff Ice brand, stating that the company “rightfully have the ability to gain that [position] back”, with plans to boost sales of Smirnoff Ice drinks again.[49] To this end, Diageo launched a new advertising campaign for Smirnoff Ice across more than 20 countries in June.

Indeed, Dr Laura Tinner, a research fellow at the Centre for Public Health at the University of Bristol, identified the role the alcohol industry is playing in trying to capture a younger audience they feared they were losing. Her analysis is “...that alcohol companies are continually trying to target young people with their products,” such as “...using the current revival and zeitgeist around 00s and 90s culture to design their products to target young people.”

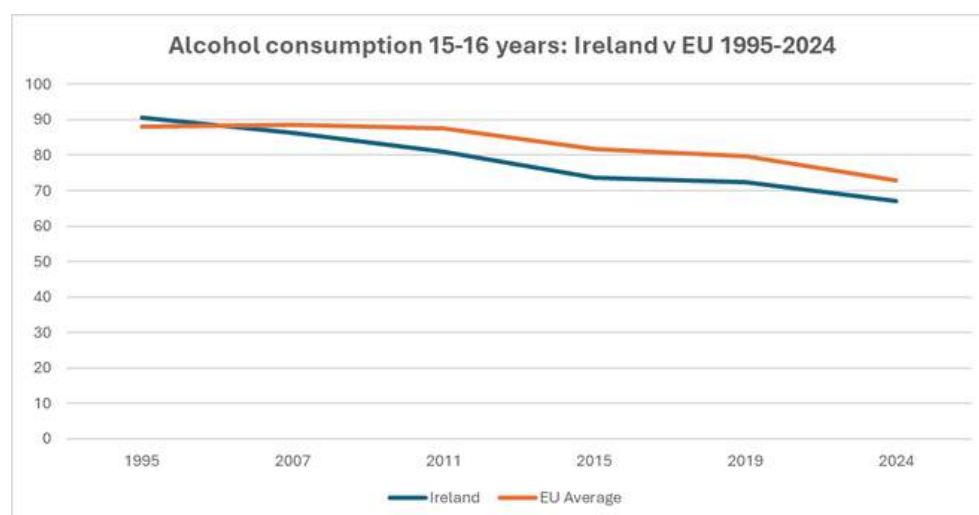
Additionally, research from Rabobank prompted the financial institution to proclaim that reduced alcohol consumption amongst young people due to concerns about health and greater use of social media are greatly overblown.[50] Their analysis of banking data identified structural and economic drivers behind changed drinking behaviours among young people. Put simply, the findings and the data indicate that current financial constraints impact alcohol use among young people, but future increased earnings will recalibrate alcohol use in this age cohort. The findings prompted the bank to state that “the data behind the report will prove far more useful in predicting Gen Z’s future consumption and will offer critical insights on how to market to this generation of young people more effectively and thoughtfully.”.[51]

Similar insight was also forthcoming from Richard Halstead, the COO of IWSR, who said that tailwinds were developing in relation to young people’s alcohol consumption – “They’re getting older so some are probably in better paying, stable jobs and they’ve got more opportunity perhaps to do things that people with a bit more money like to do, which is go out and buy a drink and not worry too much about how much it costs you.”.[52]

* Generation Z (Gen Z) is generally defined as those born between 1997 and 2012. This means that, as of 2025, they are roughly between the ages of 13 and 28 years old.

How does Ireland compare internationally?

On the international stage Ireland was once a worrying outlier in terms of youth drinking. However, there have been improvements, especially in terms of the 15-16 years age cohort. The 2024 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) found that lifetime alcohol use amongst 15- to 16-year-olds dropped from 91% in 1995, to 72% in 2019 and to 67% in 2024.[53] As can be seen from Graph 6, these improvements compare favourably with EU averages, especially in the years after the introduction of the PHAA.



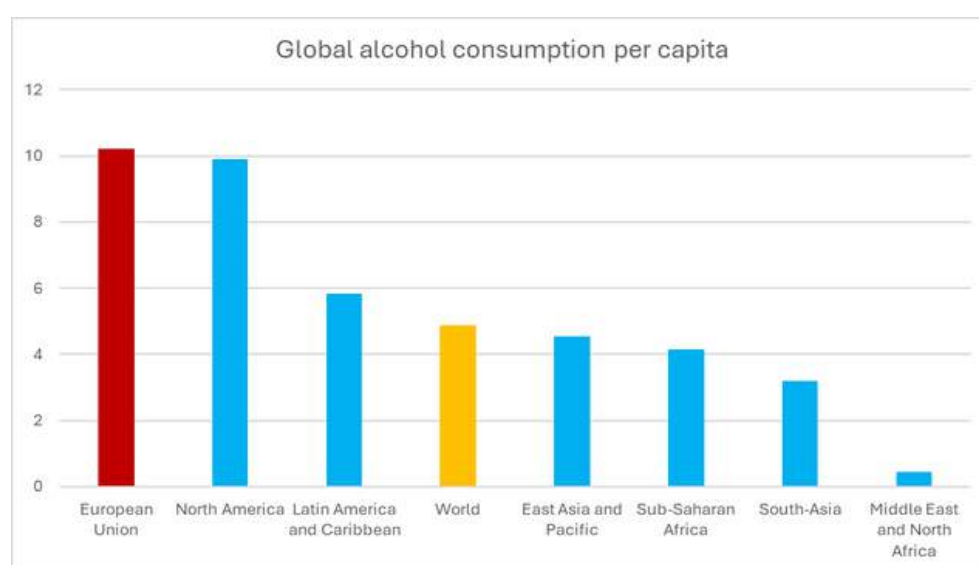
Graph 6: The 2024 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs – Lifetime alcohol consumption 15-16 years: Ireland v EU 1995-2024 [53]

Improvements in lifetime alcohol use can be measured against the 37 European ESPAD countries, where in 2024 Ireland was recorded as having use levels below the EU average. Latterly as per ESPAD data, countries who have implemented public policy aimed at reducing overall alcohol consumption levels have also seen declines in adolescent drinking. For instance, Ireland's downward trend has been accentuated across all areas, including heavy episodic drinking which has fallen to 23% by comparison to an EU average of 30%.[54]

Other countries, such as Lithuania, which took important policy measures to address problematic alcohol consumption levels at a population level have also seen improvements in adolescent drinking. Alcohol control policies around advertising, availability, and affordability, have coincided with an overall reduction in alcohol consumption and associated harms.[55] This has also seen a

decrease in adolescent drinking where lifetime alcohol use has dropped from 97% in 2003 to 77% in 2024, and current use has dropped from 77% to 23% over the same period.[56]

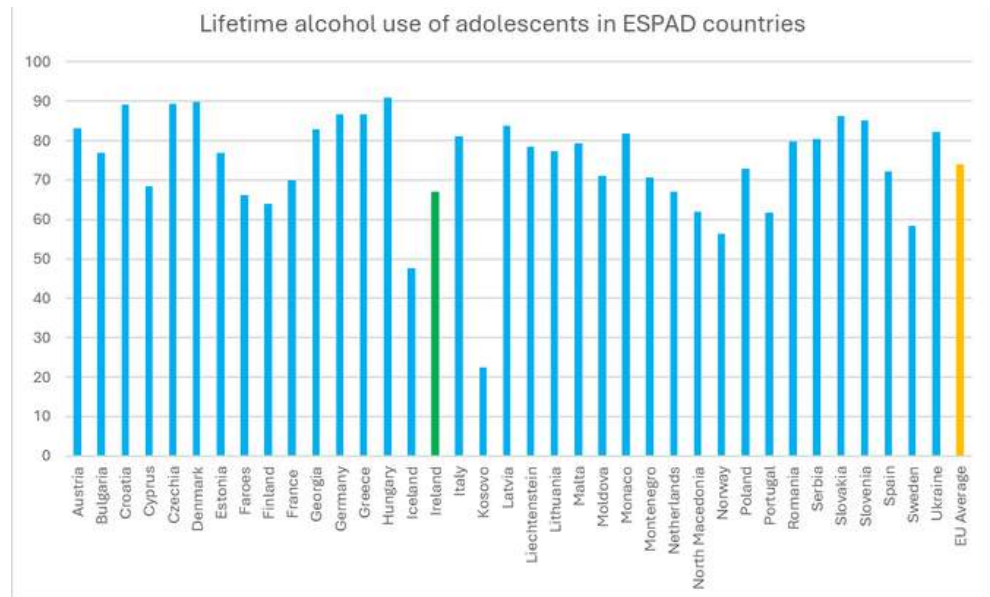
Nevertheless, this data, and EU averages, must be contextualised in terms of the European Union being the heaviest drinking region in the world[57], with the average European consuming twice that of the global alcohol intake.[58] [59] Therefore, it is little wonder that the European Region has the highest proportion of ill health (7%) and early death due to alcohol in the world.[60]



Graph 7: Alcohol consumption per person, 2020. Estimated consumption of alcohol is measured in litres (pure alcohol) per person aged 15 or older, per year. Data source: World Health Organization, via World Bank (2025) [61]

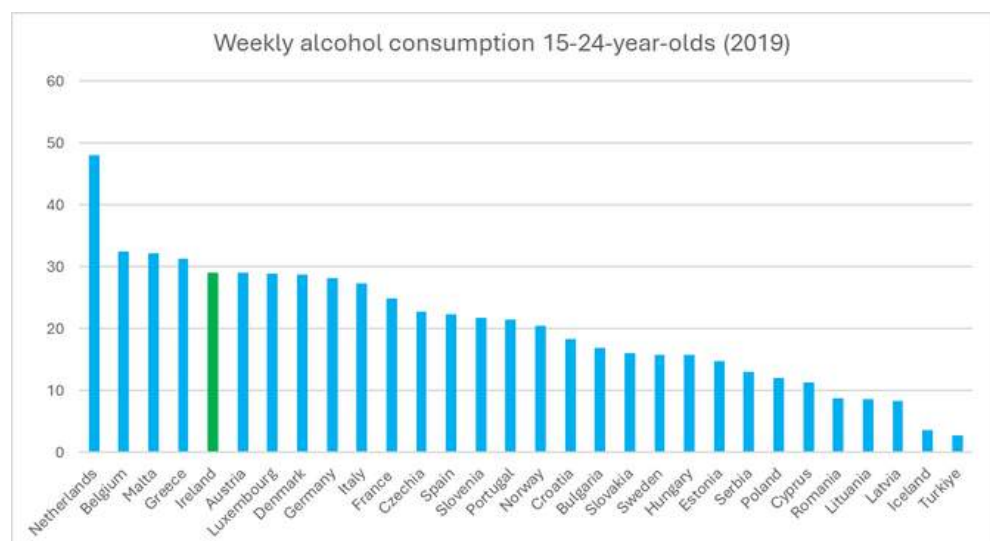
Moreover, countries who have allowed the alcohol industry a seat at the table in alcohol policymaking have seen alcohol use among adolescents remain relatively high. Lifetime alcohol use among adolescents in the Netherlands stands at 67%, only reducing by 15% in 25 years, by comparison Ireland has reduced lifetime adolescent alcohol use by 23% since the 90s, and Lithuania has reduced use by 21% since 2003.[62]

While Ireland and Lithuania pursued public health approaches to dealing with alcohol, the Dutch government gave the alcohol industry a seat at the policy table[63] – hence, the country remains top of the leaderboard for weekly youth alcohol consumption at nearly 50%.[64] Therefore, it is little wonder that the government’s alcohol Prevention Agreement is devoid of the main, proven measures to reduce alcohol consumption and harm – the WHO ‘Best Buys’ – controls on advertising, availability, and affordability.[65]



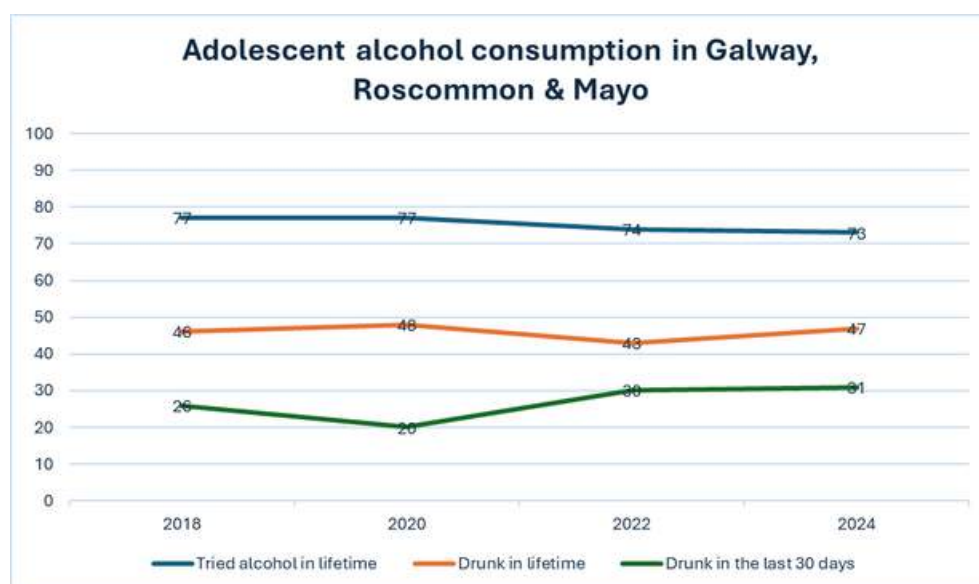
Graph 8: The 2024 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs – Lifetime alcohol consumption 15-16-year-olds across Europe (2024) [53]

Ireland's successes since the early 2000s, however, are no reason for complacency given that when age ranges are expanded beyond adolescents to include other young people, the country drifts back towards the top of the table in terms of frequency of alcohol consumption. Analysis of Eurostat data on alcohol consumption in 2019 saw Ireland rise to fifth place for weekly consumption among 15-25-year-olds (29%)[66] while recent CSO data indicates weekly consumption rates stand at 27% for 18-24-year-olds.[67] Furthermore, ESPAD data also shows that current alcohol use is still quite high for adolescents, standing at 35%.



Graph 9: Eurostat: Frequency of alcohol consumption by age (15-24) [68]

Eurostat and CSO data is also broadly in line with regional data gathered by Planet Youth Ireland – an initiative designed to promote wellbeing and improve outcomes for our young population. Planet Youth conducts detailed standardised survey data, adapted to the Irish context, with adolescents (post-Junior Cert) every two years in over 150 schools and Youthreach centres across Ireland. 2024 data collected among adolescents in Galway, Roscommon, and Mayo found that three quarters of 15- to 16-year-olds have tried alcohol, half have been drunk in their lifetime, and a third have been drunk in the past month. [69] Shockingly, a quarter of young people revealed they were drinking in pubs. [70]



Graph 10: Planet Youth Regional Trend Data 2018-2024 – Adolescents alcohol consumption in Galway, Mayo, and Roscommon [70]

Young people and alcohol related harm

On the back of a decade of increasing youth alcohol consumption, and with such high levels of hazardous and binge drinking, come associated harms across a range of areas, such as physical and mental health, criminal justice, road safety, economic productivity, amongst others.

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity; it is a depressant drug with significant health implications for those who use it, and it is a significant risk factor for suicide, as recognised by the World Health Organisation.[71] Young people classified as problem or hazardous drinkers are most likely to be in the severe category for depression and more likely to have engaged in deliberate self-harm or have attempted suicide. In almost three-quarters of suicide cases among young people, there was a history of alcohol and/or drug use.[72]

Globally, in 2019, alcohol use ranked second for attributable disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) among adolescents and young adults aged 10-24 years.[73] Alcohol contributes to all the leading causes of death for young people: suicide, road traffic collisions, poisoning, and assaults, while long-term use is linked to seven different types of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and liver disease.[74]

Furthermore, acute alcohol related conditions tend to be more common among younger people.[75] Alcohol-related hospitalisations among young people increased by 12% between 2015 and 2018 while the number of discharges with a diagnosis of alcoholic liver disease increased by 221% since 1995, to 90.8 per 100,000 persons, with the increase most pronounced among those aged 15–34 years (and those aged 65+). [76] Of all discharges with a diagnosis of alcoholic liver disease, 8.4% died while in hospital.

Harm also extends into the criminal justice system. In 2022 the Health Research Board analysed alcohol and other drug use among children and young people in Ireland. The HRB overview also examined Garda PULSE data and found that 14% of drink-driving arrests were of young people aged 18-24 years, [77] while data from the Road Safety Authority indicated that one-half (49%) of young driver fatalities during 2013–2017, with a toxicology result available, were positive for alcohol.[78]

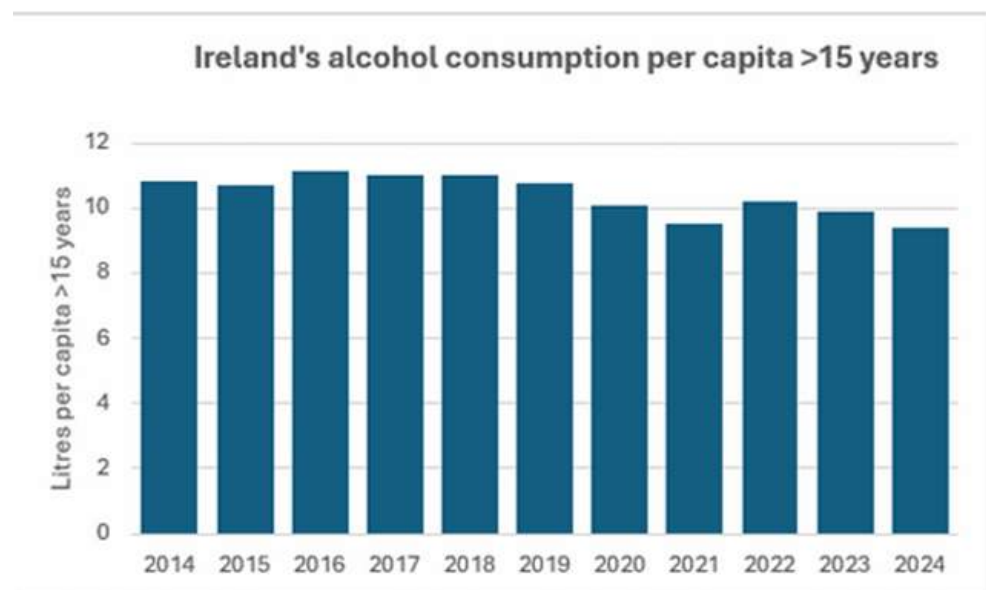
Policy context

Public Health (Alcohol) Act (2018)

In recent years, Ireland has rightly drawn plaudits for its groundbreaking Public Health (Alcohol) Act of 2018 which for the first time placed public health at the heart of alcohol legislation. The overall aim of the legislation as outlined in the government's Healthy Ireland policy[79] is to:

- reduce alcohol consumption to 9.1 litres of pure alcohol per person per annum
- delay the initiation of alcohol consumption by children and young people
- reduce the harms caused by alcohol
- ensure the supply and price of alcohol is regulated and controlled in order to minimise the possibility and incidence of alcohol related harm

The measures include Minimum Unit Pricing; structural separation in shops; controls on sales and special offers; some restrictions on alcohol advertising particularly in relation to youth places and times; plus the introduction of health information labelling on alcohol products. The measures are being slowly implemented[80] and since its passage, alcohol consumption has decreased by 15% to 9.4 litres per capita.



Graph 11: Data source: <https://alcoholireland.ie/facts-about-alcohol/how-much-do-we-drink/>

However, challenges remain. Important measures including controls on the content of alcohol advertising have not been commenced and following intensive lobbying by the alcohol industry, labelling of alcohol products has been delayed until 2028. The modest controls on alcohol advertising close to schools, on sports pitches and on radio/TV are being significantly undermined by a proliferation of zero alcohol product advertising using identical branding to the alcohol master brand.[81] Given the data on youth drinking it is clear that this legislation needs to be fully implemented and loopholes closed.

Coherent strategies needed

As outlined earlier, youth drinking has significant impacts on multiple aspects of their health. In 2025, the Department of Health is developing new policies on suicide reduction, obesity and an overall new Healthy Ireland plan. Reducing alcohol consumption, particularly in youth, must be central to such strategies. However, alcohol policy does not just lie within the scope of the Department of Health. For example, excise duties are a matter for the Department of Finance, alcohol licensing is dealt with by the Department of Justice and road safety rests with the Department of Transport. In all of these areas there are important measures which could be taken to complement the goals of the Department of Health.

Excise duties have not been changed in 11 years so their value is being eroded by inflation.[82] Alcohol sold in supermarkets today is now 85% more affordability than in 2004.[83] There are proposals from the Department of Justice through the Sale of Alcohol bill[84] to extend licensing hours and Ireland has the lowest level of road-side breath testing in the EU[85] despite one in eight drivers admitting to drink driving in the past year.[86]

Children's rights

In addition, there is a broader children's rights lens which must be applied. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[87] to which Ireland is a signatory, children's right to health is a fundamental human right. The Convention also protects children from harmful media and economic exploitation and in particular General Comment 15[88] says that States must regulate private sector actors including the food, alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries with special attention to be paid to vulnerable and marginalised children.

More importantly, General Comment 16 (GC16)[89] provides guidance on implementing measures to prevent and remedy child rights violations caused by business activities, while also stating that corporations fulfil a range of responsibilities in upholding children's rights. Analysing the impact of GC16, researchers note that because children are among the most vulnerable groups in society and can be particularly impacted by the activities of businesses in a variety of negative ways, GC16 "must address these disadvantages faced by children in the realisation of their rights."[90]

Digital alcohol marketing

While Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 has some important measures to reduce children's exposure to alcohol marketing, unfortunately it is silent on online marketing which is rapidly expanding. A recent report from AAI points to the national and international research evidence.[91] The report notes that digital alcohol marketing employs subtle tactics, including influencer marketing, sponsored content, and user-generated content, which effectively promotes drinking behaviours among young people.

Internationally we have seen that social media and video sharing platforms offer ideal environments for marketing, allowing alcohol companies to reach young people with tailored and engaging content, often through the exploitation of user data and preferences to create sophisticated, personalised marketing content. Several international studies have revealed the scale of digital and social media alcohol marketing. Research from Australia has shown that young people may see more than 20 alcohol ads per hour on social media, while New Zealand research found that nearly three-quarters of young people in a study (70.6%) reported seeing alcohol marketing on a social media platform they regularly use. These advertisements appeared across many different social media platforms, but most commonly were seen on Instagram (72.9%), YouTube (56.6%), Facebook (45.8%), Tik Tok (37.1%) and Snapchat (19.6%).

In 2024 the Minister for Health established the Online Safety Taskforce to examine a range of issues.[92] Within this work, the Taskforce commissioned the Institute of Public Health (IPH) to complete a national and international research and literature review on the digital marketing of health harming products to children. This report published in December 2025[93] makes a number of recommendations and was integrated into the final report of the Online Safety Taskforce.[94]

The IPH report identified the need for national-level data collection and analysis to monitor children's online exposure to health-harming products and to measure and track online sales of such products to minors. It also recommended strengthening age verification processes for the purchase of goods online and enhanced compliance monitoring in relation to the sale of products, such as tobacco and e-cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, or sunbed use, to minors. A key recommendation was the need for a government-led strategic approach to protect children from being targeted by the digital marketing of potentially health-harming products. The report noted that reliance on industry codes and other forms of self-regulation is insufficient.

Alcohol Action Ireland are firmly of the belief that social media companies cannot be trusted to deal with these issues. Therefore, like many children's rights campaigners, public health organisations, and academics, we believe regulation needs to shift from "remove harm when you find it" to "prove that your system prevents harm".[95]

Therefore, social media and video sharing platforms must be required to adhere to mandatory input filtering, independent audits and licensing conditions that make harm prevention a legal technical requirement.[96] This means it may catch the harm before it materialises, enabling regulation to minimise harmful behaviour before products are deployed.

Home deliveries

The home delivery of alcohol is another risk factor for youth drinking. For over a decade the issue of alcohol home deliveries has been raised by politicians and public health organisations, however, the loopholes which allow this have not properly been addressed.[97] Moreover, recent technological developments have exacerbated the situation.

It is not illegal to have alcohol delivered to your house from an off licence or shop and, technically, the same restrictions on the sale and supply of alcohol apply, including the restrictions in relation to hours of trading and the provisions in relation to the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor to young persons. Furthermore, the purchase must be completed from their home in advance of delivery.[98]

However, many politicians have pointed out that, in practice, these restrictions are not adhered to by those providing drink delivery services. They have highlighted that the lack of bespoke regulation in this area means age verification and licensing rules are regularly bypassed with payment on delivery being common. Indeed, the Department of Justice does not even hold data in relation to the non-compliance of alcohol delivery services.[99]

In more recent years technological advancements and a lack of regulation have allowed the situation to escalate. Politicians have raised the issue of minors using delivery apps and websites, where age-verification is often not adequately enforced, to purchase alcohol for home delivery.[100] The ‘tick-the-box’ nature of age verification for these apps and websites simply allows minors to say they are 18 or older.[101] While some delivery services check the person’s ID when they drop off the alcohol, this doesn’t always happen.

Without the adequate collection of data by the Department of Justice it is difficult to identify the scale and breadth of the problem, or the specific legislative changes necessary to resolve the issue. However, we do know that drink delivery is a risk factor for youth drinking and that it needs to be addressed. As a matter of urgency, the Department of Justice must begin data collection in this area, ensure rigid enforcement of the law, and begin to develop amending legislation to close the lacunas in the law which allow minors access alcohol through home delivery services.

Ensuring a focus on youth drinking in the new drug and alcohol strategy

Alcohol remains Ireland's largest drug problem, by far – 71% of the population currently consume alcohol^[102] compared with 7.4% using any illegal drugs.^[103] Within this young people now make up the largest cohort of those using alcohol. Indeed, as outlined throughout this document, young people now consume alcohol more than the national average, and doing so in an exceptionally harmful way.

Despite these worrying developments, there is longstanding concern that the new National Drugs Strategy will not adequately address the scale and breadth of alcohol use, especially amongst young people, in Ireland. This is concerning for several reasons. Firstly, alcohol constitutes a serious public health concern, as well as a social and economic concern. However, there are secondary implications of alcohol use in terms of illegal drug use as a wealth of academic evidence now points to alcohol being a gateway drug to illegal drug use.^{[104][105][106][107]}

Indeed, as has been outlined earlier in this paper – alcohol is frequently used in conjunction with illegal drugs and recent comprehensive research reinforced the value of reducing, and delaying, alcohol consumption as a means of not only addressing alcohol use, but also drug use because factors contributing to early alcohol use may be important targets for interventions aimed at reducing polysubstance use. Such research highlighting the strong association between drug use and early alcohol use underscores the importance of alcohol being comprehensively addressed in the new National Drugs Strategy.^[108]

Youth drinking, treatment and recovery

The risk of alcohol dependence begins at low levels of drinking and increases directly with both the volume and pattern of consumption – that is, the risk escalates with increased consumption as well as hazardous drinking patterns.^[109] In Ireland, alcohol is the most commonly used drug among young people, with this age group making up the largest cohort of those using alcohol as well as those binge drinking. Therefore, this puts young people at heightened risk.^[110]

The 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol Survey^[111] indicated that 70% of young male drinkers (15–24) met the criteria for hazardous drinking. 38% of all drinkers aged 15–24 were classified as having an alcohol use disorder (AUD). The same survey also found that 8% were considered to have possible alcohol dependence. Using this data, we can estimate from CSO population statistics^[112] that there could be over 43,000 young people with alcohol dependence across Ireland.

This is of significant concern because children and adolescents are typically more vulnerable to the harmful effects of alcohol. In addition, it poses significant questions for the provision and delivery of treatment and recovery services, because we already know that there are not enough services to cover unmet need.

Ireland has a significant issue with alcohol consumption. Research from the Health Research Board[113] found that more than half of all who drink are classified as hazardous drinkers and around 20% have an Alcohol Use Disorder – that’s around 600,000 people. Despite these high numbers, in 2024, only 8,745 accessed alcohol treatment.[114] Where it comes to young people, the numbers accessing treatment is even less reflective than the projected scale of the problem. While age related data is limited, we know that in 2024, 71 cases under the age of 17 were treated for alcohol.[115]

While we need policies aimed at reducing population alcohol consumption, we also need greater provision of services, and currently, there is a significant gap between treatment needs and provision. Alcohol must be treated with the seriousness it merits, therefore, services must be improved and increased, and it must also be properly included in the new National Drugs Strategy, with the strategy reflecting that it is Ireland’s largest problem drug.

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“The continued rise in youth drinking in Ireland is a red flag for a coming tsunami of harms from alcohol for individuals, families and society in general, now and into the future. However, it is not surprising as the alcohol industry continues to promote its products by having a presence in every aspect of young people’s lives, from music gigs to the sponsorship of many sporting events. Alcohol ads are local, national and online, where there is minimal to no regulation, despite public calls for change to protect our young people. Even the modest measures in force in Ireland which are designed to protect young people from alcohol harm are being outrageously flouted by zero-alcohol products using the same branding as full-on harmful alcoholic beverages. Failure to tackle the rise in youth drinking – from underage drinking and into third-level institutions – is a dereliction of government’s duty to protect our children and grandchildren from alcohol harm across all of society.”

Paddy Creedon,
Recovery advocate, Voices of Recovery founder
and AAI board member

Conclusion

There is cause for celebration in the fight against alcohol harm as research over the past two decades indicates the age of first alcohol use increased from 15.6 years to 16.6 years, and between 2002 and 2019, monthly heavy episodic drinking decreased from 74% to 56% among those aged 15–24 years. [116] Unfortunately, there has also been complacency in relation to youth drinking with assumptions taking precedence over facts. While there was a successful decade of decreasing levels of youth alcohol consumption, this has been followed by a decade of increasing levels of youth alcohol consumption.

In-depth research by the HRB concludes that the overall decline in consumption since the highs of the 2000s is being driven by younger adolescents, particularly those less than 17 years – who should not be drinking anyway. Drinking remains the norm for young people in Ireland and amongst those who do drink, harmful alcohol consumption patterns are rife. Among this age cohort research indicates consistently high levels of binge drinking,[117] with hazardous drinking a normal consumption pattern,[118] and one in three young drinkers having an Alcohol Use Disorder. [119] Therefore, stronger interventions, particularly those tailored towards younger individuals, are needed to reduce the substantial harms attributable to alcohol in Ireland.[120]

Government alcohol policy needs to stay the course if we are to see more than superficial change in youth drinking. In order to tackle the existing harmful consumption patterns then the Public Health (Alcohol) Act must be implemented in full – including the rollout of alcohol health information labelling from its delayed date of 2028. Additionally, Minimum Unit Pricing must be uprated in line with inflation so as to maintain its public health value, while the lacuna in the law which allows advertising of zero-alcohol products, using the identical branding of the master brand alcohol product, must be closed. There must also be a comprehensive approach to the online marketing of alcohol to children.

If such issues are not addressed then, as much evidence suggests, any improvements will only be temporary.

Recommendations

A bold new approach is needed if we are to see more than superficial change in youth drinking. At a minimum the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 must be implemented in full – including the rollout of alcohol health information labelling from its delayed date of 2028. Additionally, Minimum Unit Pricing must be uprated in line with inflation so as to maintain its public health value, while the lacuna in the law which allows advertising of zero-alcohol products, using the identical branding of the master brand alcohol product, must be closed.

Beyond these measures, a new target to reduce alcohol consumption to within the HSE lower-risk drinking guidelines should be set – 6.1 litres per capita. Such a reduction is entirely possible to achieve but needs coherent policy across government with, for example, increases in excise duties annually in line with inflation, no increases in licensing hours and venues, addressing online marketing to children, plus enforcement of existing legislation on drink driving and the serving of alcohol to minors and those intoxicated.

The Department of Justice must also begin data collection around home deliveries of alcohol, ensure enforcement of the law, and develop legislation to close the lacunas in the law which allow minors access alcohol through home delivery services. Treatment services must be improved and increased, and must also be properly included in the new National Drugs Strategy, with the strategy reflecting that it is Ireland's largest problem drug.

With such an approach which places the right of children to health above the demands of an immensely profitable industry, Ireland can achieve a significant improvement in the health and wellbeing of our youth with long-term benefits for Ireland as a whole.

43,000

The estimated
number of young
people (15-24) in
Ireland with alcohol
dependence



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