

# Getting the facts right on

# Alcohol & underage drinking

Underage drinking and harmful drinking patterns amongst children and adolescents are a significant problem in a number of European countries. Curbing such trends is a priority for all stakeholders, including governments, public health specialists and the industry.

Contrary to common belief, **underage drinking has generally remained unchanged in Europe**, and **consumption patterns vary significantly**. Effective measures must **take those differences into account** and must **focus on the greatest influences**: parents, siblings and peers.

This document aims to provide an effective toolkit to address questions surrounding underage drinking (young people are defined here as being under the legal purchase age)

## K E Y P O I N T S

Trends and current status of underage drinking in Europe

- Overall underage alcohol consumption in Europe has been stable since 1999 and even slightly decreasing since 2003
- Problem drinking is not a typical characteristic of European underage people (young people under the legal purchase age); 82 % of European 16 years old do not drink alcohol or seek to become intoxicated

Is there a convergence of underage consumption in Europe?

- Evidence shows that alcohol consumption patterns among underage people vary greatly across Europe
- Such diversity does not call for a uniform European solution, but rather national and local initiatives which take cultural differences and local consumption patterns into account

What are the most influential factors of underage drinking?

- The principal influences on youth drinking are parents, siblings and peers
- There is no evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage people's drinking patterns; voluntary advertising codes ensure that the content of advertising is responsible and that underage people's exposure is limited

What are the most effective means to curb underage drinking?

- Despite monitoring difficulties, some education programmes have proven to be effective in preventing underage alcohol consumption and later alcohol misuse
- A stricter enforcement of legal purchase age requirements and associated licensing laws would help prevent underage people from consuming alcoholic beverages

# Trends and current status of underage drinking in Europe

Is there a convergence of underage consumption in Europe?

What are the most influential factors of underage drinking?

What are the most effective means to curb underage drinking?

## KEY POINTS

- Overall underage alcohol consumption in Europe has been stable since 1999 and slightly decreasing since 2003
- Problem drinking is not a typical characteristic of European underage people (under the legal purchase age); the vast majority of 16 year olds do not drink alcohol or seek to become intoxicated

## ESPAD

The **European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD)** is a pan-European project (across 35 countries) surveying alcohol (and other substance) consumption amongst 15/16 year olds. Carried out every four years, the latest survey was carried out in 2007 and the results were published in 2009. ESPAD numbers should be interpreted cautiously bearing in mind that in 1/3 of countries surveyed, it is legal for 16 year olds to drink their preferred beverage (beer):

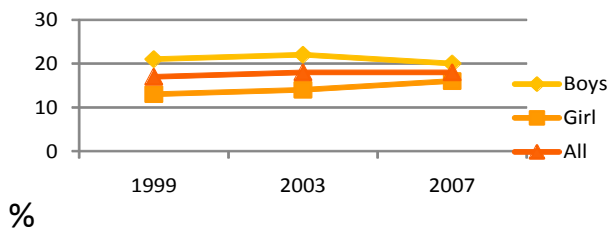
Beer	Spirits	Wine	Alcopops	Cider
40%	30%	13%	11%	6%

Source: <http://www.espad.org/>

### Trends and evolution of underage alcohol consumption in Europe

**Underage alcohol consumption is stable and slightly declining for boys**

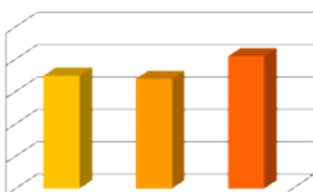
Evolution of proportion reporting having had 5 or + drinks on one occasion, 3 times or + during the last 30 days



Source: ESPAD. 99, 03, 07

The graph above shows that the proportion of 16 y.o. reporting having had 5 or + drinks on one occasion 3 times during the last month is stable in general, and slightly decreasing for boys.

Evolution of 16 y.o. not having been intoxicated in the last month (in %)



The graph below shows that the proportion of underage people reporting **not being** drunk is increasing. Contrary to common perception, underage people are not getting increasingly intoxicated.

Source: ESPAD. 99, 03, 07

%

### Adolescents, underage and young people

In the absence of an official definition of “children” or “young people”, it is preferable to refer to “underage people”: those under the **legal purchase age (LPA)**.

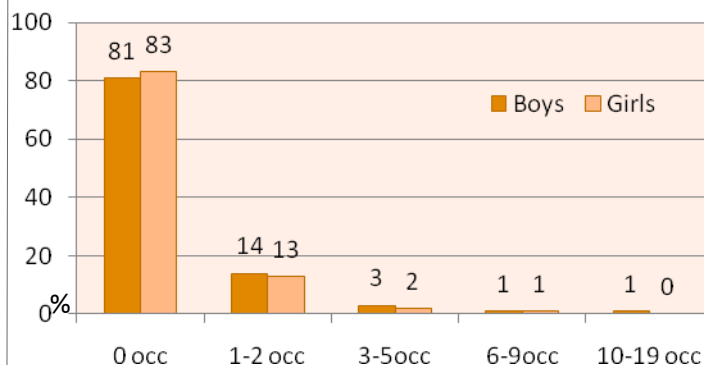
The legal purchase age differs from one country to another and varies sometimes depending on the type of beverage or the place where it is purchased. In most European countries, the legal purchase age is 18. In approximately 1/3 of EU countries, however, young people may purchase and consume beer at the age of 16.

### Status of underage alcohol consumption in Europe in 2007

**Problem drinking is not an overall characteristic of underage people**

Data shows that a majority of European 16 year olds do not drink or drink alcoholic beverages only occasionally (1 to 2 times per month) (64.5%). Frequent drinking (10 or more) was reported by only 10% (it may become harmful if high quantities are consumed).

Occasions of reported drunkenness in the last 30 days at age 16. Average of 35 countries (in %).



Source: ESPAD. 2007

A vast majority of 16 y.o. do not drink irresponsibly (see graph above). Despite the fact that in 1/3 of EU countries 16 year olds are allowed to drink their favorite beverage (beer), 82% have not reported drunkenness in the last 30 days.

Trends and current status of underage drinking in Europe?

# Is there a convergence of underage consumption in Europe?

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- ### KEY POINTS
- Evidence shows that alcohol consumption patterns among underage people vary greatly across Europe
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## Quantity of underage alcohol consumption

### Quantities consumed by underage people vary greatly across Europe

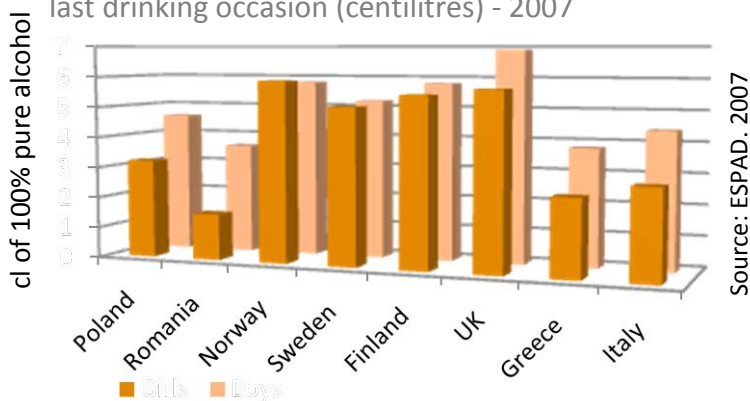
The map below shows the disparities in the quantities of alcohol consumed by 16 y.o. during their last drinking occasion: Eastern and Southern Europeans drink significantly less than Northern Europeans

Estimated average alcohol consumption during the latest drinking day (centilitres)



The graph below illustrates the great diversity in underage alcohol consumption by gender and country: British boys drink almost twice as much as Romanian ones; Finnish and Norwegian girls drink more than their male counterparts. Northern European girls drink more than Southern European boys. The gender gap is significantly greater in Southern and Eastern European countries in comparison to Northern Europe.

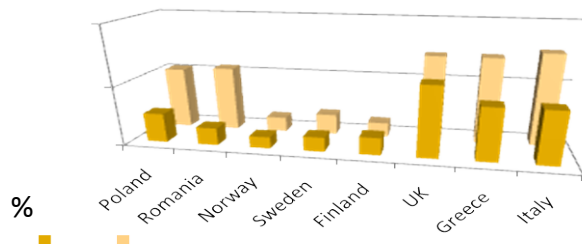
Estimated average alcohol consumption during the last drinking occasion (centilitres) - 2007



## Frequency of underage alcohol consumption

The graph below demonstrates that Northern Europeans drink less frequently than the rest of Europeans (with the exception of the UK). E.g. 31% of Italian boys consume at least one alcoholic beverage 6 times a month (every 5<sup>th</sup> day) compared to 5% of Finnish boys and 6% of Finnish girls. The gender gap is significantly higher in Eastern and Southern Europe.

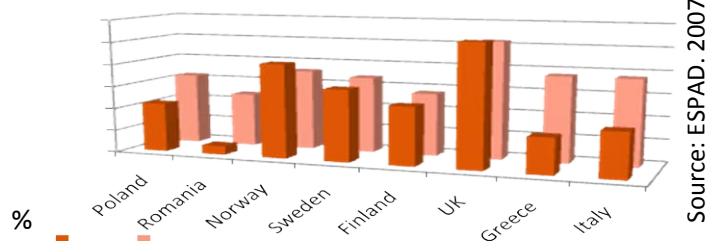
% of people having had 1+ drink at least 6 times in the last 30 days



The graph below shows that regular heavy drinking (3+/last 30 days) varies greatly among countries and genders. In general, boys get drunk more frequently than girls. However, the gender gap is significantly smaller in Northern European countries and even reversed in Finland and UK.

In general, Scandinavians consume alcoholic drinks less frequently but in higher quantities and report binge drinking about twice as often as South or East Europeans.

5 or + drinks on one occasion, 3 times or more during the last 30 days by gender (%)





## KEY POINTS

- The principal influences on underage drinking are parents, siblings and peers
- There is no evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage people's drinking patterns; voluntary advertising codes ensure that the content of advertising is responsible and that underage people's exposure is limited

### The influential factors in underage drinking

#### The principal influences on youth drinking are parents and peers

Much research has been devoted to examining the respective roles of family, peers, cultures, social forces, advertising and other factors in underage people's decisions on whether to drink or not. Family and peers are the most powerful factors in shaping belief and attitudes about drinking (Fisher, 1993; Milgram, 2001).

There is value in teaching underage people about the negative implications associated with alcohol misuse and excessive consumption and the importance of moderate consumption, as this makes them less likely to abuse alcohol or to have drinking problems.

### The context of underage drinking in Europe

#### The perceptions of alcohol-related risks varies in Europe

The perception of the *risk factor* and the image of irresponsible consumption are very different across Europe. In France, Germany and Italy, young people consider *risk* to be a positive challenge, whereas in Spain, risk has the double meaning of danger and amusement. In Greece, risk is perceived as a tool for personal growth, while in the UK, it is linked to adrenaline excitement (Bühninger, 2000).

### The impact of alcohol marketing on underage people's drinking patterns

#### There is no evidence of a causal link between alcohol advertising and underage people's drinking levels

Most studies on the influence of advertising on young people merely reveal an awareness of generic types of alcoholic beverages (part of popular culture like Champagne or wine), but no evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage consumption.

A very recent review of studies on the effects of alcohol advertising also holds that '*alcohol expectancies, family history, peer influence and personality characteristics may act as confounders in the relationship between exposure to advertising and (...) subsequent alcohol use*' (Smith & Foxcroft, 2009, 13). These findings reinforce the point that other factors appear to have a much stronger influence on underage drinkers.

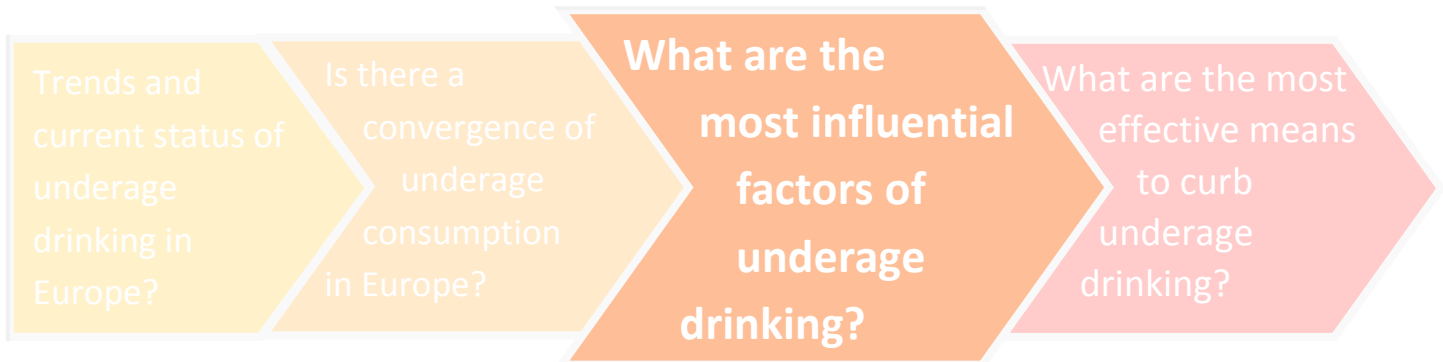
**Young alcohol users often get alcohol from family or home** according to data from the US National Survey on Drug Use and Health, published in 2011. '*These results suggest that family members can play a direct and important role in reducing young adolescents' access to alcohol, preventing not only underage drinking but also the early onset of other associated behavioral health problems*'.

[www.stopalcoholabuse.org/](http://www.stopalcoholabuse.org/)

### **Alcohol advertising: the rules protecting children and underage people**

EU legislation lays down provisions to protect underage people from exposure to alcohol advertising. The **Audiovisual Media Services Directive** (2007) prohibits advertising for alcoholic beverages aimed "specifically at minors". A **Council recommendation** (2001) prohibits references to youth culture and ads featuring underage people.

In addition, advertisers have voluntarily agreed to detailed rules protecting minors, including on the content of their advertising, and the media used. Spirits advertisers have committed not to advertise in media of particular appeal to underage audiences, i.e. any media with more than 30% share of underage audience.



## *A Review of the scientific evidence*

The scientific evidence is inconclusive on **price measures**, which have not proved effective in curbing underage drinking. In a recent meta analysis of 132 studies, Gallet (2007, 133) concludes that *'if we are particularly concerned with teenage drinking, since we find that teens are least responsive to prices, then perhaps the best approach to reducing alcohol consumption should involve alternatives to taxations, such as education campaigns'*. (For further information, see *Getting the facts right on: alcohol taxation, pricing and alcohol-related harm*).

**The impact of advertising** is the subject of a wealth of literature, most of which is contradictory, and finds that the impact of advertising is marginal at best. For every study finding a positive correlation between advertising and alcohol consumption, there is another one contradicting the sample, the methodology or the conclusions. Virtually all econometric, cross-sectional, and case studies have found that marketing has no or only modest effects on alcohol consumption (Broadbent, 2008; Nelson and Young, 2008; Nelson, 2007; Gallet, 2007; Duffy, 1999). Nelson (2008, 500) reviewed a series of longitudinal studies and concluded that *'the evidence on alcohol advertising and youth is mixed, contradictory and inconclusive'*. (For further information, see *Getting the facts right on: alcohol advertising*).

**Health warning labels** do not have a significant impact on underage and young people. In their book reviewing numerous studies, Babor et al (2003, 193) found that *'no direct impacts of warning labels on consumption or alcohol-related problems have been reported'*. The authors refer to another study which concluded that *'among youth, the warnings did not increase perceptions of alcohol risk, and may even have made products more attractive to both drinkers and non-drinkers'*. Babor et al conclude: *'in summary, the warning label research does not demonstrate that exposure produces a change in drinking behaviour per se'*.

**Parents, siblings and peers** are the principal influences on youth drinking (Walls et al 2009). Donovan's (2004) review of the risk factors for adolescent alcohol initiation concluded that *'the most consistent antecedent risk factors for starting to drink in adolescence were parental and peer approval and models for drinking'*. In 2007, Van der Vorst et al hold that *'ample studies have established that parents as well as peers function as role models in the development of adolescents' alcohol use'* (1814). Windle et al (2009) conclude that *'among the most influential alcohol-specific risk and protective factors are family history of alcoholism and the influences of siblings and peers, all of which shape all adolescents expectancies about the effects of alcohol, which in turn help determine alcohol use behaviors'* (30). Over 15 years of peer review concur with the above (Williams, 1995).

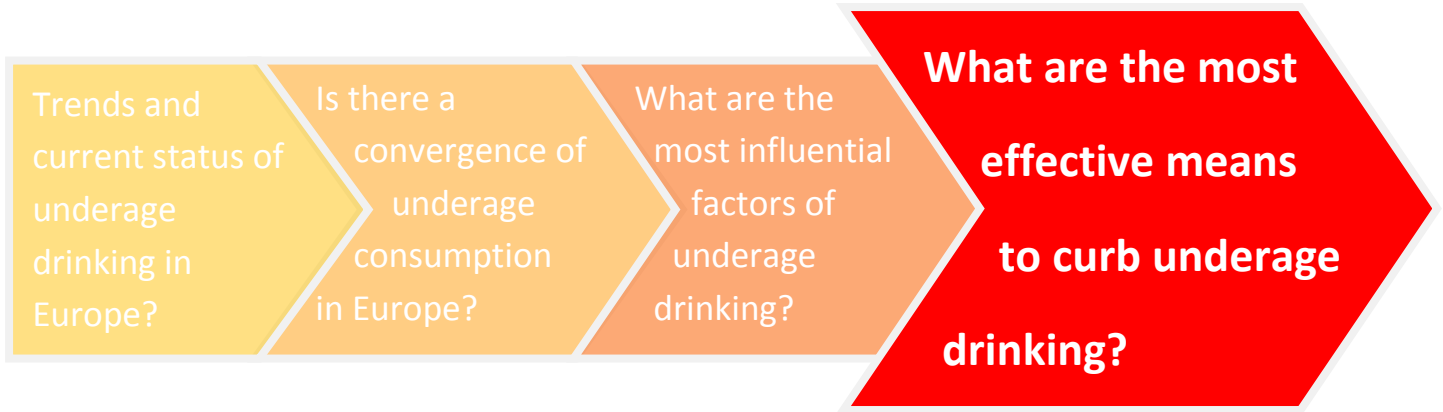
Gallet, C.A. (2007) The demand for alcohol: a meta-analysis of elasticities, *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 51, 121-135.

Nelson, J. P. (2008) Reply to Siegel et al: alcohol advertising in magazines and disproportionate exposure. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 26(3), 493-504.

Babor, T. et al. (2003) *Alcohol: No ordinary commodity – research and public policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Donovan, J.E. (2004) Adolescent alcohol initiation: a review of psychosocial risk factors, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 35(6), p.529, e7-18.

Van Der Vorst, H. et al. (2007) Similarities and bi-directional influences regarding alcohol consumption in adolescent sibling pairs. *Addictive Behaviors*, 32(9), 1814-1825



## KEY POINTS

- Despite monitoring difficulties, several education intervention/programmes have proven a reasonable effectiveness in preventing underage alcohol consumption and later alcohol misuse
- Consumer information, social norms marketing, and stricter enforcement of age limits are effective means to curb underage drinking and alcohol misuse

### Underage people and education programmes

#### Education programmes have a preventative effect on alcohol misuse

Despite the paucity of quality studies providing evidence of their effectiveness, some educational interventions have shown evidence of effectiveness. For example, a study undertaken in 2009 examined the effects of a school-based education intervention in 30 public schools in Germany. It found a lower level of life-time binge drinking after the intervention (Morgenstern et al, 2009). A similar project was carried out in Croatia in 2008. The authors found that *'qualitative data suggest benefits from the program overall. Given the intervention was successful in the earlier grades it should be initiated earlier to have a greater impact'* (West et al, 2008, 55). The effectiveness of interventions is increased if they involve skills training, families, peers and community engagement. (Jones et al, 2007).

In addition, education programmes focusing on harm reductions rather than promoting abstinence appear to be promising alternatives. (See also: see Caria et al, 2011.). A systematic review of 53 programmes – some targeting alcohol misuse and others with a wider focus for prevention – revealed that certain wide generic programmes *'can be effective and could be considered as policy and practice options'* (Foxcroft et al, 2011).

#### The cost-effectiveness of interventions

Due to a general lack of data and rigorous studies, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of programs. More and better designed studies are needed to evaluate both their effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. However, Pacileo and Fattore (2009, 390) conclude that *'if the interventions are effective they are also cost-effective'* (ibid, 390). Considering the positive results attained by certain programmes, more efforts should be made to promote these interventions.

#### Enforcing age limits and licensing laws

Stricter enforcement of legal purchase age requirements and associated licensing laws would considerably reduce levels of underage drinking. Systematic ID checks in licensing premises and training of bar staff be promoted across Europe.

#### Social norms interventions can correct misconceptions about consumption

Social norms marketing is an approach to alcohol education that aims to correct misperceptions, promoting positive norms in order to replace misperceived negative ones. It aims to modify misperceptions through education programmes. A recent systematic review of studies by Moreira et al. (2009, 2) concludes: *'Interventions delivered using the web or computer, or in individual face-to-face sessions appeared to reduce alcohol misuse'*. (See also Palfai et al 2011.)

To date, most social norms marketing has been targeted at young people, particularly in college campuses in the USA. The approach is based on the finding that most students overestimate their peer's drinking levels, and therefore have a wrong idea of how much they 'should' be drinking. Correcting these misperceptions can help reduce heavy drinking and harmful outcomes. Evaluation of these approaches has shown promising results: decreases have been reported in heavy episodic drinking, injuries to self and to others (e.g. Fabioan, 2003; Haines & Baker, 2003; Perkins & Craig, 2002).

#### Consumer information can contribute to a more comprehensive solution

Despite the lack of well-designed studies assessing effectiveness in this area, certain forms of consumer information may be a useful contribution to a wider and more comprehensive solution. Website campaigns, in particular, seem to be promising means, as they may offer brief self-assessment and personalised and anonymous feedback.

Evaluation of a consumer information website launched in Ireland through a TV campaign and targeting excessive drinking by young adults highlighted that, after the campaign, 91% agreed that getting drunk is embarrassing and 86% that one should not drink to get drunk.

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## Getting the facts right

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