

Unrecognised and under-reported:
the impact of alcohol on people other
than the drinker in Scotland.



back ground

This briefing provides a summary of a research study which was commissioned by Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) in 2012 to better understand the scale and magnitude of alcohol's harm to people other than the drinker in Scotland.

AFS is Scotland's national charity working to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. AFS's vision is a future free from widespread health and social harm caused by alcohol. To realise this vision, AFS works with a wide range of partners to advocate for evidence-based policy; deliver learning and development programmes and provide accurate and accessible information about alcohol to the media, policy-makers, practitioners and the general public.



context

There is increasing recognition that alcohol harm not only affects the individual drinker, but also affects others around the drinker including family members, friends, co-workers and the wider community. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in its *Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol* (2010), called for special attention to be given to reducing harm to people other than the drinker and has prioritised this area for international research attention.

Harms to others occur along a continuum ranging from minor to serious harms, which may be due to a one-off incident or recurring incidents. Types of harm include injury, assault, traffic and workplace accidents, child neglect, partner abuse, relationship problems, harassment, noise and damage to property. These harms are experienced in public spaces, such as communities, town centres and workplaces, as well as in the home.

Findings from the study confirmed the wide range of harms experienced from other people's drinking and identified those most at risk: people aged 16 – 34 years and those who have heavy drinkers in their lives. The consequences of alcohol's harm to others impinges on a person's sense of safety, ranging from harassment to physical harm, as well as on a person's social network, be it in the home, with friends, work colleagues or in local neighbourhoods. The experiences of social, health and law enforcement agencies who support those at the more severe end of the spectrum, illustrate the range and magnitude of damage from others' drinking within families and in the local community. The policy debate on the societal impact of alcohol use in Scotland needs to be reviewed in order to fully encompass the widespread negative effects of drinking behaviours of others on families, workplaces and communities. There is a duty of care by government at all levels to protect citizens from the second hand effects of drinking, as has happened with second hand effects of smoking.



public spaces

noise

accidents

harassment

violence

drink-driving



private spaces

stress

family breakdown

money problems

domestic violence

child neglect

aims

The aims of the study were:

- To provide a snapshot of the reach and impact of harm to others from drinking across the general population in Scotland.
- To explore harm to others in more depth with local agencies in one geographical area: Edinburgh.



methods

The study methodology is informed by research undertaken in other countries, in particular the Australian study, which measured and documented the nature and magnitude of harm to others (Laslett et al 2010)¹. The research themes will allow for international comparisons to be drawn as part of the International Group for Studies of Alcohol's Harm to Others (IGSAHO). The research comprised three key components:

- **National omnibus survey**
A national omnibus survey involving 1007 Scottish adults participating in face to face interviews. Sixteen measures were used to identify a range of typical social and personal situations where harms may be experienced as a result of someone else's drinking. The harms were examined from two perspectives – those experienced within the general population and the effect of knowing heavy drinkers.
- **Local case study**
At a local level, Edinburgh was used as a case study to explore the impact of alcohol's harm to others from the viewpoint of frontline service providers. This involved fourteen semi-structured telephone interviews with people working in the NHS, emergency services, social work and other agencies, and a focus group with nine participants.
- **Data mapping**
The project also identified and mapped information on alcohol's harm to others from existing surveys and other data sources, at both a national and local (Edinburgh) level.

strengths and limitations of omnibus survey

Traditionally the main focus of population surveys has been to ask the drinker about the consequences of their own drinking. The strength of this survey is that it asked about harms experienced due to another person's drinking, with a strong focus on the social roles and environment, such as within the family, with friends, colleagues and the wider community.

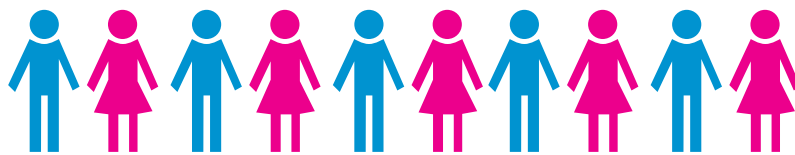


However, it is important to note some limitations of the survey when interpreting the findings.

- The survey reflects a representative quota sample of the population, however it misses those not living in households, including prisoners, those in the armed forces, homeless people, students in halls of residence. Evidence suggests that some people in these groups are likely to be heavier drinkers, and this should be taken into account when considering the findings.
- The proportion of abstainers in this survey is higher than that reported in the Scottish Health Survey (SHeS 2013).² This may be attributed to how the question was asked. The SHeS uses a detailed data collection process which has no direct comparability to this study.
- The sample size (1007) restricts the possibility of a detailed breakdown of individual types of harm by age and gender.
- The data collection method used – face to face interviews in the home – may result in under-reporting.

national survey

key findings



- 1 in 2 people report being harmed as a result of someone else's drinking.
- 1 in 3 people report having heavy drinkers in their lives.
- People under 35 years old are four times more likely to experience harm from others in a public setting (street, public space, cars, workplace).
- Those who know heavy drinkers are more likely to experience harm from others in private settings (home, family, neighbours, private parties).
- Experiencing harm from other people's drinking is not related to whether the person affected by the harm drinks or not.
- Those who experience harm from other people's drinking report lower life satisfaction compared to others.

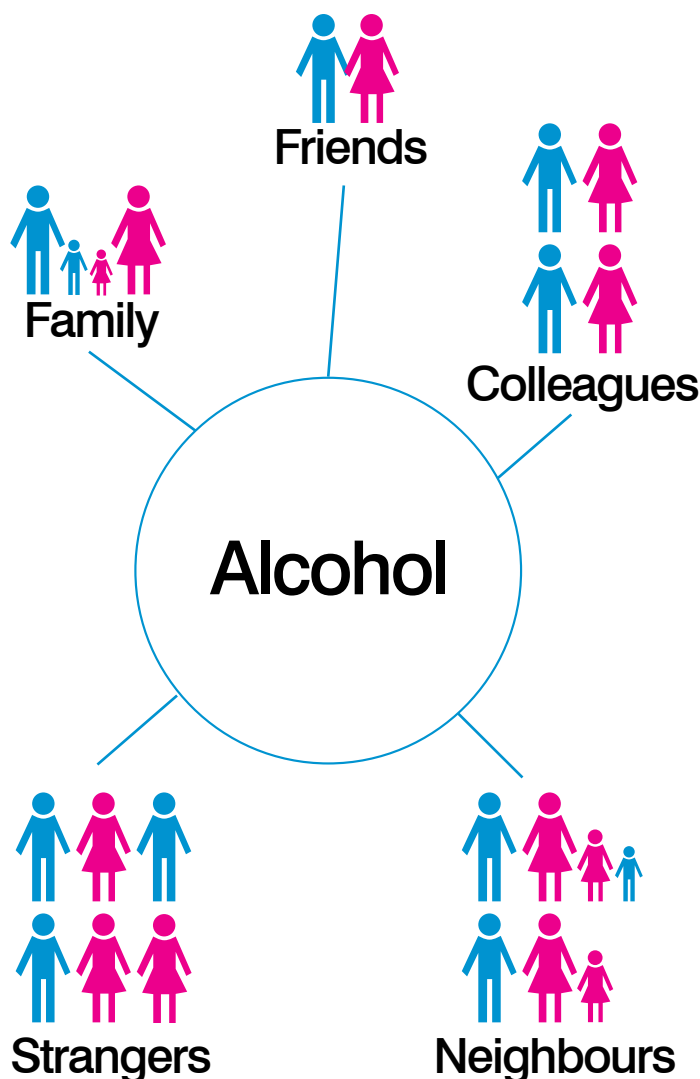


The national survey has provided an indication of the extent to which harm to others is an issue across Scotland and the review of national data has given a snapshot indication of how this harm manifests itself across the population.

The survey documents the wide range of harm experienced as a result of other people's drinking, both in the public domain, which is very visible, and in private settings where harms to others are often hidden from public view.

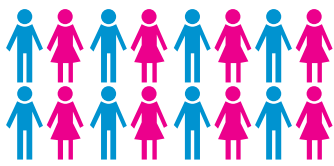
The negative effects range from minor (being kept awake), to serious (physical harm). Scotland reports more harms in public places such as harassment and being afraid due to others' drinking than studies in other countries. The findings suggest that many people are experiencing harm from other people's drinking, whether in the public or private domains.

The consequences impinge on a person's sense of safety, as well as on a person's social network, whether in the home, with friends or work colleagues or in local neighbourhoods.



local case study - Edinburgh

An estimated



7,000 children

in Edinburgh live with an adult with problematic alcohol use.

Alcohol was a factor in

half

of all murders,

72%

of domestic abuse incidents and

76%

of assaults.

City of Edinburgh Council received

4,499

 calls

related to noise in 2012/13, with an estimated

90%

of these calls involving alcohol.

Agencies who contributed to the study report:

- **Harm to others** from drinking is **not well recognised** and is **under-reported** in Scottish society.
- **Cheap alcohol** was seen as a **contributing factor** to alcohol abuse.
- The **stress and burden** of living with a problem drinker causes **family disharmony** and can result in relationship problems, **tension, arguments, unpredictability** and **chaotic lifestyles**.
- For **children** there is **worry, fear and uncertainty**. Parental alcohol problems can severely impact on children resulting in neglect and poor school attendance.
- **Communities** and neighbours experience **noise, verbal abuse** and **disturbances** as a result of others drinking.
- Those who provide public services, including **ambulance and hospital staff** and public transport drivers **experience harm from others** in the course of their work.

Information from existing published reports and surveys was complemented by additional data provided directly by local agencies in Edinburgh.

The information gathered in the interviews and focus group documented the more severe problems as a result of someone else's drinking, as the key informants were local agencies who primarily deal with problems which involve harm to others from alcohol. The findings illustrate the range of social services where harm to others from drinking emerges as a primary or contributory factor. The risk to children from others' drinking was evident across a number of agencies such as child counselling, family services, child protection, domestic abuse and homeless services. In Edinburgh, a quarter of people thought street drinking or alcohol public disorder was a problem in their local area. Alcohol featured highly in violent crime (assaults and murders) and was an important contributor for ambulance emergency call-outs.



recommendations

The findings from this study suggest that harm caused by alcohol to people other than the drinker is wide ranging. Harm occurs in a number of ways – from neighbour disputes, workplace accidents and being harassed in the street to child neglect, family breakdown and violence. The harm also occurs in many different places, including within town centres, in the home, in neighbourhoods and in the workplace.

Consequently, to reduce the detrimental impact of alcohol on people other than the drinker, a range of actions are required across different domains, involving many partners. Actions should be aimed at preventing harm to others, as well as providing support and assistance for people negatively affected by the drinking of others. The recommendations below provide a starting point to begin to address alcohol's harm to others in Scotland.



1 implementation of effective interventions to reduce overall levels of alcohol harm

The burden of alcohol harm that a population experiences is related to the amount of alcohol it consumes. The more a population drinks the more harm it will experience and vice versa. It follows that the best way of tackling the harm caused by other people's drinking is to reduce the overall amount of alcohol consumed, as well as reducing the incidence of 'binge drinking'. Evidence demonstrates that the most effective and cost-effective measures for reducing harmful alcohol consumption are controls on the price, availability and marketing of alcohol. WHO terms these interventions 'best-buys'. The Scottish Government has a lead role in implementing population-level interventions in Scotland, with local authorities responsible for the application of licensing legislation. Many measures that will address alcohol's harm to others are included in the current national alcohol strategy. If implemented in full, they will go a long way towards protecting the population against the harmful effects of alcohol. However, there is scope for further action, particularly in relation to the marketing of alcohol.

specific actions for national government and local government

- Reduce the affordability of alcohol through the implementation of minimum unit pricing for alcohol and ensure alcohol taxes are increased in line with inflation.
- Control the availability of alcohol by ensuring effective implementation and enforcement of licensing legislation.
- Restrict the marketing of alcohol, particularly to children.
- Raise awareness among the general public of the range and magnitude of alcohol's harm to others and build support for effective alcohol policies.

specific actions for public agencies who gather alcohol data:

- Collect and report alcohol and drug data separately, where possible and appropriate.
- Include harm to others indicators in existing data collections.
- Create new methods and processes to gather data on harm to others where required, to fill current information gaps.

2 better data collection and monitoring

One of the main findings of this study is that alcohol's harm to others is not well-recognised and is under-reported. Better data collection and monitoring of the full extent of alcohol-related harms enables the development of an alcohol strategy that is appropriate and proportionate. Public agencies have an important role in collecting and monitoring data which can be used to provide a more comprehensive picture of the range and magnitude of alcohol-related harms in Scottish society.

This information can be used to develop interventions to tackle the harm that alcohol causes to people other than the drinker. Fully understanding alcohol's specific effects is particularly important because alcohol is a legal drug.

3 development of local action plans to address alcohol's negative impact in communities

Local communities are negatively affected by other people's alcohol consumption in various ways including noise, nuisance, anti-social behaviour, harassment and physical harm. Local authorities have a lead role in addressing alcohol's negative impact as they are responsible for many aspects of the local environment, including licensing. Local authorities should adopt a 'whole community approach' to tackling the harm caused by other people's drinking. It would be counterproductive for a local authority to establish procedures for responding to complaints about alcohol-related noise and disturbance, if the same local authority is also sanctioning an increase in the number of licensed premises, with the risk that alcohol problems will be exacerbated.

4 better identification and support services for people affected by someone else's drinking

Service providers who participated in this research study provided insights into the range of harms to others caused by alcohol that occur within families. These harms included fear and tension caused by adults' occasional binge drinking, for example family events or parties, which led to unpredictable behaviour and arguments, through to chronic worry and stress caused by living with a problem drinker. The consequences for families include financial worries, relationship problems, isolation and family breakdown. Often families experiencing such harms do not come into contact with services until the situation is at crisis point. It is suggested that practitioners providing alcohol treatment and recovery services, also consider the impact the drinker is having on those around them. It is also important that practitioners who work with children and families have an understanding of the range of alcohol's harm to others as it occurs within families, and are aware of where to get support if required.

specific actions for service providers:

- Routine screening for harm to others should be carried out by alcohol treatment and recovery services.
- A 'whole family' approach should be taken when planning and delivering alcohol treatment and recovery services.
- Assessment and mapping of the demand and availability of services to support those affected by another person's drinking should be undertaken.
- Improve identification and support for those affected by other people's drinking by providing harm to others training for specialist and generic practitioners.

specific actions for local government:

- Provide opportunities for local communities to discuss issues arising from other people's drinking.
- Establish and promote clear mechanisms for members of local communities to report incidents relating to other people's drinking and develop support services for those affected.
- Make the licensing process more accessible to local communities to ensure licensing decisions reflect local concerns.

5 recognition of the impact of alcohol's harm to others in the workplace

It is estimated that alcohol cost the Scottish economy £865million in 2007³. This cost is made up from unemployment, premature death (before the age of retirement), absenteeism and presenteeism (where people are at work but there is reduced activity and productivity). Absenteeism and presenteeism not only have an impact in terms of economic costs, but have an impact on workplace colleagues, as they are required to provide additional support or cover. The wider harm within the workplace caused by other people's drinking is not just confined to financial losses, but affects the stress levels, performance and job satisfaction of colleagues.

specific actions for employers:

- Development and implementation of workplace alcohol policies which outline support structures and processes for effectively dealing with alcohol issues.
- Training for managers and supervisors to implement effective workplace alcohol policies.
- Information and training for employees on their rights and responsibilities relating to alcohol in the workplace.

¹ Laslett A-M, Catalano P, Chikritzhs Y, Dale C, Doran C, Ferris J, Jainullabudeen T, Livingston M, Matthews S, Musgavin J, Room R, Schlottertein M, Wilkinson C. (2010). *The range and magnitude of alcohol's harm to others*. Fitzroy, Victoria: AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Eastern Health.

² Rutherford L, Hinchliffe S and Sharp C (2013) *Scottish Health Survey 2012*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh; <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00434590.pdf>

³ York Health Economics Consortium (2010), *Societal Cost of Alcohol Misuse in Scotland for 2007*; Scottish Government, Edinburgh; <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/29122804/0>



contact

Alcohol Focus Scotland
166 Buchanan Street, Glasgow G1 2LW
tel: 0141 572 6700

Email: enquiries@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk
www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

follow us on twitter @ AlcoholFocus