

Canadian Institute

Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation Community of Practice



Event #32: March 24, 2025

Minimum unit pricing (MUP) policies: Evidence and impacts in the UK and Ireland

The views and opinions expressed as part of this presentation are those of the presenters and do not necessarily represent those of our funders or other organizations acknowledged.

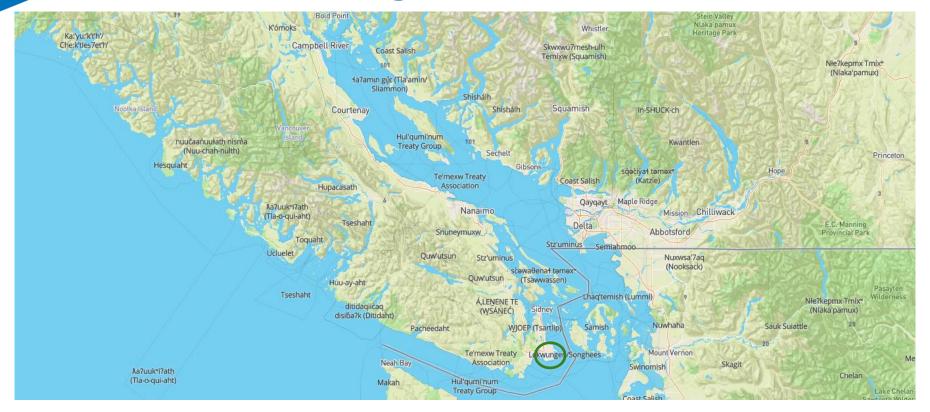








Land acknowledgement

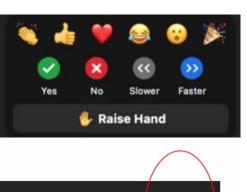


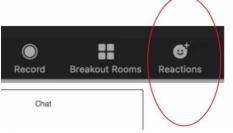
Today's session

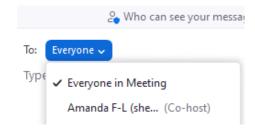
- This webinar will be in English and includes three presentations with Q&A at the end, 90mins total.
- The presentation components will be recorded, not the Q&A. Links to the recording and presentation slides will be sent via email.
- We invite your feedback about today's session.
 A survey link will be shared in the Chat box and via email.
- To receive persons with lived/living experience honorariums, please email capecopcoord@uvic.ca



- Use the chat box or Q&A tool to submit a question at any time.
- 'raise hand' during Q&A segment. The moderator may ask you to unmute to pose your question.
- The moderator may read aloud questions typed in the chat or Q&A tool.
- ➤ Technical difficulties?
 Please message us in the chat.







Presenters

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Dr Wulf Livingston, Professor of Alcohol Studies, Wrexham University, Wales



Why Pricing and Why MUP?

Powerful policy lever for impacting consumption and a range of harms

- Decrease affordability and decrease demand
- Minimum prices set a floor price below which a specific <u>volume of a</u>
 <u>beverage</u> or <u>volume of alcohol</u> (e.g. a unit or standard drink) cannot be sold.
- Revenue generation, cost recovery (within a monopoly), targeted policy (products and drinkers)
- Min prices increase the price of the cheapest alcohol and thus are particularly effective in targeting heavier drinkers



Minimum pricing in CAPE (2022)

Provinces and territories were assessed on whether minimum prices for onpremise sales (restaurants/bars) and off-premise sales (retail stores) were:

- applied to all alcohol sold (e.g. all beverage types, all sales outlets, no exemptions/exceptions)
- set at an ideal level*
- automatically indexed to inflation each year
- are based on the alcohol content of the beverage (i.e. MUP)

The ideal/best practice policy being indexed minimum unit pricing (iMUP)

*Off premise = \$1.83 (2021); \$2.12 (2025) On premise = \$3.66 (2021); \$4.24 (2025)



Minimum pricing in CAPE (2022)

Table 2: Minimum Prices for Alcohol

	Off-premi	Off-premise (ideal of \$1.83')				On-premise (ideal of \$3.66*)			
	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Coolers	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Coolers	
ВС	\$1.35	\$1.03	\$1.37	\$1.12	\$2.76**	\$3.45	\$5.18	\$2.47	
AB	None	None	None	None	\$2.01	\$1.76	\$4.32	\$1.98	
SK	\$1.52	\$1.45	\$1.38	\$1.28	\$1.92	\$1.68	\$3.38	\$1.61	
МВ	\$1.44	\$1.34	\$1.34	\$1.34	\$2.25	\$2.16	\$3.38	\$1.61	
ON	\$1.06	\$1.54	\$1.63	\$1.30	\$2.00	\$1.92	\$1.97	\$1.43	
QC	\$1.49***	None	None	\$1.02****	None	None	None	None	
NB	\$1.32	\$1.29	\$1.10	\$1.67	\$1.27	\$1.73	\$2.16	\$3.10	
NS	\$1.82	\$2.00	\$1.48	\$1.96	\$2.40	\$2.40	\$3.67	\$1.72	
PE	\$2.33	\$2.14	\$1.59	\$2.06	\$2.15	\$3.50	\$3.50	\$2.50	
NL	\$1.71	\$1.72	\$1.47	\$2.12	\$1.65	\$1.91	\$2.34	\$1.13	
ΥT	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	
NT	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	
NU	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	

price per standard drink for a common container size and beverage strength, expressed in 2021 dollars.

[&]quot;for draft beer in serving sizes greater than 1.42 L (50oz)

^{***}Products sold in grocery stores only.

^{****}Malt-based coolers only.



Minimum Unit Pricing for alcohol

The international evidence

Colin Angus Sheffield Addictions Research Group 24/03/25

Minimum Unit Pricing 101

What is Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP)?

- A **Minimum Unit Price** is a 'floor price' that sets a minimum price level below which a fixed volume of alcohol (e.g. a unit) cannot be sold
- This is a specific version of a more general **Minimum Price** policy, where the floor price refers to a fixed volume of product, not alcohol (as implemented in Canada)
- A 'banded' Minimum Price policy, as implemented in some Canadian states is closer to MUP, but still doesn't directly tie the floor price to the alcohol content

MUP: the theory

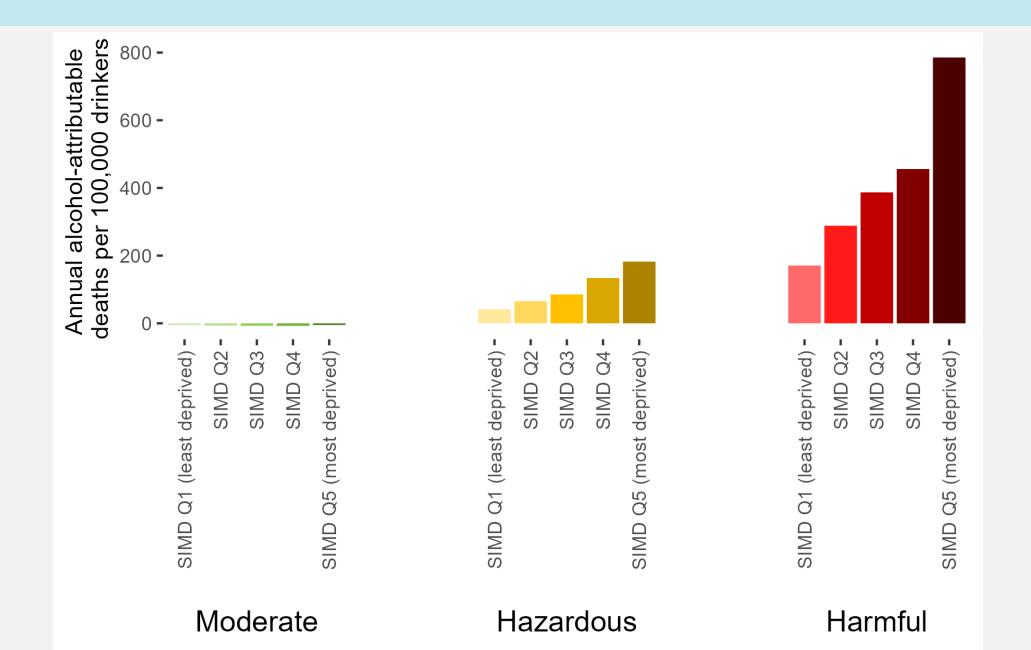
Why should it work?

- We know that increasing prices is one of the most effective methods of reducing alcohol consumption
- MUP only affects the price of the cheapest alcohol...
- ...with a bigger impact on the very cheapest products
- So we would expect MUP to lead to reductions in consumption among people drinking cheap alcohol...
- ...while having little or no impact on people buying more expensive alcohol
- This is in contrast to the impact of tax increases, which generally affect all alcohol to a similar extent

Who buys the cheap alcohol?

- Heavier drinkers are much more likely to buy alcohol from shops, rather than in pubs and bars
- Even within shop-bought alcohol, heavier drinkers consistently pay lower prices through a combination of choosing cheaper products and volume discounts
- Lower income drinkers also pay lower prices on average than higher income drinkers, however the price gradient across income groups is typically shallower than across drinker groups...
- ...and the heaviest drinkers from on the lowest incomes pay the lowest prices of all

Who suffers the alcohol harm?



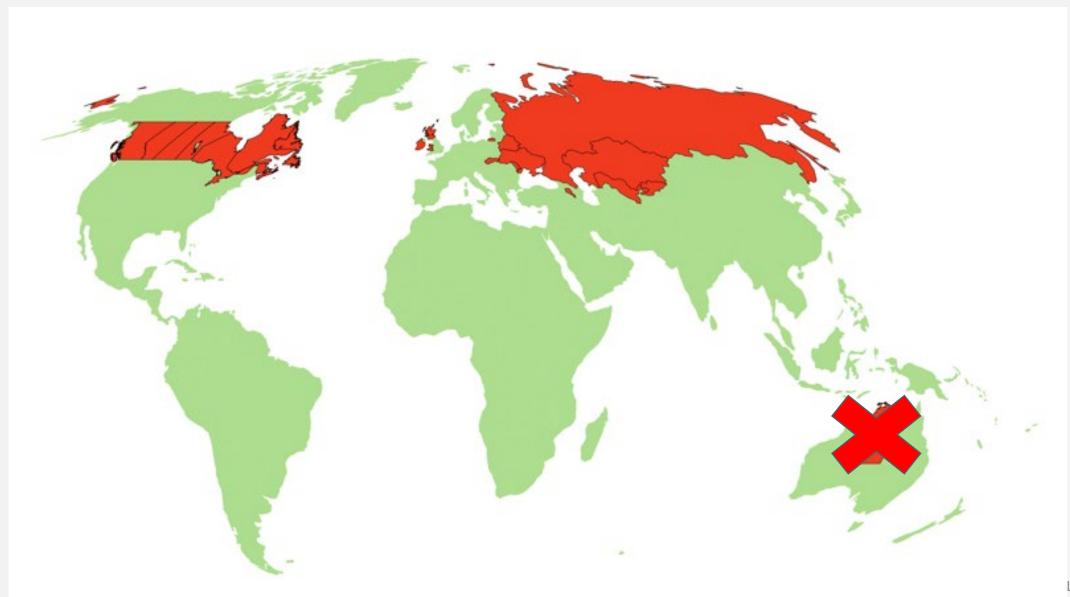
A silver bullet?

So, MUP should be a targeted approach, using alcohol prices, which we know to be an effective tool for reducing alcohol consumption and harm, which should have the biggest impact on heavier drinkers, while not "penalising" moderate drinkers and which should reduce health inequalities



MUP: the history

Who has MUP?



Minimum Pricing around the world

- Canada has a long history of Minimum Pricing (in some cases banded Minimum Pricing)
- Russia and many former Soviet nations have had forms of Minimum Pricing since the 2000's and 2010's
- These were either Minimum Prices (not Minimum Unit Prices), or only affected some products (e.g. spirits)
- Armenia and Scotland were the first countries to introduce a comprehensive Minimum Unit Price that affects all alcohol in early 2018
- Subsequently Australia's Northern Territory (2018), Wales (2020) and the Republic of Ireland (2022) have followed suit

Minimum Pricing in the UK & Ireland



Minimum Pricing in the UK & Ireland



All MUPs are not created equal

- The impact of an MUP depends on the distribution of prices and the level of the MUP
- Prior to MUP being introduced, 44% of off-trade alcohol in Scotland was being sold for less than the MUP level
- In Australia's Northern Territory the figure was 19%
- In Ireland it was likely much higher (around 80%)
- But while Scotland and Wales had white cider and Australia had cask wine that were regularly sold well below the level at which MUP was introduced, Ireland didn't have any one alcoholic product that was clearly cheaper than others...
- ...as a result Ireland's MUP raised the price of many products by a relatively smaller amount, while Scotland's raised the price of some products by a lot.

MUP vs. pubs



- Canada is the only country that has implemented separate, higher, minimum prices for the on-trade
- In all other countries that have implemented minimum prices, although the minimum price does apply in the on-trade, the price threshold is set at a level such that it will have essentially no impact on on-trade sales
- In the UK at least, this is a feature, not a bug

MUP: the reality

Scotland's MUP evaluation

40+ separate research studies

Some directly commissioned by Scottish Government, some conducted independently

Wide range of methodologies

Examining a *very* broad range of outcomes

Informed by a detailed theory of change



The market response to MUP

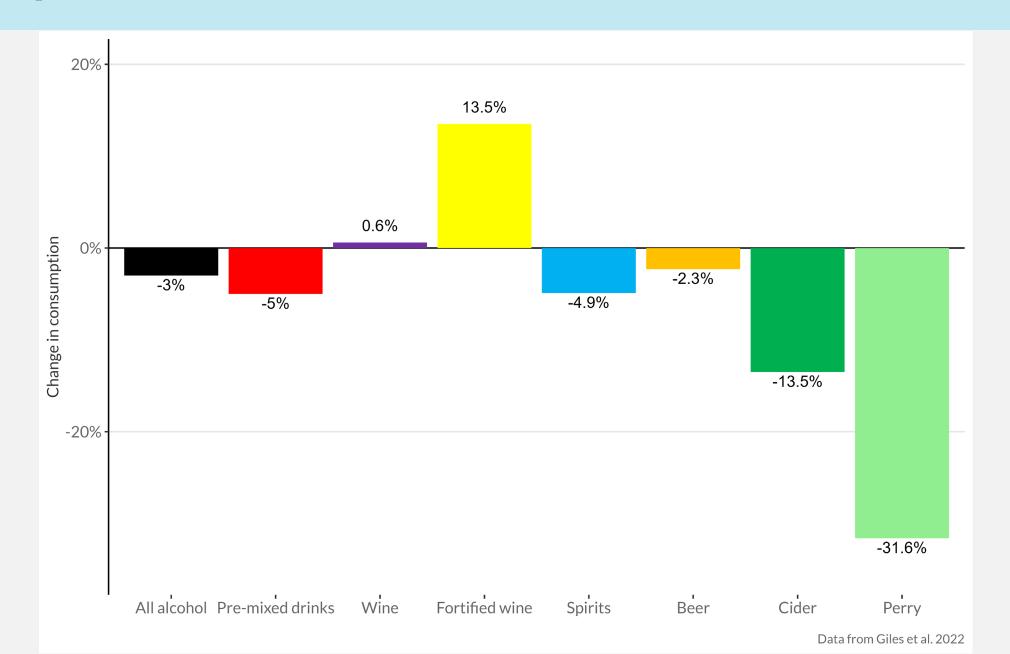
 Compliance with MUP was very good, with strong qualitative and quantitative evidence that alcohol was not being sold below 50p/unit after MUP was introduced



The market response to MUP

- Compliance with MUP was very good, with strong qualitative and quantitative evidence that alcohol was not being sold below 50p/unit after MUP was introduced
- There was some evidence of market response through lower ABV versions of some products being launched
- Some products were also packaged in smaller containers and many retailers stopped stocking large bottles of high-strength white cider altogether
- Some evidence from interviews with industry that we didn't see more change in product ranges as Scotland is a relatively small market, so not cost-effective to develop products specifically for it

The impact on alcohol sales



Who reduced their drinking?

- 21 separate studies across the evaluation looked at alcohol consumption to some extent
- This is excellent for a scientist like me who always wants more data...
- ...but less good for public health messaging, as there were inevitably some conflicting findings





Who reduced their drinking?

- 21 separate studies across the evaluation looked at alcohol consumption to some extent
- This is *excellent* for a scientist like me who always wants more data...
- ...but less good for public health messaging, as there were inevitably some conflicting findings
- Overall the evidence suggests that heavier drinkers reduced their consumption more than lighter drinkers, but is less clear about whether the heaviest drinkers in the surveys reduced their drinking
- Separate studies focusing on people engaged with alcohol treatment services found no consistent evidence that they had reduced their drinking

The impact on health

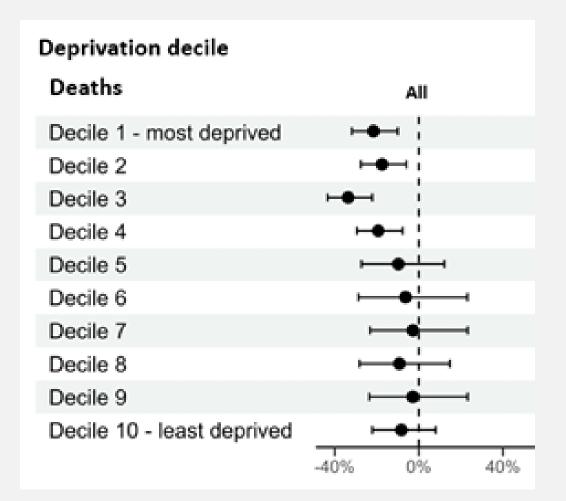
- The primary evaluation study found a 13.4% reduction in alcohol-specific deaths and a 4.1% reduction alcoholspecific hospital admissions
- These correspond to 156 fewer deaths and 411 fewer admissions every year
- These results were impressively robust to various alternative assumptions
- These was less certainty around the impact on conditions where alcohol is just one of many risk factors, but in total the best estimate was 268 fewer deaths and 899 fewer hospital admissions overall each year



Whose health improved?

Reductions in alcohol-specific deaths were slightly larger for:

- men (-14.8%)
- the over 65s (-26.7%)
- the most deprived 4 deciles



Not all health outcomes improved

Separate studies looking at:

- Alcohol-related ambulance callouts
- Prescriptions for the treatment of alcohol dependence
- Emergency department attendance
- Level of self-reported dependence or health among drinkers engaging with alcohol treatment

All found no clear evidence of any impact (positive or negative) of the introduction of MUP

Limited impact on other outcomes

- No clear evidence of a change in police callouts or crime
- Conflicting and inconclusive evidence on road traffic accidents
- No clear evidence of an impact on food purchasing or diet, although some evidence of a reduction in overall sugar consumption in more deprived households, due to reduced alcohol intake

Impacts on the alcohol industry

- No clear evidence of lost jobs or other negative impacts on the alcohol industry
- The overall fall in sales volume was more than offset by the increase in sales value...
- ...however there were winners and losers
- E.g. some small shop owners felt the policy had 'levelled the playing field' with major supermarkets in relation to the price of alcohol, which had benefitted them

Other potential side effects of MUP

- Evidence of increased cross-border purchasing was very limited and almost entirely limited to those living near to the border
- No clear evidence on negative impacts on children, either through their own drinking, or the drinking of others (e.g. family members)
- And, the public broadly support the policy, and that support increased after it was introduced

In summary

- MUP matched or exceeded pre-implementation expectations on the key outcomes alcohol consumption and alcohol-attributable deaths
- In spite of looking pretty hard, evidence of negative impacts of MUP was extremely limited...
- ...with the exception of the financial impact on some vulnerable drinkers with alcohol dependence

Key challenges to MUP

Challenges to MUP

- The evidence from Scotland has demonstrated the misplaced nature of many of the original criticisms of MUP (it will lead people to switch to illicit drugs, it will destroy the alcohol industry etc. etc.)
- However, there are some important challenges that remain

Challenges to MUP

"It's a tax on the poor"

- MUP is more directly targeted at heavier drinkers than poorer drinkers (and many of those on lower incomes drink very little, if at all)
- But, there are substantial inequalities in alcohol harm
- If you want to reduce those, then you have to reduce alcohol consumption in more deprived groups
- MUP is much more effectively targeted at heavier drinkers on lower incomes than tax increases

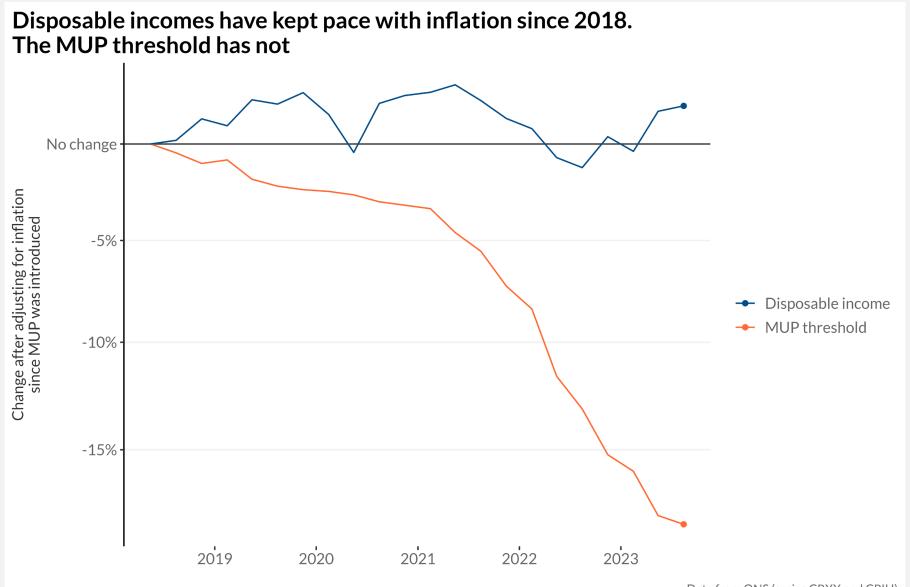
Challenges to MUP

"The extra money just goes to the alcohol industry"

- The introduction of MUP has increased spending on alcohol in Scotland
- The vast majority of this increase has gone to alcohol producers and retailers (who
 may well invest it in things that have a negative impact on public health), not the
 government
- This could be mitigated by increasing alcohol taxes alongside MUP
- Or with more innovative solutions (e.g. a levy on alcohol producers/retailers or a 'minimum excise tax')

Where next?

MUP vs. inflation



Inflation

- We estimate that alcohol consumption in Scotland is 2.2% higher as a result of this
 erosion in the effective value of the MUP threshold, compared to if it had been
 increased in line with inflation since its introduction
- The MUP level would be 61p/unit today if it had been increased in line with inflation to have the same real-terms value as when it was introduced
- So while Scotland's increase to 65p/unit may seem large, it's barely keeping pace with inflation, and leaving the threshold at 50p would have risked allowing the policy's positive impacts to 'wither on the vine'



Wales: An example of implementing. Minimum Price for Alcohol: Wales

WulfLivingston

CAPEWebinar

March 24-2025

Prifysgol Wrecsam Wrexham University

Overview of ground covered

- Wales: how does it compare to rest of British Isles (United Kingdom and Eire)
- MUP Story in Wales; implementation, evaluation and conclusions (the positive bits)
- A focus on some of the qualitative findings (including the difficult bit)
- Recommendations (Government and service providers)
- Personal reflection (10 years of evaluating this policy)



UK	(Aug 2023/Feb 2025) Differentiated tax/duty rates by abv bands and for draught		
	Retailers' operation across the devolved boundaries.		
England	No intention to introduce MPA		[More overt influence of alcohol industry on policy
			makers –McCambridge et al]
Northern Ireland	Intent to	tbc	Stand alone legislation. – licensing and availability
	introduce		restrictions devolved to Westminster (UK) government
	Oct 2024		(more complex overlaps UK/Brexit/Ireland)
Wales	Sunset clause –	50 ppu unit being	Stand alone legislation. – licensing and availability
	March 2026	reviewed	restrictions devolved to Westminster (UK) government
Scotland	MPA – actively	65 ppu	Public Health legalisation includes – licensing and
	renewed		availability restrictions
Eire	MPA – Jan 2022	Equivalent of 70 ppu	Public Health legalisation includes – licensing and
			availability restrictions W

The Welsh difference - even terminology

Minimum Pricing for Alcohol

- (i) used to refer to the policy of setting a minimum price for alcohol
- (ii) Shorthand reference to Welsh Government Policy differentiate from Scotland

Minimum Unit Price

- (i) a minimum price level set per unit which is used as a mechanism of minimum pricing for alcohol
- (ii) Shorthand reference to Scottish Government Policy, routinely referred to as MUP



Welsh [Implementation and Evaluation] Complications

- Implementation March 2020 and Lockdown
- Covid 19 impact on behaviour, consumption, incomes, availability
- Affordability cost of living 'crisis', inflation, state benefit cuts
- Shadow of Scotland
- Smaller evaluation fund, activity, government office
- Limited policy levers for effect/potentially smaller effect
- Longer period since first modelling of 50ppu
- [Natural experiment with England]



Evaluation

- Overall approach Contribution Analysis
- 1 x pre implementation study (focus on switching)
- 4 x longitudinal studies (overview, general population, treatment population and retailers)
- 1 x Covid impact study (general population)
- 1x Public Attitudes study
- 13 published reports (+ some journal articles)
- Final Reports published 15/01/2025



Key Findings (1)

- Implementation smooth: retailer compliance and effective enforcement
- Cheapest alcohol products essentially disappeared –most notably strong cider
- Shifts if promotions (multibuys) some temporary
- Shifts in products (size, availability) some temporary
- Some evidence of decline in purchasing as proxy for consumption
- Evidence of some shift from ciders to wine and spirits.



Key Findings (2)

- Concerns about negative consequences (i. crime/shop lifting, ii. switch to heroin/other drugs, iii. cross border shopping/white van sales) largely unrealised
- Strong resonance with Scottish evaluation outcomes; important in context of timing and evaluation
- AND those on low incomes, experienced further struggles in financially maintaining their drinking habits [next slide].



The picked-up bit: 'tax on the poor'

- Qualitative data the difficulties for low-income dependent drinkers.
- Difficultly in maintaining affordability frequent echoed
- Extension of existing coping mechanisms
- Key response –going without food, goods and not paying bills
- Some expressions of shoplifting
- Switching to drug use only for those already using drugs
- Hard to delineate in tales what is MPA, and what is other factors
- In the nuance a sense of some reduction, but not a change in dependency



Recommendations - Welsh Government

- Retain the policy measure especially in context of devolution
- To maintain value/counter inflation price should rise
- Need to continue to communicate effectively about the policy
- Pay attention to effect on on certain populations and the required other policy
- Next steps must include continued evaluation/monitoring [maybe explicit populations]
- AND...inequality in health and social outcomes.



Recommendations - Service Providers

- Better communicate form Government on intent and impact of policy with services providing treatment support.
- Actively engage with the experiences of individuals and support services for financial support, housing, relationship advice, counselling, and referral into detox.
- Be clear in offering explicit harm reduction advice regarding the potential harms of switching from one alcohol product to another and/or to other substances.



More support than not

- Consistent dislike of the ultra cheap product
- Protecting future generations
- Belief in the evidence, the best buys
- Acknowledgement of need to reduce harms
- Welsh independence
- (a) unfair/tax on the poor (b) won't stop people drinking (c) Zombie policies, lipstick on the pig, Comical Ali, in the business of politics not evidence

Personal Reflections

- Understanding and value of methodology: Contribution Analysis.
 Accepting the messiness.
- The challenges of communicating the nuance
- 2015-2025; for some life is just getting tougher and the coping mechanism is increasingly attractive.
- The need for comprehensive policies; alcohol, injustice and treatment.
- Robin Davidson: Cautious of the Zealots (There are lobbyists on both sides)
- James Nicholls: The elephant in the room pleasure



Q&A



Thank you for attending!

Complete our 3min feedback survey:

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Health Canada | Santé Canada

Substance Use and Addictions Program | Programme sur l'usage et les dépendances aux substances



Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connection

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