

# The current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.

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## Summary of Target Material

Hello everybody. Thank you for attending, and welcome to this presentation. My colleagues and I will be discussing with you the research we have reviewed in the area of alcohol availability and its regulation. We will argue for the proposition that current alcohol restrictions and regulations in Ireland and elsewhere generally are sufficient. Before summarizing our reasons for supporting this proposition, the key principles, research findings, methodological weaknesses and strengths, and interpretations are introduced. We hope you enjoy the presentation, and maybe, like us, you may learn a little about the complexities of policy making along the way. Alcohol availability is ubiquitous in the public discourse and many argue that its widespread availability carries heavy consequences. The research reviewed in this presentation primarily attempts to get to the source of what causes both alcohol related crime, and illicit consumption by adolescents. Is it mere availability or is the problem more systemic?

In Norway, Sweden, and Finland, there has been a stark increase in the amount of alcohol consumption from 1990 to 2010 and various organizations have been trying to determine the driving factors. In Norway, it has increase by almost 50% and in Sweden, 20%. In Sweden, regardless of the increase in consumption, alcohol-related harms did not increase (Ramstedt, 2010). Contradictorily, in Finland, alcohol-related harms did increase in the same time period (Karlsson, Mäkelä, Österberg, & Tigerstedt, 2010). Strict alcohol policies can also result in political uproar. Protests in Turkey were recently staged against new stringent alcohol restrictions enacted by the predominately Islamic Turkish government. Affecting adolescents and adults alike, the bans prevent the serving of alcohol at concerts, festivals, receptions, and other such similar events. They also limit clientele to those over 24 when the

event is sponsored by a liquor company. These protests highlight the difficulty of implementing policy effectively (Akin, 2011).

A key discussion point in this debate is whether consumer demand drives alcohol supply, or whether supply drives consumption. As we shall see later on, there is also a third way in which can view this interaction between supplier and consumer in more dynamical terms (see Grunewald, 2008). For now, it is interesting to simply highlight the ways in which our drinking behaviour is shaped by the media. One large cross-cultural study (see video) reports an association between alcohol consumption in adolescents and the prevalence of drinking in movies they have recently watched. The positive association still held despite different cultural norms and policies between countries, and an impressive number of controls such as rebelliousness and peer drinking.

**Principles: The current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.**

*Those who want regulation.....*

*Politics*

The desire for an adjustment in the regulation of alcohol is based in part on the different political ideologies of paternalism and libertarianism. Paternalistic politics favor large governments and larger taxation in addition to strong social security networks and regulated markets. All of these are principles a paternalistic government would apply to the issue of alcohol and its availability. Advocates of paternalistic states fear that unregulated markets result in concentrations of power, monopolies, and inequality. So, as a caricature, paternalists would tend to favor strict regulation of the alcohol industry in an attempt stop unfair competition arising from monopolies and also to protect the people before industry. Paternalists claim taxes are a necessity for society to function. The classic argument is the “who would pay the roads” argument. However, in the process of taxing, the prices of alcohol

skyrocket. These taxes also support the A&E which regularly handles intoxicated men and women. If libertarianism was the prevailing ideology, the lack of taxation would result in cheaper alcohol. Would this foster greater levels of consumption? It can also be speculated that a reduction in the security net might even cause people to behave more responsibly and take less risks. Also, with this potential increase in consumption comes the fear of a threat of an increase in crime (which will be addressed at a later point in the presentation). This link, however, is still speculative.

### *Religion*

There are many religiously motivated beliefs about the consumption of alcohol. Bishops in the media have reported that the abuse of alcohol is not only one of societies major sins, but also a danger to oneself and others. For example, a front of page story of the daily mail claimed that increased alcohol usage has led to an increase in abortions; however, on closer scrutiny, the study the paper referenced made no such claims (see slides). This article was subsequently reposted on several popular Christian news websites. While many balk at such absolutist positions as those of zealous bishops, many would also draw a line at total relativism whereby right and wrong are subject wholly to cultural norms and perspectives. Sam Harris argues in the moral landscape that science can answer moral questions, thus freeing us from the relativism which turns a blind eye to humanitarian crimes such as the stoning of women in the Middle East. These debates on morality illustrate how difficult it is to negate starting values in policy making or science, in practice. Is it possible, without starting values, to take a side in the current proposition: “The current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.”

**Principles: The current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.**

*Those who want less regulation.....*

Libertarianism has opposing views the regulation of alcohol, and most other commodities and services also. Libertarianism stresses that people and complex systems such as the economy function best when left to their own devices, without the interference and nuisance associated with big government. Libertarians desire smaller governments which value individual freedoms, free markets, no taxation and little regulation. In so doing, this political ideology necessarily opposes the motion that alcohol should be regulated on any level. Fiscally, libertarians are similar to the conservatives. For example, both these ideologies might argue that while alcohol availability is associated with crime, the revenue collected covers the damage (see Heaton, 2012), and no personal freedoms need be violated in the process.

With an increase in prosperity alcohol consumption soared during the Celtic Tiger, an economic era of prosperity in which Ireland was characterised by a policy climate of neo liberals who were reluctant to accept the idea that the state should interfere with the alcohol market in an effort to prevent alcohol related problems (Butler, 2009). Treatment of alcohol problems is said to have become less moralistic and more client-oriented (e.g., Mäkelä et al., 1981, pp. 99–107). When competent adolescents become mature adults it becomes more difficult to argue for the primacy of political power over individuals right of self determination; however, power operates more successfully when subjects actively participate in the process of governance (Petersen & Lupton, 1996; Akinci, 2011). So the vital question is how do individuals control themselves (Hänninen & Karjalainen, 1997)? Laws based on paternalism are often considered to be an insult to personal dignity although some argue that coercion is justified in order to prevent us from harming one other. We have a personal responsibility to abstain from harmful substances which are addictive to us on the other hand the moderate use of certain substances can enhance the good life. Knowledge of the difference

between moderation and excess is something which can be achieved through wisdom and character excess and character according to (Boss, 2002).

Douglas Husak (n.d) argues that it is not the place of government to impose on citizens an ideal of human excellence, rather it is up to us to responsibly determine our own concept of the good life. Virtue requires us to seek the mean between excess and deficit (Boss, 2002). The doctrine of the mean calls for us to be know ourselves and our limitations and that we use our reason to establish where the mean is for ourselves between excess and deficit. While education, and responsible behaviour of the alcohol industry are all essential the government alongside its citizens have a mutual role to act responsibility if change is to happen (Marmot, 2004).

If we go outside of political ideology we do not have to look far to find examples of value systems where alcohol regulation is anathema to its credo. Nietzsche, the great immoralist, advocated a Dionysian life style –the god of wine- and quipped that frugality railed against this heavens. This could hardly be more different than denouncing alcohol as a sin. Of course, Nietzsche often made such statements merely to bring attention to a more pressing and super-ordinate belief; that their no facts, just interpretations. One might well come to a similar conclusion reading the research on alcohol.

### **Proposal**

“The current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.”

**Research: Yes, the current level of alcohol availability and regulation is apt.**

A dearth of research exists investigating the relationship between alcohol availability and crime. When evaluating the Governments role in the regulation of alcohol, crime is a critical outcome variable. A number of papers have delineated causal relationships for specific crimes

such as violent crime, economic crime, homicide (Gyimah-brempong, 2003) domestic violence (Gorman, Labouvie, Speer & Subaiya, 1998) and Heaton (2012) performed split a large data set of crimes into minor and major. The purpose of such studies is to inform policy makers and allow them to make informed decisions. As this presentation has already demonstrated, alcohol availability arouses intense interest in various groups, and often for different reasons— for example, political, economical, moral, or cultural. Government regulation is an issue which traditionally strikes fear in the heart of multi-national corporations, and therefore, the threat of lobbying groups and privately funded research is a clear and present danger. For this reason, studies on alcohol availability must be scrutinized with great care. Meta-analysis should be preferred and exclusion criteria and controlling variables should be considered before conclusions are accepted.

A meta-analysis conducted by Bryden, Roberts, McKee, and Petticrew (2011) described the relationship between alcohol availability and usage as inconclusive. Twenty-six were included in total. However, the multi-component design of this meta-analysis allowed for pin-pointing of specific components of availability which did show a general positive association towards availability and usage—these include higher outlet density and exposure to advertising in the local community, especially in adolescents. The exclusion criteria for this study excluded individual level characteristics such as demographics, genetics, family history of alcohol abuse, parental factors, social availability (alcohol in the home). Consequently, it cannot be determined if alcohol serves as a mere mediator of socioeconomically driven crime, or as a unilateral driver of crime in its own right. The inability of this meta-analysis to arrive at an effect size derives from the heterogeneity of the included studies. The difficulty of providing robust empirically-based conclusions means that principled arguments may be hard to deflect for policy makers.

To address these concerns of 'robustness' a study was conducted by Gyimah-Brempong and Racine (2006) which specifically addressed this issue. The study concluded that commonly used parametric analysis underestimates the relationship between alcohol availability. The authors conducted linear parametric and non-parametric analysis and then compared both methods in goodness of fit model. The non-parametric model explained twice as much variance with respect to availability and crime. This is due to the non-linear relationship of the *level* of availability on the affect of alcohol availability on crime. So for example, Gyimah-Brempong and Racine argue that crime rates accelerate when outlet density rises above the in a census tract. As a result, crime rates could be reduced by a redistribution of outlets. This would not be predicted by a linear model. The authors suggest that policy makers should charge higher taxes from people living in areas of high outlet density. However, this means charging higher taxes for those in poorer neighbourhoods. Considering the proven efficacy of marketing on alcohol usage (see Bryden, Roberts, McKee, and Petticrew, 2011) it may be considered unethical to extend large tax deductions to multinational corporations who spend that money on advertising their products in poor neighbourhoods while simultaneously charging higher tax to those poorer individuals who inevitably purchase those products.

A study by Reboussin, Song, and Wolfson (2011) investigated the clustering of underage alcohol consumption as well as other related offences. They reported that riding with a drink driver, attempting to purchase alcohol, and successfully attempting to purchase alcohol all significantly clustered in areas with higher densities of off-licences. It was found that a youth has a 37% increased risk of driving after drinking if a randomly selected youth from the same census tract has reported drink driving at some point in the past. To explain the clustering method in the author's own words; "The pair-ways odds ratio's (PWOR's) are therefore not merely a function of prevalence rates; areas with a lower rate of underage

drinking could have a higher degree of clustering” (Reboussin, Song, & Wolfson, 2011, p. 1547). This approach highlights the possible role of socioeconomic disadvantage in breeding anti-social normative behaviours such as underage drinking. This has been a limitation in previous research.

A study by Heaton (2012) studied the affect on crime of legalizing alcohol sales on Sunday in Virginia in 2004. The study estimated that the availability of alcohol on a Sunday increased minor crime by 5% and serious alcohol related crime by 10% interestingly, the study also estimated that the costs incurred from this crime where roughly similar to the extra revenue generated by the alcohol availability. Minor crime included crimes like being drunk and disorderly, driving under the influence and public order offenses and more serious crimes those such as fraud, weapons violations, assault and drug offenses. While it may seem impossible to monetize the cost of crime in terms of pain and suffering, economist’s do in fact attempt to do this. However, a seminal paper by Miller et al. (1996, as cited in Heaton, 2012) warns researchers to urge on the side of caution when making such appraisals. As an example, Heaton cites Cohen and Piquero (2009) who estimate... “that low-level public order crimes generate about \$500 per incident in total costs in 2007 dollars, with these costs essentially attributable to criminal justice costs. Such research, while limited, is necessary and no better methods are currently available to better inform policy makers in this area.

### **Research: No, the current level of alcohol availability and regulation is not apt**

We already discussed several macro-level predictors of alcohol related crime and general usage; for example, socio-demographic factors and density of alcohol outlets. However, these studies often omit ‘individual level’ characteristics such as genetics, parental roles, and social availability (available at home as opposed to off-licence density) from their analysis (see Bryden, Roberts, McKee, & Peticrew, 2011). The nascent field of social epidemiology

investigates the social factors that shape the population distribution of substance use behaviour (Galea et al, 2004). Research in this area indicates that alcohol usage may be associated with social factors such as socio-economic status. Social support has also been linked with a greater cessation of substance abuse more broadly (Galea et al, 2004). If individual level characteristics indeed drive alcohol consumption crime then it's hardly surprising that attempts at prohibition have been historically unsuccessful, with the exception of certain religiously adhered to prohibitions (O'Hara et al, 2007).

For research to inform public policy, its empirical findings must be supported by theory which allows for policy makers to shape the system in place. Grunewald (2008) argues that much of the research on alcohol availability and its usage is a simple restatement of the statistical findings; 'more outlets equals more usage'. Without a theory explaining the underlying mechanisms no meaningful cause and effect inferences can be made. For example, alcohol related crime in location x could be due to outlet density, but also an influx of people who had been drinking elsewhere. Grunewald (2008) proposes a dynamical perspective on the relationship between alcohol availability and crime, such that outlets respond to local demand with increasing fit as markets mature.

Over time, demand is saturated and outlets may need to increase demand by establishing niche markets such as wine outlets. In this way, for example, a 'violent bar' might appear in an area where there are violent drinkers. It would be wrong to say that violent bars (for example, a motorcycle bars with pictures of famous boxers hanging from the wall) cause violent drinking. It's a dynamic and interdependent system. Grunewald (2008) convincingly argues that the current literature is simplistic and static. We need to understand the reasons why outlets are more prevalent in some areas, and find the correct level if the system to intervene. Once again, research at the population level must account for individual

level characteristics (Rehm, Ashley & Dubois, 1997), and population level research must not treat the economic supply and demand cycle as static and unresponsive to local needs Grunewald.

Parent's permissiveness and attitudes are particularly influential in predicting both younger and older adolescence initiation and heavy alcohol consumption (Wagenaar & Perry, 1994; Jackson C., Henriksen L., Dickinson D, 1999). Given the vast amount of research which stresses the importance which parental psychosocial factors have on adolescence drinking behaviour research highlights the need of parents to realign their principles and values and take responsibility for their own behaviour and attitude towards alcohol. Literature provides evidence that it is no good preaching if you do not practice. An epidemiological study conducted by Komro et al. (2007) found, unsurprisingly, that parent and adolescent reports of parental provision of alcohol were associated with alcohol use in those adolescents. The paper concludes somewhat tautologically that giving alcohol to your children may be 'risky' because it leads to them drinking it.

While this study draws our attention to proximate causes of alcohol usage such as parental provisions, we must not forget that dynamic and contextual circumstances which may lead parents to judge such decisions favourably. The influence of parental modelling was found to be an extremely important factor in influencing youth alcohol consumption (Komro et al., 2007). The effects of parents non-verbal communication -what they did rather than what they said- has a significant impact on adolescences substance behaviour. Parental drinking also predicts the initiation of smoking (Enett et al, 2001). Research has shown that a vast majority of youth imitate their parents drinking behaviours. Parental practices have a significant impact on adolescents drinking behaviours; however, this conclusion does not therefore empirically support the primacy of parents in adolescent drinking behaviour. It is

ultimately ones subjective values which lead them to point towards any one point of the ecological cycle as the prime mover. Personal responsibility advocates –conservatives- will blame parents, and paternalists will sympathize with the tough decisions parents must make in certain difficult circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

The proposition that alcohol regulation is apt at its current level was argued for several reasons. More accurately, it is argued for because of the lack of reasons not do so. The research on alcohol and its associated outcomes is thick and heavy (Bryden, 2011; Gyimah-Brempong & Racine, 2006); however, few if any studies have moved beyond bare descriptives of statistical associations towards providing empirically verifiable theories of underlying mechanisms that might be useful in the brass tax world of policy making (Grunewald, 2008). Without cause and effect demonstrations linking alcohol availability and usage directly to adverse societal outcomes, it is unwise for the government to meddle with the existing economic ‘equilibrium’ by introducing new measures which could potentially upset the free-flow of supply and demand and cause a lot of unwelcome disturbance at the local level.

It seems likely, that as more sophisticated studies emerge, so too will more sophisticated perspectives on the complex aetiology of negative societal behaviour. It is unlikely that any one panacea (i.e. alcohol availability) will be the answer to explaining alcohol consumption and associated criminal behaviour. In the zero-sum game of human and economic interests it is likely that heuristical platitudes such as “personal responsibility” will continue to be bandied around the political arena rather the grimmer realities of social planning. While dichotomous arguments, such as libertarianism vs. paternalism are useful in

the dialectical sphere, it is unrealistic, even impossible, for any real state of governance to fit any one model exactly. The future of alcohol regulation will likely follow a similar course to the present day. Thus, while future research is desirable, there is no basis for altering current levels of alcohol regulation.

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