



‘Calling Time on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship in Ireland’

**Supporting a Ban on Alcohol Advertising in Ireland,
Protecting Children and Adolescents.**

A Policy Paper prepared by the
Faculty of Addiction Psychiatry
of the
Irish College of Psychiatrists

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“Calling time on alcohol advertising and sponsorship in Ireland”

“Supporting A Ban on Alcohol Advertising in Ireland, Protecting Children & Adolescents” – A Policy Paper Prepared By the Faculty of Addiction Psychiatry of the Irish College of Psychiatrists

Recommendation of the Irish College of Psychiatrists

It is the opinion of the Irish College of Psychiatrists, that particularly given the evidence of Adolescent alcohol-related harm, that the Republic of Ireland should ban all promotion of alcohol products.

Authorship

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Introduction

Irish people drink much more than their international counterparts in all age groups. The per capita alcohol consumption in the Republic of Ireland has risen by about 40% in the last 15 years. The health related consequences of alcohol use have also increased substantially (Mongan et al, 2007). It is estimated that alcohol is responsible for about 1500 deaths each year in Ireland (Department of Health & Children, 2004). Against this backdrop, the Irish College of Psychiatrists believe that the time has come to dramatically curtail promotion of alcohol products through advertising and sponsorship.

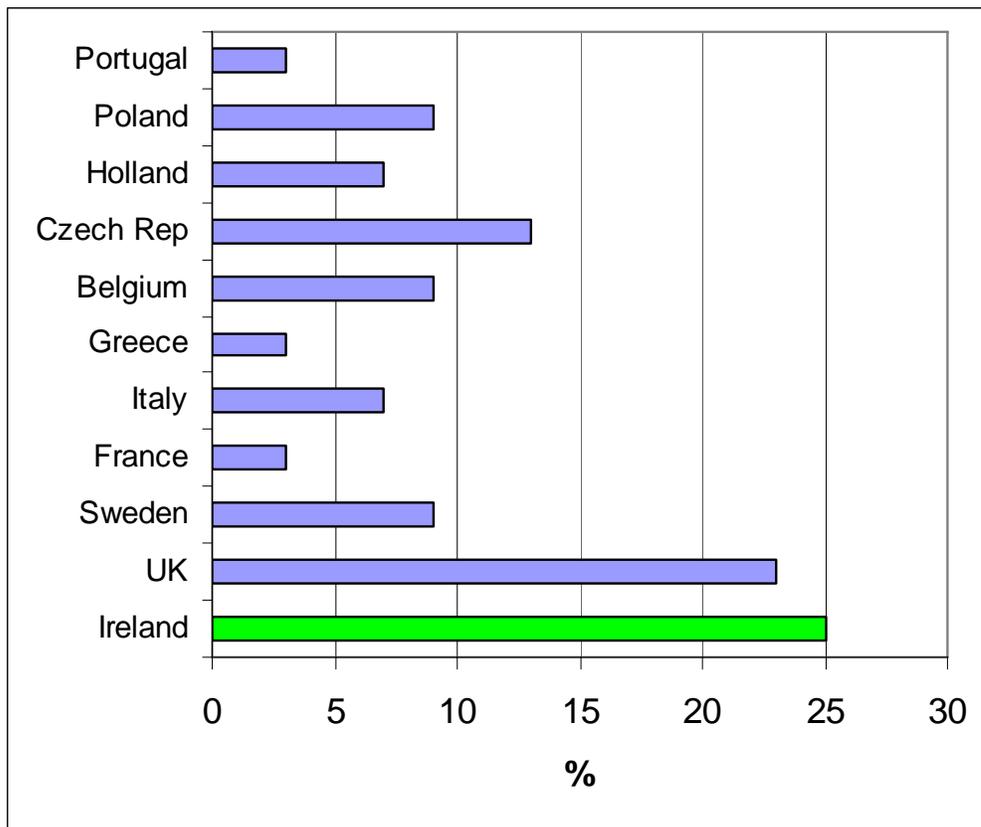
Adolescent Spend on Alcohol

A recent report, by the Office of Tobacco Control (2006) on spending by Irish children, revealed that the average spend by 16 & 17 year olds on alcohol is €20.9 per week. This translates as a total annual spend by Irish adolescents of 145 million euro. This illegal alcohol market is therefore larger in size than the total illegal market in Ireland for drugs such as heroin.

International Evidence of Adolescent alcohol-related harm

The international ESPAD survey of 15-16 year olds (Hibell et al, 2004) revealed that Irish school children demonstrate the highest rates of drunkenness in Europe as shown in Figure 1, with 25% reporting getting regularly drunk (i.e. at least three times per month). With the emerging scientific evidence of the harm which alcohol can do to the developing teenage brain, these levels of drunkenness by Irish children should cause great alarm. In the USA, where only 7% of 15-16 year olds report getting frequently drunk, the Surgeon General is so concerned by the problem, that he is leading an initiative to reduce teenage drinking to even lower levels (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Although there have been a number of reports on Alcohol related harms in Ireland, we have had little meaningful or effective action, the recommendations of reports being largely ignored.

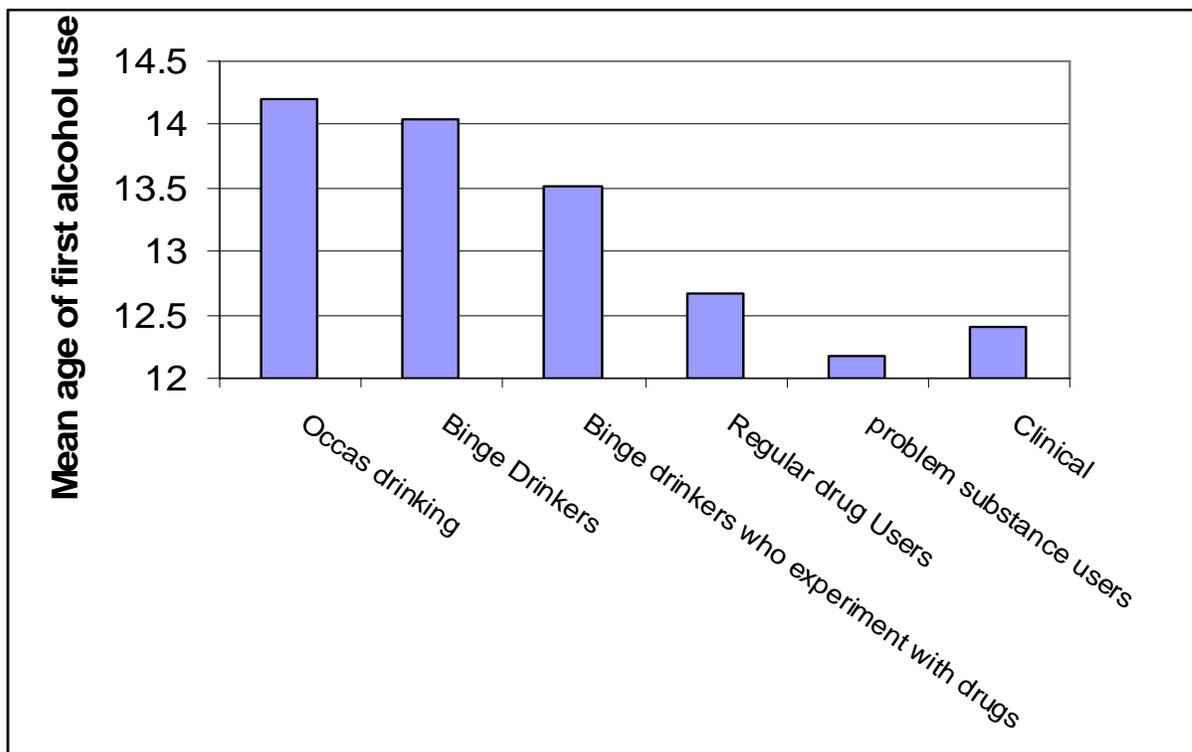
Figure 1. Proportion of children aged 15-16 reporting getting drunk three or more times in the past month (Hibell et al, 2004)



Irish Evidence of Adolescent alcohol-related harm

The average age of drinking initiation in Ireland is now just 13 years (Palmer & O'Reilly, 2008). This study found that earlier initiation into drinking predicted the level of substance abuse demonstrated by people aged 15-19 years (see Figure 2). This suggests that alcohol use in the early teens is acting as a 'gateway drug' into more extensive alcohol and drug abuse in the later teens. Hence, it should be public health policy in Ireland to delay initiation into drinking. With this goal in mind it makes sense to ensure that children are not exposed to promotion of alcohol.

Figure 2. Age of first drinking among 462 Irish people aged 15-19years, grouped by level of current alcohol and drug abuse (Palmer & O'Reilly, 2008)



Evidence of alcohol advertisements aimed at Adolescents

Unfortunately, Irish children are exposed to high levels of alcohol advertising and sponsorship. Irish research has proven that alcohol adverts are hugely popular among children and adolescents (Dring & Hope, 2001). Advertisements for alcohol were perceived by young people as promoting a desirable lifestyle. Typically adverts were seen to present alcohol users as physically fit, socially & sexually successful and great fun. Brain imaging research has found that teenagers with alcohol use disorders show greater brain activation in response to

alcohol advertisements, especially in areas linked to reward, desire and positive affect (Tapert et al, 2003). Recent lager adverts on Irish TV feature activities such as snow boarding and roller skating. These adverts are designed to capture the imagination of teenagers specifically, through use of youth orientated sporting activities.

Alcohol Advertising Guidelines

When benchmarked against the alcohol policies of other European countries, Ireland's response to alcohol abuse is seen to be very casual (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006). This laissez faire approach is best exemplified by the self regulatory guidelines produced by the Alcohol Marketing Monitoring Body. These are part of the self regulation guidelines agreed between the Alcohol and Advertising Industries and the Department of Health & Children. In Ireland, children aged 4-17 years account for just 20% of the population* (Census 2007). Consequently, a TV program which is equally attractive to both children and adults will have 20% child viewers. Children will only account for more than 20% of viewers if a program is selectively watched by children, relative to adults. Under the old guidelines it was permitted to advertise alcohol when up to 25% of viewers were children. When the guidelines were reviewed in 2005, the alcohol and advertising industries lobbied to have the threshold raised. The Department of Health & Children agreed to do this. The threshold was raised to 33% of child viewers. In view of the fact that children account for just 20% of the potential TV viewers, this threshold was set so high that it was meaningless. Following lobbying by concerned groups, this threshold has been reduced once again to 25% in June 2008. This figure seems to have been plucked out of the air for the purpose of 'being seen to do something'. At 25%, advertisers can continue to place adverts during programs which are selectively watched by children. The guidelines appear to be an exercise in public relations with the goal of allaying public concern, rather than the required public health intervention. In any case, continuation of advertising based on audience profiling will continue to expose hundreds of thousands of children to alcohol promotional material, whatever threshold is set.

Social partners concern about the current alcohol advertising guidelines

As part of the Sustaining Progress process, a working group was established to address alcohol related harm (Working Group on Alcohol Misuse, 2006). Most of the Social Partners agreed that the advertising regulations needed to become stricter and they proposed at 9pm watershed. This was opposed by the Business Pillar and bizarrely, by the Department of Health and Children. The result is that we continue with the situation whereby alcohol producers can advertise during programs which are more popular among children.

*For audience profiling purposes only people aged 4 years and above are included. Total Irish population aged 4 and above in 2006 census was 3997215. Of these, 793401 are aged 4 to 17 inclusive, representing 19.8% of the population aged 4 and above

Evidence against current guidelines with self regulation

Despite the largely meaningless restrictions on advertising, the self regulatory group monitoring compliance with the advertising threshold found multiple breaches of it, although it was predictably indifferent to these breaches (Alcohol Marketing Communications Monitoring Body, 2007). Although their report is titled “Limiting the Exposure of Young People to Alcohol Advertising”, the authors made no attempt to actually measure the exposure of young people to alcohol advertising. Again, this appears to be a public relations exercise in order to create the illusion that something is being done about the ongoing morbidity and mortality associated with alcohol abuse.

Alcohol Industry and the bias towards Adolescent alcohol use

A large proportion of our children are regular drinkers by the age of 15 or 16 (Hibell et al, 2004). There are about 50,000 children who get drunk every weekend in our country. We cannot expect the alcohol industry to be excessively concerned when so many Irish parents are permitting their own children’s use and abuse of alcohol. There are many good business reasons as to why the drinks industry seeks to target children in Ireland. It is important to establish brand loyalty early in the drinking career. Hence, companies who refuse to target children, on ethical or moral grounds, will lose out financially. Additionally, with an annual spend by Irish children on alcohol of 145 million euro each year, there are substantial profits to be made in Ireland’s child drinking market (Office of Tobacco Control, 2006). Research also tells us that teenagers who drink regularly are much more likely to become heavy drinking adults (Grant et al, 2006). Heavy drinking adults are better for business than adults who drink little. Hence, increasing the number of teenage drinkers generates profits now and also fosters profitability into the future. The motives for the drinks industry are therefore clear.

Media Alcohol Advertising and the bias towards Adolescent alcohol use

Alcohol advertising hampers honest debate about alcohol abuse in Ireland. As citizens we rely primarily on the media to inform us about the problems in our society. The alcohol industry provides an enormous amount of money to the media, through the huge spending on alcohol advertisement. The spend on alcohol advertising in Ireland was 69 million euro in 2007, a 31% increase on the previous year. As commercial enterprises in their own right, the TV and radio stations will not want to lose this substantial source of revenue. Given the amount of money involved it is also possible that editorial policy is influenced by a desire not to upset the drinks industry on how alcohol related stories are reported.

France and their ban on Alcohol Advertising

It is possible to change drinking habits across a country. In France, there has been a dramatic reduction in alcohol consumption, and in alcohol related harm, in the past 30 years, achieved through a combination of measures, which included severe restrictions on alcohol promotion (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006). The drinks industry has vigorously contested these advertising restrictions in a multitude of legal battles, but the right of the French Government to take measures to protect the health of its citizens has been upheld in the European Court (Rigaud & Craplet, 2004). As shown in Figure 1, adolescent drunkenness is now rare in France.

Conclusion

In summary, Irish children demonstrate very high rates of alcohol abuse. There is growing evidence that early initiation into alcohol use adversely affects brain development and increases the risk of later drug and alcohol abuse. The purpose of advertising is to promote consumption and Irish children are very fond of alcohol advertisements. Consequently, the Irish College of Psychiatrists believes that the Republic of Ireland should follow the lead given by France, a country with substantially lower rates of alcohol abuse, and ban all promotion of alcohol products.

Recommendation of the Irish College of Psychiatrists

It is the opinion of the Irish College of Psychiatrists, that particularly given the evidence of Adolescent alcohol-related harm, that the Republic of Ireland should ban all promotion of alcohol products.

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