



Alcohol Minimum Unit Pricing: Mythbuster

Is there any proof that MUP will actually work? Is it not just 'modelling'?

Evidence on the effect of minimum unit pricing comes from broadly two sources: observations from places that have introduced similar policies, and academic models, based on the best available evidence, simulating the likely effects of the policy. In Canada, where minimum pricing is in place, it has resulted in a reduction in the amount people drink,¹ with fewer hospital admissions and fewer alcohol-related deaths.² Detailed modelling of the effects of minimum unit pricing in Scotland has been produced by Sheffield University's School of Health and Related Research using their Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model (SAPM). This suggests that minimum pricing will save 58 lives in Scotland in year one, rising to 121 lives in year 20, as well as significantly reducing hospital admissions and crime. The most recent modelling, from April 2016, is available [here](#).

Surely price doesn't matter to people who are alcohol-dependent?

Evidence shows that even very heavy drinkers tend to adjust their alcohol consumption in response to price. The Sheffield modelling suggests that harmful drinkers (drinkers whose usual alcohol intake exceeds 50/35 units per week for men/women), will reduce their drinking by 7% or 246 units per year on average, roughly equivalent to 8 bottles of vodka or 25 bottles of wine.³ That would bring significant health benefits.

Minimum unit pricing will not only encourage those who already have alcohol problems to reduce how much they drink but will help prevent those of us at risk of developing problems in future from increasing our drinking.

Will people not just find other ways to get alcohol or turn to illegal drugs if the price goes up?

It has been suggested that dependent drinkers will find ways round price increases by turning to illicit alcohol, stealing, or by turning to illegal drugs, however, there is no real evidence to back this up. Research with a group of heavy drinkers that explored these scenarios indicated that there is no single response. Some individuals would employ a range of strategies to cope with a sudden increase in price of their alcohol; from reducing the amount they drink or changing what they drink, to borrowing money or taking the money for the alcohol from the household budget. Those who are not already using illegal drugs are unlikely to start doing so and potentially reducing their alcohol intake may reduce the likelihood that they will.⁴

What is important is that those with serious alcohol problems have access to appropriate services as and when they need them to support them in cutting down or stopping drinking.

Is this not just the nanny state telling people what to do?

No. People will still be free to make their own choices about how much they drink. But the reality is that alcohol consumption and harm in Scotland have doubled in Scotland since the 1980s,⁵ driven by alcohol being 60% cheaper today than 30 years ago.⁶ The Scottish Government has a duty to act to address the unacceptable situation where beer can be bought more cheaply than water. Every one of us is paying the price - regardless of whether we drink - whether as a family member, friend or colleague of someone with an alcohol problem; as a member of a community which feels unsafe due to alcohol-related crime; or as a tax payer paying for the NHS, social services and policing.

Is this not punishing the majority for the sake of a few who have a problem with alcohol?

No. In Scotland, one in four of us are drinking above the Chief Medical Officers' recommended limits⁷ and alcohol claims 24 lives each week.⁸ Drinking too much increases the risk of a range of health harms - including cancer, stroke and accidents - as well as creating social problems. Often it is people other than the drinker who feel the effects the most: children, family, friends, colleagues and workers in front line services like the NHS and police. Half of Scots report being harmed as a result of someone else's drinking, and more than 1 in 3 report having heavy drinkers in their lives.⁹ As a result of parental drinking, many children in Scotland have experienced physical abuse and violence, and a lack of care, support and protection.¹⁰ There is also a strong association between alcohol consumption and crime, especially violence. The total cost of alcohol harm to Scotland is estimated at £3.6 billion a year;¹¹ equivalent to £900 for every adult.

Moderate drinkers will spend only an additional £2 extra a year on alcohol under MUP.¹²

Is MUP not unfair to people living in poverty, who won't be able to afford to drink?

No. It is people in our poorest communities who suffer the effects of cheap, high strength alcohol the most, so they have the most to gain from minimum unit pricing. People in our poorest communities are currently suffering huge health inequalities from alcohol: they are 6 times more likely to die and 8 times more likely to be hospitalised due to alcohol than people in our most affluent communities.¹³ That's because people in our poorest communities who drink heavily tend to drink significantly more than heavy drinkers in more affluent communities¹⁴ and are more likely to have other compounding factors such as smoking, poor diet or general health issues.¹⁵ Around 46% of the lives that will be saved by minimum unit pricing will be amongst hazardous and harmful drinkers living in poverty, even though they only represent 2.6% of the Scottish population.¹⁶ Minimum price won't solve poverty but it is one of the few public health interventions which can reduce health inequalities.

Will MUP not lead to an increased demand for health services, and can our services cope?

Alcohol harm costs the NHS in Scotland an estimated £267 million each year,¹⁷ and is a significant drain on our hard-pressed public services. Reducing alcohol harm will greatly reduce this burden and help us to maintain high-quality, responsive, publicly-funded health services. With an ageing population and more complex and costly medical treatments, demand on our NHS is continuing to increase, making the need to prevent and reduce alcohol harm all the more pressing. MUP may prompt some people to seek support for their drinking who might not otherwise have done so but overall the policy will reduce pressure on public services by cutting the number of hospital admissions by nearly 1,300 in the first year alone.

Is MUP illegal?

No. The UK Supreme Court unanimously ruled, on 15th November 2017, that alcohol minimum pricing does not breach EU law, and that it is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

Wouldn't taxing alcohol be more effective/less intrusive?

No. Minimum pricing is particularly effective at reducing the amount of alcohol drunk by harmful drinkers as they tend to buy most of the cheap alcohol that is affected by minimum pricing. Using taxation as a price lever is less effective because some retailers can afford to absorb tax increases and consumers still pay cheap prices. In addition, taxation can't specifically target the cheapest alcohol in the same way that MUP can. The most effective approach would be minimum unit pricing combined with alcohol taxation based on alcohol content not - as it is currently - on categories of products.

Will MUP not just result in more profits for supermarkets and pubs?

The Scottish Government's modelling of the policy looked at the impact on revenue and predicted that – with a 50p per unit price – revenue to off-trade retailers (i.e. shops) would increase by £41m per annum, but would fall by £7m for on-trade retailers (i.e. pubs/clubs). Although this modelling estimates additional revenue for the industry as a whole, no-one knows where this additional revenue will end up along the supply chain. The monitoring and evaluation programme which has been put in place will look at the impact of MUP on the market. Some (including Alcohol Focus Scotland) have argued that if there is evidence that the industry makes additional profit from MUP, the government should look to recover this to pay for alcohol prevention and treatment through a new tax.

Will MUP not lead to job losses? For example, what about people working in the drinks industry?

Alcohol harm costs Scotland a staggering £3.6 billion each year.¹⁸ Tackling alcohol misuse will improve the economy not damage it.

It is difficult to estimate the impact of MUP specifically on jobs in the alcohol industry. Some producers consider that there could be job losses for companies heavily involved in own label production.¹⁹ However, it is likely that 'value' products will still be sold, although in reduced quantities.²⁰ An analysis of the Europe-wide alcohol market found no relationship between trends in employment in hotels, restaurants and catering (and bars) and alcohol consumption. In several countries (e.g. Italy) employment and consumption levels even went in opposite directions.²¹ The Sheffield Model also estimated that a minimum price of 50p per unit would reduce unemployment among harmful drinkers by 1,300 per year through their increased ability to participate in the workforce.²²

Will MUP mean you can no longer get alcohol in meal deals, or using discount coupons and reward cards?

Businesses can continue to run promotions (as long as they are not classed as irresponsible promotions) provided that the minimum price of the alcoholic product in question is included in the overall price of the promotion. For example, where a supermarket offers a meal deal that includes a bottle of wine with an ABV of 12.5%, the total cost of the meal deal must not be below the minimum price of the wine (i.e. £4.69). Reward cards can continue to be used to buy alcohol provided that the points redeemed have an equivalent cash value that is not below the minimum price of the alcoholic product. Similarly, discount coupons can still be used for alcohol, provided that the price of the product, after all applicable discounts are applied, does not fall below the minimum price of the product.

Will people not just buy their alcohol online or using 'click-and-collect' to get round MUP?

It has been suggested that online sales and services like 'click-and-collect' will not be covered by MUP. However, MUP will apply to all sales of alcohol that take place within Scotland. This means that if alcohol is purchased online and despatched from within Scotland – for example as part of a weekly shop – then MUP will still apply. In relation to 'click and collect', these facilities are acting as a post box/collection point rather than a despatch point; the point of despatch would be where the goods have been despatched from to the 'click and collect' facilities. If alcohol is purchased online in Scotland but despatched from outwith Scotland (whether that be the rest of the UK or internationally), then minimum pricing will not apply. However, the Scottish Government believes that the type of alcohol typically bought over the internet is unlikely to be affected by MUP,²³ and it is highly unlikely that any supermarkets will make home-deliveries of alcohol across the border.

In addition, Wales is already following Scotland's lead on MUP, whilst the UK government is under increasing pressure to replicate the Scottish legislation. This means that it may well not be long before MUP applies across much of the UK.

¹ Stockwell T, Auld MC, Zhao J et al (2012) *Does minimum pricing reduce alcohol consumption? The experience of a Canadian province*. *Addiction* 107 (5): 912-920

² Stockwell T, Zhao J, Martin G et al (2013) *Minimum Alcohol Prices and Outlet Densities in British Columbia, Canada: Estimated Impacts on Alcohol-Attributable Hospital Admissions* *Am J Public Health*. 103:2014–2020. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301289

³ Angus, C., Holmes, J., Pryce, R., Meier, P. & Brennan, P. (2016). *Model-based appraisal of the comparative impact of Minimum Unit Pricing and taxation policies in Scotland An adaptation of the Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model version 3*. ScHARR, University of Sheffield, https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.5653731/file/Scotland_report_2016.pdf

⁴ Ludbrook A, *Asking the Right Questions about Substitution and Complementarity: A Comment on Moore's Paper*, *Alcohol and Alcoholism* Vol. 45, No. 5, pp. 412–413, 2010

⁵ Alcohol deaths rates are double those in the 1980s: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/vital-events/deaths/alcohol-related-deaths/main-points>

⁶ NHS Digital (2017). *Statistics on Alcohol*. Available at <http://www.content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB23940/alc-eng-2017-rep.pdf>

⁷ Bardsley, D. et al (2017). *The Scottish Health Survey 2016 Edition, Volume 1, Main Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

⁸ National Records of Scotland (2017). *Alcohol-Related Deaths in Scotland, 1970-2016*. Edinburgh: National Records of Scotland.

⁹ Hope, A., Curran, J., Bell, G. & Platts, A. (2013). *Unrecognised and under-reported: the impact of alcohol on people other than the drinker in Scotland*. Glasgow, Scotland: Alcohol Focus Scotland.

¹⁰ Wales, A. & Gillan, E. (2009). *Untold Damage: Children accounts of living with harmful parental drinking*. Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP), Edinburgh and Child-line, Glasgow.

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- ¹¹ York Health Economics Consortium, University of York (2010), *The Societal Cost of Alcohol Misuse in Scotland for 2007*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research
- ¹² Angus, C. et al (2016), op cit.
- ¹³ Alcohol Focus Scotland and the Centre for Research on Environment, Society and Health (CRESH) (2018). *Alcohol Outlet Availability and Harm in Scotland*. Glasgow: Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ¹⁴ Bardsley, D. et al (2017). *The Scottish Health Survey 2016 Edition, Volume 1, Main Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- ¹⁵ Angus, C. (2017), op cit.
- ¹⁶ Angus, C. (2017). Why minimum unit pricing is not a tax on the poor. Institute for Alcohol Studies
<http://www.ias.org.uk/Blog/Why-minimum-unit-pricing-is-not-a-tax-on-the-poor.aspx>
- ¹⁷ York Health Economics Consortium, University of York (2010), *The Societal Cost of Alcohol Misuse in Scotland for 2007*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research
- ¹⁸ York Health Economics Consortium, University of York (2010), *The Societal Cost of Alcohol Misuse in Scotland for 2007*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research
- ¹⁹ The Scottish Government (2018). *Final Business and Regulatory Impact Assessment Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 - The Alcohol (Minimum Price per Unit) (Scotland) Order 2018*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government
- ²⁰ The Scottish Government (2018). *Final Business and Regulatory Impact Assessment Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 - The Alcohol (Minimum Price per Unit) (Scotland) Order 2018*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government
- ²¹ Anderson, P. and Baumberg, B. (2006) *Alcohol in Europe*, London: Institute of Alcohol Studies
- ²² University of Sheffield (2012). *Model-Based Appraisal of Alcohol Minimum Pricing and Off-Licensed Trade Discount Bans in Scotland Using the Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model (V 2):- Second Update Based On Newly Available Data*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield
- ²³ The Scottish Government (2018). *Final Business and Regulatory Impact Assessment Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act 2012 - The Alcohol (Minimum Price per Unit) (Scotland) Order 2018*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government