

Two Years On: MUP Mythbuster

May 2020

'People are just swapping their drinks - they were drinking cider, now they're drinking stronger drinks like vodka and whisky.'

Evidence so far suggests changes in what people are drinking, with consumers switching to smaller packs, lower-alcohol, and more premium products. People are particularly moving away from buying large bottles of cheap, high-strength cider, which was an expected outcome of minimum unit pricing (MUP),¹ with many shops no longer stocking these products.

If those people are spending the same amount of money on other types of drinks, they will be consuming fewer units of alcohol. Sales data suggests that the number of units consumed has fallen since MUP was implemented.

'People are just switching to drinking Buckfast.'

Although sales of all fortified wine rose in the year following the implementation of MUP, Buckfast sales were rising in Scotland before minimum unit pricing and the price of Buckfast has been unaffected by MUP as it was already above 50p per unit. Buckfast sales represent only a very small percentage of overall alcohol sales in Scotland and people who drink Buckfast are likely to be drinking other alcohol products too. The impact of alcohol on people's health and well-being is linked to how much they are drinking, not what they are drinking.

'MUP isn't working because we aren't seeing the promised reduction of 58 fewer deaths and 1,299 fewer hospitalisations after the first year'

Modelling by Sheffield University in 2016 estimated that in the first year alone, MUP would result in 58 fewer deaths and 1,299 fewer hospitalisations.² While we haven't yet seen any change in the overall rate of deaths or hospitalisations from alcohol following MUP, this is not overly concerning. The annual statistics on alcohol-specific deaths only report around one third of all deaths caused by alcohol (they count deaths from conditions that are *only* caused by alcohol, such as alcoholic liver disease and alcohol poisoning). The Sheffield modelling therefore provides a fuller picture of the lives expected to be saved by MUP, including those from strokes or cancers caused by alcohol consumption, than the national statistic actually measures.

Interestingly, although overall hospital admissions have not gone down, there are some positive signs that the number of people admitted due to alcoholic liver disease has decreased since MUP was introduced – particularly amongst people living in our poorer communities. This is important because people in our more deprived communities suffer the greatest harm.

The impact of MUP on death and hospitalisation rates will also increase over time, as the effects of reduced consumption will lag behind changes in consumption. Some of the health harms caused by alcohol consumption – such as cancers – can develop over ten years or more. Results reported so far on the impact of the policy on alcohol consumption are promising; in the year following MUP's implementation, consumption reduced by over 3.6%, compared to a 3.2% increase in England and Wales.³

'MUP punishes moderate drinkers for the excessive drinking of a few.'

Moderate drinkers don't tend to drink the cheapest, strongest alcohol like white ciders and own-brand spirits that are most affected by this policy. The effect on moderate drinkers is therefore quite small - it is estimated they will spend just an extra £2 per year on average.⁴ This is a small price to pay for a policy that will save hundreds of lives and improve thousands more.

'MUP is unfair to people living in poverty, who aren't able to afford to drink now.'

No. It is people in our poorest communities who suffer the worst effects of cheap, high-strength alcohol, so they have the most to gain from minimum unit pricing. Around 46% of the lives that are expected to be saved by minimum unit pricing will be amongst hazardous and harmful drinkers living in poverty.⁴

People in these communities are currently suffering huge health inequalities from alcohol: alcohol-specific death rates are seven times higher, and alcohol-related hospital stay rates are eight times higher, when compared to the most affluent communities.⁵ That's because people in our poorest communities who drink heavily tend to drink significantly more than heavy drinkers in more affluent communities⁶ and are more likely to have other compounding factors such as smoking, poor diet or general health issues.⁴

'Dependent drinkers can't cut down so they - and their children - will go without food.'

In some cases, household budgets may feel a strain, and we know that it's already a difficult time for many people financially. But we also know that even very heavy drinkers will change how much they are drinking in response to price increases. Research estimated that heavy drinkers would reduce their drinking by 7% per year on average as a result of MUP, bringing significant health benefits.⁴ Minimum unit pricing will not only encourage those who already have alcohol problems to reduce how much they drink but, importantly, it will help prevent those of us at risk of developing problems in future from increasing our drinking.

The MUP evaluation includes a study on the impact of the policy on heavy drinkers, so we will know more when the researchers report on this (expected 2020 and 2021).

'Dependent drinkers will just turn to other substances or drugs instead of alcohol if it is too expensive.'

A small number of individuals may use other substances, but the majority of people are more likely to be changing what they are drinking, or drinking less of what they were drinking before. We know that there has been an increasing trend in drug use over the past couple of years, which has pre-dated the introduction of MUP. It is important that help is available to support those with alcohol and/or drug problems to recover.

'People will steal the alcohol if they can't afford it now.'

This isn't true. The majority of people will respond by changing what they are drinking or how much they are drinking. No increase in theft has been reported.

'People are just buying alcohol online.'

Most alcohol bought online prior to MUP was already above the 50p minimum unit price. Supermarkets have complied and adjusted their website for sales in Scotland accordingly (any alcohol sold in Scotland must comply with minimum pricing laws).

'People are crossing the border to buy their booze, and some are cashing in by purchasing cheap alcohol in England and selling it up here.'

Evidence so far suggests that some people are crossing the border to buy cheaper alcohol, but there's no indication that this is happening on a large scale. In fact, it is thought that much of this activity predates MUP, and is linked to how people near the border live and work, and the fact that there were already differences in how alcohol can be sold in England as compared to Scotland (such as allowing multi-buy discounts).⁷

Those who are crossing the border to buy alcohol are doing so as part of their normal grocery shopping, with no evidence of bulk buying or 'white van' trips. Anyone selling alcohol in Scotland requires a licence and would be committing an offence to sell below the minimum unit price. Evaluation studies so far have found no evidence of increased illegal trade.

'MUP affects the price of a pint down the pub.'

The vast majority of alcoholic drinks in pubs and restaurants cost more than 50p per unit before the introduction of MUP so won't have changed under minimum pricing; in 2017 the average price per unit sold in the on-trade was £1.80 compared to 54p per unit in shops and supermarkets was.⁸ The impact on alcohol consumption and harm is expected to be significant however, as the majority (73%) of alcohol is bought from shops and supermarkets for consumption at home.⁸

'MUP will damage the Scotch whisky industry.'

According to the Scotch Whisky Association Scotch whisky topped UK exports in 2018, growing 7.8% in value terms to £4.7bn.⁹ Exports account for around 93% of whisky production meaning only around 7% of whisky is produced for sale within the UK.¹⁰ As only products sold in Scotland are subject to MUP there should be no damage to the Scotch whisky industry as a whole.

'The minimum unit price will never change.'

Due to inflation, the effectiveness of the 50p unit price may have declined in the eight years or so since the Parliament approved the MUP legislation. The Scottish Government have committed to reviewing the price after the second anniversary to ensure the benefits of MUP are fully realised.

For all the evidence reported so far, see [Evaluation and other evidence on the impact of Minimum Unit Pricing](#) briefing.

References

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- ¹⁰ BBC News (20 February 2017) Single malt Scotch whisky exports top £1bn for first time. Accessed 25/04/19 from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-39022740>