

# Briefing: Alcohol and Crime

January 2025

## Summary

- We welcome the publication of the **Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems' paper, *Alcohol (In)justice: Position on People with an Alcohol use Disorder in the Justice System***.
- Scotland's **prison and custody populations have a high prevalence of alcohol problems**.
- There is a **strong link between alcohol and violent crime**, with **availability of alcohol associated with higher levels of crime, domestic violence and homicide**.
- **Whole population interventions** are therefore vital in addition to **improving how the system approaches treatment and support for those in the justice system**.
- The widespread availability of alcohol in Scotland makes it easy to obtain and gives the message that drinking is a normal part of everyday life, despite the relationship between alcohol and crime. **We therefore call on the Scottish Government to introduce an updated national strategy to tackle alcohol-related harm**, incorporating measures to address areas including availability and pricing.

We welcome the publication of the **Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems' paper, *Alcohol (In)justice: Position on People with an Alcohol use Disorder in the Justice System***<sup>1</sup> and its recommendations for standards to be set for services in the justice setting. Research shows a strong link between alcohol and crime, with greater availability leading to a higher occurrence of violence and crime. It is therefore imperative that we aim to prevent alcohol-related crime through whole population interventions in addition to improving how the system approaches treatment and support for those currently affected. This is in line with action 20 set out in the **Scottish Government's Alcohol Framework 2018**:<sup>2</sup>

*"We will continue to work with partners to reduce alcohol-related violence and crime, through a combination of enforcing legislation, prevention work and early intervention activity"*

**Reducing alcohol consumption is key to violence prevention, due to the strong association between alcohol consumption and one's risk of becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence.**<sup>3</sup> As well as having a devastating impact on people's lives, alcohol-related crime is estimated to cost Scotland between £0.1 billion and £1.0 billion each year.<sup>4</sup> Those within the justice system are often disproportionately affected by health and socioeconomic disadvantages, including Adverse Childhood Experiences and mental health conditions.<sup>5</sup> Around **one-third of individuals lived with someone who was a problematic drinker during childhood**, highlighting the significant role that alcohol plays from an early age.<sup>5</sup>

*There is a strong link between alcohol availability and violent crime*

**Research has found a consistent relationship between alcohol availability and violence.**<sup>6</sup> **Alcohol availability** refers to the ease or convenience of obtaining alcohol. This includes the number and capacity of alcohol outlets in an area (both on-sales such as pubs and restaurants and off-sales such as supermarkets and shops) and opening hours of premises selling alcohol. In particular, the concentration of premises selling alcohol in an area (**'outlet density'**) is associated with higher levels of alcohol-related crime<sup>7</sup>. Research has shown that **violent crime is greater in areas with higher alcohol availability**, especially on-licensed premises.<sup>8</sup> Figures from 2019-20 indicate that **violence on strangers is most common**, accounting for 54% of alcohol-related violence reported in England and Wales.<sup>9</sup> In a study across 13 countries, women consistently **rated incidents of domestic violence as more severe where one or both partners had been drinking**.<sup>10</sup> The research has also shown a temporal relationship; **violence is much more likely to occur on days of drinking or after intoxication**.<sup>11</sup>

The **type of premises and level of deprivation within the area** are also important in relation to levels of alcohol-related crime. Research shows that **violent crimes tend to be concentrated in the most deprived areas and**

**places with higher availability of alcohol premises.**<sup>12</sup> There is an increase in the number of violent incidents during weekends, evenings and early mornings, highlighting the **impact of the night-time economy.**<sup>16</sup> Alcohol-related violence is not limited to the night-time economy, however: **85% of alcohol is sold in the off-trade** (supermarkets and off-licences) for consumption at home<sup>13</sup> and more violence is occurring behind closed doors.<sup>14</sup>

While there has been a decrease in the number of alcohol-related violent crimes in Scotland over the past decade, **dropping from 63% in 2008/09 to 37% in 2021/22, alcohol remains a factor in a significant proportion of violent crime.**<sup>15</sup> In addition:

- Most **violent incidents which occur over the weekend and at night are alcohol-related** (62% and 61%, respectively).<sup>16</sup>
- **More than 16% of ambulance callouts in Scotland over one year were alcohol-related.** The burden was even **higher over weekends (18.5%),** peaking on Friday and Saturday nights when the percentage of alcohol-related callouts was 28%.<sup>17</sup>
- At least **55 members of ambulance staff are abused or attacked every day in the UK,** with alcohol considered to play a major role.<sup>18</sup>
- **Where data is available, 49% of all people accused of homicide** over the last ten years were under the influence of alcohol.<sup>19</sup>

Scotland's prison and custody populations have a high prevalence of alcohol problems:

- Around **two-thirds of people in prison have an alcohol use disorder,** with 31% of these potentially dependent on alcohol.<sup>20</sup>
- At the time of their offence, **40% of prisoners reported being intoxicated.** This was an increase of 5% since 2017.<sup>5</sup>
- Almost **one-fifth of prisoners were concerned that alcohol would be a problem** for them when they were released.<sup>5</sup>
- A total of **41% of prisoners said that they would accept support** for alcohol if they were offered this.<sup>5</sup>

**Primary prevention measures** are therefore vital. The NCD Alliance Scotland's 10-year vision for a healthier Scotland report calls for a unified approach to tackle health-harming products like tobacco, alcohol, and high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) food and drinks.<sup>1</sup> This focuses on **restricting the marketing, taking action on the price, and restricting the availability of health-harming products** as the most effective ways to address the commercial determinants of health, alongside effective governance.

### ✓ *A new Alcohol Strategy is required*

The widespread availability of alcohol in Scotland makes it easy to obtain and gives the message that **drinking is a normal part of everyday life**, despite the research indicating that there is a bi-directional relationship between alcohol and mental health problems. Licensing boards approved 85% of new premises applications in Scotland in 2021-22 and a further 23,269 occasional licences were granted<sup>21</sup>. Ease of access has also increased due to online delivery of alcohol becoming more common, with alcohol often available within the hour leading to greater impulse purchasing. We also need licensed premises to be required to provide alcohol sales data as a condition of their licence. It is crucial that people who are experiencing alcohol problems and their families have quick, easy access to appropriate treatment and support. This must be coupled with effective prevention policies to reduce harm and protect future generations. This information should be considered within **an updated national strategy for tackling alcohol harm.**



### **Availability**

We ask the Scottish Government to **consider introducing measures to improve the functioning of the permissive licensing system.** This includes recognising that the current permissive licensing system has limitations in controlling and reducing alcohol availability, the Scottish Government **should commit to holding a national conversation to inform the development of new approaches** to control availability. We ask for **reform around the system for licensing off-trade and online sales premises** to firstly cap and then reduce off-trade availability of alcohol.

**Preventative measures are essential**, as they are the most effective way to reduce alcohol consumption and related harm, as demonstrated by the introduction of minimum unit pricing (MUP). Public Health Scotland's evaluation estimated this led to a 13.4% reduction in deaths from alcohol<sup>22</sup>. The Scottish Parliament's bold action to increase MUP from 50p to 65p on 30 September 2024 was a positive step to maximise its effectiveness. **An automatic uprating mechanism should be introduced to ensure MUP rises in line with inflation** to ensure it maintains these effects over time. We also call for **an alcohol harm prevention levy** on retailers' profits from MUP to support local prevention, treatment, and recovery services.

## About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to see fewer people have their health damaged or lives cut short due to alcohol, fewer children and families suffering as a result of other people's drinking, and communities free from alcohol-related crime and violence.

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