

UK: Minimum alcohol price not set high enough

February 24 2012

Following Prime Minister David Cameron's vow last week to tackle binge drinking, new research from Newcastle University has highlighted the need for a strong approach to alcohol pricing.

The timely study, published today in the journal [Alcohol and Alcoholism](#) finds that the ban on below cost pricing, to be introduced in April, is unlikely to have a noticeable effect on the cost of alcohol.

The study found that, in Newcastle, less than two percent of promotions led to alcohol being sold at below cost price.

The government's move is aimed at reducing the harmful effects of excessive alcohol consumption, but research by academics at Newcastle University has found that the measure is likely to have a limited impact.

They recommend the much higher minimum price of £0.50 per unit. This was first suggested by Sir Liam Donaldson in 2009, when he was Chief Medical Officer and which the Government is said to be considering.

The study, led by Dr Jean Adams, was carried out in Newcastle city centre and focused on price promotions – which are likely to represent the cheapest end of the alcohol market. The researchers visited all 29 stores selling alcohol and found over 2000 alcohol promotions on display for customers.

Dr Adams said: "The effect of price on alcohol consumption has been documented clearly: when the price of alcohol increases, consumption decreases; whereas when price decreases, consumption increases. Setting the minimum alcohol price at below cost price will not deter binge drinkers, as very little alcohol on sale will actually have to increase in price.

"Our results indicate that the current government proposal to ban sales of alcohol at below 'cost' price is likely to affect very few products and so would be unlikely to have a substantial effect on purchasing and consumption. In contrast, a minimum price of £0.50 per unit would impact on more than one quarter of the price discounts we identified."

The researchers, who are part of Fuse (The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health) also found that many of the [promotions](#) required customers to buy large amounts of alcohol to claim the discount.

The findings of this study suggest that the ban on below cost sales of alcohol is unlikely to have a substantial effect on the price of alcohol sold in shops because hardly any alcohol is currently sold at such low [prices](#).

Alcohol consumption is the third biggest contributor to disease in developed countries and in the UK young people aged between 16 and 24 consume more than any other group.

Last week, during a visit to the North East, David Cameron said the level of drunkenness in the UK was a "scandal" and that supermarkets, bars and the drinks industry should do more to help the situation. The coalition Government is due to publish a new alcohol strategy later this year.

Colin Shevills, Director of Balance, the North East alcohol office, said:
"We welcome this research, which further demonstrates the real need for a minimum price per unit of alcohol if we are serious about tackling the problems caused by its misuse.

"Alcohol continues to be sold for pocket money prices across the North East, where we have the highest rate of alcohol-related hospital admissions and male deaths in England. Research we published last year revealed that alcohol was available for as little as 12p a unit, meaning a man can drink at his recommended daily limit (3-4 units) for just 48p. This can't be right when we know that consumption is driven by price.

"Importantly, the majority of North Easterners don't think this is right. Support for a minimum price per unit of alcohol continues to grow. More than half of North Easterners support the measure, an increase of 7% from 2010 and a third think supermarket alcohol is too cheap against just over one in ten who think it is too expensive."

For a copy of the paper, see the *Alcohol and Alcoholism* [website](#).

Provided by Newcastle University

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