

Alcohol purchasing patterns of British households changed in COVID-19 lockdowns

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People drinking. Credit: Yutacar, Unsplash, CC0
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A new study of British households finds that, while overall alcohol purchases did not change after COVID-19 lockdown measures began in

2020, purchases did increase for households in socially disadvantaged areas and for households that normally buy more alcohol. Peter Anderson of Newcastle University, England, and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on January 19, 2022.

Previously reported sales data suggest that alcohol purchases in Britain did not increase after COVID-19 lockdowns were implemented in March of 2020. However, surveys of British residents have suggested an increase in [alcohol-related problems](#), and [mortality data](#) showed a rise in alcohol-related deaths.

To resolve these conflicting data, Anderson and colleagues examined alcohol purchasing data for 79,417 British households from 2015 to 2020, encompassing about 5 million alcohol purchases in total. They conducted statistical analyses to explore how changes in purchasing patterns might be related to socio-demographic and [economic factors](#).

The researchers found that, after lockdowns were implemented and forced the temporary closure of pubs and other businesses with on-site alcohol consumption, British households bought 29 percent more alcohol from grocery stores and other off-trade establishments for the rest of 2020 than on average for 2015 to 2019. However, once the researchers accounted for the estimated amount of alcohol that would have been purchased at pubs and similar establishments had they not closed, overall purchases did not actually increase.

Nonetheless, the top fifth of households that normally purchase the most alcohol boosted their purchases 17 times more than the bottom fifth. Households in more socially disadvantaged locations also boosted their purchases. Households in the north of England increased their purchases more than in any other part of Britain, most likely because the region contains more disadvantaged households and heavier-purchasing

households.

On the basis of these findings, the authors note that policies and treatments to address and reduce high alcohol consumption are especially important during times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

The authors add: "COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions impaired many people's [mental health](#) with increased depression and anxiety and [heavy drinking](#) was no exception, with the top one fifth of heavy drinkers buying 17 times more alcohol than the bottom one fifth. Our findings indicate that alcohol policy to reduce high consumption of alcohol, and the availability of help and treatment to reduce [alcohol](#) consumption, become much more important during extraordinary times such as COVID lockdowns."

More information: Anderson P, O'Donnell A, Jané Llopis E, Kaner E (2022) The COVID-19 alcohol paradox: British household purchases during 2020 compared with 2015-2019. *PLoS ONE* 17(1): e0261609. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261609

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