

# Call to change concept of harm reduction in alcohol policy

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Credit: Kevin Casper/public domain

A new policy paper by a University of York academic calls for limits on the influence of the drinks industry in shaping alcohol policy because it has a 'fundamental conflict of interest'.

The article by Professor Jim McCambridge, of the Department of Health Sciences at York and academics at King's College London and the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, is published in this week's *PLOS Medicine*.

It says the concept of harm reduction has been co-opted by industry interests in public health debates about reducing the damage caused by alcohol. The paper argues for a redefinition of the concept of alcohol harm reduction to include the full range of evidence-based measures that reduce alcohol damage to public health and society.

Professor McCambridge and colleagues say the concept of harm reduction has been important in advancing science, policy and practice for illicit drug use, particularly as a vehicle for more

enlightened responses to injecting drug use and HIV.

They point out that the drinks industry favours a policy of reducing harm by means other than people cutting their [alcohol consumption](#) - an approach that is unlikely to meet its stated objective.

Professor McCambridge said: "The ability of the alcohol industry to shape [alcohol policy](#) nationally and globally needs to be curtailed because of a fundamental conflict of interest with reducing alcohol harms."

The paper states that a "simplistic transfer of definitions of harm reduction from drugs to alcohol weakens society's ability to reduce the scale of the alcohol problem and protect [public health](#). It is thus important to expose the limitations of the [alcohol](#) industry-favoured definition. Instead we offer a simpler definition of harm reduction which gets to the heart of the matter. Put simply, if a [policy](#) or programme reduces harms or problems, then it is harm reduction."

**More information:** *PLOS Medicine*:  
[www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1001767](http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1001767)

Provided by University of York

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