



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive



TRINITY  
COLLEGE  
DUBLIN

# Alcohol's harm to others in Ireland

Key Findings

# Key Findings

## Introduction

This research examines damage from alcohol to people other than the drinker in three Irish settings – the general population, the workplace and children in families. The information is based on self-reported responses in the national drinking surveys of 2006 and 2010 (combined N=2,011), funded by the Health Service Executive.

## General Population – key findings

- Over one in four people (28%) in the general Irish population reported experiencing at least one or more negative consequences as a result of someone else's drinking such as family problems, passenger with a drunk driver, physical assaults, property vandalised and money problems.
- Women were more likely to experience family problems (one in six), while men were more likely to report assaults (one in nine). Women were also more likely to report financial problems due to other people's drinking.
- Age was an important factor in predicting alcohol's harm to others (AH<sub>2</sub>O). Those under 50 years were more likely to report family problems and those aged 30-49 years were more likely to report property damage (one in nine) due to others drinking.
- Young men had the highest reported rate of assaults (one in five). Young women were also vulnerable to assaults and had similar rates (one in eight) to men in the 30-50 age groups.

- More young men reported being a passenger with a drunk driver (one in six) than any other group.
- Those from lower social classes were more vulnerable to family problems (almost one in five) due to others drinking.
- Exposure to risk of family and financial problems occurred to victims, both abstainers and drinkers alike.
- Just one of the harms was linked to the drinking patterns of victims, when controlling for demographics. Those who were regular risky drinkers were more at risk of being a passenger with a drunk driver (one in eight). This is not surprising, given that drinkers tend to socialise together and illustrates the fluid interaction between the victim and perpetrator when both are drinking at risky levels. This finding suggests that drunk driving continues to be a threat to others which can extend to other innocent road users.
- Some of the alcohol's harm to others (AH<sub>2</sub>O) are more visible in the public domain in communities such as passenger with a drunk driver, assaults and property damage, while family and financial problems are less visible but can have serious and chronic consequences for the well-being of the whole family.

## Workplace

- One in ten Irish workers experienced at least one or more negative consequences due to co-workers who were heavy drinkers, such as the ability to do their work was negatively affected, they had to work extra hours and had an accident or close call at work due to co-workers drinking habits.
- Overall, men (one in seven) and workers in the youngest age group (one in six) were the most likely to experience the negative consequences due to co-workers who were heavy drinkers.
- One in six young men (18-34 age group) reported that their ability to do their job was negatively affected and one in nine young men reported they had to work extra hours due to co-workers who were heavy drinkers.
- The risk of workers experiencing harm increased if they themselves were also regular risky drinkers, which may suggest that workplaces facilitates a social network around alcohol use and/or it may be that workers are drawn to co-workers who have similar harmful drinking patterns.

- The impact of co-workers drinking can affect a worker's job satisfaction, create tension and the need to cover-up for problems of co-workers who are heavy drinkers, in particularly among young adults.
- The overall rate of reported harms in the Irish workforce was double that in comparison to the Australian findings for each of the measures used.
- Alcohol's harm to others (AH<sub>2</sub>O) in the workplace carries direct, increased work-related costs. In Australia, the estimated cost of the extra hours worked due to co-workers' drinking was AU\$ 453 million (€313.8 million) in a year and for absenteeism due to someone else's drinking the cost was AU\$ 348 million (€241 million) (Laslett et al 2010).
- While the scope of this HSE study was limited, the findings shed some initial light on this underdeveloped area. Further work is required to establish the scope and magnitude of the problem, the health and social services usage as well as the burden and cost of the problem to society, as suggested by WHO.
- As in the tobacco policy area, where the damage from passive smoking provided a strong case for an effective public health approach, the collateral damage from alcohol is also a persuasive rationale for a broad public health approach on alcohol.
- This research study confirms that alcohol is causing significant damage across the population, in workplaces and to children in families and carries a substantial economic burden to all in Irish society, at a higher level than comparable societies such as Australia, Canada and America.

## Children

- Overall, one in ten Irish parents/guardians reported that children experienced at least one or more harms in the past 12 months as a result of someone else's drinking – verbal abuse, left in unsafe situations, witness to serious violence in the home and physical abuse.
- Parents who themselves were regular risky drinkers were more likely to report (one in eight) that children experienced at least one or more of the harms due to others drinking, after controlling for demographics.
- Therefore, the exposure of children to risk and harm from adults drinking may come from two sources; the 'other drinker' and the heavy drinking parent. If both are in the same household, then the harm experienced by the children could be substantial.

## Summary

- This report shows that alcohol related harm extends out from the drinker and affects many other people besides the drinker.
- The vulnerability of young adults, in particular from physical violence and as a passenger with a drunk driver, can result in injuries and disabilities which impact on their well-being and quality of life. The burden and cost to society can also be substantial in the need for health and social services and the years lived with disability.

## Conclusion

This report introduces the concept of 'alcohol's harm to others' in an Irish context and the results indicate that problem alcohol use can no longer be framed exclusively in the realm of harm to the drinker. In over a quarter of cases harm to others is documented and in the case of each of two specific situations, one a vulnerable population (children) and the other economic (the workplace) one in ten report harm to others. While men generally experience more harm from others, in two domains – family and finance-women experience more harm.

Alcohol policy development from now on needs to be focused on protection of young adults, women and children (Ireland voted in November 2012 to support Children's rights) and to promote healthy, safe and productive workplaces. A policy response for the alcohol issue in Ireland requires a pro-active, integrated approach which accepts that damage from alcohol to people other than the drinker is a major element of the alcohol burden in Irish society. The new 'Healthy Ireland' framework provides an opportunity to reduce the risks posed by alcohol to future generations and improve the health and wellbeing of people now living in Ireland by implementing effective alcohol policies.



Publication Date: March 2014

Report prepared by Dr Ann Hope, Department of Public Health  
and Primary Care, Trinity College, Dublin