

# Examining the implementation and early impact of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act in Ireland: Insight from two data sources

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## Declaration of interests / Conflict of interests:

- Employed as Research Fellow, Institute for Social Marketing and Health, **University of Stirling**.
- Funded through an Academic Fellowship from the **Society for the Study of Addiction (SSA)**.
- Since 2017, I have been on the board of directors/trustees at **Alcohol Focus Scotland**.
- Between 2019-2020, I was on secondment as a research consultant in cancer prevention at the Cancer Policy Research Centre, **Cancer Research UK**.
- **No** current or previous funding from a commercial entity related to the gambling, alcohol, or tobacco sectors or other organisation funded by a commercial entity related to these sectors.
- **The survey was funded by the Society for the Study of Addiction (SSA), the Institute for Public Health in Ireland (IPH), and the University of Stirling. The news framing analysis was funded through a fellowship from the SSA.**

# What is the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018?



Number 24 of 2018

Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018

Section	Measure	When commenced?
11	Minimum pricing	January 2022
12	Labelling on products and in licensed premises	Not scheduled
13	Restricting content of adverts	Not scheduled
<b>14</b>	<b>Prohibition of alcohol adverts in certain places</b>	<b>November 2019</b>
15	Restricting on advertising during sporting events	November 2021
16	Restrictions on some forms of sponsorship	November 2021
<b>17</b>	<b>No branded children's clothing</b>	<b>November 2019</b>
18	Restrictions on alcohol adverts in print publications	Not scheduled
19	Watershed on TV/radio advertising	Not scheduled
<b>20</b>	<b>Limiting cinema advertising (e.g., only 18+ films)</b>	<b>November 2019</b>
<b>22</b>	<b>Structural separation in retailers</b>	<b>November 2020</b>
<b>23</b>	<b>Price promotion restrictions</b>	<b>January 2021</b>

# Research objectives and two data sources

## Understanding the implementation and impact of Ireland's controls

### Data source one: Impact

Assessing changes in awareness before/after initial restrictions (cinema, some outdoor, public transport, some branded merchandise).

Repeat cross-sectional surveys with adults (18+) in Ireland Oct. 2019 ( $n=1,007$ ) and Oct. 2020 ( $n=1,020$ )

### Data source two: Implementation

Examining arguments about the Act and how it is being implemented.

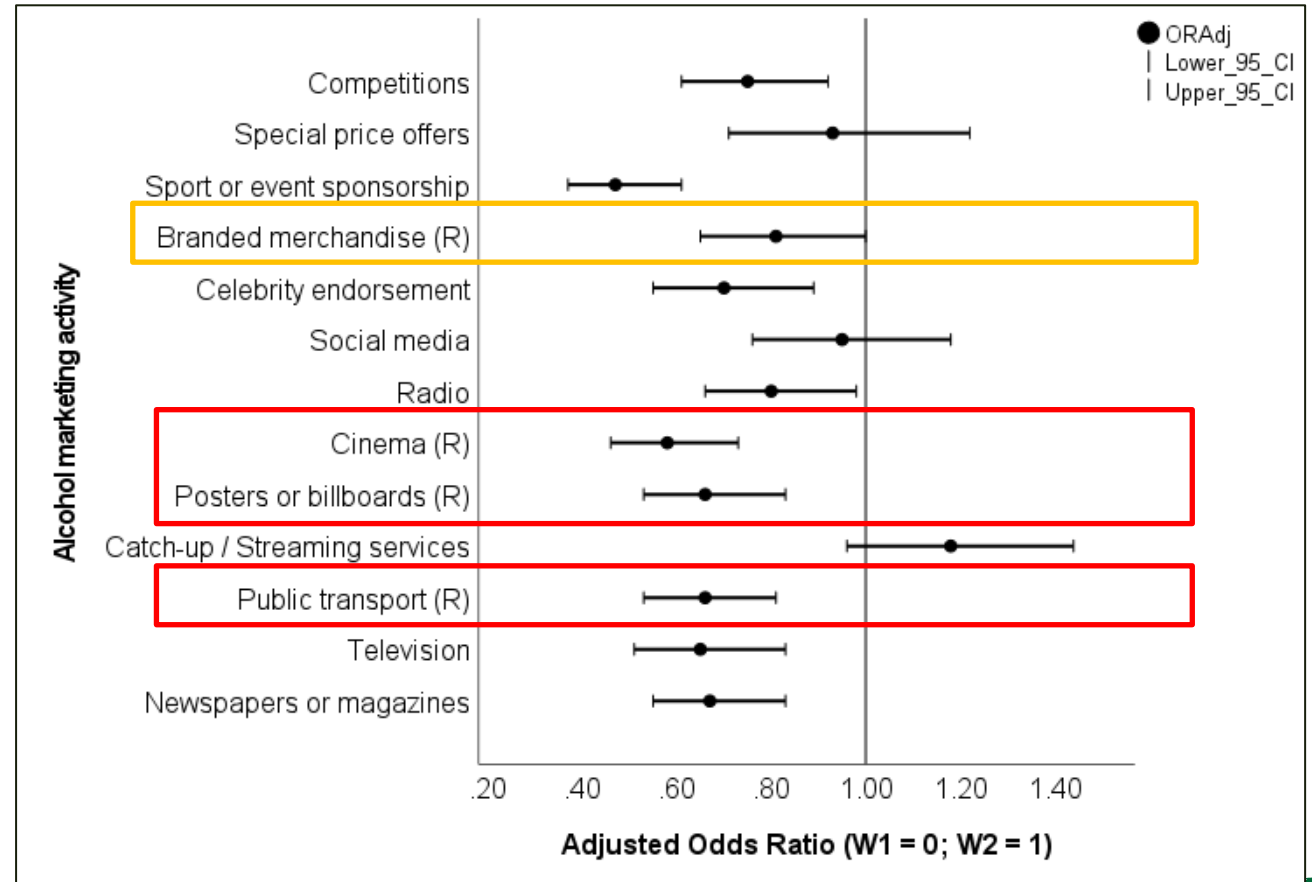
Thematic analysis of stakeholder arguments in Irish newspaper articles from Oct. 2018 to May 2021 ( $n=145$  articles)

## Data source one: Did awareness fall for activities subject to new controls from Nov 2019?

Reductions between waves in self-reporting any past month awareness for most of the newly restricted activities\*:

- Cinema (37% → 27%)
- Posters/billboards (77% → 69%)
- Public transport (65% → 55%)

No significant decline for branded merchandise, but it did nominally decrease (75% → 70%) and the restrictions only applied to **children's** clothing, which companies mostly voluntarily avoid.

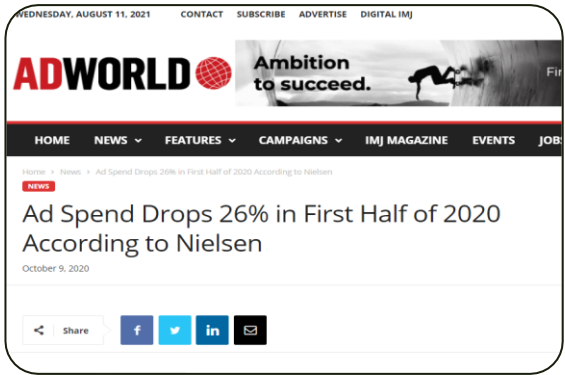
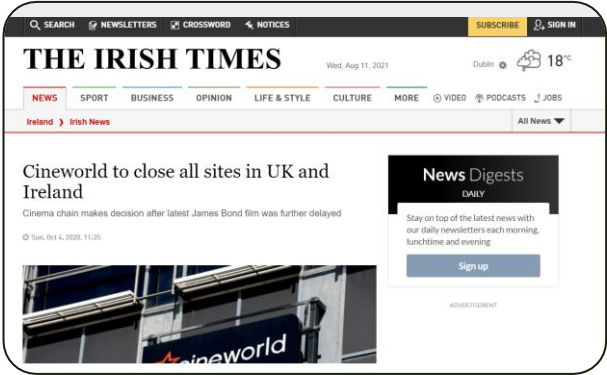
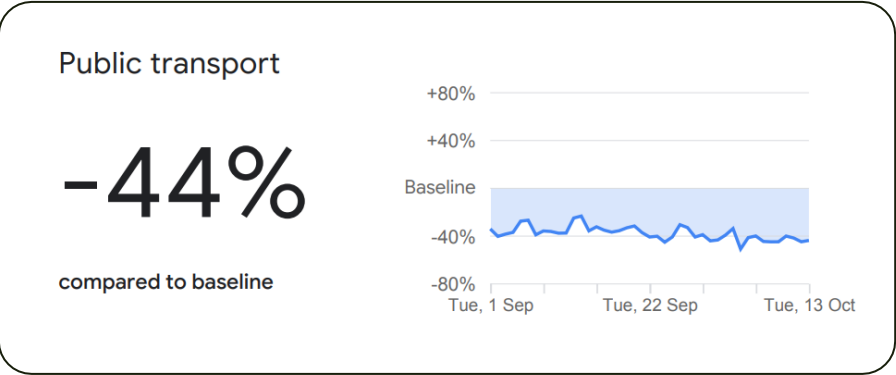


\*After controlling for age, gender, and region

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# Data source one: Cannot discount the impact of COVID-19 pandemic...

## At the point of the wave two data collection:



Google mobility data show footfall on public transport almost half of pre-pandemic levels

Cinemas shut or with reduced capacity due to distancing, postponed releases, and people avoiding closed spaces

Companies were cancelling, suspending, or reducing out of home ad campaigns

# Data source one: Initial conclusions and next steps

## Conclusion:

- Recommend a precautionary interpretation.
- Plausible that initial advertising controls and COVID-19 restrictions both contributed to decreases in awareness to some extent.
- Longer-term evaluation needed to determine relative contribution.

## Next steps:

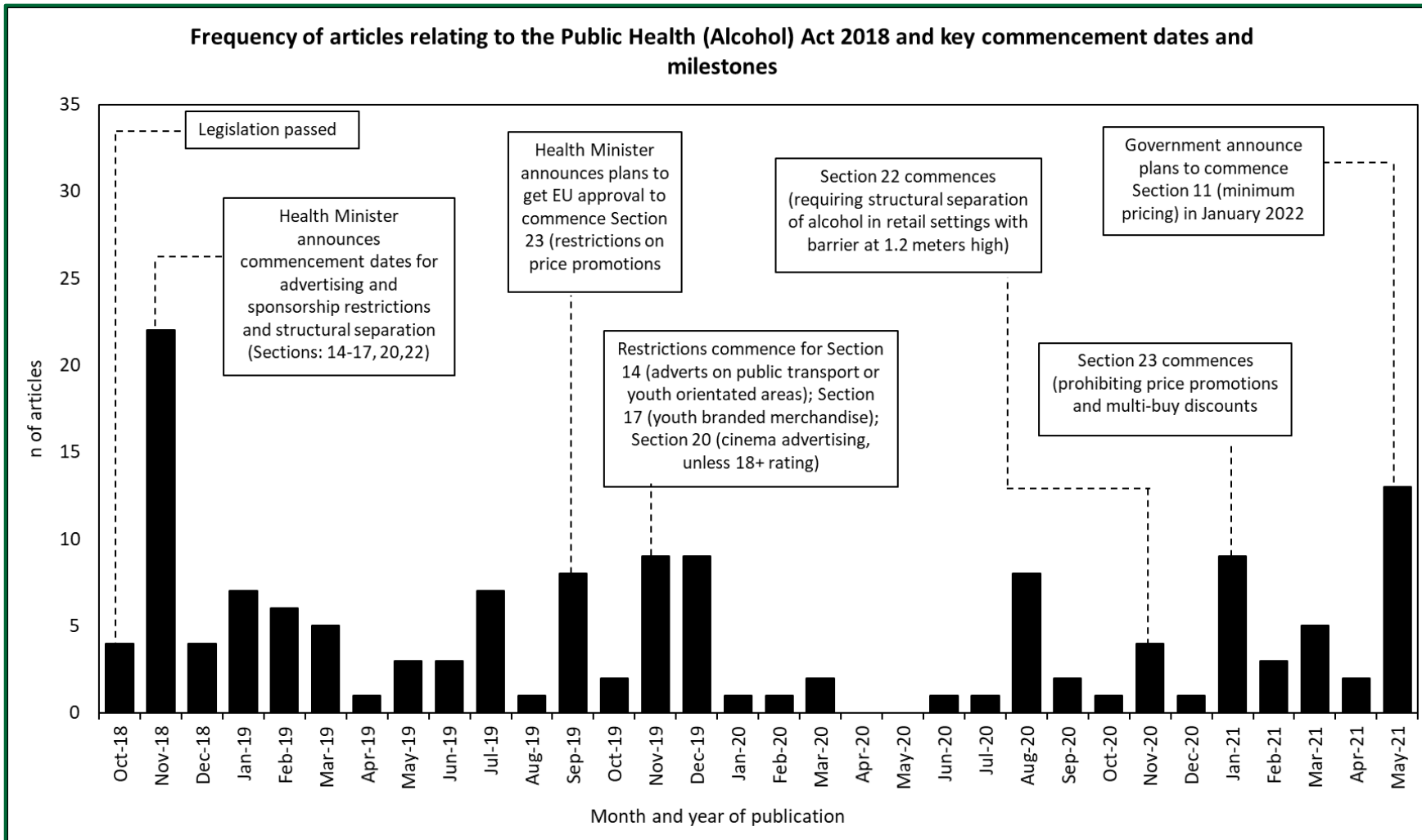
- Wave three in October 2021 will monitor longer-term trends and other restrictions (e.g., price promotions from January 2021).
- Have also collected two waves of data in Northern Ireland (Oct. 2020 and Oct. 2021) to act as a quasi 'control group'.
- Continue to monitor consumer and industry response to restrictions.



<https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab353>

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# Data source two: The Public Health (Alcohol) Act in the news, post-implementation



- **17 publications**
- **Five front-page articles**
- **Primary focus of article (66%)**

- Measures mentioned most:**
- **Min pricing (63% of articles)**
  - **Mandatory labelling (20%)**
  - **Generic reference (18%)**
  - **Structural separation (17%)**

- Stakeholders cited/quoted:**
- **Gov/political reps (45%)**
  - **Advocacy groups (30%)**
  - **Academics (15%)**
  - **Alcohol industry (13%)**

\*Provisional figures, analysis still in progress



## Data source two: Main themes in the print news coverage

1. Nature and use of alcohol use and harms in Ireland	2. Reflections on process and significance of passing the Act	3. Supporting the need for, and likely consequences of, the Act	4. Criticising the need for, and likely consequences of, the Act	5. Perspectives on the progress and nature of implementation	6. Reflections on the nature and challenges of the Irish border
<p><b>Alcohol is important public health issue.</b></p> <p><b>Alcohol is associated with myriad harms.</b></p> <p><b>Alcohol is making COVID-19 pandemic worse.</b></p> <p><i>Alcohol use is declining or not at harmful levels.</i></p>	<p><b>Long-debated and hard fought battle.</b></p> <p><b>Historical and ground-breaking.</b></p> <p><b>Required strong political leadership.</b></p> <p><b>May inform wider public policy in Ireland (e.g., e-cigs, obesity, gambling).</b></p>	<p><b>Challenge the position of alcohol in society.</b></p> <p><b>Address drivers (e.g., price/mktg).</b></p> <p><b>Protect children and young people.</b></p> <p><b>Reduce harms and increase public health.</b></p> <p><b>Effective/evidence based measures.</b></p> <p><b>Rebuffing criticisms.</b></p>	<p><i>Unnecessary state intervention.</i></p> <p><i>Challenges freedoms and punishes drinkers.</i></p> <p><i>Will harm businesses and the economy.</i></p> <p><i>Will be effective or circumvented.</i></p> <p><i>Min pricing enriches alcohol industry at expense of Gov revenue.</i></p>	<p><b>Frustration at speed.</b></p> <p><b>Encouragement to progress.</b></p> <p><b>Gov is trying to implement in timely and orderly fashion.</b></p> <p><i>Calls for independent scrutiny and evaluation.</i></p>	<p><i>Will be challenges and problems, e.g., cross border trade and harm to businesses.</i></p> <p><b>Rationales for policies on an all-Island basis.</b></p> <p><b>Delays in Northern Ireland are frustrating Ireland progress.</b></p> <p><i>Exporting Irish policies to NI is problematic.</i></p>

Provisional typology – Analysis is still underway

Key:

**Subthemes in bold are broadly supportive of the Act**

*Subthemes in non-bold italics are broadly opposed to the Act*

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## Data source two: Supporting the need for, and consequences of, the Act

Addressing key drivers of alcohol use in Ireland

***“Large companies have lured our children into alcohol addiction through advertisements. From this month, we will enforce clear boundaries and restrictions...”***  
(Minister for Health, Irish Independent, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019)

Expected benefits of the Act

***“This ground-breaking legislation should serve to ultimately reduce the harm alcohol causes”***  
(Junior Health Minister, The Times [Ire. Edn], 24<sup>th</sup> October 2018)

Confidence in the effectiveness of measures

***“In 20 years, Ireland has a 70% reduction in children smoking. How? Because there are no tobacco ads, no tobacco sponsorship in sport....”***  
(Alcohol Action Ireland, Irish Examiner, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2021)

Rebuffing criticisms

***“...MUP will have no impact on the vast majority of alcohol products sold responsibly...”***  
(National Off-Licence Association, Irish Independent, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021)

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## Data source two: Perspectives on progress and nature of implementation

Frustration over progress

***“We are now almost two years on [from enactment] and inertia marks the implementation of the central policy measures...”***

(Alcohol Action Ireland, Irish Daily Mail, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020)

Encouragement to expedite progress

***“We urgently request that the Minister for Health priorities implementation of MUP in Ireland immediately to make a long-lasting beneficial impact”***

(Letter from several Consultant Hepatologists, Irish Times, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2019)

Gov working in orderly and timely manner

***“The minister has already stated he intends to provide for a one-year lead in for the regulations so businesses have time to prepare for the changes”***

(Spokesperson for Minister for Health, Irish Mirror, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2019)

Industry concerns on implementation

***“While the Public Health Alcohol Act is now on the statute books, there are still many unanswered questions in relation to how it will be implemented”***

(Drinks Ireland, Irish Examiner, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019)

# Concluding thoughts

## Data source one:

The unknown relative role of the COVID-19 pandemic means 'precaution' is the watchword when extrapolating from existing data.

The next waves are key to examine:

- (1) The impact of the advertising controls with fewer COVID-19 restrictions;
- (2) The longer-term or lagged effect of restrictions;
- (3) Changes relative to where no controls apply (e.g., Northern Ireland);
- (4) The impact of the recent and forthcoming controls (e.g., sport sponsorship, price restrictions etc).

## Data source two:

While evaluation evidence is being gathered, the newspaper data show that implementation is occurring against a backdrop of arguments about need, effectiveness, challenges and progress. It is important to monitor and assess this coverage to:

- (1) Understand it may impact on public perceptions concerning need/effectiveness and perceived impact of measures;
- (2) Gather important contextual data to help understand trends shown in the monitoring data;
- (3) Examine arguments which may be used in debates about similar policies in other countries (e.g., Scotland);
- (4) Document the barriers, facilitators, and challenges to effective implementation of marketing controls;

# Linked publications and research

## On existing implementation

Awareness of alcohol marketing one year after initial implementation of Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

**Background** The Republic of Ireland is introducing new controls on alcohol marketing, starting in November 2019 with restrictions on some outdoor and cinema advertising, and a ban on public transport advertising. We examined changes in marketing awareness one year after initial implementation and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods** Repeat online cross-sectional surveys with adults in Ireland conducted October 2019 ( $n = 1,007$ ) and October 2020 ( $n = 1,020$ ). Participants self-reported past-month awareness of alcohol marketing and completed the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption (AUDIT-C). Current drinkers were categorised as those reporting heavy episodic drinking at least monthly and higher-risk drinkers ( $\geq 5$  AUDIT-C).

**Results** In both waves, most participants recalled some marketing awareness (94.1% vs. 93.8%). For 9/13 activities measured in both waves, there were decreases in the proportion reporting any awareness and frequency of awareness, including for the newly restricted activities. For example, any awareness of public transport advertising decreased between waves ( $OR_{adj} = 0.66$ , 95%CI: 0.53-0.81). In both waves, higher past-month awareness was associated with at least monthly heavy episodic drinking and higher-risk consumption.

**Conclusion** We recommend a precautionary interpretation. It is plausible that both Ireland's initial controls and COVID-19 restrictions contributed to decreases in awareness, but longer-term evaluation is required to determine relative contribution.

**Keywords** Alcohol advertising regulation, Alcohol control, Alcohol marketing regulation, Ireland

### Introduction

In the Republic of Ireland ('Ireland'), per-capita alcohol consumption is greater than across the European region.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, over a third of drinkers report Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED,  $\geq 60$  grams of pure alcohol) on a typical drinking occasion, with doing so more likely among younger adults, males, and more disadvantaged areas.<sup>2</sup> Such consumption is associated with many individual and social harms and places a large burden on Ireland's economy.<sup>3</sup> A study of 21

Ireland have introduced the Public Health (Alcohol) Act (hereafter 'the Act') to reduce population consumption and concomitant harms. The Act contains measures including minimum pricing, mandatory product labelling, price promotion restrictions, and structural separation in some licensed premises (i.e., physical barrier separating alcohol from other products).<sup>4-7</sup> The Act became law in October 2018 and components will be phased in by the incumbent Minister for Health. The Act also includes restrictions on marketing. From 19th November 2019, alcohol advertising is prohibited

## On forthcoming implementation

Alcohol marketing during the 2020 Six Nations Championship: A frequency analysis

Dr. Richard I Purves and Dr. Nathan Critchlow  
September 2021

A report prepared for Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP), Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) and Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI).

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UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING | AlcoholAction | IAS Institute of Alcohol Studies | SHAAP

## On non-implementation

Irish Journal of Medical Science (1971 - )  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11845-021-02719-8>

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Health information and warnings on alcohol packaging in Ireland: it is time to progress the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018

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Findings from the 2019–2020 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey are a reminder of the burden of alcohol-related harms in Ireland, with two-fifths of drinkers engaging in heavy episodic drinking at least once per month (six or more standard drinks on a single occasion) and 14.8% of the general population meeting the criteria for an alcohol use disorder [1]. This harmful use of alcohol is associated with myriad individual and societal harms and creates a substantial burden on Ireland's economy [2].

The packaging of alcoholic drinks provides a low-cost opportunity to communicate important health information to consumers, including at the point of purchase and before and during consumption. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommend alcohol companies be legally required to display relevant information (e.g., harms, consumption guidelines, warnings, nutritional value) on packaging and present it clearly and consistently across products [3]. Prominent on-pack warnings, which include images and provide clear information about use and harms, appear most likely to positively impact consumer behaviour [4–8].

Through the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, Ireland already has a legal mechanism through which to enact the WHO's recommendations. Section 12 of the Act, as it will be referred to hereafter, will make it mandatory for the packaging of alcoholic drinks sold in Ireland to display: (i) a warning about the dangers of alcohol consumption (including when pregnant), (ii) a warning of the direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers, (iii) details of an independent website with public health information in relation to alcohol consumption, and (iv) nutritional information (e.g., grams of

alcohol and energy content) [9]. The design and layout of this information will be specified by the state.

Several measures in the Act have already been implemented (e.g., structural separation of alcoholic drinks in retailers and a ban on some outdoor advertising) or will be soon (e.g., minimum pricing per gram of alcohol or a ban on sponsorship of certain events). As far as we are aware, however, there is no scheduled commencement date for Sect. 12, the provisions on alcohol product labelling. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) held a consultation, which closed in late 2019, to help inform implementation of this labelling measure [10], but the responses and any resulting actions are not yet known.

Non-commencement of the provisions on mandatory labelling prolongs reliance on self-regulatory designs and presentation of this information to the public. There are some practical benefits to self-regulation, for example negating the time and resource burden associated with legislative action. Such approaches, however, have been criticised for omitting important health information, lacking clarity, and having limited effectiveness [5, 7, 11, 12]. A study of 21 European countries found that Ireland was one of only two where alcohol consumption had not declined during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic [13]. That on-trade premises were closed or had restricted access for much of this time, while off-trade sales were permitted, suggest an increase in home consumption during this period. That the mandatory labelling provisions are not yet in force means an opportunity to maximise exposure to new warnings on take-home packaging has already been missed.

There are several reasons why Ireland's Government

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