

Underage drinking and harmful drinking patterns are a significant problem in a number of European countries. Curbing such trends is a priority for all stakeholders: regulators, economic operators and civil society alike.

Contrary to common belief, **underage drinking is stable and even slightly declining in Europe**, and **consumption patterns still vary significantly from country to country**. Effective measures must **take those differences into account** and must **focus on the greatest influences: parents, siblings and peers**. This document aims to address questions surrounding underage drinking (defined here as being under the legal purchase age) and provide an overview of scientific research in this area.

## K E Y P O I N T S

Trends and current status of underage drinking in Europe

- Overall, underage alcohol consumption in the last 30 days declined from 67% to 62% since 2003. It is now below the 1999 level (64%).
- Problem drinking is not a typical characteristic of Europeans under the legal purchase age. In 2011, 81% of 16 years old Europeans reported 'never being drunk' in the previous 30 days: a positive improvement of 12.5% since 2003.

Is there a convergence of underage consumption in Europe?

- Evidence shows that underage alcohol consumption patterns vary greatly across Europe.
- Such diversity calls for national and local initiatives, which take into account cultural differences and local consumption patterns, not a one-size-fits-all EU solution.

What are the most influential factors of underage drinking?

- The principal influences on youth drinking are parents, siblings and peers.
- Evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage drinking patterns is inconsistent, often null, and when found, always small.
- Advertising standards ensure that both the content and placement of advertising is responsible, and aimed at adults only.

What are the most effective means to curb underage drinking?

- A strict enforcement of legal purchase age regulations is necessary to help prevent underage consumption of alcoholic beverages.
- While acknowledging challenges in evaluation, some types of education programmes and interventions have proven to be effective in preventing underage alcohol consumption and later alcohol misuse.

# Trends and current status of underage drinking in Europe

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What are the most effective means to curb underage drinking?

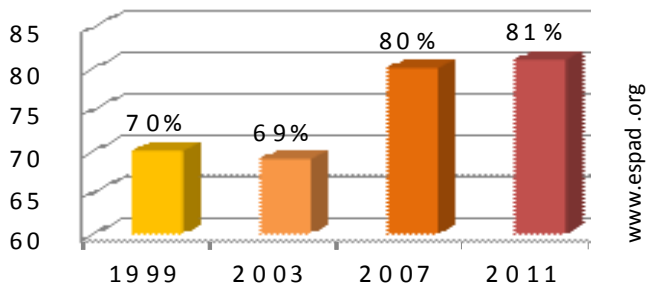
## KEY POINTS

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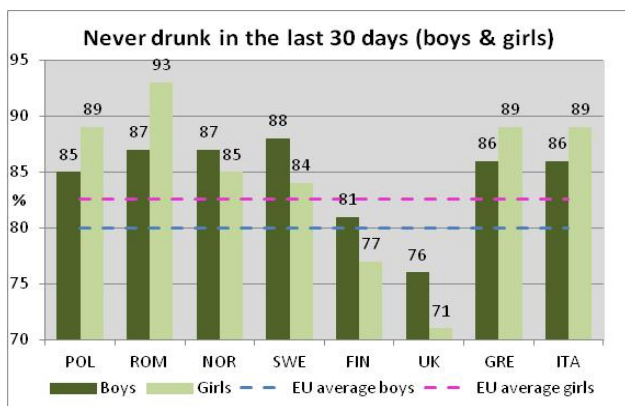
**ESPAD** The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD) is a pan-European project (across 35 countries) surveying alcohol (and other substance) consumption amongst 15/16 year olds. Carried out every four years since 1995, the latest survey was conducted in 2011. Note that the press release by the ESPAD research team recognizes a positive, declining trend of heavy episodic drinking in Europe. [www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2012/3](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2012/3)

## Contrary to what is perceived or advocated, underage Europeans are not increasingly getting intoxicated

Evolution of 16 y.o. not having been intoxicated in the last 30 days (in %)



The chart above shows that the proportion of underage people reporting **not having been intoxicated in the last 30 days** is increasing. The graph below shows that differences exist between EU countries and gender. In Poland, Romania, Greece and Italy, never been drunk is more common among girls than boys: the reverse can be observed for Nordic countries. Never reported drunkenness is particularly high for boys and girls in Romania, Greece & Italy.

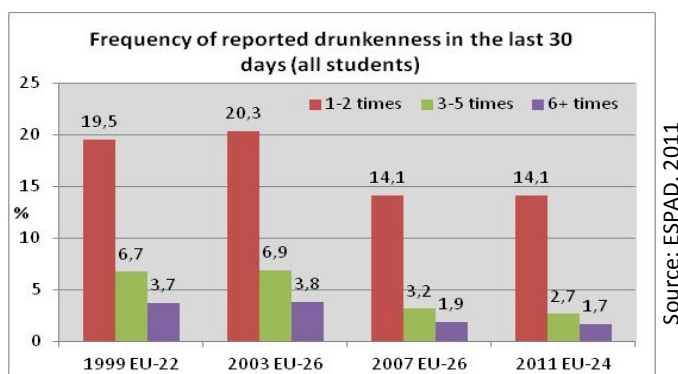


## Children, adolescents, underage and young people:

In the absence of an official definition of "children" or "young people", it is preferable to refer to "underage": those under the legal purchase age (LPA). The LPA is set at national & regional levels depending on the type of beverage or where it is purchased. Today, 22 EU Member States have a LPA of 18 for all alcoholic drinks.

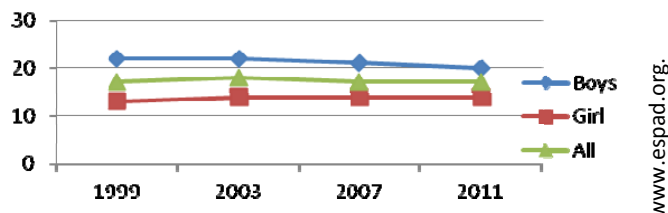
## Trends in underage alcohol consumption in Europe in 2011

2011 data shows that a majority of underage people (65%) drink only occasionally (1-2 times/month). Frequent drinking (10+ times/month) was reported by 9.8%, which may become harmful in combination with high quantity intake. The chart below shows significant declines as regards frequent reported drunkenness since 2003.



## Evolution of recurrent heavy episodic drinking (5 or + drinks on one occasion, 3 times + during the last 30 days)

The graph below shows that the proportion of 16 y.o. reporting having had 5 or + drinks on one occasion 3 times in the last 30 days is stable in general, and slightly decreasing for boys.



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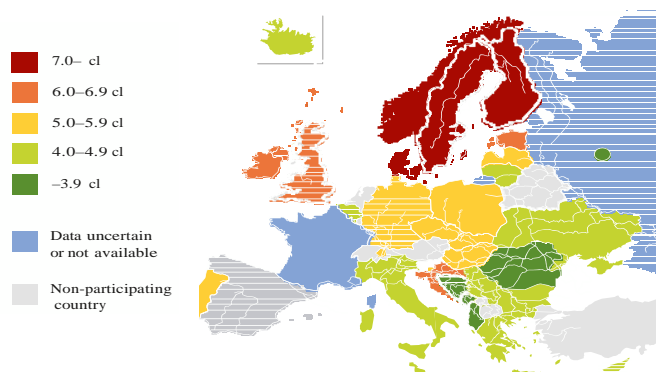
## KEY POINTS

- Evidence shows that underage alcohol consumption patterns vary greatly across Europe.
- Such diversity calls for national and local initiatives, which take into account cultural differences and local consumption patterns, not a one-size-fits-all EU solution.

### The quantities of alcohol consumed by underage Europeans vary greatly from country to country

The map below shows the disparities in the quantities of alcohol consumed by 16 year olds during their last drinking day in 2011: Northern Europeans still drink significantly more than Southern Europeans.

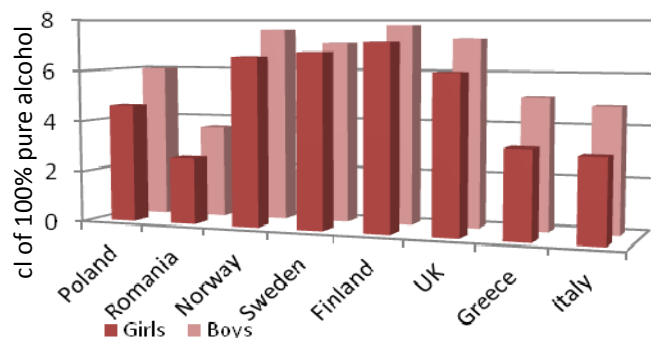
Estimated average alcohol consumption during the latest drinking day in centilitres of pure alcohol.



Source: ESPAD. 2011

The chart below illustrates the great diversity in underage alcohol consumption by gender and country: British boys drink more than twice as much as Romanian ones; Finnish girls drink as much as their male counterparts. Northern European girls drink more than Southern European boys. The gender gap is significantly greater in Southern and Eastern European countries in comparison to Northern Europe.

Estimated average alcohol consumption during the last drinking day in centilitres of pure alcohol (2011)

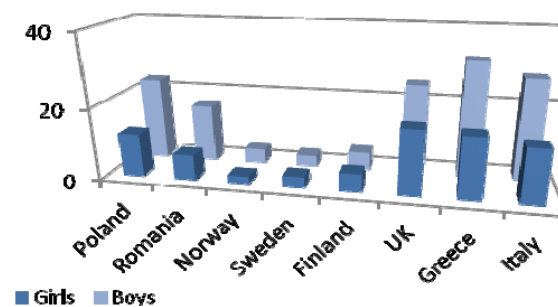


Source: ESPAD. 2011

### Overview of underage drinking patterns

The graph below shows that, in 2011, Northern Europeans drink less frequently than the rest of Europeans (with the exception of the UK). Yet, they drink more when they do. 3% of Swedish boys and 5% of Finnish girls consumed at least one alcoholic beverage 6 times a month (every 5<sup>th</sup> day) compared to 32% for Greek boys. The gender gap is significantly higher in Eastern and Southern Europe.

1+ drink at least 6 times in the last 30 days by gender (%)

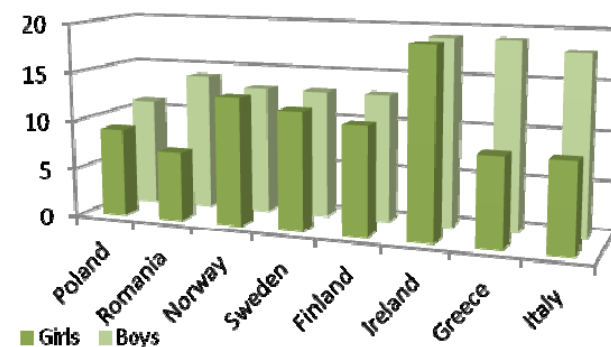


Source: ESPAD. 2011

The graph below shows that more regular heavy drinking varies greatly among countries and genders. In general, boys drink more and more frequently than girls. The gender gap is also significantly higher in Eastern and Southern Europe, while non-existent in Ireland & Norway.

In conclusion, underage Scandinavians consume alcoholic drinks less frequently but in higher quantities than other underage Europeans.

5+ drinks on one occasion, 3+ times in the last 30 days by gender in 2011 (%)



Source: ESPAD. 2011



## K E Y P O I N T S

- The principal influences on youth drinking are parents, siblings and peers.
- Evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage drinking patterns is inconsistent, often null, and when found, always small.
- Advertising standards ensure that both the content and placement of advertisements is responsible, and aimed at adults only on all media platforms.

### The principal influences on youth drinking are parents, siblings and peers

Much research has been devoted to examining the respective roles of family, peers, personality, cultures, social forces, advertising and other factors in underage people's decisions on whether to drink or not.

Family and peers are the most powerful factors in shaping beliefs and attitudes about drinking (Fisher, 1993; Milgram, 2001; Pandina, Johnson & White, 2010). Therefore, *'good parenting practices, including monitoring, nurturance, and consistent rule enforcement, can serve as protective factors against underage drinking'* (121), according to Wiers et al (2012).

### The perceptions of alcohol-related risks varies across countries

The perception of the *risk factor* and the image of irresponsible consumption are very different across Europe. In France, Germany and Italy, young people consider *risk* to be a positive challenge, whereas in Spain, risk has the double meaning of danger and amusement. In Greece, risk is perceived as a tool for personal growth, while in the UK, it is linked to adrenaline excitement (Bühringer, 2000). Due to cultural differences, risk and protective factors for underage drinking vary among EU regions and there is no one fits all solution. As De Witte and Mitchell (2012, 16) hold *'risk and protective factors are culturally-determined, such as expectancies about alcohol and parental influence'*.

**Young alcohol users often get alcohol from family or home** according to data from the [US National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), published in 2011. *'These results suggest that family members can play a direct and important role in reducing young adolescents' access to alcohol, preventing not only underage drinking but also the early onset of other associated behavioral health problems'*.

### What about the influence of advertising on underage drinking?

#### There is no evidence of a causal link between alcohol advertising and underage drinking levels or patterns

Most studies on the influence of advertising on young people merely reveal an awareness of generic types of alcoholic beverages (part of popular culture like Champagne or wine), but no evidence of a causal link between advertising and underage consumption.

A review of studies on the effects of alcohol advertising also holds that *'alcohol expectancies, family history, peer influence and personality characteristics may act as confounders in the relationship between exposure to advertising and (...) subsequent alcohol use'* (Smith & Foxcroft, 2009, 13). These findings reinforce the point that other factors appear to have a much stronger influence on underage drinkers.

#### Alcohol advertising: rules ensuring advertising is designed for, and aimed at, adults only

The **Audiovisual Media Services Directive** (2007) prohibits advertising for alcoholic beverages aimed "specifically at minors". A **Council recommendation** (2001) prohibits references to youth culture and ads featuring underage people. **National laws** often go further than these general provisions. In addition, spirits advertisers voluntarily agreed to detailed rules protecting minors. These independently enforced **advertising standards** ensure both the content of the advertisement and the media used are aimed at adults. Precise audience data and registered users databases online allow for even more refined targeting of adults only. Strict and detailed rules apply for digital and social media: on Facebook for example, content declared as 'alcohol', be it company-owned pages and related shared content, is simply invisible to underage registered users.

More information on the spirits sector practice on online media is available at [www.marketresponsibly.eu](http://www.marketresponsibly.eu).





## A Review of the scientific evidence

**Parents, siblings and peers** are the principal influences on youth drinking (Walls et al 2009). Donovan's (2004) review of the risk factors for adolescent alcohol initiation concluded that *'the most consistent antecedent risk factors for starting to drink in adolescence were parental and peer approval and models for drinking'* (529). In 2007, Van der Vorst et al hold that *'ample studies have established that parents as well as peers function as role models in the development of adolescents' alcohol use'* (1814). Windle et al (2009) conclude that *'among the most influential alcohol-specific risk and protective factors are family history of alcoholism and the influences of siblings and peers, all of which shape all adolescents expectancies about the effects of alcohol, which in turn help determine alcohol use behaviors'* (30). In reference to Windle et al (2009), Wiers et al (2012) highlight the importance of *'parental nurturance, parental monitoring, time spent together, and parent adolescent communication'* all of which contribute to *'a later onset of drinking, and possibly lowers overall underage drinking, and that these effects may continue even after the child has left home'* (98).

The scientific evidence is inconclusive on **price measures**, which have not proved effective in curbing underage drinking. In a meta analysis of 132 studies, Gallet (2007, 133) concludes that *'if we are particularly concerned with teenage drinking, since we find that teens are least responsive to prices, then perhaps the best approach to reducing alcohol consumption should involve alternatives to taxations, such as education campaigns'*. (For further information, see [Getting the facts right on: alcohol taxation, pricing and alcohol-related harm](#)).

**The impact of advertising** is the subject of a wealth of literature, most of which is contradictory, and finds that the impact of advertising is marginal at best. For every study finding a positive correlation between advertising and alcohol consumption, there is another one contradicting the sample, the methodology or the conclusions. Virtually all econometric, cross-sectional, and case studies have found that marketing has no or only modest effects on alcohol consumption (Broadbent, 2008; Nelson and Young, 2008; Nelson, 2007; Gallet, 2007; Duffy, 1999). Nelson (2008, 500) reviewed a series of longitudinal studies and concluded that *'the evidence on alcohol advertising and youth is mixed, contradictory and inconclusive'*. (For further information, see [Getting the facts right on: alcohol advertising and consumption](#)).

**Health warning labels** do not have a significant impact on underage and young people. In their book reviewing numerous studies, Babor et al (2003, 193) found that *'no direct impacts of warning labels on consumption or alcohol-related problems have been reported'*. The authors refer to another study which concluded that *'among youth, the warnings did not increase perceptions of alcohol risk, and may even have made products more attractive to both drinkers and non-drinkers'*. Babor et al conclude: *'in summary, the warning label research does not demonstrate that exposure produces a change in drinking behaviour per se'*.

Gallet, C.A. (2007) The demand for alcohol: a meta-analysis of elasticities, *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 51, 121-135.

Nelson, J. P. (2008) Reply to Siegel et al: alcohol advertising in magazines and disproportionate exposure. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 26(3), 493-504.

Babor, T. et al. (2003) Alcohol: No ordinary commodity – research and public policy, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Donovan, J.E. (2004) Adolescent alcohol initiation: a review of psychosocial risk factors, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 35(6), p.529, e7-18.

Van Der Vorst, H. et al. (2007) Similarities and bi-directional influences regarding alcohol consumption in adolescent sibling pairs. *Addictive Behaviors*, 32(9), 1814-1825

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## KEY POINTS

- A strict enforcement of legal purchase age regulations is necessary to help prevent underage consumption alcoholic beverages.
- While acknowledging challenges in evaluation, some types of education programmes and interventions have proven to be effective in preventing underage alcohol consumption and later alcohol misuse.

### Education programmes have a preventive effect on alcohol misuse

Despite the paucity of quality studies, some educational interventions have shown evidence of effectiveness. For example, the study by Morgenstern et al. undertaken in 2009 examined the effects of a school-based education intervention in 30 public schools in Germany. It found a lower level of lifetime binge drinking after the intervention. A similar project was carried out in Croatia in 2008. The authors found that *'qualitative data suggest benefits from the program overall. Given the intervention was successful in the earlier grades it should be initiated earlier to have a greater impact'* (West et al, 2008, 55). Or Caria et al (2011, 182) conclude that *'[s]chool curricula based on the comprehensive social-influence model can delay progression to frequent drinking and reduce occurrence of alcohol-related behavioral problems in European students'*.

The **effectiveness of school-based interventions is increased if they involve refusal skills training, families, peers, normative attitude and community engagement** (Jones et al, 2007). In addition, education programmes starting before initial exposure to alcohol, and focusing on harm reductions rather than promoting abstinence, appear to be promising alternatives. According to Sherry et al (2012, 148) *'selective interventions targeted towards at-risk groups (e.g., high personality risk for alcohol use disorders) have been shown to be effective in reducing alcohol use in young people. Such programmes can also delay drinking onset if introduced in early adolescence prior to the onset of alcohol use'*. Indeed, Sherry et al (2012, 148) conclude that *'the most effective family-based programmes for preventing or reducing alcohol use in young people emphasise active parental involvement and work to develop competence, self-regulation, and parenting skills. Family-based programmes have small effects, but their effects are generally consistent and lasting'*.

As conclusion, we can quote Foxcroft & Tsertsvadze's (2011, 2) concluding remarks: *'Most commonly positive effects across programs were for drunkenness and binge drinking. Current evidence suggests that certain generic psychosocial and developmental prevention programs can be effective and could be considered as policy and practice options. These include the Life Skills Training Program, the Unplugged program, and the Good Behaviour Game'*.

### Strict enforcement of legal purchase age regulations is necessary

**A stricter enforcement of legal purchase age requirements** is necessary to curb underage drinking. Systematic ID checks of young customers in supermarkets and bars should be customary. Regular **training of bar staff** should be promoted across Europe.

### 'Social norms interventions' can correct misconceptions about consumption levels

**Social norms interventions** aim to correct misperceptions, and promote positive norms in order to replace misperceived negative ones. A systematic review of studies by Moreira et al. (2009, 2) concludes: *'Interventions delivered using the web or computer, or in individual face-to-face sessions appeared to reduce alcohol misuse'*. Palfai et al (2011, 539) find that *'a feedback-based computerized intervention that includes normative information about alcohol use and consequences'* are effective in reducing alcohol misuse, but in particular for *'hazardous drinking students who are experiencing higher levels of alcohol related consequences'* (539). To date, most social norms interventions have conducted in college campuses in the USA. **The approach is based on the finding that most students overestimate their peers' drinking levels, and therefore have a wrong idea of how much they 'should' be drinking.** Correcting these misperceptions can help reduce heavy drinking and harmful outcomes. Evaluations of these approaches have shown promising results: decreases have been reported in heavy episodic drinking, injuries to self and to others (e.g. Perkins & Craig, 2002; Fabioan, 2003; Haines & Baker, 2003; Perkins, Haines & Rice, 2005).

### The cost-effectiveness of interventions

Due a lack of data and scarcity of rigorous studies, it is difficult to assess or contradict the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of educational interventions. More and better research is needed. However, Pacileo and Fattore (2009, 390) conclude that *'if the interventions are effective they are also cost-effective'* (ibid, 390). Considering the positive results attained by certain programmes, more efforts should be made to promote these interventions.

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Getting the facts right on alcohol  
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