

TROUBLE BREWING

The Case
for Alcohol
Policy

SECOND EDITION



TROUBLE BREWING:

The Case for Alcohol Policy

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

While you read this foreword, 15 people will die of alcohol-related causes—one person every 12 seconds.⁽¹⁾

Alcohol is widely consumed in many contexts and is broadly accepted socially. And for years, contradictory messages have sowed doubt about its impact on health. But the science is clear: Alcohol is a harmful product that warrants a public health response.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that alcohol is responsible for nearly 5% of all deaths.⁽¹⁾ More than half of these deaths are from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, heart disease and liver disease. Alcohol is also a societal problem: Millions suffer because of their own or someone else's alcohol use. The more alcohol a society consumes, the more it experiences social harms such as domestic violence, traffic crashes and homicides, making alcohol the most dangerous and destructive of legal drugs.⁽²⁾ Each year, the global economic toll amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars, and alcohol-related harms are a significant burden on governments throughout the world.

The public health response to alcohol must be commensurate with its health, social and economic burden. Under WHO leadership, governments around the world have committed to reducing alcohol-related harms by 20% by 2030.⁽³⁾ WHO's [SAFER](#) technical package offers practical guidance on alcohol policy interventions with proven impact on population health.⁽⁴⁾ The measures are: increasing prices via taxation; restricting marketing; regulating availability; enforcing drink driving measures; and facilitating access to treatment. In recent years, countries such as Canada and Australia have amended their health recommendations to encourage less alcohol consumption. But most countries remain woefully behind, reporting no progress on effective alcohol policies. In some countries with fewer resources, alcohol consumption is even increasing, particularly heavy episodic

drinking, or binge drinking—a higher-risk consumption pattern.⁽¹⁾ Around the world, the powerful alcohol industry is using the very same tactics as those of tobacco and soda companies to leverage market growth by interfering with and often derailing effective, common-sense alcohol policies.⁽⁵⁾

[The RESET Alcohol initiative](#) is among the largest global projects on alcohol policy to work at the national level in select countries to reduce alcohol harms. As its name indicates, the aim of RESET Alcohol is to recalibrate the public policy environment to more appropriately reflect the burden of alcohol consumption on public health and to reduce its harm. We know this kind of reset is possible and, in some parts of the world, we already see attitudes about alcohol consumption starting to shift.⁽⁶⁾ In well-resourced countries, where alcohol use tends to be the highest, young adults are beginning to appreciate the risks of alcohol and drinking less.^(1, 7) There is growing interest in “sober curiosity,” in alcohol-free cocktails, and no- and low-alcohol beers. A recent Gallup survey shows that U.S. adult consumption of alcohol fell to 54%—its lowest level in more than 85 years.⁽⁸⁾ But to truly reduce global harms caused by alcohol, policy environments must change so these are not simply short-lived trends limited to high-income countries.

This report, an updated and expanded version of the 2018 report “[Trouble Brewing](#),” seeks to provide clear and up-to-date information about the harms of alcohol and the public policies needed to address them. It provides arguments, practical tools and resources for advocates to drive progress and press for coherent and effective alcohol policies around the world. It offers evidence-based arguments to counter the misinformation that surrounds alcohol policy, often promoted by the alcohol industry. Through research-based information and compelling examples, we hope to advance the public health response to the harms of alcohol, thereby reducing suffering, promoting health and saving lives.

Jacqui Drope

Managing Director, RESET Alcohol Initiative
Vital Strategies, 2025

Messaging for Alcohol Policy



Evidence-based messages in the first section of this document focus on alcohol's harms and can be used to make the case with stakeholders for the need for policies that protect the public.



Introduction

Alcohol is a unique product that causes harms to individuals, their families, colleagues, communities and society on a worldwide scale. Reducing these harms requires a population-based public health solution.

“Of all the threats to human health, it is alcohol that causes the widest range of injury... It shrinks the brain and impairs the intellect. It causes failure of the liver, heart and peripheral nerves. It contributes to depression, violence and the breakup of personal and social life. It has been blamed for a quarter of all deaths on the road...”

Dr. Geoffrey Rose, Rose's Strategy of Preventive Medicine, 2008⁽⁹⁾

Efforts to regulate the use of alcohol date back to ancient China, 2205 B.C., when Emperor Yu imposed a tax to reduce consumption.⁽¹⁰⁾ Over centuries, alcohol has been used in many societies as a social lubricant, during religious ceremonies as an offering to ancestors or deities, and to commemorate important milestones, such as weddings and birthdays. But alcohol is also a toxic, psychoactive, carcinogenic substance with extensive health, social, psychological and financial costs to societies.

Unless alcohol policy is given more attention, alcohol-related chronic and acute harms will continue to grow as buying power, markets and per capita consumption around the world are likely to increase.^{(11) (12)}

This report is designed to help advocates and other stakeholders put effective population-level public health alcohol policies in place to reduce the harms the product causes.



- Globally, alcohol consumption causes 2.6 million deaths each year. This is equivalent to one person dying every 12 seconds.⁽¹⁾
- Unlike tobacco or unhealthy foods, alcohol harms in three distinct ways:
 - **Over the long term:** Alcohol causes liver disease, heart disease and at least seven types of cancer.^(13, 14)
 - **Acutely:** Alcohol plays a significant role in violence including homicide, suicide, child abuse and violence against women. Alcohol is also a significant cause of unintentional injuries from road crashes, falls and drownings.⁽¹⁵⁻²⁰⁾
 - **As an intermediate risk factor:** Alcohol is also a contributing factor to infectious diseases, such as HIV and tuberculosis.⁽²¹⁾
- Alcohol can cause physical, social, psychological and economic harms to those who drink, as well as their families and communities.⁽²²⁾
- The highest proportion of alcohol-related deaths is among people 20–39 years old.⁽¹⁾
- Alcohol is a leading cause of preventable birth defects.⁽²³⁾
- Alcohol makes socioeconomic inequalities worse: It disproportionately harms people with fewer resources.⁽²⁴⁾

In high-income countries, more than 90% of the mortality burden of alcohol is among four major causes of death: cancer, heart disease, liver disease and injuries.⁽²⁵⁾

In regions with fewer resources, including sub-Saharan Africa, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and respiratory infections are among the leading causes of alcohol-attributable deaths.⁽¹⁷⁾



Economics

- The costs of alcohol use dwarf any positive economic contribution of the alcohol trade. Alcohol consumption increases health care costs and decreases economic productivity, thereby jeopardizing overall economic stability and growth, including negative consequences on national health and welfare systems.^(26, 27)
- For every dollar invested in reducing alcohol-related harms by increasing taxes, restricting marketing and reducing availability, the return on investment is more than ninefold.⁽²⁸⁾

Reducing Harms

- The more alcohol a person drinks, the greater the harm.
- No one type of alcohol is “safer” or healthier. The harm is related to the total amount of alcohol in a beverage. Often, people consume lower alcohol products, such as beer, in higher quantities.
- The best way to minimize the social and health harms of alcohol is to lower consumption overall.⁽²⁷⁾
- The death, disability and injury burdens caused by alcohol are largely preventable using effective, evidence-based, population-wide measures.⁽³⁾
- The three most cost-effective alcohol policies in the WHO [SAFER](#) initiative on alcohol-related harms are: increasing taxes, restricting marketing and regulating availability.^(29, 30)

The Alcohol Industry

- As the alcohol industry continues to consolidate and expand, profits are concentrated among a very small number of people, while the negative effects have an impact on a large proportion of the world’s population.
- The alcohol industry often misleadingly frames solutions in terms of individual behavior. For example, they promote “drink responsibly” campaigns, which have not been shown to reduce alcohol harms, rather than evidence-based policies that protect populations.⁽³¹⁾
- Around the world, the alcohol industry uses aggressive marketing tactics that encourage alcohol consumption and perpetuate idealized, glamorous images of alcohol use.^(27, 29)
- To continue to grow their profits, the alcohol industry aggressively seeks and targets new customers including women and those living in fast-growing markets, which are often countries with fewer resources.⁽³²⁾
- Voluntary industry self-regulation of alcohol marketing and other activities is not a substitute for government policy, although it is often touted by the industry to distract from the implementation of effective measures.^(33, 34)
- The alcohol industry has the financial and political power to block and derail sound public health policies that threaten its profits.^(35, 36) It uses a roster of tactics to advance its interests and block effective policies, similar to those used by tobacco companies.^(5, 37, 38)

Burden and Imperative



Alcohol, along with tobacco, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and air pollution, is a leading risk factor for poor health and preventable death worldwide. Its crippling burden extends beyond health to the social fabric, the economy, global development and the environment. Exposing these truths can encourage urgent action.

The Disease Burden

Around the world, approximately 2.6 million people die each year from alcohol-related causes.⁽¹⁾ Alcohol is a major determinant of ill health and one of the most common preventable risk factors for NCDs. It can damage nearly every organ and system of the body.^(27, 39) **Alcohol consumption is a major risk factor for liver disease and cirrhosis, and it causes at least seven types of cancer.**^(13, 18)

In addition, alcohol can contribute to **diabetes, heart disease and stroke.** By weakening the immune system, increasing the risk of transmission through risky behaviors, and undermining adherence to treatments, alcohol can also contribute to respiratory and infectious diseases, such as **HIV and tuberculosis.**^(14, 29)

The cancer burden—a downplayed danger: Alcohol is a carcinogen. There is strong and growing scientific evidence of a causal relationship between alcohol and multiple types of cancer, including cancers of the mouth, throat, larynx, breast and liver, as well as colorectal and esophageal cancers. For some cancers, such as breast cancer, risk begins to increase at lower levels of consumption.⁽¹³⁾



Harm to Others

Alcohol not only hurts people who use it—it also hurts those around them. **Alcohol plays a significant role in homicides, suicides, car crashes, falls, child abuse and violence against women.**⁽¹¹⁾ Some studies found alcohol plays a role in more than half of all violent events globally.^(40, 41)

- The use of alcohol by women who are pregnant can result in fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, which can cause lifelong physical, mental and/or neurological disabilities.
- In Europe, alcohol is a factor in 40% of homicides.⁽⁴²⁾
- Among South African women experiencing intimate partner violence, almost half reported that alcohol played a role.⁽⁴³⁾
- Almost 29% of men who reported drinking heavily on a weekly basis in Mexico engaged in physical violence toward their partners.⁽⁴⁴⁾

- Recent surveys commissioned by Vital Strategies also found the link between alcohol and family violence to be a top concern among Mexican and Brazilian women.

The Economic Burden

Alcohol consumption increases health care costs, impedes family obligations, decreases economic productivity, jeopardizes the economic sustainability of national health and welfare systems, and erodes GDP. A systematic review estimates the total economic costs attributable to alcohol consumption at Int\$1,306 per adult*, representing on average 2.6% of a country's GDP.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Alcohol also burdens public safety and justice systems.⁽¹¹⁾

- The cost of alcohol to the U.S. economy was estimated at US\$249 billion annually in 2010. Updated for inflation, that figure would be US\$364 billion as of 2024.⁽⁴⁶⁾

- In Mexico, the costs associated with alcohol were US\$27 billion in 2021, which represented 2.1% of GDP.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The Global Burden

As the alcohol industry expands operations and markets, especially in Latin America, Asia and Africa,^(1, 48-50) rising alcohol consumption poses health and social risks that are magnified in poorer countries. These countries often lack health and medical services that are adequate to manage the burdens associated with alcohol harms.^(32, 51) **Decreasing consumption in wealthy parts of the world is likely to encourage a shift in alcohol industry marketing to regions with fewer available resources.**⁽⁵²⁾

*2019 international dollars (Int\$). An international dollar is a hypothetical currency that aims to have the same purchasing power everywhere.

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The Environmental Burden

Making alcohol products requires a lot of water, a critical and increasingly scarce resource in much of the world. For example, it takes about 300 liters of water to make one liter of beer from barley.⁽⁵³⁾ This is a pressing issue where water resources are scarce. In Mexico, a mayor told *The Guardian*: The breweries seem to have “industrial amounts of water to make beer, [while] the municipality of Zaragoza doesn’t have 100 liters [per second] of water to give people to drink or use in their homes.”⁽⁵⁴⁾

Young People

Young people are disproportionately affected by alcohol consumption. In 2019, people aged 20 to 39 years had the highest proportion of alcohol-attributable deaths of all age groups, representing 13% of all alcohol-related deaths.⁽¹⁾ That same year, the prevalence of alcohol consumption among 15- to 19-year-olds was 22% worldwide—boys and girls combined.

Increases have also been seen in some areas where consumption levels were previously low.⁽¹⁾

The earlier a young person starts drinking alcohol, the higher the risk of a pattern of heavy alcohol use later in life. There is also growing concern that youth alcohol consumption is beginning earlier, as young people can now be targeted more specifically with digital marketing.^(55, 56)

- More than 1 in 5 (22%) 15- to 19-year-olds worldwide consumed alcohol in 2019.⁽¹⁾
- In South Africa, the average age at which adolescents try alcohol is 13 years old. About 25% of adolescents report binge drinking in the previous 30 days.⁽⁵⁷⁾
- In Mexico, 55% of males 15-19 years and older who consume alcohol engaged in binge drinking.⁽¹⁾
- Researchers found the British multinational alcohol company Diageo was attracted to the size and demographic characteristics of

India’s population. Starting in 2013, Diageo acquired market shares in the country and focused much of its marketing on encouraging women and youth to increase their consumption.⁽³²⁾

- Children whose parents were identified as having “severe alcohol problems” during hospital intake were found to have a 30% higher probability of experiencing violence.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The definition of binge drinking varies around the world, but it refers to high alcohol consumption on a single occasion. It’s also often called heavy episodic drinking, including in official WHO documents. In the United States, binge drinking is defined as four or more standard drinks for women and five or more drinks per men in one sitting —approximately two hours.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Alcohol, Global Health and Development

Reducing alcohol consumption has been acknowledged at the highest levels of government as a health and development priority through the endorsement of the “WHO Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022-2030,” and its integration into global targets for NCDs and development in [the U.N.’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#).⁽³⁾

But with countries falling behind on targets to reduce alcohol consumption,^(60, 61) projections suggest progress in global health and development might be limited.^(61, 62) The tools for action are available, but global commitments remain unfulfilled.



Alcohol Makes Health, Social and Economic Disparities Worse

As markets in Europe, Australia and North America become saturated, alcohol companies are growing their markets in other regions, including Africa, Asia and Latin America.⁽⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰⁾ Countries in these regions often have fewer resources to bear the burden of alcohol harms and have less regulation on alcohol, putting their people at higher risk.⁽¹⁾

Alcohol results in more deaths and disability for those who lack access to a doctor or health care services when alcohol-related illnesses arise.^(63, 64) Early lifesaving diagnoses and treatments of conditions such as cancers are also less likely to be available to those without easy access to health care.

Alcohol consumption makes existing social inequalities more profound: People in low socio-economic groups, as well as their families and communities, experience more harm per liter of alcohol consumed than those in higher socioeconomic groups. Notably, people in low socioeconomic groups have a higher risk of dying from an alcohol-attributable cause than people in higher socioeconomic groups—even at lower consumption levels, because of differences in access to health care, nutritional deficiencies and comorbidities, among other factors.⁽²⁴⁾

In South Africa, researchers found that those in low socioeconomic brackets have a 4.5-fold higher alcohol-attributable death rate compared to those in high socioeconomic brackets.⁽⁶⁵⁾

While alcohol is a factor in as many as 37% of traffic crash deaths in the European region, mortality and serious injuries as a result of drink driving are higher in countries where road conditions are poorer, and where there is a higher density of both vehicles and pedestrians on the road.⁽⁶⁶⁻⁶⁸⁾

A high density of sites where alcohol is sold, such as liquor stores and bars, can be loud and disruptive. Those in wealthy areas tend to have more influence when it comes to reducing the number of bars and other places to buy alcohol in their neighborhoods, with the result that while wealthier people generally consume more alcohol, their communities suffer less from the crime, violence and other negative consequences associated with a dense concentration of alcohol outlets.⁽⁶⁹⁻⁷²⁾





Alcohol Makes Risky Behavior More Deadly

Alcohol exponentially increases the risk and severity of certain diseases and injuries. For example, not only does alcohol increase the chance that someone will have a car crash, but it also increases crash severity, as crashes involving alcohol are more likely to be fatal.^(73, 74) Alcohol also increases the risks associated with domestic violence, child abuse and violent behavior in general, as it can fuel aggressive behavior.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Some studies found that about half of all reported sexual assaults involve alcohol.^(76, 77) And because alcohol impairs judgment and decision-making, its consumption also leads to more sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

“MODERATE DRINKING”

An important impediment to alcohol policymaking has been the perception that alcohol is only a problem among people who drink heavily, and that a “health benefit” could come from moderate alcohol consumption.

For example, some studies in the past several decades suggested a heart health benefit from red wine in particular. **These findings have since been challenged**, in large part because of study design flaws and the limitation that most of these studies were observational. But the shift in scientific consensus has not been widely communicated to the public and misperceptions persist.^(14, 78-82)

More recent findings linking cancer to alcohol led WHO to alter its messaging to point out that when it comes to cancer, there is “no safe level of consumption.” As cancer research evolves, some countries such as Canada, France, the United Kingdom and Australia have tightened their guidelines on alcohol consumption. For example, Canada provides guidelines that focus on risk with the aim of encouraging people to drink less.⁽⁸³⁾ Most recently in the U.S., joint hypertension guidelines from the American Heart Association and American College of Cardiology recommend “ideally consuming no alcohol,” recognizing that alcohol can increase high blood pressure at any level of consumption.⁽⁸⁴⁾ More generally, what is clear is that the higher the alcohol consumption, the greater the risk of disease and other harms.⁽⁸⁵⁻⁸⁷⁾

Meanwhile, the alcohol industry uses any limited evidence to fuel doubts about risk, often conducting their own research or funding others to bolster their claims. Unsurprisingly, studies show that industry-sponsored research tends to favor the interests of the funder.⁽⁸⁸⁾ **The most recent independent, comprehensive, systematic review on the topic—a highly robust meta-analysis that included review of more than 1,200 studies and data sources across 195 countries—asserted that the health risks of alcohol outweigh any health benefits.**⁽¹⁴⁾

Canada's guidelines reflect the continuum of risk associated with alcohol consumption. Reproduced with permission from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.



The Alcohol Burden

BY THE NUMBERS

Around the world, approximately **2.6 million people** die each year from alcohol-related causes.⁽¹⁾

40% In Europe, alcohol is a factor in **40% of homicides**.⁽⁴²⁾



Among South African women experiencing intimate partner violence, **almost half reported that alcohol played a role**.⁽⁴³⁾

29% Almost **29% of men** in Mexico who reported drinking heavily on a weekly basis engaged in physical violence toward their partners.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Children whose parents were identified as having “severe alcohol problems” during hospital intake were found to have a **30% higher probability of experiencing violence**.⁽⁵⁸⁾

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\$249 Billion The cost of alcohol to the U.S. economy was estimated at **US\$249 billion annually in 2010**. Updated for inflation, that figure would be US\$364 billion as of 2024.⁽⁴⁷⁾

2.1% GDP In Mexico, the costs associated with alcohol were **US\$27 billion in 2021**, which represented **2.1% of GDP**.⁽⁴⁸⁾

As the alcohol industry expands operations and markets, especially in Latin America, Asia and Africa,^(1, 49-51) rising alcohol consumption poses health and social risks that are magnified in poorer countries.

*2019 international dollars (Int\$). An international dollar is a hypothetical currency that aims to have the same purchasing power everywhere.

The Alcohol Industry



The alcohol industry is a huge and formidable foe. Its consolidation has enhanced its capacity to heavily market alcohol across the globe. Exposing its tactics is crucial to policy advocacy.

Consolidation = Power

Like its tobacco counterpart, the alcohol industry is dominated by a small group of transnational companies that control more than half of the world market.^(89, 90) Companies of this magnitude present the biggest challenge to governments seeking to implement evidence-based measures to prevent and reduce alcohol harms.⁽²⁹⁾ **Their size allows them to deploy considerable resources to promote the interests of the industry.**

Though alcohol companies have been able to convince many governments, and even international development agencies, that their presence and products are good for local economies, most of their profits are returned to a small number of people in wealthy countries where the companies are headquartered, leaving behind large burdens of illness, injury and early death.^(91, 92)

Alcohol companies have also been called out for their working conditions.

- The Brazilian brewery Kaiser, owned by Heineken, was added to the government's list of companies responsible for labor conditions analogous to slavery in 2023.⁽⁹³⁾
- In 2019, investigative journalist Oliver van Beemen reported that Heineken had engaged in a wide range of unethical practices in Africa, ranging from human rights violations and failure to ensure workplace safety to working conditions that resulted in sexual abuse and exploitation of women.



For more on managing industry interference, see:

Responding to Industry Arguments on page 38

Lessons from Tobacco on page 41



Premixed drinks, featuring Coca-Cola and Jack Daniels in partnership.
©Jack Daniels Properties, Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company

An Explosion of New Products

In many countries, including the United States, Mexico and Brazil, beer is the most popular alcohol product—especially among youth.^(90, 94)

But in recent years, there has been an explosion of products: new ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages and “alcopops”; “health conscious” beverages such as low-carbohydrates and low-calorie products; and no- and low-alcohol beverages (or “NoLos”). An industry response to declining per capita consumption of alcohol in some countries, these new products are anticipated to drive rapid sales growth in key markets.^(95, 96)

Ready-to-drink beverages and “alcopops” are often sold in cans and have long been concerning because of their popularity with young people. Today, partnerships with popular brands have created new ready-to-go drinks including Jack Daniels and Coca-Cola, as well as Bacardi and Coca-Cola. These partnerships have led to a dizzying array of choices, often appearing to target young people, and

defying simple product classification. In the United States, Hard Mountain Dew, hard Simply Lemonade, hard seltzers, “Ranch Water” and spiked Dunkin Donuts coffees are now all available on shelves in many grocery stores.

New low-sugar, low-carbohydrate and gluten-free options have been developed to cater to an ever-broadening “health conscious” consumer base. These health claims are generally unregulated and can lead consumers to misunderstand the risk associated with these products, discourage them from seeking more information, and even drive them to consume more.⁽⁹⁵⁾

Meanwhile, NoLos, which typically, contain between 0% and 3.7% alcohol by volume, account for about 3.5% of the global market.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Some studies suggest they might help people cut back their alcohol consumption and reduce harms. The long-term impact on public health of these products remains unknown.

Because only a few countries regulate the definition of NoLos, their alcohol content can vary widely. Furthermore,

these beverages may also contribute to the normalization of alcohol consumption, especially since they are often marketed and branded just like their high-alcohol counterparts. In the absence of regulation, there is a concern NoLos may prime children to drink earlier as they become familiarized with the flavors, look and brands available on the market.⁽⁹⁷⁾

This growing range of alcoholic beverages available presents new challenges, but effective policy can help limit their potential harm. For example, effective taxation design based on alcohol by volume can tackle the issue of varying alcohol content by reducing the availability of products in proportion to the harms they cause. Meanwhile, the use of alcoholic beverage brands for non-alcoholic products (known as brand extension) can be addressed by effective marketing restrictions.



See more in **The Need for Policy** on page 25.



A wide range of new alcohol products sit side by side in store coolers. ©Trong Nguyen/Shutterstock.com

The power of industry interference to stand in the way of sound alcohol policy should not be underestimated.

The Problem With Public-Private Partnerships

The alcohol industry is often accepted as a partner at the highest levels of government, including at the United Nations. As an illustration, to support the delivery of drugs and vaccines in rural Africa, The Global Fund partnered with Heineken to take advantage of their vast distribution networks.⁽⁹⁸⁾ In 2019, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research partnered with British alcohol company Diageo [to ostensibly reduce drink driving](#).^(98, 99) While they appear to be worthy causes, these partnerships can encourage global leaders to underestimate alcohol as a top driver of NCDs and to distract them with unproven or ineffective approaches, critically undermining a government's ability to champion policies that reduce alcohol harms.

Marketing: Alcohol Advertising, Promotion and Sponsorship

The alcohol industry is among the largest advertisers in the world.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ The industry employs advertising to accomplish two main goals: to lure and recruit new customers, and to normalize and promote alcohol in markets to increase global consumption and profits. Alcohol corporations have massive marketing budgets. In 2023, the six largest alcohol companies, spent more than US\$19 billion on advertising globally.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

CAN WARNING LABELS COUNTERACT ALCOHOL MARKETING?

Highly visible warning labels with messages about cancer and other health harms can be effective at the population level as a means of increasing understanding of the risks involved in consumption and even reducing sales, especially if the messages are updated often.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Graphic pictorial warning labels are known to be an effective strategy to reduce tobacco use, especially when the warnings are large, easy to see and understand, and graphically depict specific harms such as cancer. Warning labels identifying alcohol as a product that can be harmful can also increase support for other alcohol policies.⁽¹⁰³⁾

In 2025, the U.S. Surgeon General called for cancer warnings to be placed on alcohol products, citing the 100,000 alcohol-attributable cancer cases in the U.S. each year, including one in six breast cancers. Only a handful of countries, such as South Korea, currently have labels mentioning cancer. Ireland's warning labels, focusing on cancer and liver disease, are scheduled to come into effect in 2028. In the Yukon Territory, Canada, concerns about legal action from the alcohol industry halted a study on the impact of cancer warning labels on alcohol products, which suggests the industry is threatened by a public that is more informed about the harms of alcohol.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾



Film star George Clooney, marketing tequila. ©Casamigos Tequila, LLC

Marketing to Youth

The alcohol industry often deploys advertising, promotions and sponsorships that appeal to youth, such as online events with downloadable games and party invitations,⁽⁵⁶⁾ as well as popular sporting events and teams. Mega-sporting events are so important to the industry's bottom line that in Brazil and Russia, advertising restrictions were loosened to allow Budweiser to sponsor FIFA during the 2014 and 2018 World Cups.^(105, 106) As a result, an estimated 325 million people under the age of 16 were exposed to alcohol marketing during these events.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

Research has demonstrated that exposure to alcohol advertisements increases the likelihood, frequency and volume of alcohol consumption among youth.^(29, 42, 55) Alcohol advertisements also create false expectations about how alcohol will make people feel and be perceived by others⁽⁴²⁾—**tapping into values and ideas that are important to young people: happiness, glamour, success, bravery, mystery, adventure, fun,**

popularity, wealth, sex appeal and the desire to be hip.⁽²⁷⁾

Young people are particularly susceptible to alcohol messages because they often lack the control, judgment and cognitive maturity to understand the sophisticated ways in which they are being manipulated by advertising.^(107, 108) The evidence is strong: A recent review of the literature concluded that exposure to alcohol advertising encourages young people to use alcohol and to consume it in larger quantities.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

Alcohol advertisements are found where young people congregate, including digital and social media such as TikTok and Instagram.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Much of today's online marketing is ephemeral and highly personalized, based on individual buying habit data and recognizable purchasing patterns. Influencer marketing and product placement make it more difficult to differentiate a friend or acquaintance who likes a product from someone who is being paid by the industry to sell a seemingly fabulous life—blurring the line between obvious advertising and

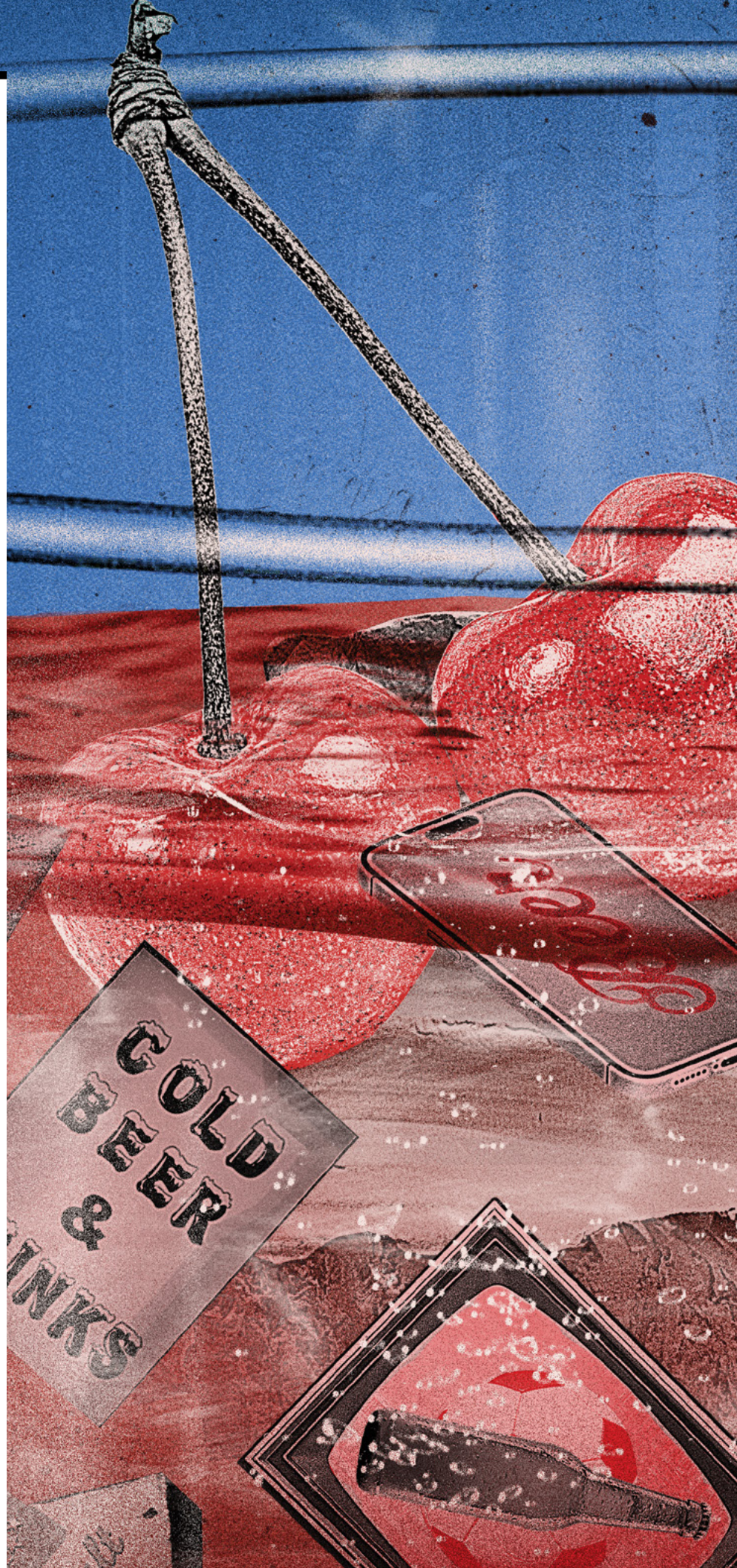
subtle messaging without any clear disclosure of financial relationships. Companies know the power of this: In 2012, some alcohol companies were reported to have the highest engagement rate of any industry on popular online sites.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Alongside these tactics, the industry continues to use long-established methods: For example, in 2012, Heineken paid an estimated US\$45 million for placement in a James Bond spy movie.⁽¹¹¹⁾

A Public Health Perspective: Taking Back the Alcohol Narrative

For decades, the industry has had a lock on public perceptions of alcohol, spending billions to convey that nearly all aspects of social life can be accompanied by their products. Alcohol is affordable and ubiquitous: It is seen in advertisements, online and in movies. It is available in restaurants, cafes, bars and at parties and other gatherings, from football matches to funerals. Industry influence is immense: Tactics encourage consumption and drive young people to begin using alcohol.

AB InBev, the world's largest alcohol company, controls a quarter of the world's beer market and collected US\$59 billion in revenue in 2023—more than the GDPs of over half of countries in the world.^(98, 112) A substantial portion of this money is used to advertise, market and promote their products as well as to influence national policy on alcohol.

It's in this context that the industry consistently frames the issue of alcohol harms as a personal one, by focusing on “irresponsible behavior” such as drink driving or drinking while pregnant, as well as people with alcohol use disorders. Such framing ignores that alcohol is a population-wide problem that transcends individual behavior and can't solely be explained by personal choices. Individuals are affected by environments in which alcohol is marketed and sold nearly everywhere. Furthermore, relying on individuals, especially young adults, to be responsible for their actions when they are using alcohol, which impairs judgment, is not an effective strategy and can delay government efforts to enact effective policies that reduce alcohol harms. Policy approaches are more effective than relying on individual behavior to tackle this immense challenge.⁽⁹⁰⁾





COLD
BEER

LIQUOR
BARN
COLD
BEER



BEER



Samba parades and parties sponsored by the alcohol company Beefeater in Rio de Janeiro during Carnival 2025. ©Pernod Ricard

Marketing to Women

Men consume alcohol more than women. They also suffer from the health harms more: Each year, 2 million men die from alcohol-related causes, compared to 600,000 women.⁽⁴⁾

To encourage more women to drink, the industry mounts campaigns to make alcohol more socially acceptable and popular among women. This strategy has proven largely successful, and as a result, alcohol consumption by women, especially those of higher socioeconomic status, is catching up to that of men.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Recent advertisements targeting women paint alcohol as a balm for the stresses of raising children and a busy life—encouraging them to spend their free time consuming alcohol on a night out with friends or after a busy day, promising relaxation, fun and even a boost in confidence.⁽¹¹³⁾ Where alcohol consumption among women is low, the industry markets alcohol to women using sweet and/or fruity flavors to make it more palatable to them.

To appear socially aware to women, Smirnoff partnered with music service Spotify to create “Smirnoff Equalizer,” offering listening options featuring an equal proportion of male and female artists. In India, Diageo, Smirnoff’s parent company, told the media that rising alcohol consumption among women offered Diageo growth opportunities: “That is a target segment we need to keep in mind and ensure that our brands get more bilingual and speak to both sets of audiences, not just be male-centric.”⁽³²⁾

A Mexican documentary film entitled “Daughters of Mezcal,” sponsored in part by tequila companies, tells the story of women who together fought the status quo with grit and determination to become mezcal producers, breaking up a male monopoly to get their fair share of this economic boom.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ The documentary presents the women celebrating their success by drinking mezcal and heralds their work as a form of progress and emancipation for women.

Marketing alcohol to women is reminiscent of tobacco industry tactics. When the tobacco industry began targeting women, tobacco control advocates responded by warning that “women who smoke like men will die like men.” But alcohol may have even more negative effects on women. **Women’s bodies are generally smaller than men’s, with more body fat and a different physiology that makes them more prone to brain, heart and liver damage from alcohol.**⁽²⁹⁾ Consumption of one drink per day increases the risk of breast cancer in women by as much as 10%.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ **In reality, women who drink like men are more likely to die than men.**



Responsible drinking or encouraging more partying? ©Absolut Vodka

“Corporate Social Responsibility”

Stakeholder marketing and so-called “corporate social responsibility” programs aim to improve the industry’s standing with the public and policymakers and can help deflect efforts to regulate its activities. These range from school-based education programs for young people to ride services for inebriated adults. These measures have been found to have limited effectiveness for reducing alcohol harms^(38, 116) but offer very visible branding opportunities.

For example, Absolut Vodka used “responsible drinking” messages as part of their branding in their “Enjoy with Absolut responsibly” ad campaign.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ A lack of sincerity in these messages has led researchers to characterize them as promotion strategies⁽¹¹⁸⁾—a sales appeal dressed up in

a “public interest costume.”⁽¹¹⁹⁾ “Drink responsibly” messages are also often placed at the bottom of the very ads that promise a long night of fun while consuming alcohol at a party, or other tempting appeals aimed at young people.

Alcohol companies also seek to partner with nonprofit groups to enhance their standing in the eyes of the public and policymakers. One example is the 2017 “Beers for Africa” campaign, which positioned alcohol as an aid against poverty. In a partnership between South African Breweries (SAB) and Stop Hunger Now SA, an international nonprofit, SAB promised that for every pack of beer sold, they would provide three students living in poverty with a meal.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Notably, after pushback from international public health advocates, the “Beers for Africa” campaign was terminated.

WHO’s 2024 global status report on alcohol found that alcohol use is increasing primarily in the African, Eastern Mediterranean and South-East Asia regions.⁽¹⁾

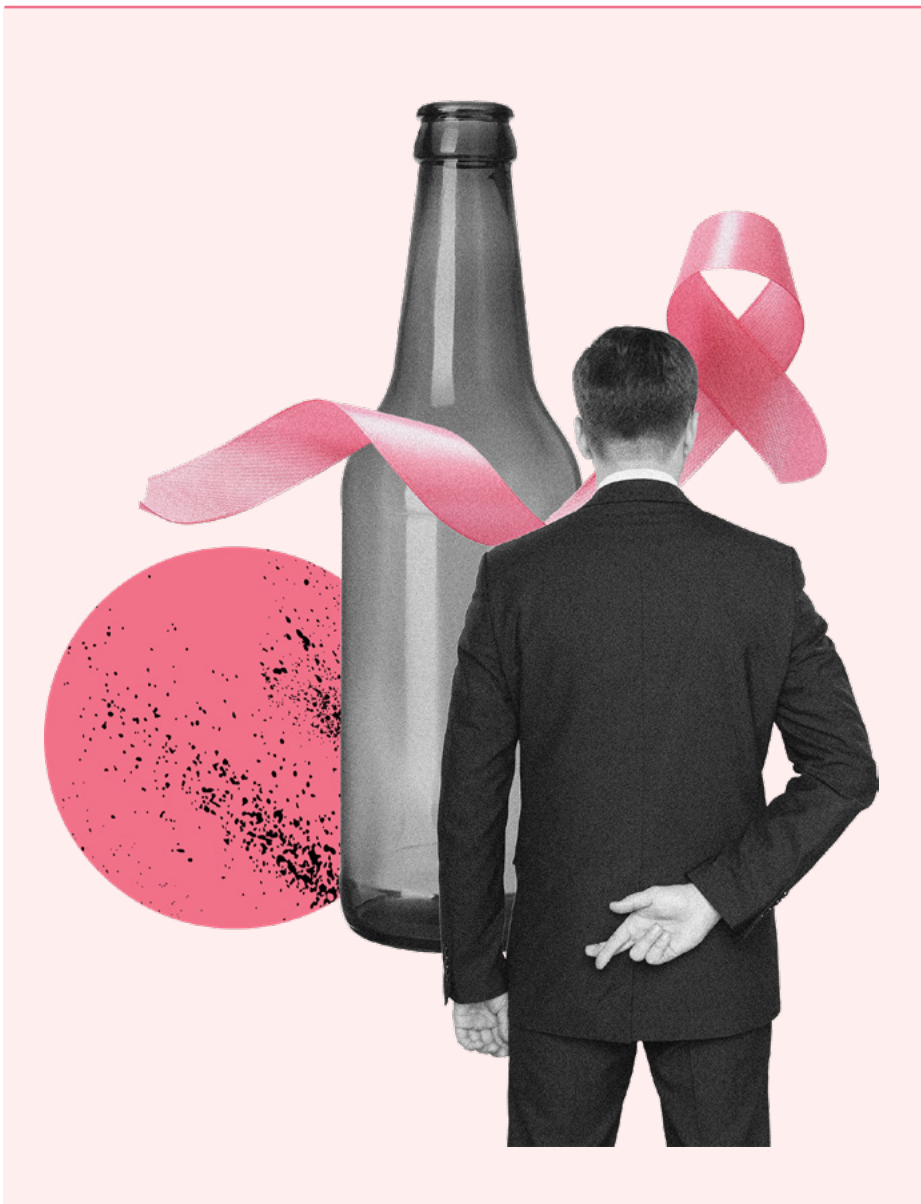
“What we want from Africa is [beer] volume growth that is above the world average.”

Ricardo Tadeu,

Zone President of Anheuser-Busch Inbev/SABMiller ⁽¹²¹⁾

“Pinkwashing” is another notable form of “corporate social responsibility” activity used by the alcohol industry. It refers to the widespread use of the color pink on products, at events, etc., in an attempt to appeal to women and/or to show a company’s commitment to women’s issues. In the case of alcohol, the industry sponsors activities associated with breast cancer organizations, awareness events and groups focused on finding a cure for breast cancer. This practice is highly hypocritical, given the evidence linking alcohol consumption to an increased risk of breast cancer.^(115, 122)

A similar example is “greenwashing”—sponsoring activities designed to help the environment, such as beach cleanups, while using scarce water resources in arid parts of the world to grow and process the crops needed to produce beer.



CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

“Corporate social responsibility” is typically portrayed as the social conscience of companies, or their philanthropic arm, but it can also serve as a form of marketing, garnering goodwill for brands and their owners. “Corporate social responsibility” activities often divert attention from alcohol-related social and health problems and from policy solutions. Corporate giving for causes like poverty or women’s rights can serve to create allies and seek the ability to influence policymaking.



A Lack of Regulation

The alcohol industry's marketing reach is expansive, especially in countries with fewer resources, where advertising regulations may be limited or absent.

Globally, self-regulation is the most common method of regulation on alcohol promotion and sales, but voluntary codes have been shown to be ineffective.^(33, 34, 123) A review of over 100 studies of voluntary industry codes across 20 countries from Australia to Ghana found that the alcohol industry did not follow its own codes in its marketing and advertising.⁽³³⁾ One study found that during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, one of the most popular sporting events in history, 86% of alcohol advertising contained at least one violation of an industry code, such as promoting excessive alcohol consumption.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

“ The alcohol industry “cannot sit at the table or have a voice when WHO defines its standards and preventive strategies, and it cannot supplant government’s role in formulating policies for alcohol control.”

Former WHO Director-General **Margaret Chan**, 2013⁽¹²⁴⁾

ILLUMINATING INDUSTRY INTERFERENCE

In the late 1990s, four countries in sub-Saharan Africa were found to have uncannily similar draft national alcohol policies that prioritized the protection of industry interests. These drafts were found to have been authored by alcohol industry representatives.⁽¹²⁵⁾ In at least one case, the industry draft was adopted.

The Need for Policy



The health, safety and socioeconomic problems attributable to alcohol can be effectively reduced by focusing on evidence-based, cost-effective policies. Strong leadership is needed from governments to ensure industry interference does not undermine policy development and implementation.

A Public Health Approach to Alcohol Harms

In recent years, the public health community has gained some traction in its initiatives to reduce alcohol harms. At the international level, [SAFER](#), the WHO technical package, was launched in 2018 to outline the five most effective interventions to reduce alcohol-related harms:

- ☐ **Strengthening restrictions on alcohol availability**
- ☐ **Advancing and enforcing drink driving countermeasures**
- ☐ **Facilitating access to screening, brief interventions and treatment**
- ☐ **Enforcing bans or comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion**
- ☐ **Raising prices on alcohol through excise taxes and pricing policies**

“Best Buys” Policies

WHO further identifies three “best buys” for reducing alcohol harms to reduce the burden of NCDs: increasing excise taxes on alcohol, restricting or banning exposure to alcohol advertising, and restricting the physical availability of retail alcohol via reduced hours of sale. There is strong evidence that these policies are the most cost-effective at reducing alcohol harms, preventing disease and saving lives—ultimately reducing the health and social burden of alcohol on society.^(29, 30, 126) The next section offers details on each of these best buys.



Increasing excise taxes on alcohol



Restricting or banning exposure to alcohol advertising



Regulating the physical availability of retail alcohol



Increasing Taxes on Alcohol

Raising the price of alcohol by taxing products can reduce consumption and associated health and social harms and costs, and increase government revenues.

THE PROBLEM:

In many countries, alcohol products are too easy to access and too inexpensive to avert the harms associated with alcohol.

THE SOLUTION:

When governments tax unhealthy products like alcohol at high enough levels, producers typically increase the prices of these products.⁽¹²⁷⁾ Consumers, including young people and the heaviest drinkers, respond to increases in alcohol prices by consuming less. When people consume less of an unhealthy product, they reduce their risk of disease and premature death. And in the case of alcohol, they are less likely to be involved in acts of violence or road crashes and more likely to be productive in the workplace. Also, with less spending on alcohol, households can reallocate their spending in healthier and more productive ways, such as for food, clothing, education and health care.^(128, 129)

THE CHALLENGE:

Some people don't want alcohol products to become more expensive. Governments and advocates have an important role in communicating to decision-makers and the general public that it's in their best interest to move the whole population toward drinking less. There are many good reasons for this: It helps people make healthier choices; improves health; increases productivity at work; and reduces disease, sexual assaults, child abuse, homicides, suicides and other violence. In addition, taxes enable governments to raise much-needed revenue that can be reinvested back into the society to pay for health and social programs.

However, not all taxes are created equal. It's critical that economists with both tax and health policy expertise are involved in supporting governments as they establish effective alcohol tax structures so that new taxes will meet both revenue and health objectives, while limiting the ability of the industry to manipulate or circumvent new taxes.

In general, most economists favor specific excise taxes because they can efficiently and predictably generate revenue while discouraging the consumption of unhealthy products. Specific excise taxes also more effectively raise the prices of the cheapest products and shrink the amount of variation in prices, helping to ensure there aren't cheaper products on the market that people can buy instead. This type of tax is both easier to administer and harder to manipulate, compared to others, though the tax must be increased regularly (at least annually) to keep up with inflation and income growth.



For more on excise taxes, see [Glossary](#) on page 43.

SOUND ALCOHOL POLICY REDUCES RISK

To effectively develop and implement evidence-based alcohol policies, national governments, civil society, research organizations, and global leaders in public health and alcohol policy must work together. This is the model of RESET Alcohol, one of the first global collaborative initiatives guided by SAFER with a primary focus on increasing alcohol taxation to levels that will increase prices and reduce consumption. The initiative also seeks targeted opportunities to regulate availability and restrict marketing.

At the core of RESET's philosophy is the recognition that the risks associated with alcohol exist on a continuum and the higher the consumption, the higher the risk. Since this also means less is better, the RESET Alcohol initiative seeks to promote population-level policy guardrails to reduce the social, economic, and physical and mental health harms associated with alcohol consumption.

The initiative is led by Vital Strategies in collaboration with country governments and civil society as well as global technical partners that include Economics for Health, Global Alcohol Policy Alliance, Movendi International and WHO.

Smuggling and illicit alcohol production need to be addressed but should not be allowed to derail the use of tax increases as a strategy to reduce alcohol harms.

Evidence for Policy

Studies show that tax increases affect purchase and consumption patterns across age groups and populations, and prevent or delay young people from beginning to consume alcohol.⁽²⁶⁾

Norway and **Sweden** have some of the highest alcohol taxes in the world and, as a result, consumption has been reduced in both countries.⁽¹³²⁾

In the **Philippines**, alcohol taxes are earmarked to contribute to covering the costs of universal health care for those in lower socioeconomic groups.⁽¹³³⁾

Overcoming Challenges

In countries where alcohol taxes are in place, they are generally designed to generate government revenue but are in most cases too low to have any real effect on consumption and alcohol-related harms. In addition, many tax rates fail to keep up with inflation and rising purchasing power, allowing alcohol to become more affordable over time, especially as countries develop and people's purchasing power grows.

Although politicians are often wary of raising taxes, a survey commissioned by Vital Strategies in five countries found alcohol to be a significant concern among the public. It also found broad support for alcohol taxes, especially if the money is used to fund popular social programs such as health care and education. Polls also indicated public distrust of the alcohol industry and considerable agreement that government should take responsibility for alcohol-related harms.

Government officials will often cite concerns about increased illicit trade and substitution of unrecorded products, such as homemade alcohol, if prices go up. These concerns are frequently brought forward and overstated by the alcohol industry—just

as they are by the tobacco industry when it comes to tobacco taxes.⁽¹³⁴⁾

To address these concerns, countermeasures and provisions to reduce the production and use of unrecorded alcohol must be part of any plan to increase taxes.

For instance, where unrecorded alcohol is a major source of consumption, such as in parts of Africa, the industry often points to the presence of toxic adulterants as an argument against increasing taxes. This argument distracts from the toxicity of alcohol itself. In addition, a more sustainable solution to the hazards of unrecorded alcohol is the creation of a strong tax administration and enforcement system, significant penalties for violations, and the harmonization of tax increases across each region.^(27, 86) Moreover, a portion of the new tax revenues from increases can be used to counter illicit trade as well as to support public health initiatives that mitigate alcohol harms.



For more on addressing industry interference, see **Tools and Resources** on page 36.





Health Taxes: A Winning Formula

Health taxes are excise taxes levied on unhealthy products, most notably tobacco, alcohol and sugary beverages, that cause disease and premature death. These products are leading drivers of noncommunicable diseases including cancers, heart disease, lung disease and diabetes.

Health taxes, if set high enough, raise prices sufficiently to reduce consumption of unhealthy products and their associated harms.

The Task Force on Fiscal Policy for Health, a technical group of international fiscal policy, development and health experts, found that increasing the price of these three products by 50% worldwide could save 50 million lives over 50 years. Such taxes could also generate nearly US\$4 trillion globally in just five years. If these revenues were directed toward health, they could boost government health spending by a staggering 40% in low- and middle-income countries—a critical tool at a time of escalating health needs and tightening resources.⁽¹³⁰⁾

Yet health taxes remain one of the most underutilized tools available to governments striving to safeguard health, encourage economic resilience and boost development. And people are generally in favor of health taxes: A 2022 Gallup poll across economically diverse countries, including India, Colombia and Tanzania, found overwhelming support for higher taxes on harmful products—as high as 74% in some countries.⁽¹³¹⁾

Supporters of health taxes, including WHO, see health taxes as a triple win because they generate stable and predictable tax revenue; lead to healthier populations, while reducing health care costs; and support greater autonomy and long-term development.

Public health advocates have been focused on promoting excise taxes on tobacco for decades. Now, growing concern over the harms of alcohol has also elevated excise taxes as one of the most effective interventions to reduce alcohol-related NCDs and social harms.



Restricting Alcohol Marketing

Restricting marketing slows initiation by young people and reduces heavy consumption among adults.

New digital marketing tools make it ever easier to effectively target young people and heavy drinkers. Powered by social media algorithms, advertisements can now reach users with precision. Alcohol companies were early adopters of digital marketing: By 2012, they were reported to have the highest engagement rate of any industry on Facebook. Ubiquitous global marketing means alcohol is advertised about three times more than the average product with virtually no policy restrictions on these new platforms.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

Exposure to alcohol advertisements and digital marketing increases the likelihood that young people who do not consume alcohol will begin to do so. The ads also increase risky alcohol use, and the volume and frequency of consumption.⁽¹³⁵⁾ For heavy users and people with alcohol use disorders, as well as those trying to stop drinking, marketing also increases the urge to consume alcohol.^(86, 136) A systematic review of alcohol marketing also found a greater effect on consumption from engagement with digital media than from simple exposure.⁽¹³⁵⁾

Evidence for Policy

A comprehensive review of research on alcohol advertising bans by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) concluded that comprehensive bans—defined as a complete ban on all types of alcohol advertising in at least one major media type (i.e. print, broadcast, or outdoor)—is effective in reducing population-level alcohol consumption.⁽¹³⁷⁾

Russia implemented a ban on alcohol advertising in 1995 and on internet advertising in 2012, along with other evidence-based policy interventions. A study showed a large decrease in consumption as a result.⁽¹³⁸⁾

In **Norway**, a 2021 evaluation of a comprehensive marketing ban originally put in place in 1975 showed a 7% reduction in alcohol sales across all ages, and a 3% reduction among 15- and 16-year-olds. Norway subsequently added digital marketing to the ban.⁽¹³⁹⁾

Overcoming Challenges

The alcohol industry markets and advertises alcohol through a broad range of channels, many of which are completely unregulated. A growing online population offers new marketing opportunities that are exceedingly difficult for regulators

to keep up with, including targeting individuals based on their online activities and habits. Industry voluntary codes can restrict alcohol advertising to young people, but they are often only enforceable on traditional media, which now represent less than half of current marketing activity.⁽⁹⁰⁾

For instance, Heineken concentrates its marketing online, where young people spend much of their time. The alcohol company Diageo was among the top 20 Facebook advertisers in 2019.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ The industry even funds what researchers refer to as “dark apps”—industry digital tools directed at consumers to track their health that have been found to provide misleading information about alcohol and potentially encourage more alcohol consumption via “priming nudges” and “social norming.”⁽¹⁴¹⁾

Marketing restrictions must keep up with media trends and be comprehensive and forward thinking. Otherwise, the industry will simply move to new unregulated platforms. Restrictions must include internet sites, streaming services, promotion and brand extension, social media, video games and virtual reality, points of sale, product placement, apps, and algorithmic targeting—essentially all advertising.⁽¹³⁷⁾



There is strong evidence that these policies are the most cost-effective at reducing alcohol harms, preventing disease and saving lives.

Regulating the Availability of Alcohol

Enacting and enforcing restrictions on the availability of retail alcohol has been shown to reduce alcohol-related harms and injuries by making it less convenient to buy and consume. But online sales make retail availability significantly more difficult to control.

Most countries regulate alcohol availability through licensing systems. These dictate who can sell alcohol, who can buy it, the days and times it can be sold, and the locations and density of outlets where alcohol is available. Alcohol placement in retail outlets can also be regulated. Enforcement varies across countries and is often lacking or simply nonexistent in countries with fewer economic resources.^(123, 142)

Evidence for Policy

Research studies from many countries have shown links between the number of outlets allowed to sell alcohol and binge drinking and incidences of violence, as well as road crashes, chronic diseases and youth consumption.⁽¹⁴³⁻¹⁴⁶⁾ Additional studies show reducing hours of sale also reduced violence.^(147, 148)

In the **United States**, reducing hours of alcohol sales in a single neighborhood in the state of Maryland was associated with a 14% immediate decrease and 29% annual decrease in all violent crime. Homicide and assault rates also saw a 48% and 31% decrease annually, respectively.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾

In **Germany**, studies found that regulating hours of sale has the potential to prevent 54,000 injuries a year.⁽⁸⁶⁾

In **Switzerland**, restrictions on late-night sales led to significant reductions in hospital admissions associated with alcohol, especially among young people.^(149, 150)

Overcoming Challenges

While research demonstrates the effectiveness of limiting access to alcohol, there is still a great need to expand policy regulations and enforcement of availability around the world.⁽¹⁾ In particular, online sales, more prevalent in cities, allow alcohol to be brought to consumers' doors in record time and potentially without age verification.⁽¹⁵¹⁾ The growth in online sales globally—expected to surpass US\$36 billion, a 20% increase over the next five years—suggests this area needs a broader, more comprehensive strategy.⁽¹⁵²⁾

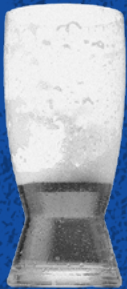
THE COVID LEGACY

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about temporary bans on alcohol in several countries including South Africa and Thailand. To avoid the closing of retail outlets, the industry fought to frame their products as “essential.” In South Africa, during periods of complete alcohol bans, trauma admission rates in hospital emergency rooms decreased significantly, compared to periods with partial bans or with no bans.⁽¹⁵³⁾

But when governments closed hotels, restaurants, bars and pubs to reduce the spread of the virus, the industry got creative. One brand marketed a “travel safe vodka” that could be used for the dual purpose of drinking and as a hand sanitizer.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ Online sales increased as to-go sales and online home delivery services exploded, something many consumers around the world had never experienced before. Delivery services continue to grow in some countries.⁽¹⁵⁵⁻¹⁵⁷⁾



**When alcohol is
taxed, alcohol
prices go up,
and when prices
go up...**



**Consumption
goes down**



**Health harms
go down**



**Road
crashes
go down**



**Violence
goes down**



“Alcohol Harms Those You Love the Most”: A message-tested campaign on alcohol’s role in domestic violence from Mexico, led by El Poder del Consumidor with support from RESET Alcohol. The campaign ran on buses and social media in 2024. The first phase of the campaign reached 11 million people. © El Poder del Consumidor, A.C.

Comprehensive Policies: Greater Than the Sum of Their Parts

Key prevention policies have the best chance of being effective when they are implemented in a systematic and complementary way, as part of a coherent strategy.

Multiple best-buy policies enacted together can contribute to changing the environment and social norms around alcohol more effectively.^(27, 86) Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) concluded that strategies combining several alcohol policies multiply or reinforce the impact of each intervention.^(87, 137)

This effect has been seen in Russia and Lithuania, where raising taxes, making alcohol less available and reducing promotion together resulted in substantial reductions in alcohol-related harms.^(138, 158)

Unfortunately, implementation of the most effective policy measures is generally lacking and highly uneven around the world, and progress on reducing alcohol harms will not be achieved without significant global and national commitment, investment and coordinated policy action.

Population-wide media campaigns can complement effective policy measures by garnering public support and increasing knowledge about the harms of certain products. These have been critical for reducing the prevalence of tobacco use as well as to raise support for public health policies such as smoke-free jurisdictions. Evidence-based campaigns have been shown to build support for alcohol health policy goals in Norway and New Zealand.^(159, 160) This strategy is also being used in Mexico and Brazil under the RESET Alcohol initiative.

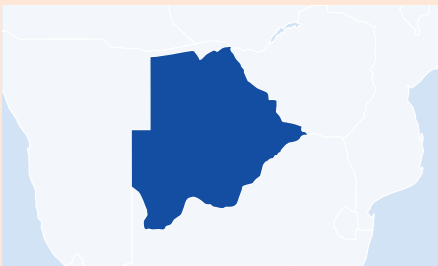
Case Studies: Alcohol Policy Success Stories

Countries where taxes and other evidence-based policies made a difference.

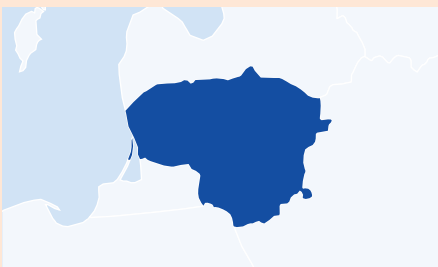


Nordic countries, including Finland, Norway and Sweden, have a long history of heavy drinking practices. Today, they are among a small group of countries with strong alcohol policies in place and the lowest levels of alcohol consumption in Europe. Their best-practice policies include:

- Excise taxes that resulted in higher prices and reductions in consumption, as well as corresponding health gains and increased tax revenues.
 - A comprehensive marketing ban that included digital marketing of alcohol in Norway and was found to protect not only youth but the whole population of the country.⁽¹³⁹⁾
 - Limiting alcohol availability through government-owned stores with limited hours and enforced age controls.
 - An explicit mission to protect health over profits.^(132, 161)
-



Botswana provides a clear example of the positive impact of alcohol taxation. In 2008, the country introduced a 30% levy on alcohol products and subsequently increased the alcohol tax two more times to reach 40% in 2010 and 55% in 2015. In the seven months that followed the introduction of the 2008 levy, traffic crash rates fell by 12%, and again by 12% after the 2010 increase. This was in the context of other alcohol policy and road safety reforms. But overall, alcohol taxation contributed to health and safety outcomes and generated critical revenue for the government.⁽¹²³⁾



Lithuania increased its alcohol tax in 2017, doubling the excise tax for beer and wine. The country also modestly increased the tax for spirits. Taxes on beer and wine are based on the amount of alcohol in the beverage—an international best practice. The tax measures were significantly associated with a decrease in all-cause mortality, with an estimated 1,452 fewer deaths in the year following implementation. Comprehensive alcohol policies were also put in place, including advertising restrictions, strengthened drink driving laws, and reduced availability such as ending the practice of selling alcohol at gas stations.⁽¹⁶²⁻¹⁶⁴⁾

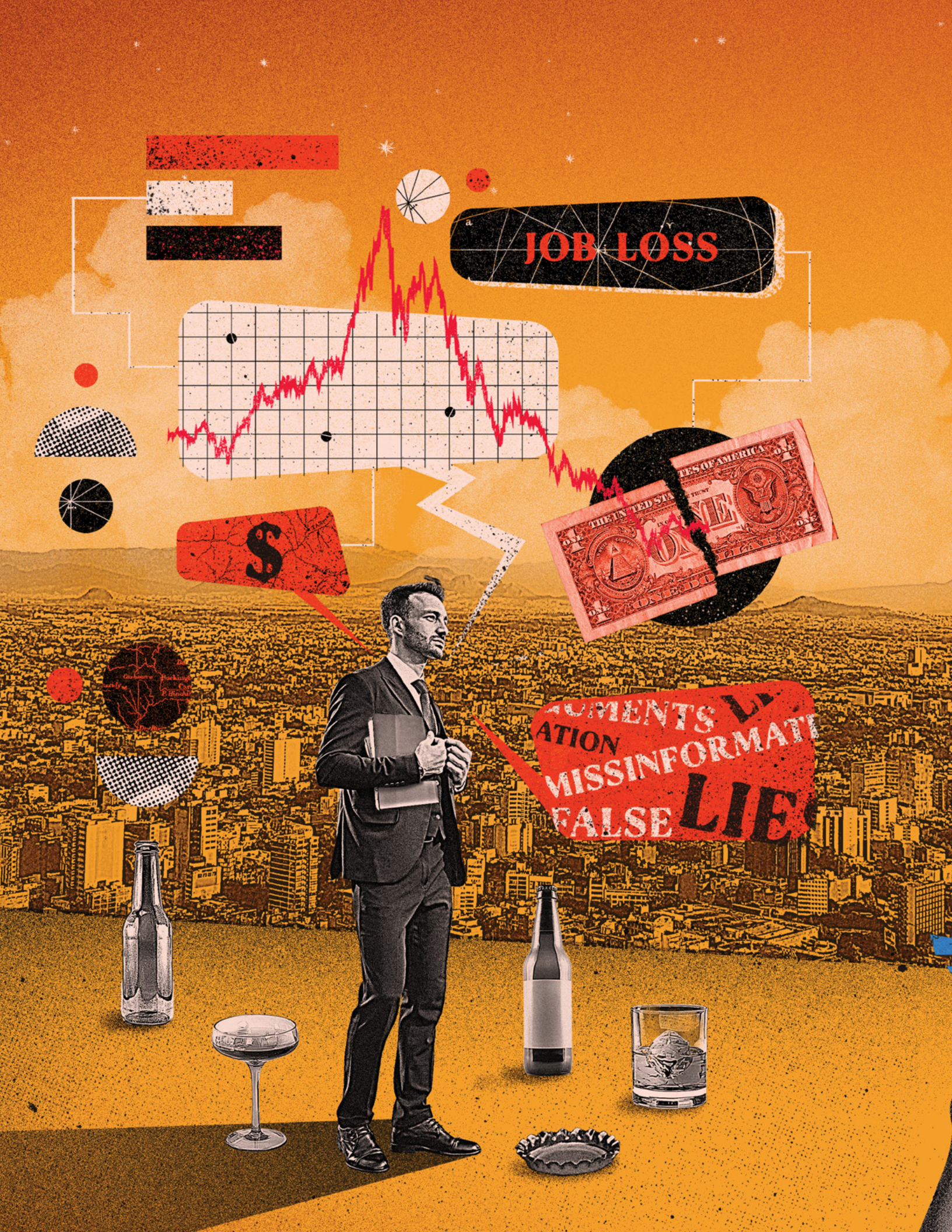


Thailand established a health promotion foundation in 2001, funded by alcohol and tobacco taxes, which generates about US\$120 million annually for health promotion activities, including mass media campaigns. The implementation of a strong national alcohol policy in 2008 slowed an upward trend in alcohol consumption.⁽¹⁶⁵⁻¹⁶⁷⁾

Tools and Resources



**Practical materials to aid in the fight
for improved alcohol policy.**



JOB LOSS

\$



**MOMENTS OF MISINFORMATION
FALSE LIES**





HARMS OF ALCOHOL

Responding to Common Industry Arguments

Industry arguments used to discourage policy are often easy to recognize, especially when tax increases are being proposed, because the industry uses a standard set of rationalizations when they want to delay and derail policy solutions to protect their profits. Among these arguments are concerns about unrecorded alcohol and illicit trade, job losses, and “regressive taxes.” If you hear these concerns from politicians, it’s likely they have been talking to alcohol company representatives, lobbyists or other industry allies. Here are responses to these common arguments.

QUESTIONS

Won't increasing taxes on alcohol encourage people to consume dangerous and illicit alcohol?

ANSWER Most countries have established alcohol beverage companies and sectors that dominate the marketplace and are not realistically displaced by illegal producers. And beer, by far the most consumed alcohol product in the world, is rarely smuggled or counterfeited.

In Africa, where many countries have some or even significant unrecorded alcohol on the market, the evidence shows that when taxes are increased and the prices of legal products go up, many of those selling unrecorded alcohol also raise their prices. Therefore, tax increases can drive down consumption in both the licit and illicit markets. To address unrecorded alcohol, it’s critical that adequate regulations such as licensing and enforcement are put in place.^(168, 169)

**PEOPLE
OVER
PROFITS**

Won't increasing prices and restrictions on alcohol mean that people will lose their jobs?

ANSWER There is no good evidence of overall employment declines in places where prices have been increased, though this claim is often used by industries that produce unhealthy goods, including tobacco, alcohol and sugary drinks. In addition, the extra income that households would have if they reduced their spending on alcohol could be used for public goods such as education and health care and to boost other sectors of the economy which typically offer more jobs compared to the alcohol sector. This, in turn, can lead to a substantial net gain in jobs.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾

What about the alcohol industry's bottom line?

ANSWER Alcohol companies are some of the most profitable businesses in the world.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Profits from alcohol sales are concentrated within a small number of multinational firms, mostly in high-income countries, while governments worldwide are left to grapple with the substantial health, social and economic costs of alcohol consumption. These health and social costs are significantly greater than any economic losses that multinationals may sustain due to reduced consumption. When industry profits compete with public health objectives, governments have an opportunity to prioritize the health and safety of their people while also improving the economy.

Isn't raising taxes on alcohol regressive?

ANSWER Throughout the world, alcohol is a luxury good, with consumption (and the resulting tax burden) generally higher among wealthier people. And the health benefits of increasing alcohol taxes are in fact progressive: People with fewer resources are more sensitive to price increases and are therefore more likely to reduce their consumption when taxes are increased to sufficient levels. This is particularly important

Effective policy models “require an openness to working with researchers, professional groups, community organizations, and government departments, and an ability to exclude vested economic interests from the agenda setting.”

Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity, 2023⁽²⁷⁾

because we know that people with low socioeconomic status, as well as their families and communities, experience more harm per liter of alcohol consumed, including a higher risk of alcohol-attributable death.⁽²⁴⁾

In addition, revenue generated by alcohol taxes can be redistributed to social programs that are more likely to benefit low-income people, such as health services, education and substance abuse prevention programs. These resources can be used to improve living conditions and reduce social inequality.

Finding Allies to Grow the Movement

A sustainable alcohol policy movement will require sustained commitment, targeted efforts to improve public health, and a coordinated approach by advocates and partners, beyond those normally engaged with alcohol. Allies who support effective alcohol policies shouldn't be difficult to find because alcohol-related harms span a myriad of issues, including noncommunicable diseases, HIV/AIDs, tuberculosis, violence, substance use disorders, road safety, mental health and economic development.



WHOM TO ENGAGE	TAILORED MESSAGES
1. Civil society: International, national and local NGOs	Alcohol is a growing problem globally with enormous health, social and economic burdens and must be high on the agenda.
2. Government and elected officials	The prevention and reduction of alcohol harms provides an important opportunity for improving economic, health and social well-being, nationally and globally, including achieving the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.
3. Health professionals: Physicians, and public health and mental health practitioners	Alcohol policy improves the health of populations, prevents illness and injuries, and reduces alcohol's considerable burden on health care systems.
4. Public safety: Police, justice, road safety, fire officials and emergency responders	Alcohol policy reduces injuries and deaths, including those from traffic crashes and interpersonal violence.
5. Educators, academia and researchers	Understanding the harms of alcohol and the tactics of the industry is key to alcohol policy. Education and policy must be based on independent, evidence-based material, free from conflicts of interest.
6. Community partners: Women's, parents', youth and religious groups	Alcohol policy requires community leadership, action, communication and commitment. Joint efforts to prevent alcohol harms reduce family and community violence and make communities safer.
7. Economic development: Tax, trade and employment officials; economists	Alcohol policy is good for employment, productivity and a country's GDP.
8. The media	Public understanding of the harms of alcohol and the role policy can play is key to creating a safer, healthier community. The media can help shape the debate.

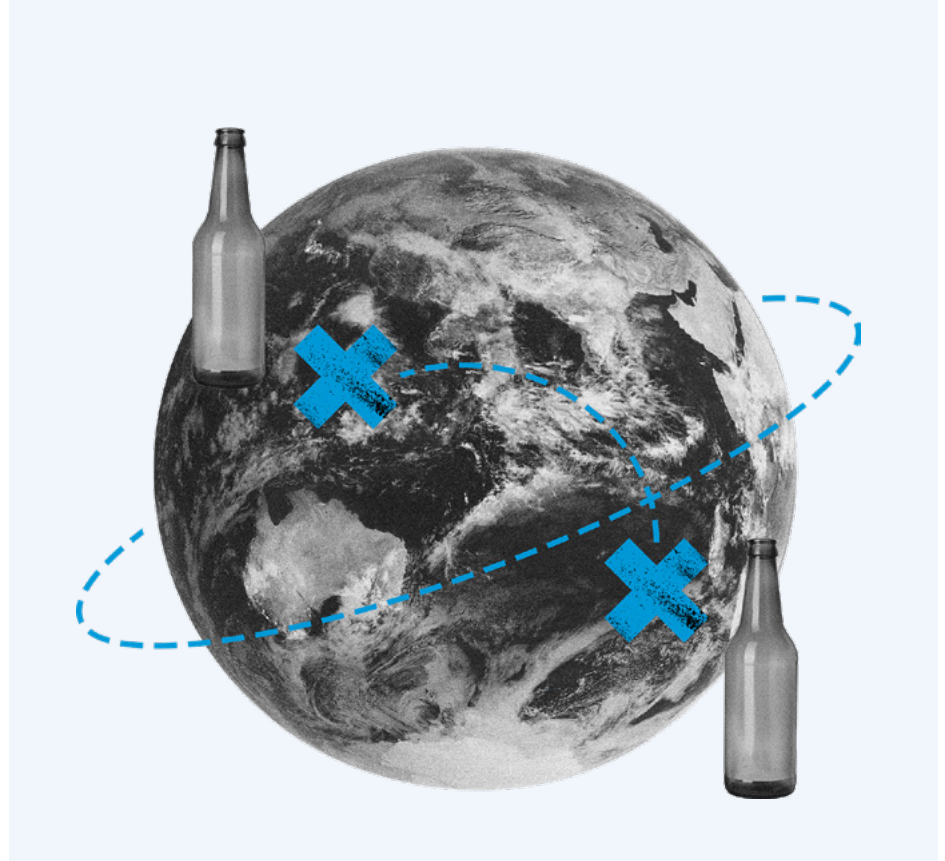
If the alcohol industry can learn from the tobacco industry, alcohol policy advocates can also learn from tobacco control strategies. Experience has shown that rigorously monitoring and exposing industry tactics is critical to policy success.

Lessons From Tobacco

Déjà vu? The alcohol industry uses a similar playbook to the tobacco industry.

When it comes to marketing its products and blocking regulation, the alcohol industry has borrowed directly from tobacco’s playbook.^(38, 89) It makes sense, given the overlap among these industries. Altria, one of the world’s largest producers and marketers of tobacco, which sells Marlboro in the United States, and SABMiller, a multinational beer company, have shared board members and directors over the years.^(171, 172) Altria also has an 8% interest in Anheuser-Busch InBev, the world’s largest beer company.⁽¹⁷³⁾

TACTICS USED BY BOTH INDUSTRIES:
<input type="checkbox"/> Sophisticated billion-dollar marketing budgets, often geared toward youth and online markets. ^(27, 126)
<input type="checkbox"/> Costly legal proceedings to delay and derail effective policy. ⁽⁵⁾
<input type="checkbox"/> Promoting self-regulatory systems and voluntary codes to head off government regulation. ⁽³⁵⁾
<input type="checkbox"/> Funding, publishing and promoting questionable science that favors their point of view. ⁽¹⁷⁵⁾
<input type="checkbox"/> Using trade associations or front groups to promote industry arguments.
<input type="checkbox"/> Partnering with other sectors, notably small hospitality businesses, to discourage policies that limit alcohol availability.
<input type="checkbox"/> Employing huge lobbying operations and campaign contributions to gain access to powerful politicians. ^(49, 176)
<input type="checkbox"/> Using “corporate social responsibility” to win favor, encourage good will and discourage effective policy. ⁽¹⁷⁷⁾
<input type="checkbox"/> Partnering with top celebrities and sponsoring sporting, music and cultural events.



International Trade Challenges

The tobacco industry has used international trade law and courts to fight against hard-won tobacco marketing restrictions, such as graphic health warnings on cigarette packs. These trade challenges delayed and tied up effective policies in courts from Australia to Uruguay, at grave economic and health cost. Yet, public health interests eventually prevailed. In Australia, the World Trade Organization (WTO) found plain packaging policies to be non-discriminatory, meaning that they applied to all tobacco products equally, and necessary, since governments are allowed leeway to implement policies that restrict trade to achieve policy objectives, such as protecting human health.

Despite these precedents, advocates are seeing the same phenomenon play out with alcohol policy. For instance, Ireland's plan to put cancer warning labels on alcohol products, which was supposed to start in 2026, was quickly met with industry opposition. Among other tactics, industry trade groups questioned the scientific validity of cancer warning labels at the WTO, despite the existence of strong and compelling scientific evidence supporting the measure.⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ Finally, in 2025, amid trade competitiveness concerns, Ireland delayed the implementation of the policy until 2028.⁽¹⁷⁸⁾

To help avoid costly and lengthy legal challenges, alcohol policy advocates would be wise to enlist international trade officials and legal experts when creating policies so that any alcohol regulations would have the best chance of circumventing international court challenges.⁽¹⁷⁹⁾

Glossary

Addiction

A physical or psychological dependence on drugs, including alcohol.

Alcohol Policy

A combination of local, national and international laws that regulate the role alcohol plays in society, including its manufacture, distribution, marketing, sale and consumption, in response to alcohol-related problems. Taxes on alcohol products are an effective, evidence-based example.

Alcohol Industry

The companies that manufacture, produce, brand, distribute and market alcohol products. Much of the business is consolidated in the hands of 10 multinational alcohol companies, including Anheuser-Busch InBev NV, Heineken NV, Diageo Plc, Pernod Ricard Groupe, Carlsberg A/S, Molson Coors Brewing Co., Suntory Holdings Ltd, Asahi Group Holdings Ltd, Constellation Brands Inc., and Bacardi & Co Ltd.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

Alcohol Use Disorder

Alcohol use disorder is a medical condition characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational or health consequences. It encompasses conditions sometimes referred to as alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, alcohol addiction and alcoholism.

Binge Drinking

High consumption in a single occasion; definitions vary across countries. In the United States, binge drinking is defined as four or more standard drinks for women and five or more drinks for men in a short period of time. Binge drinking is often a pattern among teenagers and young adults. Also referred to as heavy episodic drinking.^(1, 180)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR programs are portrayed as the social conscience of a company and often aim to improve a company's standing with the public and policymakers. In practice, CSR often works to deflect efforts to regulate a company's profit-making activities. Alcohol industry programs range from school-based education for young people to ride services for inebriated adults. But these measures have been found to have limited effectiveness for reducing alcohol harms, while offering very visible public relations and branding opportunities.^(38, 116)

Carcinogen

A cancer-causing substance.

Excise Tax

A tax that is often applied to products that exert a negative effect on society or the environment. Excise taxes tend to drive up the prices of the product they are applied to relative to other goods, unlike a value-added tax (VAT) or sales taxes that affect all products no matter their nature. Excise taxes can be specific when they are applied per unit (such as per pack of cigarettes or liter of pure alcohol), or ad valorem, when they are applied per a given value like a retail price.

Drink Driving or Driving Under the Influence (DUI)

These terms are preferred to "drunk driving" because the consumption of even a small amount of alcohol prior to or during operation of a motor vehicle can affect motor coordination and response times.

Harm Reduction

A range of public health policies, programs and practices designed to reduce the harmful physical, social and/or economic consequences associated with various behaviors, such as drinking alcohol and use of both legal and illegal drugs.

Health Taxes

Health taxes are excise taxes on products that have a negative effect on public health specifically, including tobacco, alcohol and sugary drinks. They are designed to reduce consumption of unhealthy products and their burden of related diseases, while generating revenue for governments.

Sustainable Development Goals

A collection of 17 global goals set by the United Nations to end poverty and increase human health and prosperity worldwide. Alcohol is included under health target 3.5.

Unrecorded Alcohol

Unrecorded alcohol falls outside of governmental control and therefore is not taxed. This includes homemade or informally produced alcohol—legal or illegal—as well as smuggled alcohol, surrogate alcohol (which is not intended for human consumption), or alcohol obtained through cross-border purchase.

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