

The Cost of Alcohol: The Advocacy for a Minimum Price per Unit in the UK

Background

UK drinkers regularly consume alcohol in excess of guideline limits; alcohol consumption and binge drinking are also known to have increased in recent years. One reason for this is the availability of low-cost alcoholic beverages. The introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol has been proposed as a means to reduce alcohol consumption in the UK. However, there is little in-depth research investigating public attitudes and beliefs regarding a minimum pricing policy. This report presents the findings of an in-depth qualitative study to investigate people's attitudes, beliefs, and responses to the introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol policy and its perceived acceptability.

The Project

Twenty-eight focus groups were conducted to reflect representative views regarding the introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol policy. Participants were asked to give their opinions about minimum alcohol pricing, its possible outcomes, and how its introduction might be made more acceptable. The thematic content analysis of focus group transcripts revealed important insight into participants' attitudes and beliefs with respect to a minimum price per unit of alcohol policy.

Major Finding 1

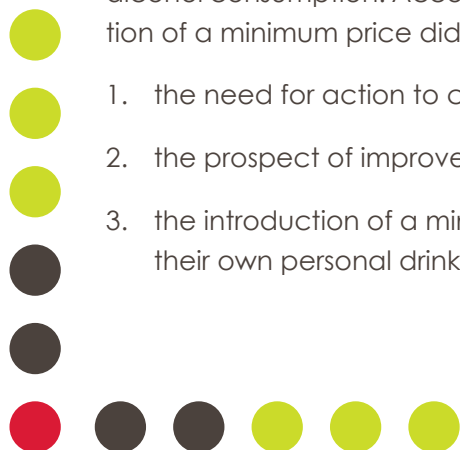
Participants were found to express largely negative views of the possible introduction of a minimum price per unit policy. Analysis indicated that participants' objections to a minimum price had three main elements:

1. participants were sceptical of minimum pricing as an effective means to reduce UK alcohol consumption;
2. participants disliked the policy for a number of reasons, in particular, the policy was believed to unfairly punish those who drink in moderation or 'sensible' drinkers; and
3. participants were concerned that a minimum price per unit might create or exacerbate other existing social problems (e.g., crime and drug abuse).

Major Finding 2

Although they were clearly not enthusiastic about the prospect of paying higher alcohol prices, a number of participants reluctantly accepted that a minimum price per unit might be necessary to address excess alcohol consumption. Accordingly, participants who supported (or at least did not object to) the introduction of a minimum price did so for one or more of three reasons:

1. the need for action to curb excessive alcohol consumption;
2. the prospect of improved public health, particularly among young and underage drinkers; and
3. the introduction of a minimum price was not perceived by participants to have a significant effect on their own personal drinking habits.



Major Finding 3

When asked how the introduction of a minimum price might be made more acceptable, two themes emerged from the analysis with participants making the following suggestions:

1. a minimum price per unit should be introduced as part of a broader package of government policies to address excessive alcohol consumption; and
2. revenue generated by higher alcohol prices should be used to fund other interventions.

In both cases, it was evident that participants were more likely to accept a minimum pricing policy if it was introduced together with other government policies participants considered most likely to reduce alcohol consumption significantly. There was also little evidence that participants' views of the minimum price policy and its acceptability varied across gender and age groups.

Conclusions

Current findings indicate that participants were largely sceptical of the introduction of a minimum price per unit alcohol-pricing policy and expressed doubts regarding its effectiveness. Participants did, however, suggest that the policy could be made more acceptable if introduced as part of a wider strategy to curb alcohol consumption. Present findings suggest that participants' objections to a minimum price per unit were the result of three main issues:

1. a misunderstanding of the minimum price per unit policy itself;
2. the failure to recognise the significance of small incremental reductions in alcohol consumption; and
3. a preoccupation with the effects of a minimum price on heavy and dependent drinkers.

Policymakers looking to introduce a minimum price policy should focus on dispelling the misconceptions regarding an alcohol-pricing policy and on highlighting the key features of the policy to counter the misunderstandings expressed by participants in the present research.

Research Team

Martin S. Hagger, Adam J. Lonsdale, Rob Baggott, Gillian Penny and Matthew Bowen

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