

Policy: The Minimum Legal Age for Purchasing Alcohol

ALAC'S POLICY

Raising the minimum legal purchase age or drinking age is an effective way to reduce alcohol-related harm to young people. The harm and costs of lowering the legal purchase age are unacceptably high.

Therefore, ALAC supports legislative change to return the legal age of purchase to 20 years. This change alone will not solve drinking problems for young people and should be supported by a range of other effective policy interventions, including targeted policing and enforcement and an effective pricing structure for alcoholic beverages.

Introduction and background

The age at which people can legally purchase alcohol in New Zealand ('the purchase age') was lowered in December 1999 from 20 years to 18 years via the Sale of Liquor Amendment Act 1999.¹ ALAC did not support lowering the purchase age.² Subsequent anecdotal evidence and ALAC's Youth and Alcohol Drinking Monitors indicate increased alcohol consumption by young people with a consequential increase in alcohol-related harm.³ In early 2002, ALAC completed an assessment of the health impacts of lowering the purchase age. The assessment provides a base from which to consider future policy interventions.⁴

Concerns were raised about young New Zealanders' problematic alcohol consumption for a number of years prior to the legislative change. These problems appear to have increased since that change was made.

As alcohol becomes more accessible to both minors and youthful legal purchasers of alcohol, consumption and related harm increase and extend to younger age groups who learn hazardous drinking patterns and behaviour from older peers and adults.

International studies conclude that the younger the age at which young people begin regular social drinking, the more likely are short-term adverse outcomes such as injuries, fatalities, and unsafe sex. Multivariate studies show a direct causal link between a lowered drinking age and increased fatalities and injuries from motor vehicle crashes, together with increased numbers of deaths by suicide.^{5,6,7} Most studies also appear to show that the younger the age of onset of drinking, the more likely it is that longer-term adverse outcomes could arise, such as alcohol dependence and abuse, and alcohol-related medical conditions.^{8,9,10}

The health impact of the lowered purchase age

ALAC's assessment focuses on the health impact of the legislative change on 18–19 year-olds and provides a hypothesis about harm for that age bracket. It is important to note, however, that ALAC's Youth and Alcohol Drinking Monitors indicate that young people aged 14–18 years of age have experienced an increase in alcohol consumption since the purchase age was lowered.³ This data supports a key concern raised by a number of individuals and organisations prior to the change of purchase age to 18 years in 1999, that thresholds for underage access to alcohol would simply

shift down the age spectrum subsequent to the legislative amendment.¹¹

Based on overseas empirical evidence, New Zealand benchmarking data, and assumptions taken at the median (i.e. the middle value of the estimated impacts rather than the highest or lowest estimate), the first round per annum health impacts and costs associated with lowering the legal alcohol purchasing age in New Zealand in 1999 from 20 to 18 are estimated to be:

- Sixteen deaths of 18 and 19 year-olds in the calendar year 2000, at a cost of \$41.940 million.
- One hundred and forty-five non-fatal, harmful outcomes from adverse health events for 18 and 19 year-olds in the year 2000, at a cost of between about \$1.604 million and \$38.505 million depending on the severity of the injuries.⁴

In practical terms, this means that these 16 deaths and 145 non-fatal yet harmful outcomes have occurred above the baseline for alcohol-related deaths and harms for the 18–19 year-old age bracket; i.e. it is most likely that they would not have occurred had the purchase age not been lowered.

A lack of relevant New Zealand data meant that ALAC could not accurately estimate a range of alcohol-related impacts upon young people's health, including teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, abortions, sexual harassment, and negative mental health outcomes. Other effects for which not enough supporting data were available included longer-term and ongoing health and economic effects such as fetal alcohol effects, increased alcohol abuse and dependence associated with an earlier age of onset, and the ongoing costs to society of vehicle injuries and teenage births.

Therefore, the estimates of deaths and non-fatal adverse outcomes and associated costs given above are likely to be under-estimates of the overall harm.

Effective policy interventions that mitigate harm

International evidence shows a number of policy interventions to be particularly effective in reducing alcohol-related harm among young people. Key among these are increasing the legal purchase or drinking age and the effective enforcement of that legislation.

Just as lowering the drinking or purchase age has been associated with increased harm to young people

internationally,¹² increasing the minimum drinking or purchase age has proven to be an effective measure internationally in the reduction of alcohol-related harm for young people. For example, the Federal US Government considered a drinking age of 21 years important enough to put state financial incentives in place designed to encourage states to raise their drinking age.^{13,14,15,16}

Over the past few years, other nations that have also increased their minimum legal drinking or purchase ages as a result of adverse consequences include Germany, Ireland and Canada (some provinces).^{2,17}

Other effective policy interventions are a graduated driver licensing system^{18,19} and a lower level of legal maximum blood alcohol content (BAC) for young drivers.²⁰ Increasing the price of alcohol has been shown to be particularly effective in reducing alcohol consumption and related harm for young people, who are particularly sensitive to changes in price.^{21,22} New Zealand already has in place a graduated driver licensing system, which comprises a lower BAC for younger drivers among other features. New Zealand also uses the alcohol excise tax and hypothecated tax to adjust alcohol prices, controls which are balanced against competition and economic imperatives.

Despite interventions already being in place in New Zealand, ALAC considers that opportunities still exist for further development of the policy initiatives suggested here.

ALAC would support the returning of the purchase age to 20 years because of the evident effectiveness of an increased purchase age and the harm estimated to have resulted from lowering the purchase age in 2000. However, ALAC acknowledges that increasing the purchase age cannot address alcohol-related harm to young New Zealanders in isolation. Such a change needs to be supported by a suite of effective policy interventions, particularly targeted policing and enforcement of drinking and purchasing laws and an effective pricing structure for alcoholic beverages.²³

References and further reading

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About ALAC

The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand – Kaunihera Whakatupato Waipiro o Aotearoa (ALAC) was established under and is governed by the Alcohol Advisory Council Act 1976. Since 1992, ALAC has operated as a crown entity under the Public Finance Act 1989.

ALAC is funded by a fixed levy on all alcohol produced for consumption in New Zealand, which ensures that funds are targeted at alcohol-related problems. This reflects the Government's desire to both address the consequences of alcohol misuse and promote safe drinking habits.

ALAC's primary objective is the encouragement and promotion of moderation in the use of alcohol, the discouragement and reduction of the misuse of alcohol, and the minimisation of the personal, social, and economic harm resulting from the misuse of alcohol.

Further information available from ALAC

Assessment of the Health Impacts of Lowering the Minimum Legal Age for Purchasing Alcohol in New Zealand, ALAC's policy statements, and ALAC's Youth and Alcohol Drinking Monitors are on ALAC's website: www.alcohol.org.nz