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Alcohol in Finland in the early 2000s: consumption, harm and policy

REPORT



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1 INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, the total consumption of alcohol in Finland has increased by approximately 10 per cent with an even greater increase in its adverse effects. Even before the 2004 alcohol policy changes that removed restrictions on the import of duty-free alcohol from other EU countries by travellers, before the accession of Estonia to the EU and prior to the reduction of excise duties on alcoholic beverages, alcohol consumption and related harm were at a high level in Finland, even in an international perspective.

Increasing pressures have been exerted on the alcohol policies of other Nordic countries as well. However, the level of alcohol consumption in the neighbouring countries in the west has been nowhere near that of Finland and, as a consequence, their level of alcohol-related problems has been lower than in Finland. Since the Nordic countries resemble one another as societies, and in the field of alcohol policy in particular, this report places the alcohol situation in Finland in a wider context by comparing its development with the development in the Nordic countries.

The chapter following the introduction discusses the development of alcohol consumption in Finland during the period of Finland's membership in the EU and compares it with alcohol consumption trends in the other Nordic countries and Europe. The third and fourth chapters examine in greater detail the changes that have taken place in Finnish alcohol consumption by discussing trends relating to drinking habits and detrimental alcohol-related effects. The increase in alcohol consumption has brought about an increase in the harmful effects of alcohol, which has been seen in an especially rapid increase in alcohol-related mortality. In this examination of alcohol consumption and its damaging effects, the emphasis is on the changes that have occurred in the 2000s, though it is done against the background of trends starting back in the 1990s.

The fifth chapter examines the changes that have taken place in alcohol policy as practised in Finland in the 2000s and compares them with corresponding changes in the other Nordic countries. It is focused on the changes occurring in the alcohol policy after the policy changes in 2004. This chapter also discusses changes that have taken place within the international, and specifically the European, alcohol policy environment.

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2 FINNISH ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

We often talk about Southern European wine culture as a virtually transhistorical phenomenon. Yet wine drinking has by no means been a static phenomenon in the Mediterranean countries, nor has alcohol consumption been that in Europe or in industrialised western countries. Alcohol consumption in industrialised countries was on the decline from the middle of the 19th century to the period between the two world wars. After the Second World War, the consumption of alcohol increased in practically all industrialised western countries up to the mid-1970s. An exception to this general trend was France, where alcohol consumption started to decrease from the approximately 20-litre-per-capita level as early as the 1950s.

In most Western European countries, the growth of alcohol consumption stopped around the middle of the 1970s and consumption took a downturn in areas such as the wine-consuming Mediterranean countries. This downward trend, due mainly to a decrease in wine consumption, seems to be continuing. The post-Second World War period of growth has been followed by a period of fairly stable alcohol consumption. In certain European countries, however, the consumption of alcohol has continued to increase since the mid-1970s. Finland, together with other Nordic countries with alcohol monopolies as well as Ireland and Great Britain, is among those countries.

Figure 1 shows that major differences in recorded alcohol consumption levels have shrunk considerably in the course of four decades. Yet there may be no justification for the assumption that the consumption of alcohol in various European countries would be settling at roughly the same level. A good example is the fact that the graphs for recorded alcohol consumption in Italy and Finland intersected in 2001, after which the falling trend in Italy and the rising trend in Finland have continued. In recent years, Ireland and many other European countries have surpassed France in alcohol consumption statistics. Figure 1 includes only a small number of these various European countries.

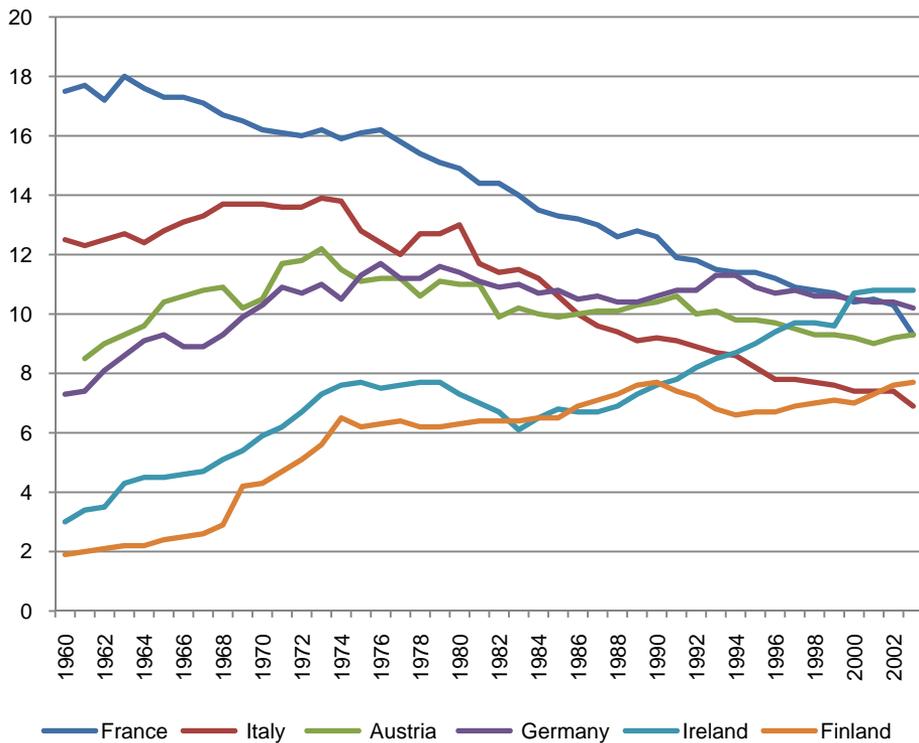


Figure 1. Recorded alcohol consumption in certain European Union member states in 1960–2003 as 100% alcohol in litres per capita.

Source: World Drink Trends 2005.

The various uses of alcohol vary greatly by country. In some countries alcoholic beverages are used mainly as intoxicants and in other countries mainly as beverages with meals. Because of these varying uses, the factors determining alcohol consumption changes also vary from one alcohol culture to another. In general, it can be said that in the wine-consuming Mediterranean countries migration from rural areas into cities, a rapid decrease in the size of families, changes in eating habits and increased leisure time have been responsible for a steep drop in wine consumption in particular.

The factors on which the decrease in alcohol consumption in the Mediterranean countries are based have not had a similar effect in countries such as Ireland or Finland; instead, the same social changes are considered to have increased the consumption of alcohol in the latter countries. The drinking of water with meals, which has become common in Finland, has mainly replaced the consumption of milk, whereas in the Mediterranean countries the same phenomenon has replaced the

consumption of wine. In the Nordic countries, including Finland, alcohol use is closely tied to increased leisure time; no reduction is expected in leisure time, in the importance of leisure-related drinking habits or in the supply of alcohol. In Ireland and Finland, changes in disposable income seem to go hand in hand with trends in the development of alcohol consumption volumes during both economic upturns and downturns, whereas in many Central European countries increased consumption opportunities have no longer been reflected as increased alcohol consumption in recent decades.

In the Nordic countries, comparable alcohol consumption data go up to 2007. While in most European countries recorded alcohol consumption has been unchanged or decreasing since the mid-1970s, in three Nordic countries, i.e. Iceland, Norway and Finland, it has been going up and in two countries, i.e. Sweden and Denmark, it was at the same level in 2007 as in the middle of the 1970s (Figure 2). Since 1961, Finland has risen from among the Nordic countries with the lowest levels of recorded alcohol consumption to the same level as Denmark, which has long been the leader in the Nordic consumption statistics.

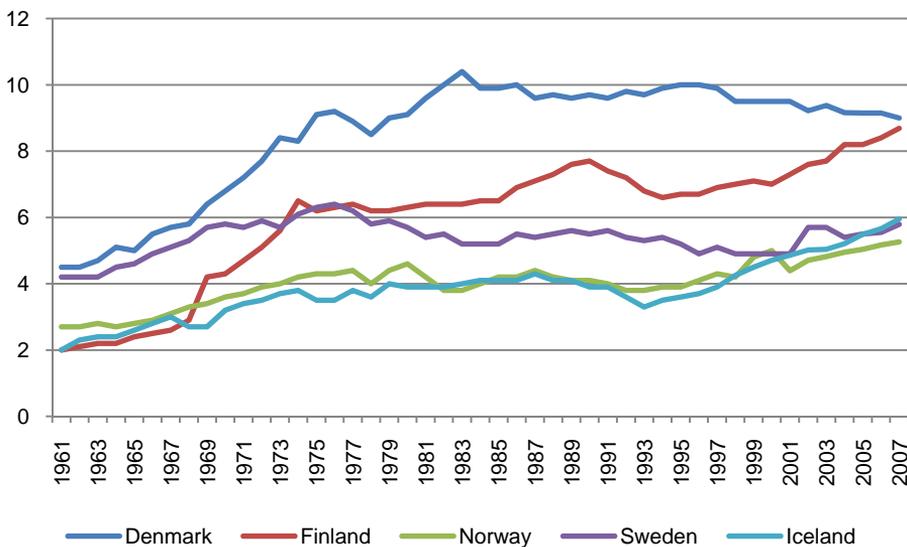


Figure 2. Recorded consumption of alcohol in the Nordic countries in 1961–2007 as 100% alcohol in litres per capita.

The structure of the recorded consumption of alcoholic beverages by beverage group has undergone a considerable change since the early 1960s. The consumption of strong alcoholic beverages was still growing in the 1960s and early 1970s in all

Nordic countries until it levelled out or took a downturn in the mid-1970s. Though the consumption of strong alcoholic beverages has increased in most Nordic countries since the year 2000, the present consumption of strong alcoholic beverages in all Nordic countries is clearly lower than in the middle of the 1970s. In Sweden, it is clear that the consumption of strong alcoholic beverages is presently even lower than in the early 1960s. On the other hand, wine consumption has increased in all Nordic countries during the past half-century. The present consumption of beer is also higher than in the early 1960s. Still, the beer consumption trends have not been uniform in the past decades. In Iceland, beer consumption has decidedly increased, whereas in Denmark it has clearly decreased. Based on the statistics, the consumption of beer in Norway, Sweden and Finland is presently at roughly the same level as it was two or three decades ago.

On the European scale, total alcohol consumption in Finland is on the upper-middle level.

Not all of the alcohol consumed shows up in the statistics. However, there are various ways of estimating the volume of alcohol excluded from the statistics. These estimates indicate that more alcohol is excluded from the statistics in the Nordic countries than in Central and Southern European countries. For this reason, the adding of unrecorded alcohol consumption to recorded consumption increases Nordic consumption by more than that in Central and Southern Europe. On the European scale, the total consumption of alcohol in Finland is on the upper-middle level. In Finland, the per-capita consumption of alcohol is higher than that in Italy and Greece and is at roughly the same level as in France. The European countries in which alcohol consumption is even higher are the Czech Republic, Hungary and Ireland. In Nordic comparisons, Finnish alcohol consumption has surpassed the Danish consumption figures for the first time (Figure 3).

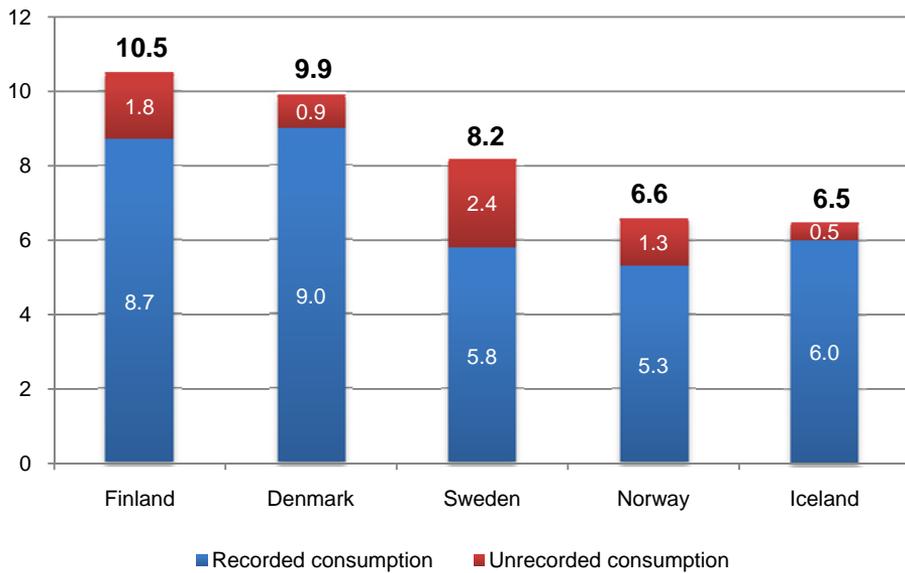


Figure 3. Recorded alcohol consumption in the Nordic countries in 2007 as 100% alcohol in litres per capita, shown separately as recorded and unrecorded consumption.

Source: Tietoja Pohjoismaiden alkoholimarkkinoista 2008 (Nordic alcohol market data 2008).

3 ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND DRINKING HABITS IN FINLAND

Alcohol consumption

The following examination of Finnish alcohol consumption focuses on the development that has taken place since 1990. Unlike in most Western European countries, total alcohol consumption in Finland has continued to grow since the middle of the 1970s and, in 1990, alcohol consumption in Finland probably surpassed all previous figures (Figure 4).

At the beginning of the 1990s, strong internal demands were made in Finland to liberalise alcohol policy, primarily to increase the availability of wines. A new phase in European economic integration also offered a strong promise of a more liberalised alcohol policy and strengthened the belief that “continental” or “European” drinking habits would spread to Finland. Those who were the most optimistic expected internationalisation to emphasise healthier life styles, dim the aura around alcohol and stop the growth of alcohol consumption. In the first half of the decade, this growth did more than simply stop. In fact, total alcohol consumption took a downturn, though this was due to the decrease in purchasing power caused by economic recession. From 1990 to 1994, total alcohol consumption decreased by a total of 11 per cent (Figure 4).

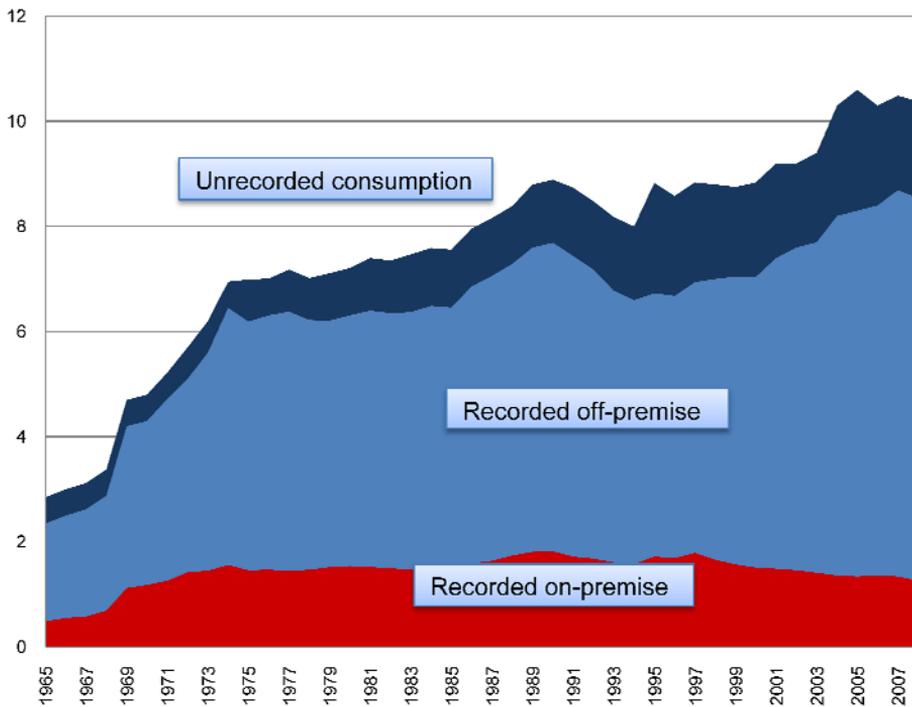


Figure 4. Total alcohol consumption in 1965–2008 as 100% alcohol in litres per capita, shown separately as recorded and unrecorded consumption and recorded consumption separated into retail sales and sales in licensed premises.

Source: National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health and the National Institute for Health and Welfare.

The decline in alcohol consumption during the recession was followed by a 10-per cent increase in total alcohol consumption in 1995. At that time, the recession was already easing. However, the 1995 increase was due above all to the lightening of quotas that put restrictions on the import of duty-free alcoholic beverages as far as beer and wine were concerned, and the abolishment of the time limits that restricted the import of alcoholic beverages by travellers from third countries. These changes resulted in steeply increased liquor and beer shopping trips across the eastern border and "beer trolley tourism" to Tallinn. In order to control imports by travellers, time limits on the import of alcohol from third countries were re-introduced in May 1996. This resulted in a slight decline in total alcohol consumption. Even then, consumption in 1996–2000 was higher than during the recession.

In 2001, total alcohol consumption started to increase slightly – 1–3 per cent annually – and the record 1990 numbers were surpassed for the first time in 2001.

When Parliament decided to lower alcohol taxation by 33 per cent on average in late autumn 2003, alcohol consumption was already increasing slightly. The excise tax reduction that took effect in March 2004, which was justified by the removal of quotas on duty-free alcoholic beverages imported by travellers from EU countries in early January and by Estonia's accession to the EU at the beginning of May, accelerated the growth of consumption. In 2004, total alcohol consumption increased by 10 per cent over the previous year and further by 2 per cent in 2005. At that time, total consumption was 10.5 litres per inhabitant. Recorded alcohol consumption increased in 2006 and 2007 and, though it decreased slightly in 2008, recorded alcohol consumption was still 4 per cent higher in 2008 than in 2005. In 2008, total alcohol consumption per capita was 10.4 litres. Omitting persons aged 15 years and under, total per capita consumption was 12.5 litres.

Before Finland joined the EU, estimates of the proportion of unrecorded consumption of total alcohol consumption were about 15 per cent. In 2005, the corresponding proportion was close to 22 per cent. During the next two years, unrecorded alcohol consumption decreased, but increased slightly again in 2008. At that time, its proportion of total consumption was estimated at 18 per cent. Some three quarters of unrecorded alcohol consumption consisted of alcoholic beverages imported by travellers and almost one fifth of alcohol consumed abroad. The proportion of alcohol produced at home or smuggled reached less than one tenth of recorded alcohol consumption. Of this, the proportion of illegal alcohol was slightly over one half.

In 2008, the Finns bought 43 per cent of the alcoholic beverages purchased in Finland from grocery retailers, including service stations and kiosks.

During the past decade, alcohol consumption in licensed premises has decreased in relative figures and even in absolute figures. While alcohol was consumed in licensed premises 1.8 litres per capita in 1997, the volume of alcohol consumed in licensed premises fell to 1.2 litres in 2008. Thus the volume consumed in licensed premises decreased by more than one fourth from 1997 to 2008 and, at the same time, the proportion of alcohol consumed in licensed premises of recorded alcohol consumption fell from 26 per cent to 15 per cent. In 2008, a total of 43 per cent of the alcoholic beverages purchased in Finland were bought from grocery retailers, including service stations and kiosks, whereas the corresponding proportion in 1995 was one third. Since 1995, grocery shops have increased their market share the most. Since 2004, Alko's market share has also increased with the exception of the year 2008.

The structure of alcohol consumption by beverage group has undergone a considerable change in Finland since the Second World War. The latest major change took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, the consumption of strong alcoholic beverages decreased by some 40 per cent and the popularity of strong beer plummeted (Figure 5).

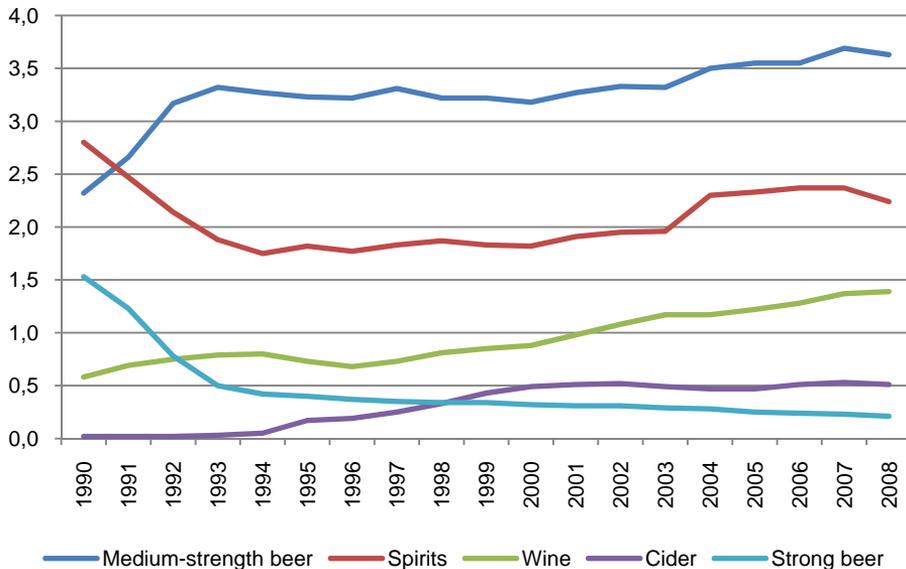


Figure 5. Recorded consumption of alcoholic beverages by beverage group as 100% alcohol in 1990-2008.

Source: National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health.

Since the middle of the 1990s, the per-capita consumption of beer has remained fairly stable, with medium-strength beer increasing in popularity. During the past decade, the consumption of medium-strength beer, wines and ciders has been growing, whereas a descending trend has been predominant in the consumption of strong beer. The consumption of strong alcoholic beverages was on the rise even before the 2004 jump, and since that time, the consumption of strong alcoholic beverages has remained roughly unchanged.

To sum up, apart from the consumption-reducing effects of economic recessions and the alcohol excise duty increases implemented in early 2008 and 2009, alcohol consumption in Finland continues to rise. After the substantial jump in 2004, the growth of total consumption has subsided, and because of the recession and the tax increases in 2009 it is likely to take a downturn in the next few years.

Drinking habits

A large part of alcohol consumption is concentrated on weekends and intoxication has an established position in Finnish social intercourse.

The level of total alcohol consumption may change quickly due to factors such as tax changes, but the main features of drinking habits change slowly. One of the characteristics of Finnish drinking culture is that it is still rare to combine alcohol use with lunching or everyday dining. For a long time in Finnish culture, alcohol was only connected with special occasions and even now alcohol is used as a festive addition to everyday life rather than as an everyday consumer product. One example of this is the fact that a large part of alcohol consumption is concentrated on weekends. Alcohol consumption as an aid to socialising may be its most important use in Finland, and intoxication has an established position in Finnish social intercourse. Such characteristics of Finnish alcohol culture have remained unchanged for decades. Yet they are not only characteristic of Finland; similar drinking-culture characteristics are found in many countries, especially in northern and eastern Europe.

Still the Finnish drinking culture has undergone changes as well. One of the major changes is probably the fact that, since the 1960s, alcohol use has become common among women and young people, both male and female. At the same time, binge drinking and drinking for the purpose of intoxication have also spread within these groups. Recently, attention has also been paid to the increasing use of alcohol among people of retirement age.

Another notable change is that, especially since the late 1980s, alcohol use has spread to new situations, such as cultural, entertainment and sports events, outdoor restaurant areas, summer festivals and other outdoor events. The easy availability of alcoholic beverages has become a prominent feature of leisure activities.

This examination is focused on the most recent changes. Drinking habits do not change that fast. Therefore, the discussion below will concentrate on a more detailed description of certain characteristics of Finnish drinking habits and the distribution of drinking among the Finnish population in recent times as well as on an examination of recent changes in drinking by population group.

Distribution of drinking over the week. Although the virtually daily use of alcoholic beverages has become somewhat more common over the decades, it is still rare in Finland. The bulk of Finnish drinking takes place in the evening and on weekends, while little alcohol is drunk at lunch time. Saturday evening between eight and nine o'clock is the time when the largest number of Finns consume alcoholic beverages.

Proportion of abstainers among the adult population. Not nearly all Finns drink alcohol. In questionnaire studies, abstainers are those who have not drunk alcohol during the past 12 months. In 2006, a total of 12 per cent of Finns aged between 15 and 69 were abstainers. Nowadays there is no major difference between men and women as far as abstinence is concerned: 10 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women were found to be abstainers.

Women's and men's share of alcohol consumption. Women's share of alcohol consumed in Finland increased considerably in the latter half of the 20th century. In the 2000s, women's share of all alcohol consumed has been one fourth or one third depending on the method of measuring used.

Heavy alcohol consumption. A small proportion of the population drinks the bulk of all alcohol consumed in Finland. Based on an alcohol panel survey, the tenth of men with the highest consumption used 43 per cent of all the alcohol drunk by men in Finland in 2006. The corresponding share among women was slightly higher at 46 per cent.

Heavy consumption can be measured in a number of ways, and a variety of annual alcohol consumption volumes have been proposed in different countries and at different times as the limit for heavy consumption. In the following example, calculations have been made of the number of units of alcohol consumed by the tenth of men and the tenth of women who consume the most alcohol on average per year. This has been achieved by allocating the volume of alcohol consumed in Finland in 2008, i.e. approximately 55 million litres as pure alcohol, to heavy drinkers and non-heavy drinkers according to the drinking distribution from the alcohol panel survey. The result obtained with this method is that the tenth of men that consume the most, i.e. some 200,000 men, drink close to 90 litres of pure alcohol per year on average. Conversion to daily consumption yields approximately 16 alcohol units, i.e. more than one-half litre of spirits or close to three bottles of wine daily. For the tenth of women that consume the most, i.e. some 200,000 women, the corresponding annual consumption averages close to 40 litres of pure alcohol, which when converted to average daily consumption equals 7 units of alcohol or well above one bottle of wine.

Not all heavy consumers are alcoholics or meet the criteria for alcohol dependency. A large proportion of them reduce their consumption before any dependency develops. In the Health 2000 study, 8 per cent of Finnish men aged between 30 and 64 and 2 per cent of women fulfilled the criteria for alcohol dependency.

At-risk drinking and drinking for the purpose of intoxication. At-risk drinking can be determined on the basis of weekly consumption or the amount of alcohol consumed on one drinking occasion. In Finland, a bigger problem has traditionally been the large volume of alcohol consumed on one drinking occasion rather than large weekly consumption volumes, considering that regular daily use of alcohol is uncommon in Finland. The maximum weekly amount of drinking recommended by the Alcohol Programme is 24 units of alcohol for men and 16 units for women. Of the respondents to the 2006 alcohol panel survey 7 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women exceeded the recommended average weekly consumption volume. In proportion to the total population this corresponds to some 200,000 people.

In 2006, 5 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women reported that they drank until they were intoxicated at least once a week. The proportion of respondents who drank until they were intoxicated at least once a month was one fifth of men and 5 per cent of women. Drinking with the purpose of intoxication is most common among men and women aged 15-29. More than one quarter of men and more than one-half of women reported that they had not been intoxicated during the preceding 12 months.

Consumption changes by population group. Figure 6 provides a picture of differences in alcohol consumption by age group, based on the Finnish Adult Population's Health Behaviour and Health material from the National Institute for Health and Welfare.



Figure 6. The proportion of men who have drunk at least 8 units of alcohol or women who have drunk at least 5 units of alcohol during the previous week shown by gender and 10-year age group from 1982 to 2006.

Source: Helakorpi et al. 2007.

The figure shows that a weekly consumption of at least 8 units for men and at least 5 units for women has become common in all age groups during the past 20 years or so. As late as the early 1980s, the difference between younger and older age groups was great, but the difference has decreased considerably over the years and the 45–54-olds have overtaken the younger age groups. The same decrease in the differences between the age groups has continued since the alcohol policy changes made in 2004, with an increased use of alcohol by the older age groups, though in the case of women also by a slightly younger age group, i.e. 25–34 years old.

In the 2000s, abstinence has become considerably more common and drinking for the purpose of intoxication has decreased among young people.

Alcohol use by young people. Based on a youth health-pattern study, the proportion of young abstainers decreased and drinking for the purpose of intoxication became more common in the 1980s and 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, however, there was a clear change in this trend, and in the 2000s youth abstinence has become much more common and drinking for the purpose of intoxication has decreased (Figures 7 and 8). These changes have been more prominent for those under 18 years of age, but in recent years abstinence has also become more common among 18-year-olds. Drinking for the purpose of intoxication has also decreased among 18-year-old girls. According to a European school survey project (ESPAD), there has been a decrease in drinking for the purpose of intoxication in all living environments and among young people from varying social backgrounds. The increase in abstinence has been stronger in southern Finland and among young people with university-educated parents. Though the cost of alcoholic beverages went down considerably in 2004, it has not stopped this favourable trend among young people.

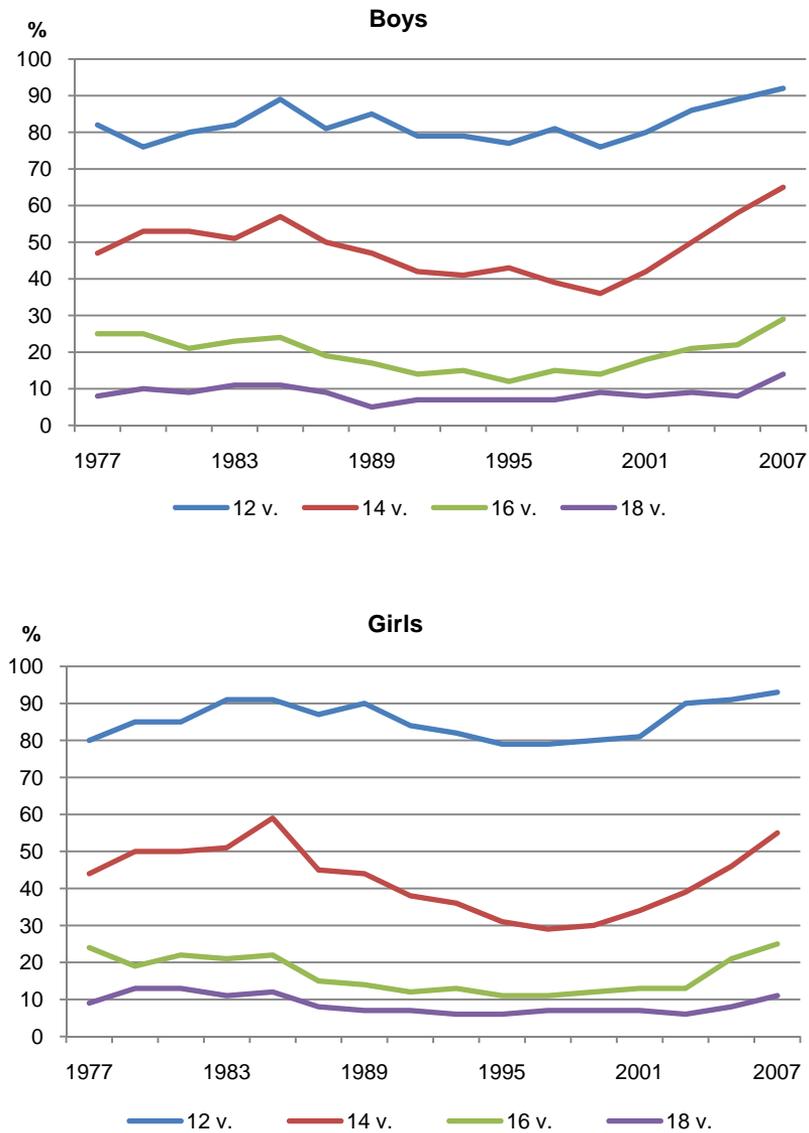


Figure 7. The proportions of abstinent girls and boys aged 12, 14, 16 and 18 by age in 1977-2007.

Source: Rimpelä et al. 2007.

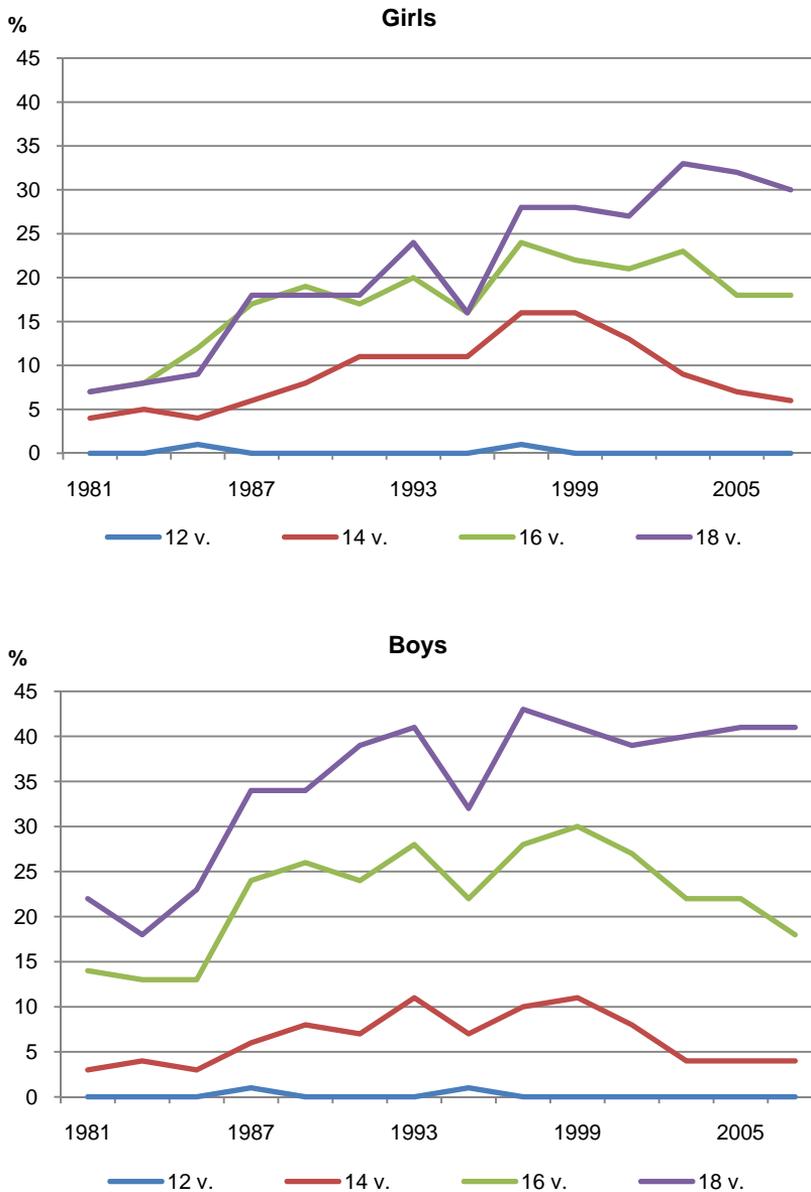


Figure 8. The proportions of girls and boys aged 12, 14, 16 and 18 who drink in order to get intoxicated at least once a month by age in 1981–2007.

Source: Rimpelä et al. 2007.

Alcohol consumption by people of retirement age. In recent years, alcohol consumption by people advanced in age has become a topic of public discourse. Yet alcohol use by people of retirement age has gradually become more common since the middle of the 1980s or even earlier, that is, as long as information has been gathered with the help of the Health Behaviour of Finnish Elderly (EVTK) study. The proportion of men aged 65-84 who use alcohol has increased from 68 per cent in 1993 to 77 per cent in 2007. The corresponding figures for women were 37 and 54 per cent. Volumes of alcohol consumed have also gone up. For the present, it is seen as a relatively limited but noteworthy phenomenon.

The 65 to 84-year-olds who were the subjects of the EVTK study were older than the large age groups born after the war. It was only the large age groups, also known as the wet generation, who abandoned abstinence on a mass scale in the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of these age groups on the shaping of the drinking habits of people of retirement age will become evident during the next two or three decades.

4 HARMFUL EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL IN FINLAND

Both a single intoxication occasion and heavy, continuous alcohol use may lead to social and health-related harm. The harmful effects of alcohol use are frequently divided into acute and chronic effects. Acute harmful effects include accidents related to single drinking occasions for example, whereas chronic harmful effects result from long-term drinking. Acute and chronic harmful effects do not exclude one another. In the case of work absenteeism due to single drinking occasions, the proportion of persons suffering from chronic alcohol effects is manifold in relation to their proportion in the total population.

Moderate users of alcohol and people who occasionally get intoxicated also suffer from harmful alcohol-related effects.

The uneven distribution of alcohol-related problems among the population makes it easy to conclude that measures taken by public authorities should focus on the identification and treatment of heavy drinkers who consume alcohol in an “abnormal” manner. Yet many studies indicate that such measures would only address part of the harmful effects of alcohol use and that preventive measures aimed at the total population would be more effective. When people are asked if their alcohol use has subjected them to quarrels, fights, accidents, robberies or arrests by police, the number of incidents reported by the one tenth who drink the most are clearly lower than the number reported by the remaining majority, i.e., those who drink less. Correspondingly, the number of hospital treatment days of the one tenth that drink the most due to alcohol-related diagnoses are clearly lower than the treatment days of all other alcohol consumers. This is explained by the fact that moderate alcohol users and those occasionally drinking for the purpose of intoxication also experience alcohol-related harm and their number is manifold compared to heavy drinkers. An additional argument for the opinion that it is not worthwhile to concentrate only on heavy drinkers in the prevention and treatment of alcohol-related harm is the fact that drinking is almost always a collective activity. Few heavy drinkers lead a life in isolation. Instead the volume of their drinking is shaped in relation to the amount and frequency of drinking by the people around them. The fact is that the various circumstances and measures that restrict drinking have frequently affected heavy drinkers the most.

One form of proof that measures directed at the total population are important in the prevention of harmful alcohol-related effects is the fact that the total consumption by

the population is the best, though not the only, factor for predicting the development of alcohol-related harm. Figure 9 shows the trend of average alcohol consumption and the figures for two harmful alcohol-related effects, i.e. alcohol-related assaults and deaths from liver disease, in relation to the population in 1970–2007. The figure shows that the increase in alcohol-related liver diseases has been considerably faster than the increase in alcohol consumption. A partial reason for this may be the fact that earlier a drinking habit with concentration on fewer occasions was more predominant, causing less stress on the liver than the more regular consumption that has become more common today.

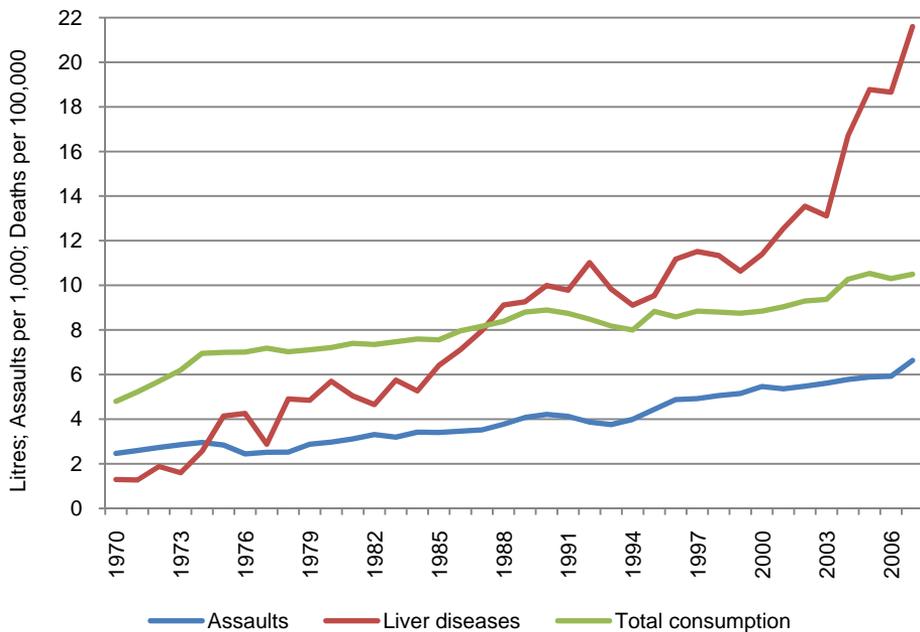


Figure 9. Assaults per 1,000 persons and deaths from liver disease per 100,000 persons (age-standardised) and total alcohol consumption in litres as 100% alcohol per capita.

It should also be remembered that only some but not all of the harmful effects affect just the drinker himself/herself. Besides the drinker, the immediate environment, outsiders and the society at large suffer from these harmful effects. Recent trends in key harmful alcohol-related effects are discussed below. This examination is focused on the trends in the 2000s, though the figures will show trends from 1990 on to serve as a background.

Alcohol-related deaths. Alcohol-related deaths found in the national cause-of-death register can be divided into three categories. First, there are cases in which the main cause of death is an alcohol-related disorder (for example, alcohol-caused cirrhosis or pancreatic disease) or alcohol poisoning. The latest trends in these deaths are shown in Figure 10, which shows that, after a period of growth in the late 1990s and a steady period in the early 2000s, such alcohol-related deaths increased substantially following the 2004 changes in alcohol policy from 1,573 cases in 2003 to 2,184 cases in 2007. Thus in 2007 there were 611 more alcohol-related deaths than in 2003, and unless there is no substantial drop in alcohol consumption, alcohol-related deaths are expected to stay at this high level in coming years as well. This means that even if the increase in mortality were to stop now, such deaths would number approximately 600 more than prior to the year 2004.

An alcohol-related disease or accidental alcohol poisoning is the most common cause of death for working-aged men and women.

Thus the ten per cent increase in alcohol consumption in 2004 has dramatically contributed to the increase in deaths from alcohol-related disorders and poisoning. From 2003 to 2007, the increase was approximately 40 per cent for both men and women. In fact, an alcohol-related disorder or accidental alcohol poisoning has become a central cause of death for Finnish working-aged men and women in recent years. By far the greatest increase in deaths has been for persons aged 50-59 and 60-69. Their proportion of the increase in alcohol-related deaths after the year 2003 has been well over 80 per cent. Deaths from alcohol-caused liver diseases have increased the most, as much as 78 per cent from 2003 to 2007.

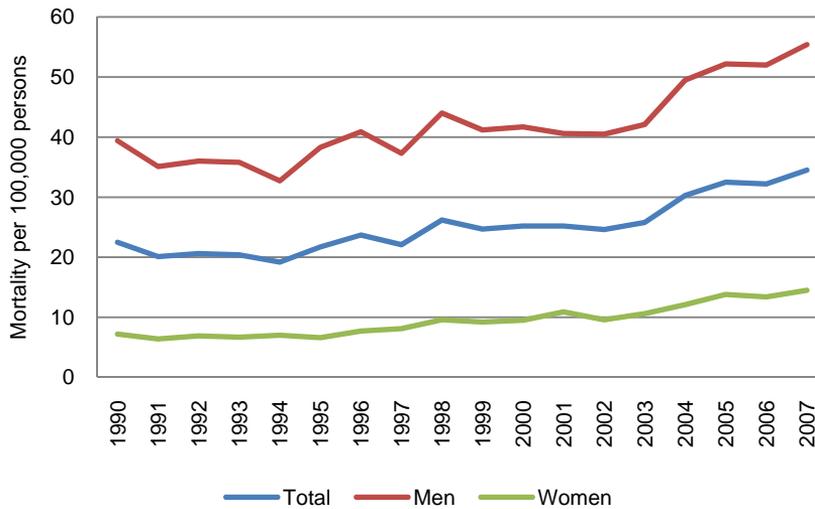


Figure 10. Age-standardised mortality from alcohol-related disorders and alcohol poisoning per 100,000 persons by gender in 1990–2007.

Source: Statistics Finland.

Secondly, the cause-of-death register provides information about violent and accidental deaths in which alcoholic intoxication has been a contributory factor. Fatal drunk-driving cases are an example of such deaths. There have been around 900-1,000 such so-called intoxication deaths annually in the 2000s. In 2004-2007, there were approximately 60 more cases annually than in 2000-2003.

Besides these two alcohol-related cause-of-death categories, deaths connected with alcohol in some other context can be extracted from the cause-of-death certificate: alcohol is a non-active substance in poisoning; an alcohol-related disorder, such as alcohol-dependency, is a contributory cause of death; or intoxication has been a contributory cause while the main cause of death has been a cause other than an accident or assault, such as a sudden heart-related death. These cases are not published every year, but in 2005, for example, they numbered 1,516.

When measured using these three indicators, alcohol-related deaths numbered some 4,500 yearly in 2004-2007.

Alcohol-related deaths can be regarded as an end point in a long process with other harmful alcohol-related effects preceding the death. They are frequently cases of different levels of social exclusion from work and family life. In such marginalised groups, the level of alcohol-related deaths is very high. During the first years

following the reduction of the excise tax on alcohol, the increase in alcohol-related deaths of working-aged people was almost exclusively limited to these groups. In the case of working persons and persons with a family, the increase in consumption after 2003 may have accelerated an on-going marginalisation process, which only later showed up in the form of increased mortality rates.

Persons detained while intoxicated. In 1975 there were close to 300,000 cases in which persons were taken into custody intoxicated. By 1990, the number had halved. In the 1990s, the number continued to fall rapidly and reached the low of 83,000 intoxicated detainees in 1997 (Figure 11). After a slight increase, the number of intoxicated detainees settled in the 94,000-97,000 range until the changes that took place in 2004 raised the number by 11 per cent to 106,000 intoxicated detainees. After 2004, the number of intoxicated detainees went down again and, in 2008, the number had fallen to 94,000 cases.

For decades, the police have attempted to transfer the responsibility for intoxicated detainees to social welfare and health authorities. As part of this attempt, the police have raised their own threshold for detention. In fact, this was the main explanation for the reduction in the number of detentions up to the middle of the 1990s.

On the other hand, the police must attend to cases in which an intoxicated person is no longer capable of taking care of himself/herself. An interesting fact is that, in relation to alcohol consumption, the number of intoxicated detainees decreased up to the year 1995, but moved practically in tandem with consumption figures during the following decade. The halt in the falling trend of the detention of intoxicated persons has been explained by the fact that, for the first time, drinking in a public place was allowed in the new Alcohol Act of 1995. Resulting disturbances led to demands by the press, among others, that the police should take firmer measures. It is also possible that, after the threshold for police detention was raised, mainly those persons were detained who were intoxicated – including those who were unconscious from intoxication – to the point of being unable to take care of themselves, and the number of such persons in poor shape may well have been following the alcohol consumption trend. However, this does not fully explain the decrease in the number of intoxicated detainees after 2004.

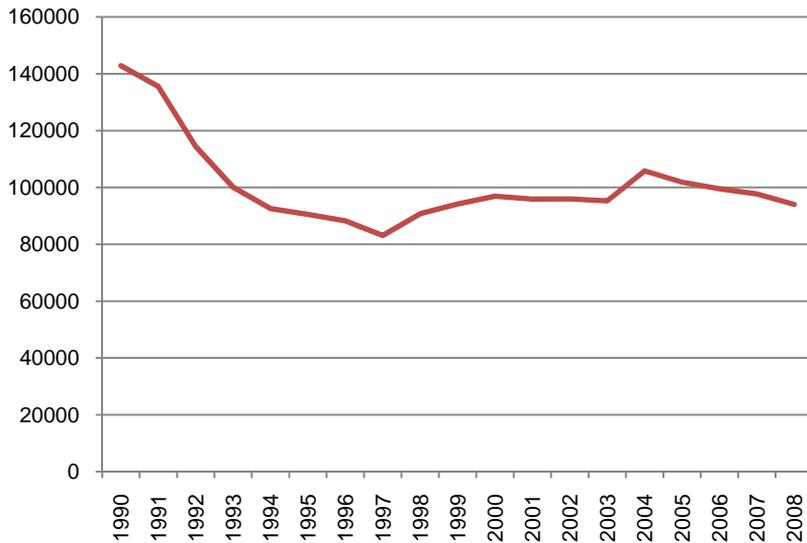


Figure 11. Intoxicated detainees in 1990–2008

Source: Statistics Finland.

Drunken driving. Alcohol use impairs the driver's ability to control his/her vehicle. On the other hand, just as with the detention of intoxicated persons, the number of drunken drivers who have come to the attention of the police is frequently considered to reflect the activeness of the police. The number of drunken driving cases that came to the attention of the police decreased from 30,000 cases in 1990 to some 20,000 cases in 1994, while alcohol consumption was falling throughout that time period (Figure 12). After this, the number increased slightly up to 2002. That year, a total of 23,000 drunken driving cases came to the attention of the police. The next two years showed a clear upward trend. In 2004, the increase was 10 per cent over the previous year, but the 2004 number, 27,000, still remained lower than the level of 15 years earlier. Since 2004, the number of drunken driving cases that have come to the knowledge of the police has varied between 25,000 and 27,500. In 2008, there were 25,877 cases of drunken driving, of which 13,812 were cases of aggravated drunken driving.

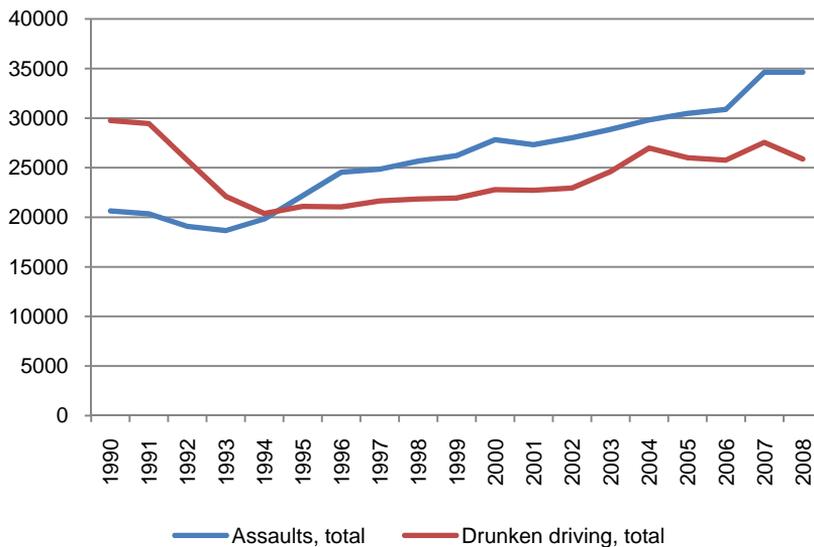


Figure 12. The number of drunken driving cases and assaults that came to the attention of the police in 1990–2008*.

* Drunken driving numbers also include persons who drove under the influence of drugs. In 2007, these cases numbered 3,396.

Source: Statistics Finland.

The number of persons injured in drunken driving cases is an indicator that is independent of police action. This indicator graph is fairly similar to graphs that describe the number of drunken driving cases. The number of persons injured so much as halved in the early 1990s, but increased in 1995, and remained stable until 2002. After that, the number of road accidents related to drunken driving started to rise again. In 2004, the increase was 6 per cent over the previous year. Thus drunken driving indicators follow total alcohol consumption trends in 1990-2008 fairly well.

The proportion of young drivers in the number of persons involved in road accidents has remained high during the entire period reviewed. The proportion of young drivers was the highest in 2004 when as many as 43 per cent of alcohol-related road accidents involved persons under the age of 24.

Some 70 per cent of the suspects in assault cases have been under the influence of alcohol.

Assaults Alcohol is clearly connected with assaults. Some 70 per cent of the suspects in assault cases have been under the influence of alcohol. The number of assaults fell slightly in the early 1990s but has been rising since 1994. In relation to the level of alcohol consumption, the number of assaults increased in 1990-2008 (Figure 12). In 2008, some 34,600 assaults came to the attention of the police. The total number was almost 70 per cent higher than in 1990 and 25 per cent higher than in 2000. The 2004 increase in alcohol consumption does not show up as any sudden increase in assault offences.

In 2008, manslaughters and murders numbered 132, as opposed to 122 in 1990, and so they have decreased in relation to the increase in alcohol consumption. Criminal homicides in Finland are dominated by violence between socially excluded and alcoholic men.

The impact of parents' alcohol use on the wellbeing of families and children. No direct informative research and statistical data are available on the prevalence of alcohol use among people with parental responsibilities, which means that indirect methods of description must be used. The examination of alcohol-related damage by age group yields some kind of trend information. Trends in the number of child welfare cases are essentially influenced by use of addictive substances as well.

Among people of "parental age", i.e. people aged 25-49, the number of substance abuse treatments, alcohol-related deaths and alcohol-related hospitalisations decreased slightly from the year 2000 onwards, and the lowering of the price of alcohol in 2004 did not increase its harmful effects. Worrisome from the viewpoint of children may be the fact that the number of women seeking treatment for alcoholic problems has increased in all age groups since 1987. This information indicates that the substance abuse problems of women of parental age have been increasing.

The statistics on children placed outside their homes or taken into custody do not contain nationally uniform information on the significance of intoxicant use. Individual studies have discovered that heavy intoxicant use by parents has been a reason or even the main reason in some 30-50 per cent of custody cases; in the case of children under the age of 12 the portion has been considerably higher. Since the early 1990s, the number of children placed outside their homes by order of municipal welfare boards has continued to rise steadily.

5 ALCOHOL POLICY IN FINLAND AFTER 2004

The operational preconditions for an independently directed national alcohol policy have been considerably weakened since the beginning of the 1990s. European integration and the single market as well as Finland's accession to the EU have contributed to the undermining of the execution of restrictive alcohol policy in Finland. The changes that have taken place in alcohol policy and the control of alcohol markets in recent decades have also been felt as increased alcohol consumption and its related harmful effects, especially after 2004 when the alcohol policy environment underwent major changes in Finland.

This chapter examines the changes that have taken place in the national alcohol policy and alcohol policy environment in Finland after accession to the EU. Trends have been observed from the early 1990s but the examination itself is focused on the period after 2004. The changes in Finland's alcohol policy are compared with the changes that have taken place in Sweden and Norway because, as in Finland, the alcohol policies of those two countries are based on the control of availability by means of alcohol retail monopolies as well as restrictive national and local alcohol policies.

The chapter reviews the measures taken by the Alcohol Programme and other public administration sectors in the prevention of alcohol-related harm and examines changes in alcohol taxation and the availability and demand for alcohol. Because the possibilities for practising an independent and restrictive alcohol policy have been undermined on the national level, pan-Nordic initiatives in the field of alcohol policy are investigated, as well as the changes in international alcohol policy that have occurred, especially in Europe, in recent years. As the background for this examination, changes that have taken place during Finland's membership in the EU are reviewed.

5.1. Alcohol policy becomes more European, environment changes, availability increases

In addition to tax reduction, the easing of the physical availability of alcoholic beverages and changes to alcohol administration in recent years have had a major impact on Finland's alcohol policy environment. A similar development, which can be seen as adapting the Nordic alcohol systems to the EU or even as a dissolution of

the restrictive Nordic alcohol policy tradition, has been underway in Norway and Sweden as well.

The main pillars of the restrictive Nordic alcohol policy have gradually crumbled.

For decades the Nordic countries, with the exception of Denmark, were used as the frame of reference for regulating the alcohol situation in Finland. Prior to EU membership, the existing alcohol policy rested on three pillars, which were regarded as the cornerstones of the Nordic alcohol policy. They are as follows: 1) restrictions on private profit interest in the alcohol business, 2) restrictions on the physical availability of alcoholic beverages, and 3) restrictions on the economic availability of alcoholic beverages by means of high taxation. Little by little, each of these pillars has crumbled. The principles of the free movement of goods and unobstructed competition, which are essential to the single market, have been especially instrumental in opening the doors to private profit seeking in alcohol production and trade and have disempowered an alcohol policy based on high taxation.

At present over 70 per cent of the Alko shops are located in connection with a shopping centre, supermarket or department store, which has lowered the threshold between alcoholic beverages exceeding medium-strength beer in strength and grocery shops.

Based on research, restrictions on the physical availability of alcoholic beverages is one of the most effective means of curbing consumption. The availability of alcohol has been at Finland's own discretion to a greater extent than many other sectors of alcohol policy. However, restrictions have gradually been eased considerably on availability as well. With the exception of estate wines, alcoholic beverages that contain more than 4.7 per cent by volume of alcohol continue to be sold in Alko shops only. With the help of the retail monopoly, it has been possible to restrict the availability of alcoholic beverages within the framework of EU membership as well but, at the same time, a number of other alcohol policy measures have substantially lowered the threshold for the availability of alcoholic beverages.

Though the Alko monopoly has made it possible to limit the number of alcohol retail shops, more of them have been established throughout the EU membership period. In 1994 there were 248 shops, and when the survival of the retail monopoly was

confirmed after an EU court decision on the so-called Franzén case in October 1997 new shops were opened at an accelerated pace. In 2003, the number of shops exceeded the 300-shop boundary mark and, at the end of 2008, shops numbered 344, an increase of close to 40 per cent since 1994. At the same time, more and more new shops have opened in central places of sale. At present, over 70 per cent of Alko shops are located in connection with a shopping centre, a supermarket or a department store.

The opening hours of Alko shops have also been extended by some 50 per cent since the early 1990s. At present, Alko shops are open 64 hours per week. In the Nordic monopoly comparison, Alko's opening hours are clearly the longest. For the sake of comparison, it should be noted that the Swedish and Norwegian monopoly shops are only open approximately 45 hours a week. All Alko shops have been self-service shops for over ten years, which has helped alcoholic beverages to become commonplace. The same trend can be seen in the other Nordic countries as well. More than 99 per cent of Norway's Vinmonopolet shops operate on a self-service basis and, in Sweden, 70 per cent of Sweden's Systembolaget shops are also based on self-service. Besides shops, Alko had 124 outlets for sales based on orders at the end of 2008. They are located in remote areas around Finland, and their sales do not amount to more than a little over one per cent of total sales.

At the same time, the placement of Alko shops in shopping centres has meant that the threshold between alcoholic beverages stronger than medium-strength beer and grocery shops has become lower. Since the beginning of the 1990s, medium-strength beer has been by far the best seller among alcoholic beverages in Finland, and after ciders and other alcoholic beverages with a maximum alcohol content of 4.7 per cent by volume produced through fermentation appeared on the shelves of grocery shops in 1995, the proportion of grocery sales in domestic alcohol sales has increased further.

The steady increase in the number of licensed restaurants has also increased the availability of alcohol, though most alcohol is sold in places other than restaurants. The number of A-licences (licence to sell all alcoholic beverages) has more than doubled since the early 1990s when the number of licences reached over 2,000. At the end of 2008, there were as many as 5,700 A-licences. The number of seats in restaurants had increased even more. On the other hand, the number of C-licences (beverages containing less than 4.7 per cent by volume of alcohol) started to decrease in 1995 (some 6,000 licences) and, at the end of 2008, the number of C-licences had been reduced by more than one half (some 2,400). The opening hours of licensed premises have also been extended since the early 1990s. Nowadays the most common closing time is 2 a.m. The closing time can be extended to 3 or 4 a.m. with a special permit. In 1995, such extended-hours permits numbered

approximately 1,000, whereas at the end of 2008 they numbered almost 1,200. The number of extended-hours permits has fallen, however, since the end of 2003 when over 1,400 permits were granted.

5.2. The Alcohol Programme and government measures in the prevention of alcohol-related harm

The Alcohol Programme as part of the prevention of alcohol-related harm

The national alcohol policy is directed by the Government Resolution in Strategies on Alcohol Policy issued in October 2003. During the preparation of the resolution, the government had just submitted a bill to Parliament on a large reduction, averaging 33 per cent, of alcohol taxes. The tax reduction took effect in March 2004 when the import of alcohol from other EU countries had just been liberalised and only two months prior to the accession of Estonia to the EU in May 2004.

The purpose of the government resolution was to outline the future of alcohol policy in a situation in which alcohol consumption and harmful alcohol-related social and health effects were on the increase even before the decision to lower alcohol taxes. The resolution states: “The liberalisation of imports by travellers from countries with lower prices and the pressures this causes to cut the taxation and prices of alcoholic beverages only serve to make the situation worse. The growth in consumption is also leading to a rise in the need for social welfare and health-care services, which is increasing costs for municipalities.” The main objective of the 2004 Alcohol Programme (2004-2007) and its second programme period (2008-2011) has been the meeting of the objectives of the government resolution. The action has been aimed at meeting the following three objectives:

- a) Considerably reduce adverse effects caused by alcohol on the well-being of children and families,
- b) Considerably reduce the at-risk use of alcoholic beverages and their consequent adverse effects
- c) Create a downward trend in the overall consumption of alcoholic beverages

Although the Alcohol Programme has not always played an important role in alcohol policy decisions, its profile has been prominent, at least formally. The programme has been mentioned in the manifesto of prime minister Vanhanen’s second government, for example, and it has had a certain, though limited, influence on the allocation of resources in the field of alcohol prevention and work.

In Norway and Sweden, alcohol policies are also directed by similar action programmes, whose main objectives, just as in the Finnish Alcohol Programme, are the reduction of total consumption and the minimisation of the harmful effects of alcohol (Table 1). In all of the three countries, the key areas of focus that have emerged are children and youth as well as “situational abstinence”, i.e. full abstinence in certain stages or areas of life, such as traffic, workplaces, and pregnancy in the case of women. In Norway information, education and international co-operation have also been emphasised, whereas the re-organisation of preventive work as well as local prevention measures have been the main foci of the Swedish action programme.

Special funding received by the Finnish Alcohol Programme is modest in comparison with the Swedish and Norwegian programmes, which also correlates with the social-policy and health-policy importance of alcohol issues.

Similarities in the foci of these programmes are obvious, but there are also differences, especially in resource allocation and financing structures. Overall, the Swedish alcohol programme can be considered to have the best resource allocations, whereas the special funding received by the Finnish Alcohol Programme has been the most modest. The resource allocations of these programmes also correlate well with the social- and health-policy importance of alcohol-related issues, which has been much greater in Norway and Sweden than in Finland.

Table 1. Special features of the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish alcohol programmes

Source: Karlsson, 2008.

Finland	Norway	Sweden
Adopted by: Government	Adopted by: Parliament	Adopted by: Parliament
Objective: Reduction of total consumption and minimisation of harm	Objective: Reduction of total consumption and minimisation of harm	Objective: Reduction of total consumption and minimisation of harm
Foci: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children and youth • situational sobriety • risk or heavy use of alcohol • networking, partnership agreements, local implementation of action 	Foci: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children and youth • situational sobriety • services and early intervention • information and education • co-ordination of activities • international co-operation 	Foci: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children and youth • situational sobriety • services • risk groups • building of a new system, local prevention efforts
Funding level: Satisfactory	Funding level: Good	Funding level: Excellent

Measures affecting the availability of and demand for alcohol

When alcohol consumption and its harmful effects started to increase after 2004, the government finally, in November 2005, set up a ministerial working group on alcohol policy to prepare action for the reduction of alcohol-related harm. Following the proposals of the working group, the government favoured the following action, among other things:

- The retail of alcoholic beverages will commence not earlier than 9 o'clock in the morning instead of 7 o'clock. This regulation came into force on 1 April 2007.
- Bulk discounts for beer (6-pack, 12-pack) and other alcohol beverages will be prohibited. This change was implemented at the beginning of 2008.
- Alcohol may not be advertised on TV earlier than 9 o'clock in the evening and alcohol advertising in cinemas will be prohibited in shows that minors are allowed to attend. This regulation came into force on 1 January 2008.

The decision to change the Alcohol Act was taken at a time when the atmosphere around alcohol-related opinions in Finland had become stricter and politicians across party boundaries supported higher alcohol taxation. The year 2006 in general, and its

latter half in particular, was characterised by a substantial tightening of opinions among professionals and political decision-makers around alcohol-related issues. Parliament also added a resolution to a parcel of laws passed in 2007 according to which alcohol taxation and especially the taxation of strong alcoholic beverages should be raised during the next term of government. This promise was contained in the manifesto of Vanhanen's second government.

Its intention was to stipulate that, as of 1 January 2009, alcohol packages and bottles should carry a general warning about alcohol-related health hazards and that separate warnings should be given about foetal damage caused by alcohol. However, a general warning worded "WARNING: Alcohol endangers foetal development and your health" did not suit the EU, and at the proposal of Risikko, Minister of Health and Social Services, the law pertaining to warnings was repealed in the spring of 2008, even before it came into force. The Minister of Health and Social Services did not believe herself that the warnings would be effective, which, for its part, explains this repeal procedure. Throughout the law-drafting period, the Federation of the Brewing and Soft Drinks Industry also actively opposed the implementation of warnings.

In the spring of 2009, the government and Parliament had at least two processes for amending the Alcohol Act under discussion. The government bill for amending the provisions governing alcohol-related offences (HE 84/2008 vp) proposed that sections dealing with alcohol-related crimes should be transferred from alcohol legislation to criminal legislation. The most interesting amendment from the viewpoint of fundamental rights concerned the extension of the right of inspection of the police – an extension that allowed the police to inspect articles that are in the possession of a minor in order to find and confiscate illegally carried alcoholic beverages. Another much-debated amendment dealt with alcohol image advertising and the inclusion of a section dealing with alcohol marketing offences in criminal law. The government bill was submitted to Parliament in June 2008, and the amendments to the law came into force in November 2009.

Another topical amendment process involving the Alcohol Act contains a proposal that a retail licence holder for estate wine should be able to retail separately defined liqueurs. The present maximum alcohol content of estate wine is 13 per cent and the proposed maximum alcohol content of estate liqueur is 22 per cent by volume. Wine estates have existed in Finland since 1995 but their number as well as the number of fruit wines and ciders produced by them has been going down in recent years. In 2007 there were 38 wine estates in operation and they produced a total of slightly less than 18,000 litres of liqueur. Thus it does not involve any large volumes and the amendment would not entail any great increase in total consumption or harm. However, the right proposed for wine estates to retail estate liqueurs is not a public

health threat primarily because of increase in consumption but rather because of the possible multiplier effects of the current amendments proposed for the alcohol system.

If the proposal is carried in its present form, it is likely that the producers and importers of alcoholic beverages who have no retailing rights would demand that the competitive distortions related to the retailing of alcoholic beverages should be corrected by further extending the retailing of alcoholic beverages. This interpretation is supported in a communiqué published in January (26 Jan. 2009) by the Finnish Grocery Trade Association, which opposes the estate liqueur bill for the reason that it violates the equality of entrepreneurs as long as alcohol trading enterprises with a wholesale licence are not permitted to sell alcoholic beverages to corporate customers.

Permitting the sale of estate liqueur would challenge the alcohol retail monopoly and could cause its abolishment.

The ministerial group on social policy approved the estate liqueur bill on 22 October 2009 and the bill is likely to be submitted to Parliament during the autumn session. Permitting the sale of estate liqueur would challenge the justification for the retail monopoly system and even lead to its abolishment if the Commission decides to take the matter to the EC Court for a decision. The abolishment of the monopoly system again would multiply the number of alcohol beverage sales outlets. Based on research, it would increase the consumption of alcohol and public health and harmful social effects would increase along with it.

Alcohol taxation as a part of alcohol policy decision-making

Besides the restriction of the physical availability of alcoholic beverages, the high level of alcoholic beverage prices has proven to be an effective means of controlling alcohol consumption and the level of alcohol-caused harm in society. The possibilities of using high taxation as a part of alcohol policy have been reduced, however, with the accession of Finland into the EU. The use of alcohol taxation as an alcohol policy tool became even more difficult to implement in 2004 when the import of alcohol by travellers from other EU countries was liberalised, alcohol taxation was lowered by 33 per cent on average, and Estonia joined the EU.

Since the 2004 tax reduction, alcohol taxation has been increased twice. In 2008, excise duties on strong alcoholic beverages were raised by 15 per cent and those on

other alcoholic beverages by 10 per cent. In connection with this moderate increase in taxation, the government promised new tax increases for 2009 if required by the situation. Alcohol taxation was discussed again during the government budget session but the government could not reach an agreement on new increases at that time. Two months later, in November 2008, the Ministerial Committee on Economic Policy unexpectedly decided that the taxation of all alcoholic beverages would be raised by 10 per cent at the beginning of 2009.

Equally unexpected as the alcohol tax increase at the beginning of 2009 was the government's decision to increase alcohol taxes for a second time by 10 per cent during 2009. That increase, which will add some 70 million euros to the government's tax revenue, is, first and foremost, an attempt to fill in a dent in the state economy caused by recession. The increase in alcohol taxes will take effect at the beginning of October. At that time, beer and strong alcoholic beverages in particular will continue to be taxed more lightly than prior to the tax cuts of 2004. On the other hand, the taxation level of wine will be higher than the level in effect prior to 2004.

Price policy continues to be an essential means of control, though the alcohol policy-related operating environment has undergone a notable change during the last two decades or so.

Although with the liberalisation of alcohol exports by travellers, similar external threats have also affected Sweden and, indirectly, the EEA country Norway, the alcohol taxation policy in Finland has been considerably more inconsistent than in the two countries mentioned. Our western neighbours have held their alcohol taxation levels fairly stable. Public debate on alcohol taxation has been lively in our neighbouring countries, however, and, as late as 2004 and 2005, proposals were made to reduce alcohol taxation substantially in Sweden. It is true that minor adjustments have been made to alcohol taxes in Sweden and Norway. For example, inflation increases have been made at regular intervals in alcohol taxes in Norway and, in Sweden, taxation on various beverages was evened out by raising taxes on beer and lowering them on wine. To sum up, it can be said that price policy continues to be an essential tool, though it will be carried out in a new alcohol policy environment.

5.3. Alcohol policy in the Nordic countries and Europe

While alcohol policy on the national level has lost some of its justification in Finland, alcohol issues have become more prominent on the international level. When limits on imports by travellers were removed in the EU, issues related to alcohol policy matters became prominent on the agendas of the Nordic Council and the Council of Ministers. The Nordic finance ministers took a common stand on alcohol taxation in May 2004 and, in October 2004, the health and social services ministers prepared a joint statement on alcohol policy.

Although the statement was in many respects just a symbolic gesture of co-operation, the Nordic countries have together succeeded in advancing certain important international alcohol issues. The most significant achievement may be the Commission's Communication on an EU Strategy to Support Member States in Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm (COM (2006) 625) – the EU's first "alcohol strategy" – in whose preparation and approval the Nordic countries and Sweden in particular played a central role.

The Nordic countries have also been active in advancing alcohol issues at the World Health Organisation (WHO). It was partly due to the influence of the Nordic countries that, in May 2005, the WHO's General Assembly passed a resolution on public health problems caused by the harmful use of alcohol (A58/26). In the comment, the WHO was asked to prepare a global programme for the reduction of alcohol-related harm. Two years later, i.e. in May 2008, the WHO's General Assembly approved a strategy for the reduction of the harmful use of alcohol (A61/13). Sweden and Norway played a central role in the birth of the two resolutions. It should also be noted that the Nordic countries have been successful in activating other member countries of the WHO in alcohol issues. A good example of this is the fact that the initiator of the 2008 resolution was not one of the Nordic countries; instead it was initiated by the Republic of Rwanda, a country in Central Africa.

Nordic attempts at influencing the shaping of international alcohol policy have not been equally successful in all areas. Issues such as the pan-Nordic goal of re-implementing the limits on alcohol imports by travellers within the EU and halving the present suggested import limits have fared somewhat poorly. Despite their efforts, the Nordic countries have not succeeded in pushing through an increase in the minimum level of alcohol taxation within the EU.

A common Nordic front in alcohol issues towards the Commission could well be a more realistic strategy than that of Finland going it alone in defending its alcohol policy interests in the EU. At the same time, it should be remembered that pan-

Nordic initiatives are largely symbolic and political declarations of intent in alcohol issues and that they can never replace those alcohol policy measures affecting the price of alcoholic beverages and their availability which were abandoned when Finland became part of the EU's internal market.

6 SUMMARY

This review has looked into the development of the alcohol situation in Finland in 1990-2008. At the end of the period reviewed, the situation appears as follows:

- Finland has the highest alcohol consumption in the Nordic countries, i.e. 10.4 litres as 100% alcohol per capita, which is a high figure even on an international scale.
- However, the near-daily use of alcohol is uncommon in Finland. Instead, alcohol is consumed on weekends and evenings, and drinking with the purpose of intoxication is relatively common.
- Alcohol use by persons of retirement age is on the increase, whereas abstinence among young people has increased and drinking with the purpose of intoxication has decreased, especially in the youngest age groups, during the past decade.
- Alcohol consumption by women has increased in recent decades, relatively even more than among men.
- In recent years, alcohol-related disease or accidental alcohol poisoning has become a central cause of death for working-aged men and women.
- Among the various harmful effects, the number of alcohol-related deaths has seen the strongest increase. This applies especially to deaths caused by liver disorders. Such deaths have almost doubled within five years.
- An increase in alcohol taxation in 2008 and 2009 has curbed the growth of consumption and, with the recession, consumption may turn slightly downwards.
- As long as alcohol consumption stays roughly at its present level, the harmful effects of alcohol and their concomitant costs will be massive and further add to the pressures directed at municipal social welfare and health services.

During this review period, alcohol consumption has reached a new level in Finland. The increase in consumption began after the recessionary period in the early 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s. In 2004, alcohol consumption increased by 10 per cent during the year and then settled at its present level. Increased alcohol consumption has been clearly visible in the increased incidence of both acute and chronic disorders. This, in turn, has increased costs to society caused by the adverse effects of alcohol use and though the importance of restrictive alcohol policy has been on the increase in recent years, the measures taken have not yet been effective enough to reverse the trends of alcohol consumption and its harmful effects.

However, the current recession together with the decreasing purchasing power of the population and rising unemployment may change the situation and turn alcohol

consumption downward. In recent years, increased harmful alcohol-related effects have strengthened strict opinions related to alcohol policy in Finland and political decision-makers have also taken a more favourable view of restrictions. At the same time, the increases in alcohol taxation in 2008 and 2009 have shown that it is not at all impossible to influence the price of alcoholic beverages in the present situation. Nothing will prevent the implementation of restrictions on the availability of alcoholic beverages either, provided that the political will exists. A good example of this is Parliament's decision to shorten the opening hours of alcohol retail outlets by two hours in 2007.

Tightening the reins on alcohol policy in a situation in which abstinence is increasing among young people and restrictive alcohol policy seems to be more widely in demand, could in the best scenario reverse the negative trend in alcohol situation – one that has continued for over a decade – and bring us closer to the objectives set in the government's 2003 resolution on alcohol policy.

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