
Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004



World Health Organization
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse
Geneva
2004

Part I

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Conclusion

Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity. While it carries connotations of pleasure and sociability in the minds of many, harmful consequences of its use are diverse and widespread. As documented in this report, globally, alcohol problems exert an enormous toll on the lives and communities of many nations, especially those in the developing world. Research has shown that when extrapolating from historical trends, the role of alcohol as a major factor in the burden of disease will be increasing in the future. Particularly worrying trends are the increases in average volume of drinking predicted for the most populous regions of the world (e.g. in China and India) and the emerging trend of more harmful and risky patterns in drinking especially among young people.

A global perspective on alcohol policy needs to acknowledge and take into account the characteristics, effects and consequences of alcohol use in different societies, and yet to focus and act on the public health goal which is to minimize the harm caused by drinking. Alcohol-related burden is linked to at least two different dimensions of consumption: average volume and patterns of drinking. Thus, in order to avoid or reduce burden, both dimensions should be taken into consideration. In other words, one may reduce burden by decreasing the average volume of alcohol consumed or by shifting patterns of drinking to less harmful patterns. One may also change burden by weakening the link between exposure and disease, e.g. by disaggregating the link between alcohol and traffic injuries by not combining drinking and driving (Rehm et al., 2003b).

This report has contributed to the knowledge base for doing so, by documenting levels and trends in alcohol-related problems, and showing how drinking levels and patterns contribute to these problems. Another recent WHO publication - the *Global status report: alcohol policy* - seeks to evaluate and disseminate knowledge of strategies and policies that are effective in reducing the rates of alcohol problems. The Global Alcohol Database, as well as this report, aims at providing a standardized reference source of information for global epidemiological surveillance of alcohol use and related problems. It is evident from this report that there is a need for countries to develop national monitoring systems to keep track of alcohol consumption and its health and social consequences. This would be particularly useful in raising awareness among the general public and policy-makers of the serious implications that alcohol use have within the public health domain.

To effectively reduce the level of harmful social and health consequences from alcohol use requires much preparation and planning. It is now the responsibility of governments worldwide and concerned citizens to encourage healthy debate and formulate effective public health-oriented countermeasures in order to minimize the harm caused by alcohol use.