



Availability of Alcohol Regional Strategies **FACT SHEET**

This fact sheet arises from the project Building Capacity, which has received funding from the European Union, in the framework of the Public Health Programme. Sole responsibility for the contents of this publication lies with the author. The Executive Agency is not responsible for any use of the information that may be contained herein. The contents of this fact sheet are based on the discussions and outcomes of the AER Alcohol Peer Reviews that took place between 2007-2009 as part of the Building Capacity project.



Availability of Alcohol - the situation in Europe's regions

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) organised an Alcohol Peer Review on the availability of alcohol in the regions and the policies that regions can adopt in this area (Umeå, Västerbotten-S, 4th June 2008).

In preparation for the 2nd AER Alcohol Peer Review on the Availability of Alcohol, participants were asked to provide information on the availability of alcohol in their regions.

Legal availability - Age limits

Among the regions surveyed, the average age limit for buying alcohol is 18 and all regions have enforcement measures accompanying this age limit.

Alcohol is easily available at a variety of stores in most regions, and gas stations in particular are highlighted as being open on a 24-hour basis, thereby allowing unlimited access to alcohol.

The majority of regions surveyed highlight the need to better enforce age limits for the purchase of alcohol so as to render these measures effective.

Commercial availability - Outlets for sale of alcohol

Of the respondents, only Norway and Sweden noted a system of national monopolies for the sale of alcohol.

Norway operates a part-national monopoly on the retail sale of alcohol, where beverages with an alcohol content of over 22% are sold in state-controlled outlets to persons aged at least 20 years. The Swedish age limit for consuming alcohol in bars and restaurants is 18 years.

Swedish regions operate within a system of a national monopoly for retail sales of alcohol, with a minimum age limit of 20 years for purchasing beverages at these outlets. Only light beer (5% or under alcohol content) is available outside the state monopoly system. However, Swedish respondents noted that the European single market and the free movement of persons and goods has an impact on the effectiveness of these monopoly measures, as people can now purchase alcohol at a cheaper price abroad and bring it legally back to the country.

Illegal Availability

All regions surveyed confirm that the illegal availability of alcohol is a problem in their territories, and highlighted the sale of alcohol to minors and the illegal sale of alcohol as key problems. The illegal production of alcohol is less of a problem for the regions surveyed.

Social Availability

All regions surveyed confirmed that alcohol is easily available to young people through their social contacts.

Availability and Youth

All participating regions stressed how alcohol remains in fact relatively easily available to young people, despite the restrictions in place. Regions estimate that sales to minors occur regularly, despite legal age limits, but of course do not have data at their disposal to fully appreciate the extent of the problem. Television programmes or associations have tested the respect of age limits for the purchase of alcohol and have found that young people can often easily purchase alcohol or be served in a bar even if they do not have the legal drinking age.

Regions feel that the social environment in which a young person evolves has an important impact on when they first come in contact with alcohol and the type of alcohol they consume. Young people first consume alcohol in the family or through their group of friends. Parents often offer alcohol to their children thinking that it is best that they teach their children how to drink correctly and that in this way they will be able to control what they drink. Young people often have older friends who can purchase alcohol for them and alcoholic beverages are often available at parties.

Availability of Alcohol - Key challenges for the regions

At the occasion of the 2nd AER Alcohol Peer Review, participants discussed the challenges they encounter when it comes to the impact of the availability of alcohol has on their citizens and territories and the difficulties they encounter when trying to control availability.

Availability of alcohol is in most cases not a regional competence – rules are fixed at national level and are implemented mainly at local level, notably when it comes to granting licences for the sale of alcohol.

1. Regions' biggest problem

Regions state that their biggest problem is the almost unlimited availability of alcohol. They encounter difficulties in trying to implement restrictions on this availability.

Participants agreed that setting restrictions to availability was a first step, but the most important change required is to ensure these restrictions are respected. In particular, it is important to control the social availability of alcohol and change peoples' attitudes to alcohol.

Smuggling and illegal alcohol were also cited as problems to successfully restricting alcohol availability and preventing harm.

2. Most important change regions should make

Participants agreed that setting restrictions to availability was a first step, but the most important change required is to ensure these restrictions are respected. In particular, it is important to control the social availability of alcohol and change peoples' attitudes to alcohol.

Smuggling and illegal alcohol were also cited as problems to successfully restricting alcohol availability and harm.

3. Most effective policy measures

Participants referred to training schemes for staff in outlets that sell alcohol, so that they ask for IDs and refuse to serve minors or persons who are drunk.

The *Responsible Beverage Service* project, which aims to reduce alcohol-related harm in and around alcohol-selling venues, was identified as a very effective policy initiative. The project is based on cooperation between local authorities, who grant alcohol licences, and bar and restaurant owners. Should the latter break availability rules, they are subject to penalties such as losing their licence or going to prison.

A separate fact sheet with further details on this strategy is available.

Regions agree it is essential to change people's attitudes to alcohol consumption and encourage them to be more responsible. Cooperation with parents and schools is important when it comes to applying restrictions addressing young people.

4. Regions' role & supporting the local level

It is important to bring the alcohol problems to the attention of politicians, with clear facts and figures. This is the first step to gaining political support for policies and ensuring they are implemented.

Cooperation with local authorities is essential, as it is often these that grant licences for serving and selling alcohol and fix opening hours for shops and bars.

Bibliography, References & Links

- For the full outcomes of the AER Alcohol Peer Reviews, visit the AER website: <http://www.aer.eu/main-issues/health/alcohol-prevention/aer-alcohol-peer-reviews.html>

AER, April 2010