The Social Cost of Alcohol

- The total social cost of alcohol in Europe was estimated to be €125 billion in 2003 – equivalent to €650 per household per year, and roughly the same level as recently estimated for tobacco.
- Alcohol causes a cost in many different areas of human life – from the workplace (€59bn, including the cost of early deaths) to healthcare & treatment (€22bn) to crime (€33bn) to traffic accident damage (€10bn).
- If we place a value on alcohol-related pain, suffering and life itself on top of these material losses, then we get a much higher figure ranging between €150-700 billion each year, depending on how life itself is valued.

Alcohol and Jobs

- Alcohol is a major industry in the EU, with drinks production accounting for three-quarters of a million jobs (with many more linked to alcohol indirectly) and the alcohol trade contributing €9billion to the goods account balance.
- But this does not necessarily mean that effective policies will lead to job losses:
  - There is only a weak and inconsistent link between trends in drinking levels on the one hand, and trends in jobs linked to alcohol on the other.
  - More importantly, if people spend less money on alcohol they have more money to spend on other things. For example, when the World Bank looked at this for tobacco, they found that countries like the US would see more jobs in the long-term if tobacco vanished overnight.

Total Health Impact

- Alcohol is responsible for 7.4% of all ill-health and early death in the EU after taking account of any benefits to health, which makes it the third most important cause behind tobacco and high blood pressure and ahead of factors like overweight, high cholesterol and illicit drugs.
- Alcohol is responsible for 115,000 deaths in people who die before the age of 70 (after taking into account any health benefits), and is the leading cause of death in young men in the EU.
- Alcohol is a cause of harm to others than the drinker, including some 60,000 underweight births, 5-9 million children living in families adversely affected by alcohol, 10,000 traffic deaths to people other than the driver, and 2,000 murders in the European Union each year.
- Alcohol causes inequalities in health both between and within countries, leading to an estimated 90 extra deaths per 100,000 men and 60 extra deaths per 100,000 women in the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004, compared to the 15 pre-2004 EU countries.
Young People

- Nearly all **15-16 year old students** (>90%) have drunk alcohol at some point in their life. The average amount drunk on a single occasion by 15-16 year olds is over 60g of alcohol (equivalent to nearly four pints of beer), while more than 1 in 6 (18%) have ‘binged’ three or more times in the last month.

- **The trend in youth drinking** has been for binge-drinking to rise, with most countries showing an increase between 1995 and 2003. In the older EU countries, this increase mainly happened between 1995 and 1999 with more varied patterns since, while the newer countries are still seeing further rises.

- While there has been a lot of concern over girls’ drinking in Europe, boys continue to drink more and get drunk more often than girls, with little reduction in the absolute size of the difference between boys and girls.

Adult Men and Women

- While many adults do not drink high levels of consumption and do not binge-drink, the **number of risky drinkers** is still high in the EU – 40 million EU15 citizens report ‘drinking too much’ monthly and 100 million (1 in 3) binge-drink at least once in a month.

- Similarly, while 266 million adults drink alcohol at relatively lower risk levels, over 58 million adults (15%) drink more than this, including 20 million (6%) **drinking at harmful levels**. 23 million Europeans (5% of men, 1% of women) are **dependent** on alcohol in any one year.

- While many people hold strong **stereotypes** about different countries in Europe, the differences between countries, and particularly between northern and southern Europe, are less than is commonly thought. For example, beer is increasingly drunk in southern Europe and wine in northern Europe. People in Spain now drink more of their alcohol in the form of beer than in wine, while people in Greece and Spain drink more spirits than people in Sweden & Norway.

‘What Works’ in Reducing Harm

- Although politically popular – and a human right – the effectiveness of **education and public awareness campaigns** in reducing the harm done by alcohol is low. This means that they are **not an alternative** to more effective measures.

- Alcohol **taxation** has consistently been found to be an effective way to reduce the harm done by alcohol, and has a particularly strong effect on younger people and heavier drinkers. If alcohol taxes were used to raise the price of alcohol in the EU by 10%, over 9,000 deaths would be prevented during the following year and approximately €13bn of extra revenues would be gained.

- Based firmly on the evidence, the report concludes by making a series of **recommendations** in 10 key policy areas (available in full in the summary of the report): (1) defining an alcoholic beverage; (2) creating the evidence base; (3) preparing and implementing plans; (4) cross-border support; (5) drinking and driving; (6) education and public awareness; (7) labelling; (8) regulating the market; (9) drinking environments; and (10) brief advice for heavy drinkers.

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1 Defined as drinking 5 or more drinks on a single occasion

2 ‘Low-risk’ = <20g (women) or 40g (men) per day; ‘harmful’ = >40g (women) or 60g (men)