



## MAY 2012 NEWSLETTER

### United Kingdom Alcohol Epidemic: An Update, Part 1

by Pamela S. Erickson

*"Binge drinking isn't some fringe issue, it accounts for half of all alcohol consumed in this country. The crime and violence it causes drains resources in our hospitals, generates mayhem on our streets and spreads fear in our communities."*

*"My message is simple. We can't go on like this. We have to tackle the scourge of violence caused by binge drinking. And we have to do it now."*

*- David Cameron, Prime Minister, United Kingdom, March 22, 2012*



In September 2009, I released a report called "The Danger of Alcohol Deregulation: The United Kingdom Experience." It described a five-decade process of alcohol deregulation and increased drinking. During that time, consumption by the whole population more than doubled, hospitalizations and deaths due to alcohol sky-rocketed, and underage drinking rose to twice the U.S. rate. While beer sales were flat, sales of wine and spirits rose sharply. Community problems became acute as town center

entertainment areas got out of control with hundreds of highly intoxicated patrons.

What has happened in the past three years? Things have improved slightly on some fronts, but not others. Here is a summary:

**Consumption:** The overall consumption rate began declining in 2004, but is still more than twice the rate in 1956. The decrease began even before corrective measures were in place, but it has just "rounded the top of the mountain." The real question is, Is this decrease a result of the recession or a real decline?

**Affordability:** Alcohol remains highly affordable, with a minor price decrease followed by a slight increase in recent years. A tax increase pushes pub closures. Despite a substantial tax increase, alcohol has continued its climb in affordability after a slight decrease. The new tax was generally not passed on to consumers, but absorbed by the supplier or retailer. The exception is the traditional pub, which has more difficulty absorbing a tax increase. Nearly 20,000 pubs have closed since 1970.

**Cheap alcohol continues to foster "pre-loading," or drinking in homes before going out.** With the recession pushing people to be more thrifty, pre-loading has continued. In a study of this practice, two-thirds of 17- to 30-year-olds arrested in one city in England claimed to have pre-loaded. Another study found "pre-loaders" to be 2 1/2 times more involved in violence than other drinkers.

**Underage drinking:** Underage drinking began a slight decline in the mid-2000s, but the amount consumed by those who do drink is twice what it was in 1990. While the overall consumption rate is down--and ID checking measures are now in place--the amount drunk by underage drinkers doubled from 1990 to 2006. And, the "gender gap" has disappeared as girls are as likely to drink as boys.

**Hospital admissions for alcohol-related problems have increased even though overall consumption has declined. Deaths due to alcohol continue at high levels.** In 2009-10, hospital admissions for alcohol exceeded 1 million for the first time. In 2010-11, they increased again by 9%. This compares to 2002-03, when such admissions were 510,780. Obviously, recent alcohol consumption declines have not impacted hospital admissions. The death rate from alcohol-related causes remains high at approximately twice the rate in 1991. While death rates peaked in about 2007, they remain high as the consequences of heavy drinking come in the form of alcohol-related disease.

data by Eurobarometer: "Britons drink almost as regularly as Mediterraneans but binge like Scandanavians." In its most recent report, the World Health Organization ranked the UK higher than the U.S. on a risky drinking scale. Increased risky drinking is associated with a greater burden of disease, according to the WHO.

*Stay tuned. Next month's newsletter will deal with Part 2 of the Update: Has government action impacted the epidemic? In July, Part 3 will look at whether the U.S. is likely to have a similar epidemic.*

For more information, see [www.healthyalcoholmarket.com](http://www.healthyalcoholmarket.com)  
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**Risky Drinking:** A recent survey by Eurobarometer illustrates that drinkers in the UK are more likely to engage in heavy drinking than the European Union average. The alcohol problem in the UK includes a pattern of risky drinking. In an article in The Economist, the authors commented on