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Public attitudes to minimum unit pricing of alcohol

Research Summary

Social research

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The Welsh Government's Public Health White Paper, published in April 2014, includes a proposal to introduce a minimum unit price of alcohol in Wales in order to reduce the harms associated with alcohol misuse.

To help gain a better understanding of public attitudes to alcohol and minimum unit pricing, the Welsh Government commissioned questions in the March 2014 wave of the Wales Omnibus Survey, conducted by Beaufort Research Ltd.

Questions were asked of 1,012 respondents. The survey is designed to be representative of the population resident in Wales aged 16 years and over.

Stated impact of minimum unit pricing

Respondents that drink alcohol were asked if the introduction of a minimum unit price would lead them to drink more, the same, a bit less, or a lot less than they currently do. The higher the minimum unit price, the greater the proportion of drinkers that said they would drink a bit or a lot less alcohol:

- 6 per cent would drink less alcohol at the 50 pence level;
- 14 per cent would drink less alcohol at the 60 pence level; and
- 24 per cent would drink less alcohol at the 70 pence level.

Given the concern over the distributional impact of minimum unit pricing of alcohol on different socio-economic groups, it is worth noting that the proportion of respondents saying they would drink less at each level was the same for ABC1 and C2DE respondents. However, the lack of a difference in expected effect between ABC1 and C2DE respondents may suggest limited population-wide understanding of the degree to which individuals will be impacted by a given minimum unit price.

At the 50 pence level, there was a small but statistically insignificant difference in the proportion of lower and increasing or higher risk drinkers who said they would drink less. However, this difference grows as the minimum unit price increases and is statistically significant at the 60 pence and 70 pence levels. Double the proportion of 'increasing or higher risk' drinkers say they would drink less at a minimum unit price of 70 pence (32 per cent) than 'lower risk' drinkers (16 per cent).

This suggests that minimum unit pricing may be successful at targeting increasing or higher risk drinkers, with the difference appearing to grow as minimum unit price increases.

Support for proposals to introduce minimum unit pricing for alcohol

All respondents were asked 'Are you aware of any proposals to place certain controls on the price of alcohol that is sold in Wales?'. Overall, just under half of respondents (47 per cent) said they were aware of proposals.

Respondents that were aware of any proposals were asked what they think the proposals are. Around a third of respondents (32 per cent) specifically mentioned that a minimum price would be introduced, and a similar proportion (30 per cent) said that prices would increase.

To test prompted awareness, all respondents were then shown a description of the Welsh Government's proposal to introduce minimum unit pricing of alcohol, and were asked if they had previously seen or heard anything about it. Around half of respondents (52 per cent) said they had seen or heard something about it. A significantly greater proportion of drinkers (57 per cent) had seen or heard something about the proposals than non-drinkers (38 per cent).

Around half of respondents (49 per cent) were in favour of the proposal to introduce minimum unit pricing of alcohol. Almost four out of ten (37 per cent) were against the proposal, while 14 per cent didn't know.

Half of increasing or higher risk drinkers (51 per cent) were against the proposal, compared with a third (31 per cent) of lower risk drinkers and a quarter (25 per cent) of non-drinkers.

Respondents were asked why they were in favour of, or against, the proposal to introduce minimum unit pricing of alcohol. A wide range of reasons were given by those in favour, the most frequent being to stop binge drinking and drunkenness in general (21 per cent), and specifically among young people (19 per cent).

For respondents who were against the proposal to introduce minimum unit pricing, one quarter (25 per cent) said they didn't think minimum unit pricing would make any difference to the amount people drink.

Alcohol consumption

Overall, a quarter of respondents (26 per cent) said that they never drink alcohol, while another 23 per cent said that they drink alcohol monthly or less. Almost one out of ten respondents (8 per cent) said

that they drink alcohol four or more times per week.

Around three out of ten respondents that drink alcohol (29 per cent) said they drink one or two units on a typical day when drinking, while at the other end of the scale, one out of five respondents (20 per cent) said they drink 10 units or more. Men under 35 years of age were the most likely to drink a high quantity of alcohol on a typical day when drinking.

Among respondents that drink alcohol, around one out of five (19 per cent) said they had drunk over six units (women) or eight units (men) at least weekly in the past 12 months. Binge drinking was more common among younger respondents and men.

Using the World Health Organization's AUDIT-C classification, around four out of ten of all respondents (38 per cent) were categorised as being at 'increasing or higher risk', while one third (33 per cent) were categorised as 'lower risk'. The remainder were non-drinkers (26

per cent) or not classified (3 per cent).

There was a marked difference by age and gender, with six out of ten men, and around four out of ten women, aged 16-54 years classed as being at 'increasing or higher risk'. This compares with three out of ten men, and one out of ten women, aged 55+ years.

Drinking at home and pre-loading

A greater proportion of 'increasing or higher risk' drinkers consume alcohol at home at least twice per week compared with 'lower risk' drinkers, and were also significantly more likely to pre-load (drink alcohol at home before a night out).

Of respondents that had consumed alcohol at home before a night out in the past 12 months, around six out of ten (61 per cent) said they usually have one or two drinks before going out, while one out of ten (9 per cent) said they have enough to get drunk.

Regular pre-loading was most common among respondents under

35 years of age, with 29 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women saying they had consumed alcohol at home before a night out at least twice a month in the past year.

Respondents that drink alcohol at home were asked what the most important considerations are when choosing what to buy. Around six out of ten respondents (61 per cent) said choosing familiar brands was the most important consideration. In total, around a quarter of respondents chose an answer option related to getting a bargain or a good deal ('brands which are on special offer', 'brands that are the cheapest', or 'own-label brands').

Raising the price of alcohol in supermarkets, off-licences and convenience stores

All respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about raising the price of alcohol in supermarkets, off-licences and convenience stores.

A greater proportion of respondents agreed that raising the price of

cheaper alcohol products in these stores 'would reduce ill health' (48 per cent agreed) than 'would reduce crime' (39 per cent agreed).

More than half of respondents (53 per cent) agreed that it 'would make no difference to the amount people drink', while six out of ten respondents '59 per cent' agreed with the statement that 'how much someone drinks is a personal choice and the government should not interfere'.

Discussion

It is important to note the potential limitations of this study given the difficulties around social desirability bias and recall bias when answering survey questions about subjects such as alcohol consumption, particularly in a face-to-face interview setting. Such biases may lead respondents to distort reports of alcohol consumption by providing responses that are perceived as being more consistent with social norms.

Despite these limitations, public perceptions of minimum unit pricing

suggest that the law may be well targeted at reducing consumption among more risky drinkers:

- A successful minimum unit pricing law is likely to have most impact on off-trade alcohol sales, and may therefore reduce 'pre-loading'. This survey found that a greater proportion of 'increasing or higher risk' drinkers consume alcohol at home more frequently – and are more likely to 'pre-load' before a night out – than 'lower risk' drinkers.
- At the 50 pence minimum unit price level, a slightly higher proportion of 'increasing or higher risk' drinkers said they would drink less alcohol than 'lower risk' drinkers – but as the minimum unit price increased, so did the gap between the proportion of 'increasing or higher risk' and 'lower risk' drinkers saying they would drink less alcohol.
- Finally, this survey found that a greater proportion of respondents were in favour of a minimum unit price being

introduced in Wales than were opposed to it. Support, however, was much lower among 'increasing or higher risk' drinkers – possibly reflecting the prospect that this group are the most likely to be impacted by such a law.

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