Alcohol and violence are crippling our country. In 2008 it was estimated that the annual cost to Scotland of alcohol abuse was £2.25 billion\(^1\). The cost of violence, although impossible to estimate with accuracy, could be as high as £3 billion\(^2\). But while in these straitened financial times we must look to make cuts in all areas of spending, we should not forget that with alcohol and violence there is a cost that goes beyond economics: the personal cost to the families of both the victim and the offender of losing a child to death or to prison. That is a cost that cannot be measured in pounds and pence.

Violence is situated within a complex landscape of causes, societal conditions, personal circumstances, individual characteristics, attitudes and cultures. These conditions are further complicated by the ready availability of alcohol. Alcohol has a significant impact on levels of interpersonal violence, affecting the behaviour of both victims and offenders. This ready availability of relatively cheap alcohol and its apparent acceptability as the “drug” of choice for many people is a key challenge facing Scotland in the 21\(^{st}\) century.

Alcohol itself does not make people violent. However, it lowers inhibitions and increases risk taking behaviour, such as violence. The majority of those who drink alcohol will not engage in violent behaviour. However, it is hard to ignore the volume of evidence and experience that indicates a correlation between the use of alcohol by victims and perpetrators of violence. For instance, there is overwhelming evidence of assaults occurring in and around licensed venues during peak drinking hours.

Crime recording systems do not store details of the influence of alcohol or any other drugs in any consistent manner, making it difficult to establish a reliable breakdown of all violent offences committed whilst under the influence of alcohol. However, information stored on the Scottish Homicide Database for female victims gives some indication of the impact of alcohol on both the victim and offender in murder cases: analysis of 534 female murders since 1968 suggests that 30% of victims and 31% of offenders were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the murder. However, if the unknowns are removed from the samples for both offenders and victims then the statistics become more compelling, with 52% of all victims and 76% of all offenders under the influence of alcohol.

From self reports from Scottish Prison Service (2006) the picture starts to become clearer, with 46% of all prisoners indicating they were drunk at the time of their offence.

\(^1\) Scottish Government Health Analytical Services Division

\(^2\) Professor James Heckman
Alcohol is cited as a contributory factor in:

- 76% of assaults - Source: Scottish Crime Survey
- 72% of domestic violence incidents - Source: Scottish Crime Survey
- Half of all murders - Source: SE Homicide in Scotland 2006
- 66% of under 21s drunk at time of offence - Source: Scottish Prison Service
- Scottish Crime Survey 4/5 cite alcohol as one of the most serious issues facing Scotland,

In September 2009, the World Health Organisation and Liverpool John Moores University launched “Violence Prevention: the Evidence”, an eight-part series of briefings on the evidence for interventions to prevent interpersonal and self-directed violence. Among the intervention areas listed within this study as being effective in reducing violence is reduced availability to and harmful use of alcohol. The report states that:

“Harmful use of alcohol is a major contributor to violence. Studies have shown that violence can be cut by reducing the availability of alcohol through regulating sales outlets and hours and prices; by providing brief interventions and longer term treatment for problem drinkers; and by improving the management of environments in which alcohol is served.”

It adds:

“Studies exploring the impact on violence of increases in alcohol prices are rare, but economic modelling strongly suggests that alcohol price hikes can be effective.

This is borne out by price changes introduced in Sweden. In 2004 the Swedish government reduced the tax on spirits by 40% and wine by 20%. As a result, the average yearly increase in violent assaults went up from 2.8% to 7%.

But while increasing the cost of alcohol can have an impact on violence levels, it should be borne in mind that this alone will not reduce the problem. Rather, a package of measures of which this is a part will, over a sustained period of time, begin to have a significant impact on levels of alcohol related violence. These should include:

- Education – including early years and lifelong
- Provision - enforcing licensing legislation that ensure locations where alcohol related violence regularly occurs are not saturated with off-licences – and existing local provision is always taken into account before a new licence is granted
Injury surveillance in A&E units which will help identify “hotspots” where alcohol related violence occurs

Beyond this, there is a need to alter our country’s attitude to alcohol. Adolescent binge drinking – drinking to get drunk - is symptomatic of adult drinking patterns in the UK. Many teenagers see adults consuming huge amounts of alcohol on a weekly basis – so it is small wonder they grow up to follow suit. We can limit the availability of alcohol, crack down on street drinking and stop people buying alcohol on behalf of under 18s, but they cannot stop young people growing up to copy what they see as normal behaviour. To break that cycle, we need to change our attitudes to drink. Getting drunk has become acceptable and alcohol is more freely available than ever through off sales, where sales are double those of pubs, clubs and restaurants where there is more regulation and supervision of drinking.

While our primary concern within this discussion is violence and its links to alcohol, things which are immediate and readily observed and recorded, we must also recognise the longer term effects on Scotland’s health. If we are to be a country that can meet all the challenges of the 21st century, we must begin to tackle our problem with alcohol and violence.

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