

European status report on alcohol and health 2014

**Reducing the public health impact of illicit alcohol and
informally produced alcohol**



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Background

“Unrecorded alcohol” refers to informal and home-made alcohols, illegally produced or smuggled alcohol products and surrogate alcohol that is not officially intended for human consumption. Consumption of illegally and informally produced alcohol and surrogate alcohol may pose a health hazard due to contamination or a higher potential ethanol content. Furthermore, the lower cost of illegally traded alcohol may result in higher consumption, particularly among young people.¹

Although it is difficult to measure, the amount of unrecorded alcohol consumed in the European Region is estimated to be as high as between one third and two fifths of all alcohol consumed, with consumption of unrecorded alcohol much higher in the eastern part of the Region than in the western part. The focus of alcohol policy should be on reducing the harm from recorded alcohol and bringing more unrecorded alcohol into the recorded and managed system, while at the same time undertaking a full assessment of the extent of potential harm from all forms of unrecorded alcohol.¹

Strategies

Alcohol policy currently includes no evidence-based concept for managing unrecorded alcohol, with the exception of some successful past policy measures such as the prohibition of methanol to denature alcohol. However, as outlined in the *European action plan to reduce the harmful use of alcohol 2012–2020*,¹ additional measures might range from legalizing unrecorded alcohol, with subsequent quality control, to instructing the producers of unrecorded alcohol on how to avoid the problems detected. Two tools that could help monitor and combat smuggling are the computerization of surveillance data on the movement of excise products, and the issuance of tax stamps to show when and where duty is paid.

Methods

This chapter presents the results from the WHO survey on alcohol and health, carried out during the period February–December 2012. Unless otherwise noted, the responses reflect the policy situation in each Member State as at 31 December 2011. The survey was sent to the WHO national focal points for alcohol policy in each Member State, to be completed in consultation with various national experts. All 53 Member States of the WHO European Region participated in the survey.

¹*European action plan to reduce the harmful use of alcohol 2012–2020*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2012.

Results

At the time of data collection, all but four Member States reported that they had national legislation to prevent the illegal production or sale of home- or informally produced alcoholic beverages (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Member States with legislation to prevent illegal production and sale of home- or informally produced alcohol

LEGISLATION	NO. OF MEMBER STATES (n=53)
Legislation to prevent the illegal production and/or sale of home- or informally produced alcoholic beverages	49 ^a
Legislation to prevent illegal production	45
Legislation to prevent illegal sales	44

^aIn 2013, a new law on excise duties entered into force in Croatia. Small manufacturers (people who produce spirits for their own use and in an amount not exceeding 20 litres of pure alcohol per household per year) are not allowed to sell and must be entered in the register of excise duty payers.

The use of duty-paid, excise or tax stamps or labels on alcoholic beverage containers/bottles was reported by 14 Member States for beer, by 20 Member States for wine, and by 34 Member States for spirits.²

Ten Member States reported that a regular estimation of consumption of unrecorded alcohol is one of the main components of the national system of monitoring alcohol consumption. These estimations are based on research focused on unrecorded alcohol consumption in five Member States, on expert opinion in two Member States, on indirect estimates using government data on confiscated/seized alcohol in two Member States and on indirect estimates using survey data in eight Member States.

Conclusion

Although the main focus of alcohol policy should continue to be on reducing the harm done by recorded alcohol, the *European action plan to reduce the harmful use of alcohol 2012–2020*¹ proposes several strategies to address unrecorded alcohol. One option is for Member States to take steps to make new estimates of the size of the illegal market. Results from the most recent WHO survey on alcohol and health indicate that fewer than 20% of Member States include regular estimates of the consumption of unrecorded alcohol as one of the main components of the national system of monitoring alcohol consumption.

The action plan suggests that, where appropriate, work should be carried out with manufacturers of informal or surrogate products to reduce the risk of harm from manufacturing processes. Other options include conducting extensive chemical testing of samples of unrecorded alcohol to identify the riskiest products and their potential for harm,

² Data missing from one Member State.

using computerized tracking to monitor the movement of alcoholic products, and introducing tax stamps to facilitate the tracking and identification of illicit products.¹ Survey results indicate that 18 Member States reported no use of duty-paid, excise or tax stamps or labels on any alcoholic beverage containers/bottles.