



POLICY BRIEF

# Combatting alcohol harms: Introducing a Minimum Unit Pricing

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# Summary • • •

**With one of the highest rates of alcohol consumption in the world and severe binge drinking, South Africa cannot afford to ignore severe societal costs that come with alcohol-related harms. This brief advocates for the introduction of a Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) policy as a crucial strategy to combat binge drinking.**



# ● Introduction

South Africa holds the ignominious title of being the world's fifth leader in alcohol consumption and the number one in Africa.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that South African adults drink an average of 9.5 litres of alcohol annually, as opposed to the African regional average of 6.2 litres per person. It means that we have episodic or binge drinkers who consume at least 60g or more pure alcohol, or six standard alcoholic drinks, on at least one occasion over 30 days.

The repercussions of heavy drinking are extensive:

- Binge drinking costs South Africa an estimated R277 billion per year, according to research conducted in 2014,<sup>1</sup> potentially amounting to R433 billion adjusted for inflation in 2023.
- Alcohol contributes to one in 10 deaths nationwide.<sup>2</sup>
- South Africa has the world's highest reported prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD),<sup>3</sup> which harms children's health due to maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy.
- Alcohol is a major factor in violent behaviour, especially gender-based and domestic violence, and places our nation's children at risk.

Given these challenges, it is evident that a range of interventions is needed. This brief focuses on MUP to deter excessive alcohol purchases and reduce consumption.

# What is Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP)?

Minimum Unit Pricing is a policy aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm by setting a minimum price per unit of alcohol, preventing alcohol from being sold below this price. The minimum price is based on the alcohol content of the beverage, and the primary reason would be to discourage excessive drinking, particularly among heavy and binge drinkers.

When looking at South Africa's drinking population, it is clear that interventions are urgently needed. Thus far, the Western Cape government is the only province to explore introducing MUP.

Researchers estimated that in 2015, one in three individuals reported drinking alcohol, while one in seven reported binge drinking on an average day that they drank.<sup>4</sup>

Initial studies on MUP in South Africa are encouraging.

UCT professors Corné van Walbeek and Grieve Chelwa, in partnership with the DG Murray Trust (DGMT), found that heavy drinkers are more likely to reduce their alcohol consumption as prices increase. For instance, a minimum unit price of R6 per standard drink could result in a 6.2% decrease among binge drinkers, a 15.5% reduction among other heavy drinkers, and a 4.6% among moderate drinkers.<sup>5</sup>

# ● Lessons from other countries

Several countries have successfully implemented MUP policies:

- **RUSSIA:** A country plagued by binge drinking implemented an MUP, specifically on vodka, to improve life expectancy and mortality rates. Over 10 years of consistent price increases, it saw a decline in alcohol-related injuries and premature mortality.<sup>6</sup>
- **AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY:** A one-year evaluation of an MUP policy found significant declines in total alcohol sales, alcohol-related assaults, protective custody episodes, alcohol-related ambulance attendances, alcohol-related road traffic crashes, the number of child protection notifications, protection orders, and out-of-home care cases.<sup>7</sup>
- **SCOTLAND:** An evaluation by Public Health Scotland in 2023 found that introducing an MUP policy averted a number of deaths related to alcohol consumption and reduced alcohol-related hospital admissions, with the most significant impact on men and those living in the poorest 40% of areas in Scotland.<sup>8</sup>





# Key actions required

## Impact of MUP on behaviour

According to a study commissioned by the Western Cape provincial government, regular heavy drinkers would be the most impacted as they as they tend to drink cheap alcohol, as evidenced by surveys.

Implementing an R8 MUP in the Western Cape could result in significant health improvements, including 278 000 fewer cases of alcohol-related HIV, TB, interpersonal violence, self-harm, road injuries, liver cirrhosis, and breast cancer over a 20-year period.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, it is estimated that an R8 MUP would generate R503 million in healthcare cost savings, R79 million in reduced crime costs, increased revenue for retailers (R2 454 million) and taxation for the government (R263 million). This does not account for all alcohol-related health conditions but represents a substantial health benefit.<sup>10</sup>

South Africa already has an unacceptably high incidence of gender-based and domestic violence, and alcohol plays a significant role. Placing an additional cost on liquor will curb excessive purchases and consumption.

Alcohol disproportionately affects the poorest South Africans, with higher rates of alcohol-related harm in lower socio-economic groups. Alcohol-attributable mortality is highest in the lowest socioeconomic group, 727 per 100 000 deaths, compared with 163 deaths per 100 000 for the highest socioeconomic group (Probst et al., 2018b).<sup>11</sup>



# Conclusion

The South African government must acknowledge that our society has a pervasive binge-drinking culture and unacceptably high levels of alcohol use and commit to reforming the country's alcohol legislative framework.

A Minimum Unit Pricing policy might not be a silver bullet for the harm that alcohol causes. However, it holds the potential to be one of many robust solutions to bring about a decline in binge drinking along with its associated consequences.

Policymakers must be resolute in facing opposition from the liquor industry and retailers, as the status quo cannot continue while innocent bystanders, particularly women and children, suffer.

# Endnotes

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# What is Change Ideas?

DGMT's Change Ideas is a new initiative that makes cost-effective and scalable policies accessible to the public and politicians. These policies, drawn from years of implementation experience, research, and embeddedness in South African civil society, offer opportunities to get South Africa out of the inequality trap. Change Ideas aims to empower you with comprehensive policy briefs, research findings, and expert perspectives on 10 key opportunities identified as pivotal for fostering sustainable change.



**Making change possible**

This policy brief was written by Phylicia Oppelt, Project Lead of Change Ideas, with contributions from other pivotal projects within DGMT. We want to thank DGMT's Alcohol Harms Reduction Campaign and its partners in civil society for laying the groundwork for the policy proposals contained in this brief.



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