

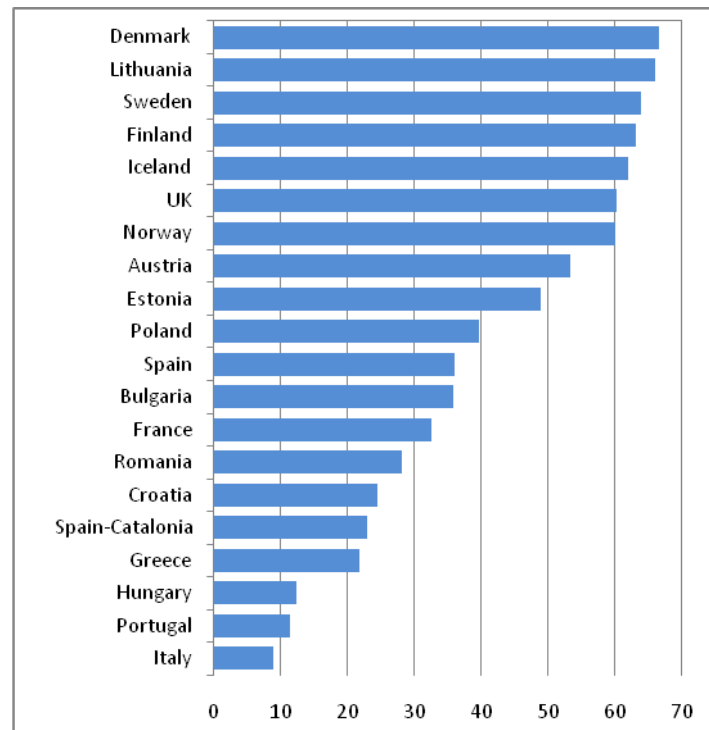
Drinking cultures in Europe are still highly diversified; RARHA SEAS study reports from 19 European countries.

Differences in northern/eastern vs. southern European drinking cultures still persist in terms of drinking frequency and amounts of alcohol drunk per drinking day. In all countries traditionally termed as spirits drinking countries from North and East of Europe, the frequency of drinking is on average lower and volumes consumed per drinking day higher as compared with the countries belonging to Mediterranean cultures. In the former countries, beer and/or wine have typically come to dominate over spirits, while in the latter countries wine is losing its dominant position in favour of beer and spirits.

Binge drinking is still more prevalent in Northern Europe

Huge variation exists as regards the prevalence of binge drinking or risky single occasion drinking (RSOD). The proportion reporting RSOD at least once in the past 12 months ranges from over 60% in the countries located in the North of Europe to about 10% in Italy and Portugal.

Percentage reporting binge drinking in the past 12 months



Spain is contributing to RARHA SEAS with two samples: a national sample covering and representative of the whole country and an additional one specially designed to be representative of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia. Although both samples are coming from one sole country (Spain) for practical purposes they are presented separately under the names "Spain" for the national sample and "Spain-Catalonia" for the Spanish Autonomous Community of Catalonia

RARHA SEAS study estimated the share of alcohol attributed to RSOD in overall alcohol consumption. This is about 30% on average but with a huge range from close to 50% in Finland and Iceland to less than 10% in Italy.

Large differences in proportion of abstainers reverse conclusions from sales statistics

On average, about 15% of Europeans report having abstained from alcohol in the past 12 months. This proportion, however, varies greatly from 7% in Denmark to over 25% in Portugal and over 30% in Italy. Information on the proportion of abstainers throws additional light on the meaning of recorded consumption. As sales statistics show, per capita consumption in Italy, at 7.6 litres per adult, belongs to the lowest in Europe while in Denmark it is relatively high, surpassing 9.5 litres. However, looking at the figures only for those who drink, per drinker consumption in Italy – 10.8 litres is as high as, or even higher than, in Denmark – 10.4 litres.

Europeans abstain from alcohol due to negative experiences while they drink in search of positive effects

There are a number of reasons why people of legal drinking age abstain from alcohol. Four factors emerged in the RARHA SEAS sample: bad personal health, bad experiences with drinking, disliking the taste and effects of alcohol and finally, rejecting alcohol due to religious or other principles that are reinforced by economic considerations. Examination of motives for drinking also identified four factors: pleasure, fitting in with others, healthiness and coping with problems. On average, hedonistic and social reasons were dominant .

Unrecorded supply - significant source of alcohol

Seven countries decided to explore a question on unrecorded supply of alcohol. The proportion of respondents who acquired unrecorded alcohol from both domestic sources and from abroad was substantial; ranging from about 5% in Spain, 10% - in Hungary, Poland and Portugal, 28% in Croatia to about 40% in Finland and Greece.

Symptoms of alcohol disorders present in 20% of Europeans

The Rapid Alcohol Problem Screen (RAPS) composed of four questions showed that almost one in five respondents experienced at least one symptom of alcohol use disorders while one in ten experienced two or more symptoms in the past 12 months. Problems reported ranged from the most frequent "feeling guilt", to the least frequent "morning drink".

Harm from others' drinking affects majority of Europeans in the past 12 months while every fifth lived with a fairly heavy drinker in childhood and adolescence

It was found that, on average, over 60% of Europeans from the participating countries reported being harmed due to others' drinking in the past 12 months, including 46% of those affected by a person known to them and 42% of those affected by a stranger's drinking. If more serious harm is considered such as being harmed physically, getting in a serious argument, being driven by a drunken driver or being involved in a traffic accident related to drunk driving this proportion is still substantial approaching 20% on average, ranging from over 40% in Lithuania to around 10% in Sweden, Austria and Hungary. The RARHA SEAS showed that every fifth European on average lived during childhood or adolescence in a household with a fairly heavy drinker and about half of them felt negatively

affected 'a lot'. The highest prevalence of such experiences was reported in Baltic countries (well above 30%) and the lowest – in Italy and Spain.

Alcohol is not a commodity as any other and requires special restrictions

There is consensus among respondents that the most preferable policy measures are education and information as well as random breath testing of drivers, both supported by the vast majority of respondents. However, a majority of respondents accepts that alcohol is not a product like any other and requires special restrictions. They also believe that public authorities have responsibility to protect people from being harmed by their own drinking. A lesser consensus emerges as regards various alcohol policy measures; opinions on different restrictions on alcohol availability and affordability are almost split among supporters and opponents. A small majority are in favour of controlling late evening hours of alcohol sales and a tiny majority are against high prices aiming at reducing alcohol-related harm.

First ever EU Joint Action on Alcohol aiming at Reducing Alcohol Related Harm (RARHA) produces substantial European added value

The EU Joint Action on Alcohol is a project co-funded by the European Commission and the Member States www.rarha.eu/

The published report is based on the Standardised European Alcohol Survey (RARHA SEAS), which offers new highlights on European drinking. RARHA SEAS is a comprehensive survey completed in 20 European jurisdictions located in 19 countries spreading from the Iberian peninsula in the far west to Scandinavia, and from Greece and Italy to the Baltic countries, Poland and UK. The survey was carried out on representative samples of the general populations aged 18-64. On average, fifteen hundred interviews per country were carried out, with total number of interviews collected surpassing 32 000.

Future action

1. RARHA SEAS survey should be replicated within four-five years to grasp trends in alcohol epidemiology and to monitor the impact of alcohol policies as well as the influence of more general socio-economic and cultural developments.
2. Sustainability of standardised alcohol surveys could be secured by the establishment of a European institutional framework. Different options needs to be considered including a special European agency for alcohol research and policy or extending the mandate of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Report:

Moskalewicz J., Room R., Thom B. (eds) (2016) Comparative monitoring of alcohol epidemiology across the EU. Baseline assessment and suggestions for future action. Synthesis report.

Available in: <http://www.epicentro.iss.it/alcol/Rarha.asp>