

Tackling alcohol harms must be an integral part of the nation's recovery from COVID-19

20 May 2020



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As the UK and most other countries went into lockdown, the need to save lives from the coronavirus rightly took priority over longer term health issues.

But experts writing in *The BMJ* today warn that "if we don't prepare for emerging from the pandemic, we will see the toll of increased alcohol harm for a generation."

In the week to 21 March, [alcohol sales](#) were up 67% as many people reacted to the closure of pubs and restaurants by stocking up to drink at home in isolation, write Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of Alcohol Health Alliance UK, and Baroness Illora Finlay, Chair of the Commission on Alcohol Harms. In comparison, overall supermarket sales only increased by 43%.

Just before the pandemic hit the UK, the Alcohol Health Alliance UK started a Commission on Alcohol Harm, aimed at highlighting the damage to individuals, families and communities.

The evidence so far suggests that those already

struggling with [alcohol dependence](#) and those on the brink of dependence will be in particular need of urgent support.

Gilmore and Finlay also point out that alcohol is strongly associated with [domestic violence](#) and an early feature in lockdown was a rise in calls to domestic violence charities.

While the relationship between alcohol and domestic violence is complex they say, research finds that as many as 73% of perpetrators of domestic abuse have been drinking at the time of the assault.

"As in so many aspects of the coronavirus epidemic, it will be only in hindsight that we will be able to measure the impact of social isolation, job losses, and financial meltdown on the alcohol balance sheet," they say. Yet even at the best of times, alcohol costs the NHS in excess of £3.5bn (€4bn; \$4.2bn) and the wider economy at least £21bn each year.

The report will come out later this year and will call for evidence-based population-level action on key drivers of harm, such as price, availability, and marketing, and for the implementation of innovative and cost-effective sobriety schemes to reduce alcohol fueled crime.

But Gilmore and Finlay fear that these calls will struggle to be heard amidst the avalanche of issues to be addressed once the pandemic is waning.

They predict a further rise in alcoholic liver disease, already increasing before the covid-19 crisis, and a similar surge in the need for alcohol treatment services, which are traditionally an easy target for cuts when finances are tight.

"We cannot claim to be a nation recovering from covid-19 if we do not adequately support the most vulnerable among us," they argue.

"We know that investing £1 in alcohol treatment services will save £3, as well as directly helping affected individuals, often the most vulnerable in society. This time, let's be ready. Tackling [alcohol](#) harms is an integral part of the nation's recovery."

More information: Editorial: Covid 19 and alcohol - a dangerous cocktail, *The BMJ*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.m1987](#) , www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1987

Provided by British Medical Journal

APA citation: Tackling alcohol harms must be an integral part of the nation's recovery from COVID-19 (2020, May 20) retrieved 12 June 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-tackling-alcohol-nation-recovery-covid-.html>

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