

THE EFFECTS OF MINIMUM ALCOHOL PRICING

The allegation

According to Dr Sarah Wollaston MP, the Department of Health (DH) delayed the publication of a study of the effects on alcohol abuse of a minimum price compared with a ban on below cost sales, until the day of a government policy announcement.⁴

Timeline

- Mar 2012 Government published its alcohol strategy, undertaking to introduce a minimum price per unit of alcohol.⁵
- Nov 2012 - Jul 2013 The government launched a consultation on delivering this strategy⁶ and asked researchers at University of Sheffield to model the impact of a minimum unit price.
- Mar 2013 Researchers provided a draft report to the Home Office, DH and the Treasury. Asked to model the effect of a 45p minimum price, they estimated it would “reduce alcohol consumption by 1.6%, leading to approximately 625 fewer deaths per year due to alcohol, 23,700 fewer hospital admissions and 34,200 fewer crimes” after ten years. They compared this with the effects of banning the sale of alcohol below cost price, which their model shows would be far less effective at reducing problem drinking: it was estimated to “reduce consumption by just 0.04%, leading to around 15 fewer deaths, 500 fewer hospital admissions and 900 fewer crimes related to alcohol per year.”⁷
- Jul 2013 On the same day as the Sheffield study was released, the government rejected a minimum price. The crime prevention minister announced that government opted instead for a ban on below cost sales.
- Jan 2014 The authors of the research released a statement, saying, “The government did not bar [us] from releasing the reports – we had agreed from the outset that we would align our publication with the government’s response to the alcohol strategy consultation to ensure we provided their impact assessment of minimum unit pricing with the most up-to-date evidence possible. Having produced additional analyses on below cost selling in June, a further consideration was that if these were published directly before the government’s announcement that could be considered a de facto announcement of government policy.”
- Sep 2014 Sheffield researchers published their comparative study in the *BMJ*.⁸

How were government policy and public debate affected?

The government’s 2012 strategy said that a minimum price of 40p per unit “could mean 50,000 fewer crimes each year and 900 fewer alcohol-related deaths a year by the end of the decade.” In the interim it changed its mind. Responding to the Sheffield study and to other evidence submitted to the consultation on that strategy, the government said the consultation had “not provided evidence that conclusively demonstrates that minimum unit pricing will actually do what it is meant to: reduce problem drinking without penalising all those who drink responsibly.” Citing an “absence of that empirical evidence,” they said a minimum price was being delayed “until we have conclusive evidence that it will be effective.”⁹ Failing to publish the Sheffield study ahead of announcing a change of government policy prevented the public from judging whether this change was justifiable.

⁴ Wollaston, S (2014)

⁵ HM Government (2012)

⁶ Home Office (2012)

⁷ Holmes, J (2014)

⁸ Brennan, A et al (2014)

⁹ Home Office (2013)