



November 2005

POSITION on LEGAL PURCHASING AGES

The Brewers of Europe, the voice of the European brewing sector, promotes sensible drinking and is opposed to the misuse of alcoholic drinks. Together with its Members, The Brewers of Europe, has a proven track record of initiatives that form part of our ongoing work designed to combat misuse where it occurs¹. We share the concerns expressed by the Council, the Commission and other stakeholders that in a number of European countries, there is a big problem of drinking (and binge-drinking) by minors under the legal age. However, any initiative to tackle this problem should be judged on the extent to which it actually contributes to reducing misuse.

Legal purchasing ages vary across the EU

EU Member States impose legal restrictions on the age at which young people may purchase alcoholic drinks. The minimum legal purchasing age varies according to the country, to whether alcoholic beverages are fermented or distilled, or lower or higher in alcohol content, and to the premises where they are available. These differences fully reflect the diversity of cultures and traditions that characterises Europe.

Harmonisation is not the solution

Introducing a European harmonisation of the minimum legal purchasing age would ignore this diversity and miss its objective in that it would not help to reduce underage drinking in countries where there is a big problem. The principle of national subsidiarity on this issue must therefore continue be applied.

It is striking to note that, in countries where the minimum legal purchasing age is amongst the highest in Europe, the proportion of sixteen year-old students reporting drunkenness is clearly above the EU average.² This contrasts with countries where, whilst the minimum legal purchasing age is amongst the lowest, the proportion of sixteen year-old students reporting drunkenness is substantially below the EU average.³

There are proven effective measures

Evidence based strategies that combine increased enforcement with media and other community activities can lead to reductions of sales to minors.⁴ In particular, interventions focused on (a) enforcement of underage sales laws, (b) responsible beverage service training and (c) media advocacy have been seen as promising prevention tools for communities that seek to reduce underage drinking.⁵ We can add to this the importance of education, in particular through parental guidance.

Enforcement of current laws is key

The Brewers of Europe strongly supports enforcement of existing national laws and has a proven track record of support to partnership schemes aimed at introducing and further developing environmental strategies as described above.

¹ See [Worldwide Brewing Alliance Global social responsibility initiatives](#)

² <http://www.espad.org/>

³ *idem*

⁴ Wagenaar AC, Toomey TL (2000). Alcohol policy: gaps between legislative action and current research. Contemporary drug problems, 27:681-733

⁵ Grube JW (1997). "Preventing sales of alcohol to minors: Results from a community trial". Addiction 92. Suppl.2:251-60.