

International Center for Alcohol Policies Series on Alcohol in Society

Drinking Patterns & *Their* *Consequences*

edited by
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and
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Executive Summary

What is the main message of this book?

Quite simply, it is that people's pattern of drinking is what best predicts whether they will experience positive or negative consequences of their alcohol consumption. What is important is how a person drinks; how much they drink is only one part of that. This is a significant departure from the basis of alcohol policies in many countries and therefore requires a new approach to the development of national alcohol policies. Alcohol policies in many countries have long been based on the assumption that a wide range of health and social problems associated with the abuse of alcohol can be directly correlated with average daily per capita alcohol consumption. In light of increasing empirical evidence, this central hypothesis has been increasingly challenged. The book *Drinking Patterns & Their Consequences* examines drinking patterns both at the individual and at the socio-cultural level.

What are the lessons for the future?

There is already declining political support for controls over the availability of alcohol in many countries. There is also growing dissatisfaction among scientists with simple measures of volume of alcohol consumption as a basis for understanding drinking behavior. It is in the context of these changes that *Drinking Patterns & Their Consequences* offers a new and pragmatic approach to policy development. It proposes a two-pronged approach, which distinguishes between negative and positive drinking patterns. Negative drinking patterns should be modified by reducing heavy drinking occasions and by reducing specific adverse consequences. Positive drinking patterns should be promoted by focusing on safe drinking limits, by educating people for responsible drinking and by encouraging individual choice.

How did it come to be written?

The International Center for Alcohol Policies¹ brought together an editorial advisory group, with participants from a wide range of countries and academic backgrounds. They included public health specialists and representatives of the beverage alcohol industry, as well as senior officials from the World Health Organization and the World Bank. The authors of the chapters in the book include many members of that group and others whom they identified. The final manuscript was also submitted for external peer review before being sent to the publisher.

For whom is the book intended?

Many different people have an interest in seeing alcohol policies that actually work. Politicians and civil servants in the health, social affairs, trade, agriculture and finance sectors; medical and other health practitioners and social workers; public health practitioners and advocates; scientists and scholars from a wide range of disciplines; those working in the production and distribution of beverage alcohol and in the hospitality industry; and concerned individuals around the world who devote their time and energies to promoting responsible use of alcohol, fighting alcohol misuse and seeking to improve the quality of life of all.

¹ The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting the understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by twelve major international beverage alcohol companies.

How can the contents of the book best be summarized?

The contributors to *Drinking Patterns and Their Consequences* are 28 authors and co-authors from nine countries (including three developing countries). The book consists of an introduction and 15 chapters which are organized into three sections.

SECTION ONE

The first section looks at the relationship between patterns and consequences. Some of these outcomes are clearly adverse, some are neutral, and still others may be beneficial and play an integral role within a particular cultural context. The role of alcohol differs widely between different societies, underscoring the need to move away from a policy paradigm which attempts to impose a uniform solution on a widely diverse world. Measurement of average drinking levels has proven inadequate in addressing the outcomes for a large segment of the drinking population, in particular for those individuals with light or moderate alcohol consumption. As recent medical evidence has demonstrated, even total abstention from alcohol may be associated with health risks. Therefore, in predicting outcome, it is more important to address the patterns in which individuals drink than simply how much they drink.

SECTION TWO

The second section discusses the implications of the "patterns" approach for policy development. This includes a critical review of the "single distribution theory," reassessing the effectiveness of various control measures on reducing adverse outcomes of alcohol consumption, both from a historical perspective and with a focus on measures currently implemented in a number of countries around the world. Current measures of social cost may result in incorrect policy prescriptions and may thereby detract from areas truly meriting public intervention. A more flexible approach to alcohol policy development is proposed which emphasizes patterns of drinking and educational measures within their appropriate cultural context. This more integrative approach could provide a viable alternative to the more rigid control policies of the past.

SECTION THREE

The final section attempts to draw some conclusions and to point the way towards the future. Measurement of the parameters of alcohol consumption reveal more detail about specific drinking behaviors and their relationship with particular outcomes in diverse cultures. New approaches to prevention, education, and screening must cover the full spectrum of use from abstainers and very light drinkers to excessive and dependent drinkers. New partnerships need to be forged involving the cooperation of governments, health advocacy organizations, the academic community, as well as commercial interests. Public-private partnership is offered as an idea whose time has come. The concluding chapter emphasizes the theme of harm reduction as it applies to alcohol. The way ahead lies in greater attention to measures which focus on preventing problems associated with particular harmful patterns of drinking and less attention to general population measures which restrict all access to alcohol.

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