

What do we know about alcohol use and COVID-19 in the WHO European Region so far? First results of a pan-European survey initiative and the need for better surveillance

Jürgen Rehm for the group (C. Kilian as the lead)

Institute for Mental Health Policy Research & Campbell Family Mental Health Research Institute, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Canada

Dalla Lana School of Public Health and Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto (UofT), Canada

PAHO/WHO Collaborating Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

WHO Collaborating Centre in preparation, Agència de Salut Pública de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain

Technische Universität Dresden, Klinische Psychologie & Psychotherapie, Dresden, Germany

Department of International Health Projects, Institute for Leadership and Health Management,

I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, Moscow, Russian Federation

1. Pre-pandemic alcohol consumption in Europe

- In 2017, total APC was 9.8 litres pure alcohol among European adults (15+ years)
- About 62% of the people within the WHO European Region were current drinkers (lifetime abstainer: 27%)
- Two in five drinkers reported heavy episodic drinking (HED)
- One in ten deaths are attributable to alcohol in the Region

2. How alcohol use will change during the COVID-19 pandemic

Two plausible mechanisms (Rehm et al. 2020)

I. Distress mechanism:

Alcohol use as a maladaptive coping strategy to manage the psychological distress due to the pandemic

**Alcohol
use ↑**

II. Availability-affordability mechanism:

Reduced number of drinking occasions due to closure of outlets and consumption sites, and reduced affordability due to growing unemployment and financial insecurity

**Alcohol
use ↓**

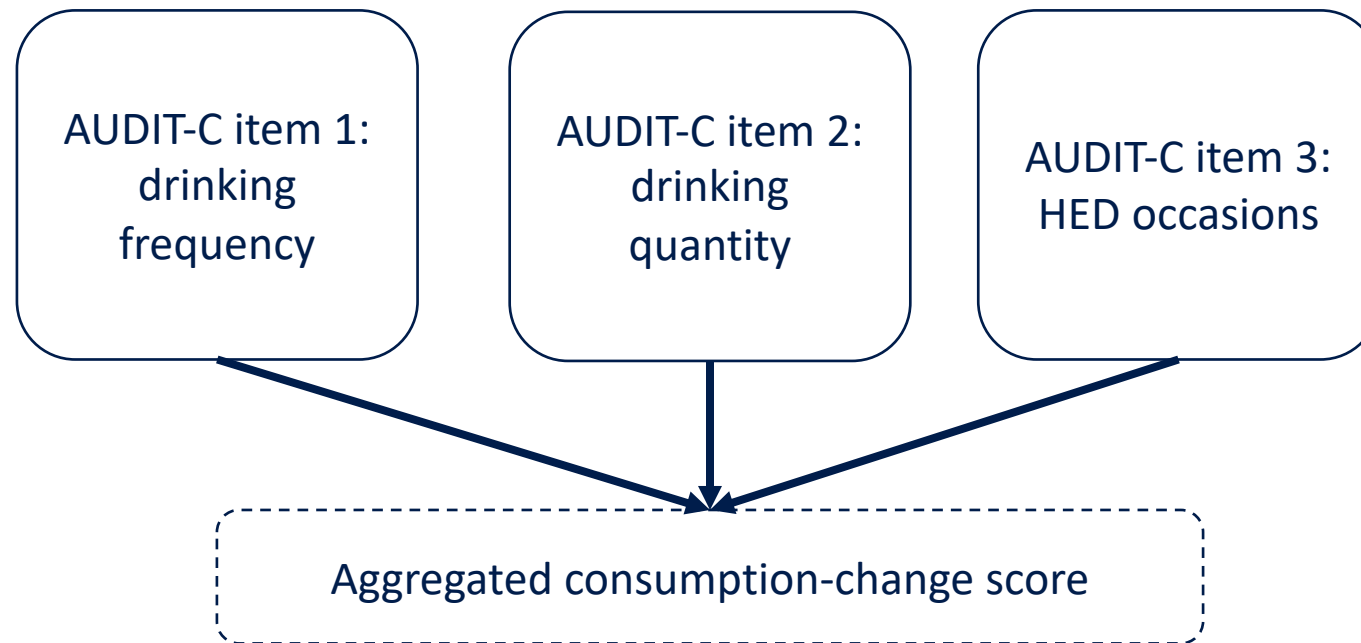
3. The European COVID-19 and Alcohol Survey (group effort lead by C. Kilian)

Key survey characteristics

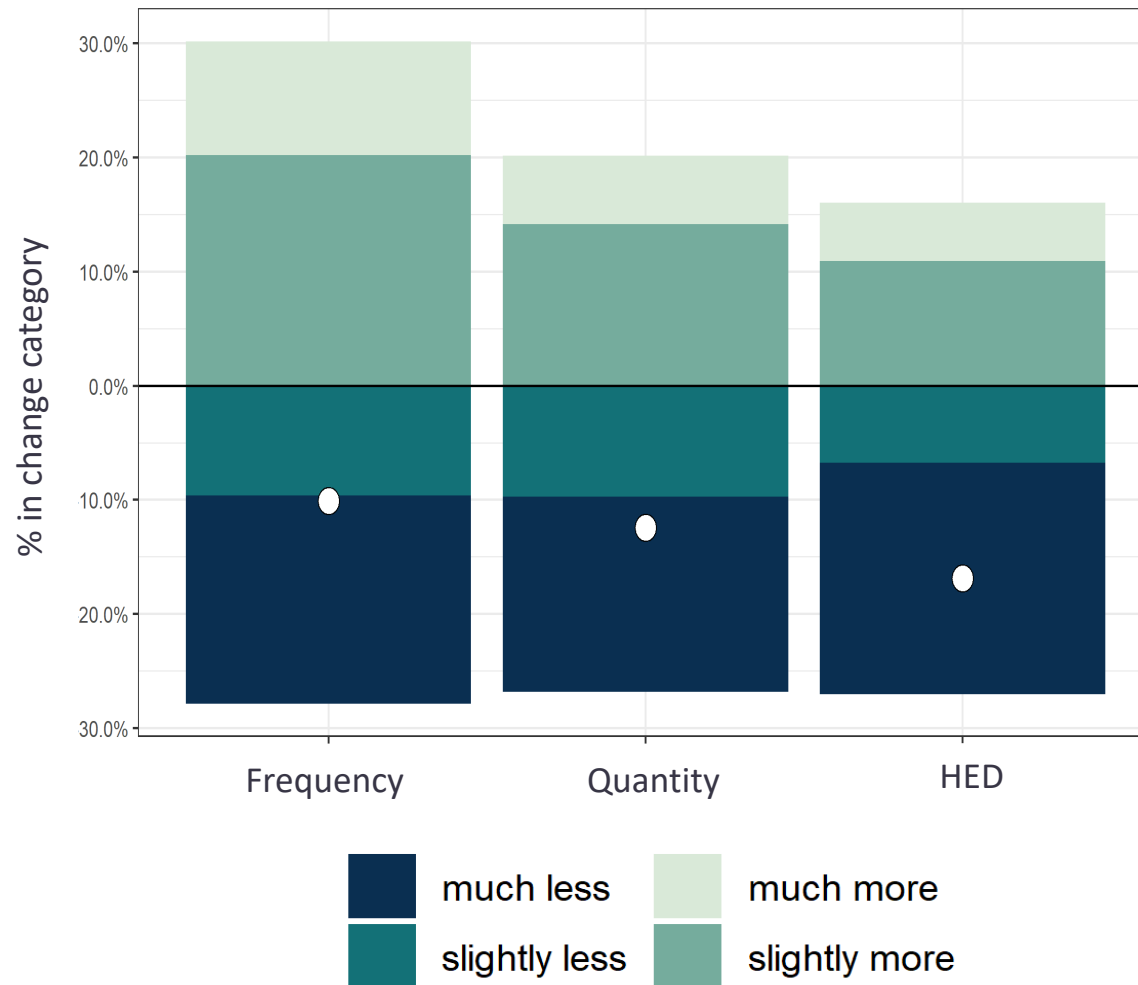
- Cross-sectional online survey conducted between April 24 and July 22, 2020 (1st survey wave: 21 countries)
- Total sample: 40,064 people (completion rate: 75.2%)
- Analytic sample: 31,964 people, excluding past-year abstainers ($n = 4,311$)
- Convenience sample: oversampling of women, middle-aged adults (35-54 years), and individuals with higher educational attainment
- Distribution of drinking patterns (AUDIT-C⁵) comparable to those in other general population surveys, slight tendency of heavy drinkers being overrepresented \Rightarrow application of survey weights and adjustment for AUDIT-C

3. The European COVID-19 and Alcohol Survey

Assessment of changes in alcohol consumption: Changes in...

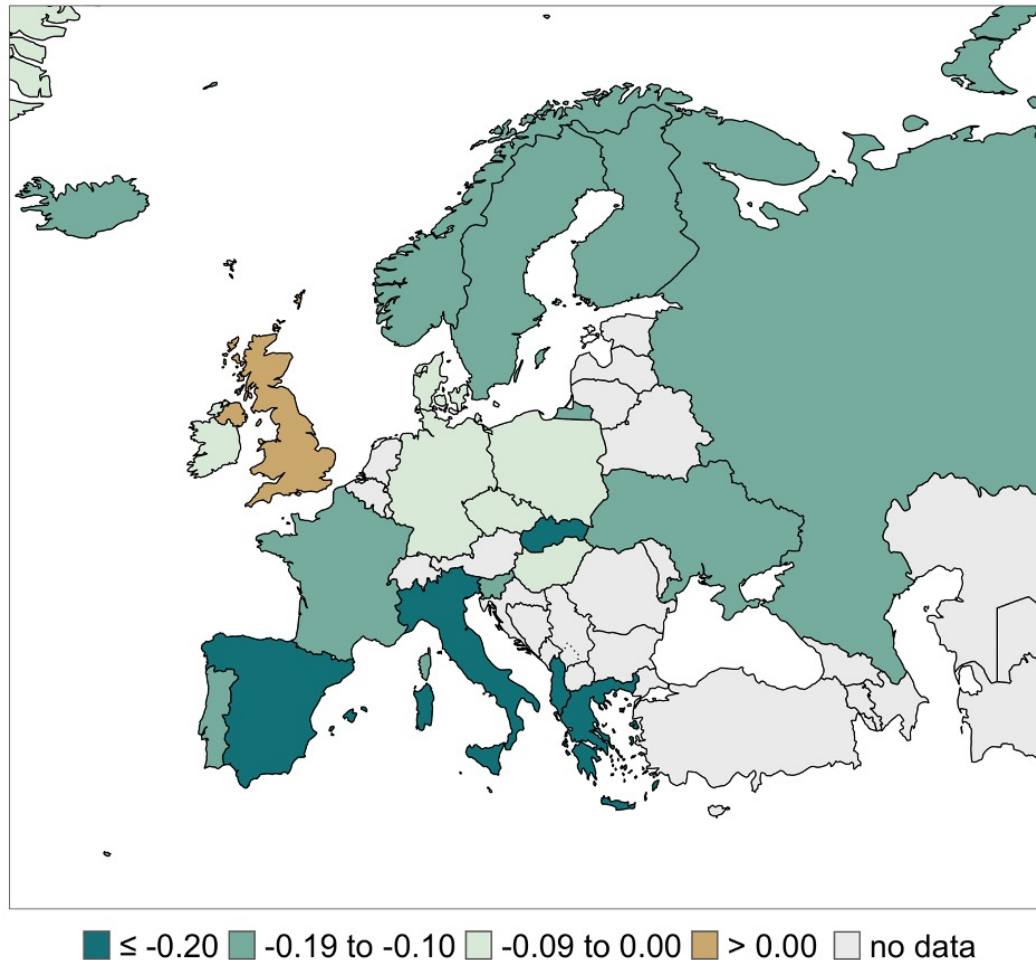


4. Alcohol consumption during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic: Changes in the individual indicators of alcohol consumption



- The weighted mean change (white circle) indicated a **significant reduction of alcohol consumption** for all three indicators ($p < .001$)
- The majority of those indicating a decrease or increase in drinking reported either to drink much less (often) or slightly more (often)

4. Alcohol consumption during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic: Changes in the aggregated consumption-change score



- Overall **decreasing consumption-change score** by 0.14
- No significant change in Ireland ($p = .084$)
- The **UK** was the only country where a **significant increase** by 0.10 was reported
- Consumption-change score was associated with income and distress experiences

5. Lessons learned from the pandemic

Study's limitations

- Convenience sample with possible bias, however, known biases were accounted for (gender, age, education, alcohol use)
- **Trends in alcohol use during pandemic to be validated and quantified by other data sources, such as household purchases or sales statistics. So far we see good concordance with these data (e.g., sales stats across countries).**
- However, all results from surveys are preliminary before we can do proper triangulation with government validated APC figures.

5. Lessons learned from the pandemic

Overall alcohol consumption seems to decline during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe.

Vulnerable subpopulations exist who are at risk of increasing alcohol consumption and hence warrant increased attention.

The natural experiment provided by the COVID-19 pandemic provides further support that alcohol consumption at the populational level can be effectively reduced when its availability and affordability were further restricted.

It also will allow the analysis of many natural experiments. We should thus not only monitor use and vulnerable groups, but also learn from the natural experiments.

Acknowledgements

The project is largely based on the commitment of the European Study Group on Alcohol use and COVID-19 whose members' contributions were indispensable for the realisation of the current project. We would therefore like to thank our partners, by name: Henri-Jean Aubin, Le Centre de recherche en Epidémiologie et Santé des Populations, France; Miroslav Barták, Vladimír Rogalewicz, and Benjamin Petrželka, Charles University, Czech Republic; Kim Bloomfield, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, Denmark; Jakob Manthey and Jürgen Rehm, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany; Katerina Koutra and Sofia Trivila, University of Crete, Greece; Elekes Zsuzsanna, Institute of Communication and Sociology, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; Manuel Cardoso and Patricia Pissarra, Serviço de Intervenção nos Comportamentos Aditivos e nas Dependências, Portugal; Eugenia Fadeeva, Artyom Gil and Konstantin Vyshinsky, National Research Centre on Addictions - branch, V.Serb'sky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology, Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Russian Federation; Beata Gavurova, Technical University of Košice, Slovakia; Sheila Gilheany, Alcohol Action Ireland, Ireland; Sveinbjörn Kristjánsson, and Rafn M Jónsson, Directorate of Health, Iceland; Ólafsdóttir Jóna Margrét, Faculty of Social Work, University of Iceland, Iceland; Igor Linskiy, Institute of Neurology, Psychiatry and Narcology of the NAMS of Ukraine, Ukraine; Fleur Braddick, Antoni Gual, Silvia Matrai, Nina Potapova, Chrisanthi Blithikioti, and Blanca Paniello, Clínic Foundation for Biomedical Research (FCRB) and Clinical Addictions Research Group (GRAC-GRE) Psychiatry Department, Neurosciences Institute, Hospital Clínic, Universitat de Barcelona, Spain; Jacek Moskalewicz, Michał Kucharski, and Janusz Sierosławski, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, Poland; Amy O'Donnell, Population Health Sciences Institute, Newcastle University, UK; Sandra Rados-Krnel, National Institute of Public Health, Slovenia; Peter Allebeck, Karolinska Institute, Sweden; Kirsimarja Raitasalo, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, University of Helsinki, Finland; Ingeborg Rossow, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Norway; Emanuele Scafato, Claudia Gandin, Silvia Ghirini, Alice Matone, and Riccardo Scipione, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Italy; Bernd Schulte, Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Suchtforschung, Universitätsklinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany; Enkeleda Shkurti, Universiteti i Mjekesise Tirane, Albania.