

## PRESS RELEASE



### **The Missing Link: new report suggests targeted action, rather than population-wide measures, may be tool of choice in the fight against harmful alcohol consumption**

Brussels, 17 January 2022 – **A new report commissioned by spiritsEUROPE analyses the effectiveness and efficiency of untargeted population-wide measures in relation to the reduction of harmful alcohol consumption and comes to a sobering conclusion.**

Today, spiritsEUROPE published the report *'The Missing Link'* which analyses the complex associations between per capita alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm based on long-term real-life data from Sweden and other European countries.

Following an extensive analysis of six decades of recorded alcohol consumption data in Sweden the report concludes that there is no clear long-term correlation between the level of, and trend in, general per capita alcohol consumption and specific trends in major alcohol-related harm indicators such as heavy episodic drinking, life expectancy at birth, drink-driving deaths, underage drinking, or chronic diseases related to harmful alcohol consumption. The author therefore concludes that targeted harm-reduction measures focused on at-risk groups will likely be more effective and efficient than broad, untargeted policy approaches affecting the entire population.

Total per capita alcohol consumption in Sweden – both recorded and unrecorded – went through several ups and downs over the past 60 years while income increased significantly over the same period: today, Swedish people earn more than three times as much as they earned in 1960. Advocates of untargeted population-wide measures often claim that the higher the price for alcoholic beverages, the lower the level of general per capita consumption and hence, alcohol-related harm. However, this claim does not really hold up when looking at the socio-economic realities and consumption patterns observed in a country such as Sweden over the past 60 years.

*"In the long run, the affordability of alcoholic beverages in Sweden seems to have had little or no impact on average per capita alcohol consumption, which suggests that alcohol affordability does not correlate with per capita alcohol consumption in the way it is often proposed. Moreover, alcohol-related harm indicators are declining irrespective of the level and trend in per capita alcohol consumption. Other factors than affordability and per capita alcohol consumption may better explain the decline in alcohol-related harm indicators",* said Dr Gregor Zwiern, the report's lead investigator.



Another encouraging finding of the report is that, today, the Nordic drinking culture appears to be approaching consistently the Mediterranean drinking style of moderate consumption. The way Swedes consume alcoholic beverages as well as their choice of alcoholic beverages have changed, with heavy episodic drinking on the decline.

*“For years, the spirits sector has been committed to help fighting harmful drinking, and we believe that a one-size-fits-all approach does not exist. Rather than restricting all consumers, there seems to be a need to pursue targeted harm reduction strategies that better protect those most at risk. Doing so holds the promise of further improving the many positive trends in terms of moderate alcohol consumption that can be observed in various European countries such as Sweden in recent years”,* said Ulrich Adam, Director General of spiritsEUROPE.

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

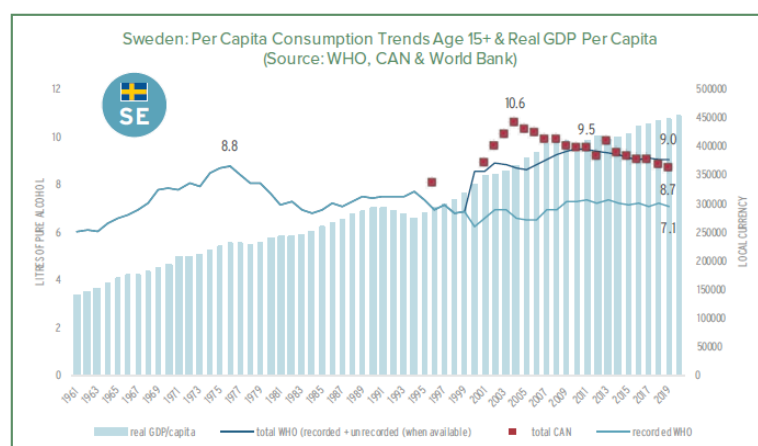
For further information, please contact:

**Ulrich Adam**  
Director General  
Tel: + 32 (2) 477636751  
adam@spirits.eu

**Gregor Zwirn**  
**G. Z. Research & Consulting KG**  
Tel: + 43.680.218.47.  
research@spirits.eu

- spiritsEUROPE proudly represents the EU spirits sector, one of Europe’s most valuable agri-food export sectors and, with it, the interests of 31 associations of spirits producers as well as 11 leading multinational companies.
- To access ‘The Missing Link: Per Capita Alcohol Consumption & Alcohol-Related Harm’, please click [here](#)
- Alcohol consumption decreased by -8% in 2020. While a significant increase in off-premise sales and e-commerce was observed, actual consumption rates went down in, e.g., Spain (-16%), Poland (-5%), Italy (-15%), Mexico (-20%) – [IWSR Data](#)
- [Figures from the Trimbos institute](#) showed that 49% of people between 16-35 cut down on their drinking during the first lockdown compared to the same period in 2019.
- Swedish disposal income compared with total alcohol consumption - Page 33 of the report

Figure 28: source (WHO – [https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/total-\(recorded-unrecorded\)-alcohol-per-capita-\(15-\)-consumption](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/total-(recorded-unrecorded)-alcohol-per-capita-(15-)-consumption) & CAN – <https://www.can.se/app/uploads/2021/09/can-rapport-202-alkoholkonsumtionen-i-sverige-2001-2020.pdf>) & World Bank – <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>)





## Q&As

### 1. Why did spiritsEUROPE commission this report?

spiritsEUROPE commissioned this report with the aim to find out if there is a Swedish or Nordic drinking pattern, which is traditionally defined as consisting of irregular heavy drinking sessions. We wanted to learn from real-life data and asked for an a-posteriori analysis that examined trends and developments over the past 60 years.

To meet the report's objective, the author compared real-life data from both Nordic and Mediterranean countries based on descriptive statistics.

### 2. What are the main findings of the report?

The report shows that attempts to reduce per capita alcohol consumption as part of a harm-reduction approach in an affluent Western European country such as Sweden seems to run counter to many real-life developments of the past 60 years and is therefore likely to fail in practice.

In Sweden, risky drinking patterns (heavy episodic drinking and underage drinking) declined rather independent of the level and trend in total and recorded per capita alcohol consumption. The declining trend in heavy episodic and underage drinking suggests a gradual shift away from the so-called Nordic drinking pattern, consisting of infrequent heavy episodic drinking sessions, to a more balanced Mediterranean style of drinking.

Importantly, alcohol affordability does not seem to have the often-assumed effect on drinking patterns. Today, Swedish people earn more than three times as much as they earned in 1960, hence alcohol affordability increased (even though prices for alcoholic beverages rose above inflation), but overall consumption did not, especially in the last decade.

In addition, the research showed that long-term per capita alcohol consumption levels and trends appear not only unrelated to heavy episodic drinking and underage drinking, but also to other alcohol-related harm indicators such as drink-driving deaths, life expectancy at birth and many chronic diseases, in Sweden and the other countries analysed in the report.

### 3. What is the so-called 'population-based approach' when it comes to tackling alcohol-related harm?

The so-called 'population-based' (or 'public health') approach rests on the hypothesis that average per capita alcohol consumption is strongly associated with alcohol-related harm. According to that assumption, if per capita alcohol consumption declines, alcohol-related harm declines as well. Additionally, according to the theory, untargeted policy measures impacting the entire drinking population should have the greatest impact on alcohol-related harm. However, the real-life data examined in this report does not support the population-based hypothesis and questions this approach.



**4. Is there an alternative to the ‘population-based approach’?**

An alternative approach is the so-called ‘health promotion approach’ that attempts to reduce risky drinking patterns with targeted measures focusing on problem drinkers while limiting the impact on light-to-moderate drinkers.

**5. What are the key takeaways from, and the added value of, this study?**

The report demonstrates why – in a comparatively affluent Western European country such as Sweden – trying to reduce average per capita consumption as part of a harm-reduction approach would run counter to many real-life developments of the past 60 years.

The long-term data presented in the study would suggest to rethink the population-based approach to tackle alcohol-related harm and reconsider more targeted health promotion approaches.

**6. Can the report’s findings be applied to other countries?**

The primary focus of the analysis is Sweden, the secondary focus is on other European countries. The report’s findings are therefore relevant for Sweden and those European countries analysed. However, the conclusions do not necessarily apply to other countries in the world where socio-economic and demographic realities may differ.

**7. What could these results mean for policymakers?**

The report shows why trying to reduce per capita alcohol consumption in Western European countries such as Sweden as part of a harm reduction approach runs counter to many real-life developments of the past 60 years. Advocates of the population-based theory claim that the higher the prices on alcoholic beverages, the lower the level of per capita consumption and alcohol-related harm. However, this claim does not seem to hold up in a country such as Sweden.

In light of this, renewed focus should be given to the development of effective and efficient ‘health promotion approaches’ that help reduce risky drinking patterns further with targeted measures focusing on problem drinkers while limiting the impact on light-to-moderate drinkers.