

Alcohol consumption among adolescents

Heavy drinking in adolescence can have severe health, social, and educational consequences. Adolescent heavy episodic drinking is associated with a range of acute alcohol-related harms such as blackouts and injuries, car crashes, or increased risk for sexually transmitted infections. Alcohol use in adolescence is also related to poor educational outcomes, including bullying and social exclusion, which in turn may impact the formation of human capital (OECD, 2021^[1]).

On average, more than one-third (37%) of European adolescents aged 15 and 16 years old reported heavy episodic drinking at least once in the last 30 days in 2019 (Figure 4.6), despite the legal drinking age in most EU countries being 18. This proportion ranges from less than 25% in Sweden, Finland, and Portugal, as well as Iceland and Norway, to more than 50% in Germany and Denmark.

In Denmark, adolescents have earlier access to alcohol than those in other Nordic countries, and alcohol control policies are also less stringent than across the Nordic Region. Indeed, the legal age for purchasing beer and wine in Denmark is lower, at 16 compared to 18 years. Further, sales of beverages containing alcohol up to 16.5% alcohol by volume are allowed in Danish supermarkets and other retail stores, while in Finland, Norway and Sweden, beverages containing above 3.5-5.5% alcohol can only be sold in government-owned monopoly stores.

In about half of EU countries, boys are more likely than girls to report heavy episodic drinking, with the greatest difference in Cyprus, Romania, and Greece (9 or more percentage points). Girls have higher rates than boys in the other half of EU countries, with the largest difference in Latvia and Spain (5 or more percentage points).

The proportion of heavy episodic drinking among adolescents has remained relatively stable between 2015 and 2019 on average across EU countries, although the trend has varied across countries. The proportion of 15-16 year-olds reporting heavy episodic drinking has decreased since 2015 in 15 of 25 EU countries. Cyprus, Lithuania and Malta saw the largest reduction with 7 percentage points or more. The proportion has gone up in the other 10 countries, with increases of 4 percentage points or more in Portugal, Ireland and the Slovak Republic (Figure 4.7).

Protecting children and adolescents from harmful alcohol use is a key pillar of public health policies. A multi-component strategy encompasses limiting accessibility of alcohol by enforcing the law on minimum legal age for purchasing and consuming alcohol, reducing alcohol affordability by limiting cheap alcohol, and restricting alcohol advertising (OECD, 2021^[1]). To limit adolescent exposure to alcohol promotion, some countries have adapted their regulation to digital marketing and sport sponsorship. In the WHO Europe region, about half of the countries report monitoring marketing infringements, but only 14 out of 49 countries have marketing bans on the internet and on social media (WHO Europe, 2021^[2]). Regarding sponsorship for sporting events, only four countries (Spain, France, Norway and Türkiye) have implemented legally binding bans across all alcoholic beverages (WHO, 2018^[3]).

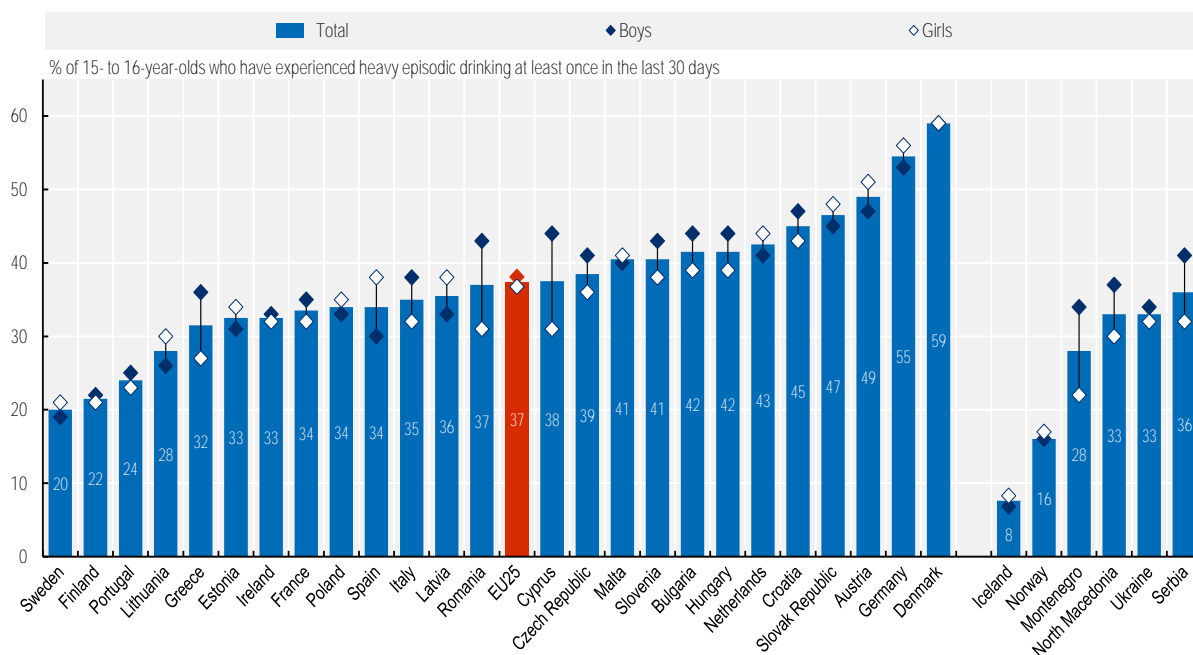
Definition and comparability

The data source is the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). The data relate to the proportion of adolescents aged 15-16 years old reporting heavy episodic drinking at least once in the last 30 days. Heavy episodic drinking is defined as having five or more drinks on one occasion.

References

- OECD (2021), *Preventing Harmful Alcohol Use*, OECD Health Policy Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, [1]
<https://doi.org/10.1787/6e4b4ffb-en>.
- WHO (2018), *Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH): Sporting events by country*, World Health Organization, <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.gisah.A1168?lang=en&showonly=GISAH>. [3]
- WHO Europe (2021), *Digital marketing of alcohol: challenges and policy options for better health in the WHO European Region*, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/350186>. [2]

Figure 4.6. Heavy episodic drinking among 15-16 year-olds, 2019

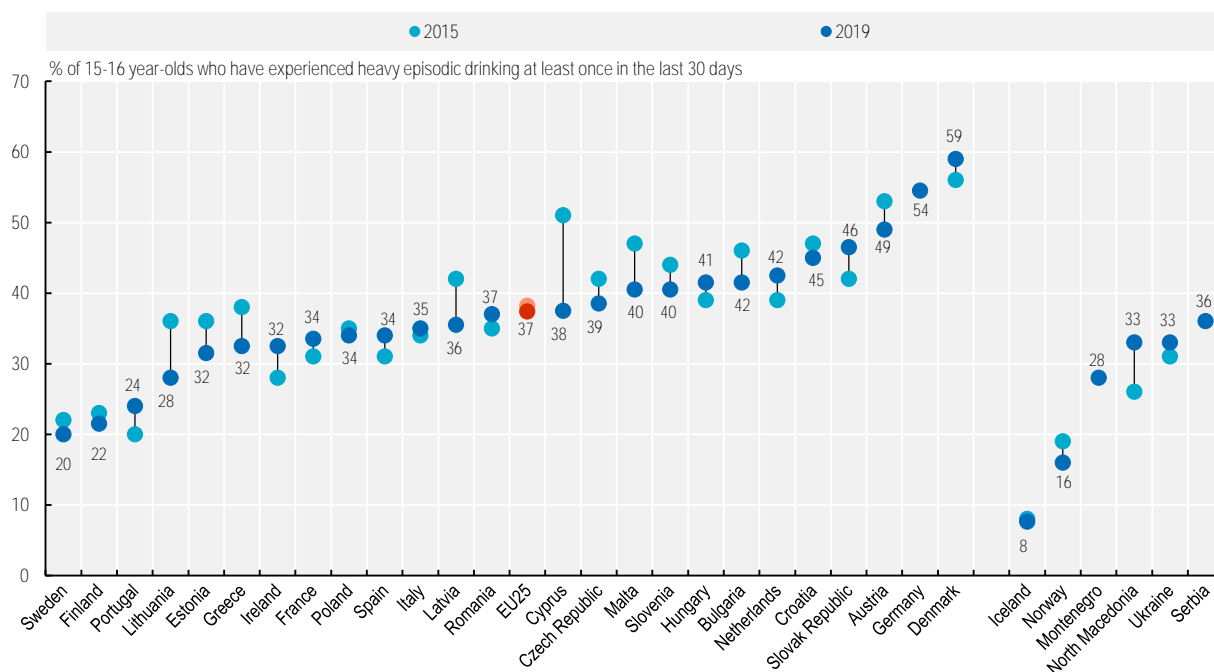


Note: The EU average is unweighted.

Source: ESPAD Group (2020), ESPAD Report 2019: Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

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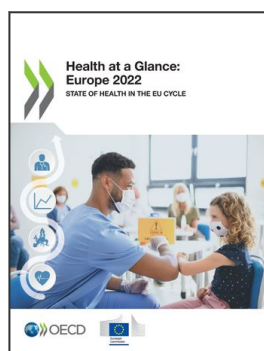
Figure 4.7. Trends in heavy episodic drinking among 15-16 year-olds, 2015-19



Note: The EU average is unweighted. No data is available for Germany in 2015.

Source: ESPAD Group (2020), ESPAD Report 2019: Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/7yh5mb>



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