

IN DEPTH

The 'pre-loader' alcohol problem that blights central cities

9:25 am on 1 August 2024



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Photo: RNZ

A police study of drinking behaviour - sparked by a string of violent and sexual assaults in Wellington - puts much of the blame on people 'preloading' on cheap booze before hitting the town.

The study says education programmes don't work and recommends raising the price of alcohol, lifting the legal purchase age from 18 to 20 and introducing restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship.

It comes just weeks after Police Commissioner Andrew Coster told RNZ that reducing opening hours for bottle stores and raising alcohol prices were **trade-offs New Zealand should debate if it wanted to reduce harm**.

After concerns about Wellington's central city safety, police, along with Wellington City Council and Health New Zealand, studied drinking behaviour on Courtenay Place.

In the study, for the Evidence Based Policing Centre, nearly 2300 people were breathalysed and interviewed between 8.30pm and 4am, recording breath levels up to 1,524 mcg/L - or about six times the legal driving limit.



Study of drinking behaviour points to harm caused by preloading drinks 5' 54"

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The study showed 65 percent of drinkers on Courtenay Place had been preloading in the early evening but by the time midnight rolled around 77 percent were preloaders.

The mean breath level for pre-loaders was 428 mcg/L (about 1.7 times the legal driving limit) and, on average, was 96 mcg/L higher than those who had not been drinking before going out.

The biggest motivation for preloading - the reason given by 44 percent of those interviewed - was saving money.

"The role of price as a key motivator of pre-loading showcases the importance of alcohol pricing policies that effectively target the high affordability of off-licence alcohol products," the study says.

This is intensified by the growing share of the market captured by supermarkets and bottle stores. In 2007, 68 percent of booze was bought from an off-licence but the study now puts the figure at 80 percent.

The favourite tippie for preloaders was RTDs (40 percent), followed by spirits (25 percent), beer (25 percent) and wine (20 percent) - with many consuming more than one type of drink.

The study found that preloaders who bought their booze at the supermarket had, on average, a breath reading 57 mcg/L higher than those who hadn't.

It says this "could relate to the lower price of alcohol found in supermarkets than bottle stores in New Zealand, especially when sold on promotion."



Alcohol sold in supermarkets can be cheaper, the police report says. Photo: LDR / Mary Afemata

The price differential between off and on licences has been growing.

In 2013, a 400ml glass of beer was 2.7 times more expensive at the bar than in the supermarket or bottle store - rising to 3.4 in 2023.

But the study shows the differential can sometimes be much greater, noting \$22 can buy a dozen 330ml bottles of beer at an off-licence or two bottles in a central city bar.

The study recommends considering excise tax increases and **minimum unit pricing** (MUP).

MUP, introduced in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, sets a minimum price that alcohol can be sold for and largely impacts the price of off-licence booze because of the existing mark-ups for alcohol sold in bars.

"Minimum unit pricing, which specifically targets the cheapest alcohol sold by setting the lowest price a standard drink could be

sold, would also assist to reduce the price gap between licence types," the study says.

It also recommends lifting the legal purchase age from 18 to 20 and "implementing comprehensive legislative restrictions to alcohol advertising and sponsorship" to reduce alcohol related harm.

"Education and persuasion-based approaches have been found to be ineffective," the report says. "Mass media campaigns regarding alcohol use have been shown to result in high recall, but little change in alcohol consumption."

It says while anti-smoking campaigns have worked, alcohol is different because of the "pervasiveness and power of alcohol marketing and pro-alcohol cultural norms in society". In contrast, tobacco advertising is banned and social norms have moved against it.

The government has been reluctant to increase alcohol prices.

An independent review of the alcohol levy, which funds public health measures to reduce alcohol harm, recommended raising it to collect \$37 million, which would have added just half a cent to a can of beer.

But in June the government **opted to collect only \$16 million**, despite being told alcohol now caused more than \$9 billion of social harm in New Zealand - more than 20 times the cost of meth.



Photo: Unsplash / RNZ

The police study says that in half of all physical and sexual assaults in New Zealand, the perpetrator has been using alcohol and that alcohol-related assault is more likely to involve strangers and occur in public places.

The study says preloaders are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of crime.

It cites previous research, conducted in central Wellington, showing alcohol harm increases as the night goes on - accelerating after 1am and peaking between 3am and 4am.

It also draws on a survey showing 73 percent of women "felt unsafe in Wellington City after dark, with the majority unwilling to walk alone at night".

Police Minister Mark Mitchell told RNZ the study's focus on preloading chimed with what police had told him.

"It is a big problem for them. Because obviously, they're having to deal with all the alcohol related

crime and violence that is associated with it," he said.

"We haven't got it right as a society, when you look at what is happening and the amount of alcohol related harm we still have to deal with."

Mitchell said responsibility for any new government measures to reduce alcohol harm lay with other ministers and would have to be balanced against individual freedoms.

"We definitely don't want to be a Nanny State," he said. "So we're going to continually, as a government, have to look at different options and recommendations around how we continue to reduce alcohol harm."



Mark Mitchell Photo: RNZ / Reece Baker



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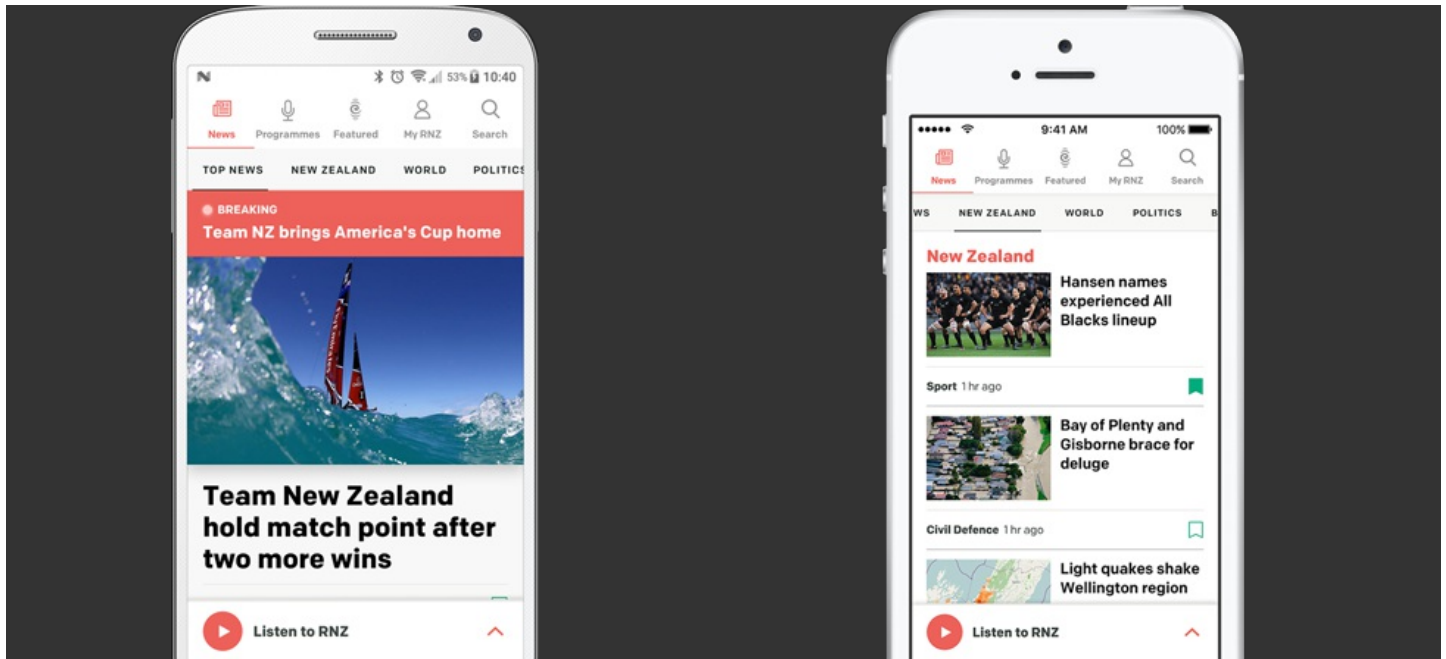
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