

# Alcohol is involved in 1 in 10 deaths in Europe: More protection needed for European citizens.

The European Union (EU) is the heaviest drinking region of the world (11 litres of pure alcohol drunk per adult each year). This is over 2,5 times the rest of the world average.

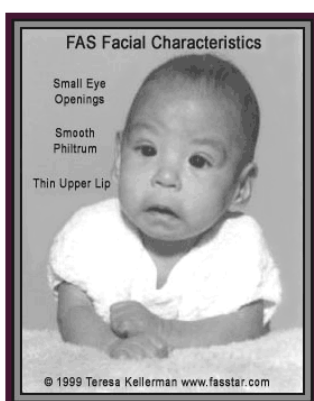
## ALCOHOL IS NOT AN ORDINARY CONSUMER COMMODITY

### Harm to the Individual drinker

Alcohol is a **key health determinant**, responsible for 7.4% of all ill-health and premature death in the EU, which makes it the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading risk factor, after high blood pressure and tobacco.

Apart from being a drug that can lead to dependence (some 23 million Europeans are dependent on alcohol), alcohol is a toxic substance in terms of its direct and indirect effects on a wide range of body organs and systems and a cause of some 60 diseases and conditions like cancers, mental and behavioural disorders, reproductive disorders etc.

### Harm to others



are described by the umbrella term, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), and can include physical, mental, behavioural and/or learning disabilities with possible lifelong implications.

**Harm to the unborn child;** drinking alcohol during pregnancy is the leading known cause of mental disorders and birth defects in the EU. It affects about 1% of people in the EU27 (i.e. nearly 5 million people). The range of effects that can occur in an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy

Alcohol is a significant contributory factor in the incidence of **abuse and violence**; one in six cases of child abuse is related to alcohol and between 7 and 9 million children are living in families adversely affected by alcohol. Alcohol also plays a role in 2 of every 5 cases of domestic violence inflicted on women, and in 4 of every 10 **homicides** in the EU.

Alcohol is a major contributory factor in accidents; whereas only about 1% of all kilometres driven in Europe are driven by drivers with 0.5 g/l alcohol in their blood or more 1 in 4 of all **road traffic fatalities** involve alcohol (10,000 traffic deaths in the EU each year).

It is estimated that alcohol causes nearly 195,000 deaths in the EU each year<sup>i</sup> (over 25% of male deaths in the age group 15-29 years are caused by alcohol).

### Young people's alcohol consumption

Statistical evidence shows a trend towards increased risky use of alcohol among young people<sup>ii</sup>. Nearly all 15-16 year old students (>90%) have drunk alcohol at some point in their life and get drunk for the first time at 14 years. The average amount drunk on a single occasion by 15-16 year olds is over 60g of alcohol (i.e. 1.5 litres of beer), and reaches nearly 40g in the south of Europe.

Children and adolescents have greater vulnerability to alcohol than adults. During adolescence, alcohol can lead to structural changes in the brain (particularly in the hippocampus, an area that is crucial for learning)<sup>iii</sup> and at high levels, can permanently impair brain development<sup>iv</sup>. Youths who begin drinking early in life are significantly more likely to become dependent on alcohol later<sup>v</sup>.

Drinking by adolescents and young adults is associated with traffic accidents, injury and death, suicide and depression, missed classes and decreased academic performance, loss of memory, blackouts, fighting, property damage, date rape, and unprotected sex, which places people at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and unplanned pregnancy<sup>vi</sup>.

Alcohol is involved in around **25% of youth male mortality** and over 10% of youth female mortality.

**RECOMMENDATIONS: Introducing a minimum legal purchase age for alcoholic beverages of 18 years. Introducing alcohol free zones where young people can meet.**

### **THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL MARKETING STRATEGIES**

By definition, alcohol advertising and marketing is one-sided and presents alcohol consumption as a safe and problem-free practice, de-emphasizing the potential health risks and negative consequences. Through its messages, alcohol advertising maintains the social desirability of drinking, overlooks the risk of alcohol to individual and public health, and contradicts prevention objectives.

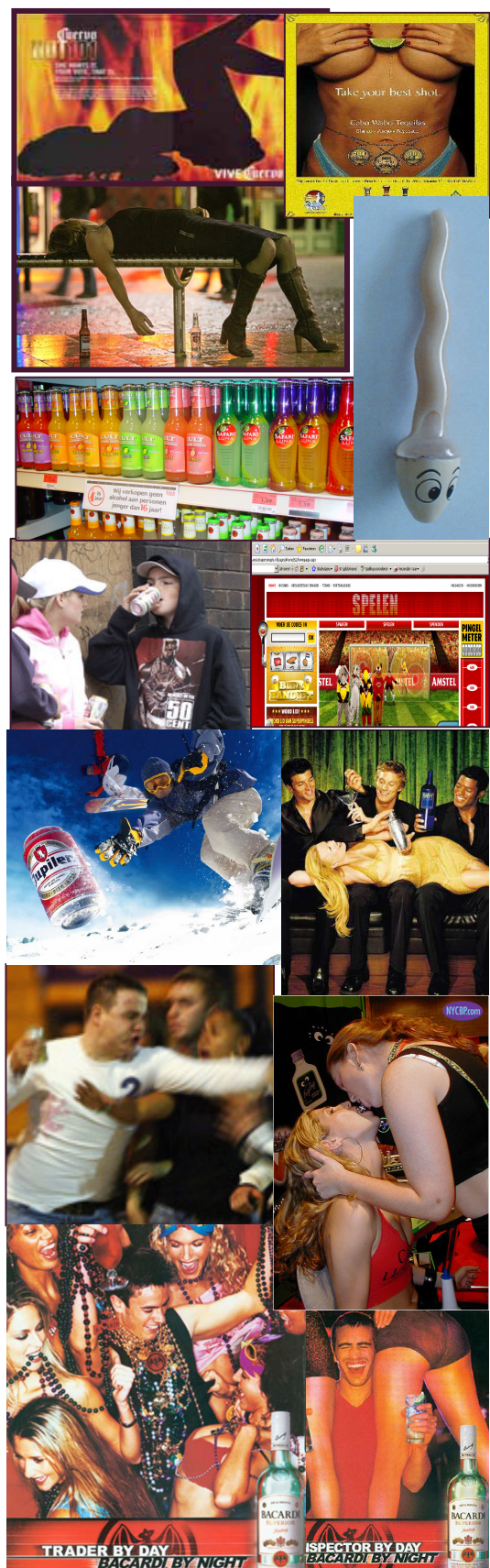
Children and young people constitute an important target group for the alcohol industry because they represent the market of tomorrow, the drinkers of the future. Creating brand allegiance among children and young people is an investment the industry is sure to cash in on.

A growing body of research shows that exposure to and enjoyment of alcohol commercials cause minors to develop more positive expectancies and attitudes towards alcohol, which in turn influence the onset of drinking age, as well as patterns and levels of alcohol consumption. Teenagers who see other teenagers drink – on television or in a real-life setting – often tend to overestimate how much their peer group is drinking. This creates beliefs and pressures that are not consistent with reality.

A recent longitudinal study shows that the effect of possessing a promotional item is bigger than exposure to televised or printed alcohol advertisements<sup>vii</sup>. Alcohol use in movies is also found to be a predictor of prevalence and initiation of alcohol use<sup>viii</sup>.

The effects found in these studies are possibly underestimating the true size of the effects, since in reality alcohol advertisers use a combination of different marketing strategies (sponsorship of music and sports events<sup>ix</sup>, product placement etc).

**RECOMMENDATION: A ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship whenever 15% of the estimated audience is underage. Expenditures by the alcohol industry on advertising, promotion and sponsorship should be disclosed to relevant governmental authorities.**



## DRINK DRIVING

It is estimated that 1 in 4 of all road traffic deaths (i.e. 10,000 deaths per year) involve alcohol.

Deaths are only the tip of the iceberg; for every person who dies an estimated 20 more people require hospital admission for serious injuries, 70 more people require hospital outpatient treatment and many are permanently disabled.<sup>x</sup>

Traffic accidents due to drink driving directly cost the EU €45bn (€10bn from property damage) in 2005.

**RECOMMENDATION: A maximum blood alcohol concentration limit of 0.2 g/L throughout Europe that is properly enforced.**

## LABELLING

Today consumers have no way of knowing the most basic information about alcoholic beverages as alcohol labels provide no information on ingredients or caloric content.

Alcoholic beverages are a significant source of calories: Large glass (250ml) of average strength red wine = 214 calories; Large glass of medium dry white wine = 190 calories = two and a half digestive biscuits; One pint of premium lager = 330 calories.

Certain ingredients or other substances used in the production of alcoholic beverages can cause allergies or intolerances in consumers, some of which constitute a danger to the health of those concerned.

**RECOMMENDATION: Ingredient listing and nutrition information on all alcoholic beverages.**

## HEALTH WARNINGS

Eurobarometer 2007 reports that three quarters of the EU population (77%) would agree with putting warnings on alcohol labels and adverts to warn pregnant women and drivers of the dangers of drinking alcohol.

There is a public interest in informing consumers, by means of labels, of the dangers and health risks associated with the consumption of alcohol; these messages could be a symbolic statement concerning the nature of the product, a low cost reminder that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity.

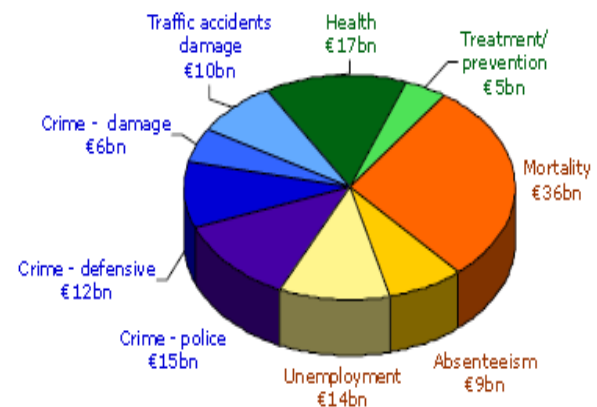
**RECOMMENDATION: health warnings should deliver clear messages about the harm to the individual and others of consuming alcoholic drinks. These should cover general health messages and more specific warnings of dangers such as liver cirrhosis, cancers, mental health issues, injuries, violence and the risk of dependence. In addition, specific messages should warn of the dangers of consuming**



**alcohol during pregnancy, when driving, operating machinery or taking certain medications.**

## TAX AND PRICE

Alcohol-attributable disease, injury and violence cost EU society an estimate of €125bn in 2003, equivalent to 1.3% GDP (i.e. €650 for each household)<sup>xi</sup> which is roughly the same value as that found recently for tobacco. This includes €33bn due to crime (police, courts and prisons, crime prevention expenditure and insurance administration and property damage), €17bn for healthcare systems.



These estimates do not take into account the intangible costs, that is the value people place on pain, suffering and lost life that occurs due to the criminal, social and health harms caused by alcohol.

**RECOMMENDATION: Increasing the Minimum alcohol excise duties. These should be proportional to the alcohol content of the beverages. Member States should have the flexibility to limit individual cross-border purchases so as not to diminish the impact of their current tax policies.**

