

A sobering picture: alcohol access and criminal behaviour among young Kiwis

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Drinking alcohol is popular among Kiwis. Many health experts suggest that NZ has a heavy drinking culture. One health survey indicates that one in five adults—or roughly 824,000 people—have drinking patterns that carry “a high risk of future damage to physical or mental health”. This is also reflected in international studies: in 2016, heavy drinking sessions were much more common in New Zealand than in the UK, the US, Canada and even the Scandinavian countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden. Some experts consider alcohol New Zealand’s most harmful drug.

Alcohol abuse is also a major contributor to crime. In 2010, the New Zealand Police estimated that about one-third of all apprehensions involved alcohol and half of violent crimes were related to alcohol.

Dropping the purchasing age

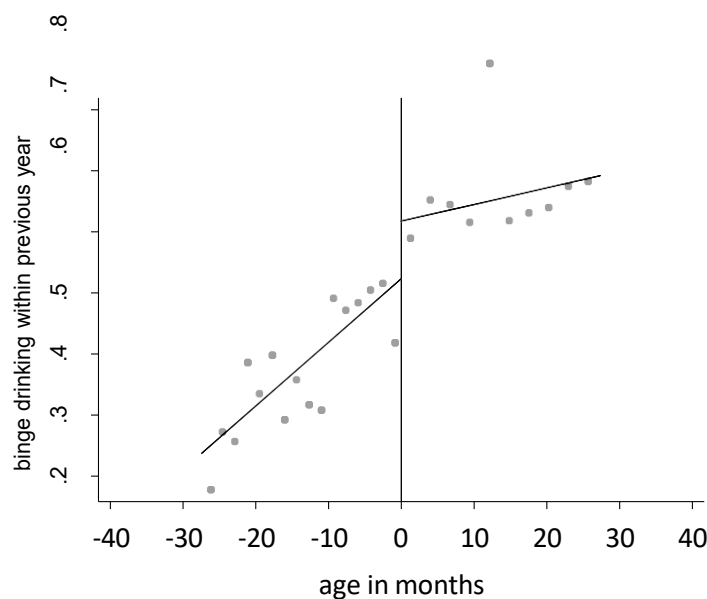
Despite these sobering statistics, in a landmark alcohol reform enacted in 1999, New Zealand reduced the minimum purchasing age from 20 to 18 years. MPs favouring the change argued that 18-year-olds could already vote and marry, and could thus be trusted to drink responsibly and in a safe environment.

Since then, there have been many debates among social and political commentators, including health professionals, as to whether the legal purchasing age should be returned to 20 years. In 2012, the collective heads of the District Health Boards pleaded for reforms to the 2012 Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act, including reinstating a minimum legal purchasing age (MLPA) of 20 years.

Does alcohol access trigger a jump in alcohol-related criminal behaviour?

Our recent study shows that alcohol consumption (including binge drinking) increases significantly as soon as individuals turn 18 and can legally purchase alcohol. Figure 1 shows the fraction of binge drinking teenagers (centred around the age of 18). In the month turning 18, the fraction increases by 10 percentage points (or 20%).

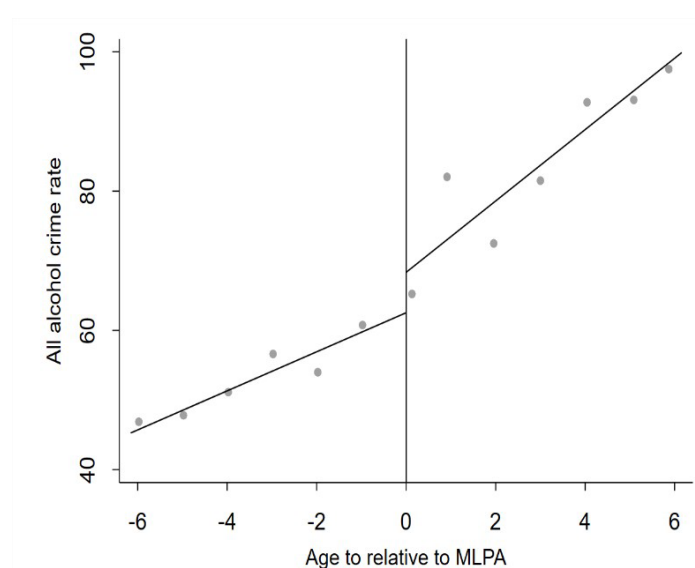
Figure 1: Binge-drinking distribution centred around age 18 (vertical line)



We use a New Zealand research database, which includes detailed crime information administered by the Ministry of Justice, to test whether this change in alcohol availability prompts a jump in alcohol-related criminal behaviour among 18 and 19-year-olds. The spectrum of offences ranges from minor incidents like bringing alcohol into an alcohol ban area to serious crimes, such as causing injury through excessive consumption of alcohol. We compared the difference in alcohol-related criminal behaviour for those just below the MLPA versus those just above.

The empirical analysis offers little evidence that those turning 18 commit more alcohol-related crimes. Figure 2 shows the number of alcohol-related convictions (per 100,000 population) around the MLPA, where only a small (statistically insignificant) jump in convictions is observed. However, similar to previous research, gaining the right to buy alcohol is associated with an immediate increase in other crimes, particularly dangerous acts and property damage.

Figure 2: Crime distribution centred around age 18 (vertical line)



Alcohol purchasing age of 20

We also studied how criminal behaviour changed when the purchasing age was set at 20 years. We found that all alcohol-related convictions drop. This surprising pattern is caused by changes in the legal breath and blood alcohol limit, which occurs at the same age and permits individuals 20 years and older to have higher alcohol levels. We did not find a change in alcohol-related crimes after removing these types of convictions. However, we did find an increase in offences against public order and other traffic-related incidents.

Conclusion

While New Zealand has an acknowledged and widespread problem with alcohol abuse, our study finds little evidence that increasing the legal purchasing age would lower alcohol-related crime. To break the link between alcohol and crime, we suggest treating the causes of alcohol-related offending. In November 2012, the Ministry of Justice piloted Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Courts in Auckland and Waitākere, adding Waikato in 2021. These courts provide alternatives to imprisonment for people whose offending is driven by alcohol or drug use disorders. They provide an evidence-based, best practice treatment pathway that includes intensive monitoring, case management, drug testing, and mentoring. In Budget 2022, all three courts were made permanent. For future research, the long-term effectiveness of these programs should be assessed.