

Alcohol Policies in Pacific Islands Countries and Territories: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol has been a neglected health issue for many Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICT). This scoping review explores the current alcohol policies in PICT. This review utilises the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses for Scoping reviews' to search and screen for literature on alcohol policies. 64 Articles, ranging from 1963 to 2020, form the final data synthesis. The results of this review reveal that all PICT have some form of alcohol policy in place. Firstly all PICT have a legal drinking age in place, however it varies between 18 and 21 years. Many PICT have prohibitions on the presence of liquor outlets near workplaces, schools, and churches. Finally all PICT have an alcohol taxation scheme in place. The alcohol tax on spirits is generally higher than beer across all PICT. Unintended consequences of taxation schemes is an increase in home-brew consumption. Overall for some PICT, alcohol taxation did reduce alcohol consumption. There is a need for a co-ordinated regional response and recommendations for targeted domestic programming in PICT. Addressing government stability in the region and democratic process are areas that need to develop consistent, effective legislation and policy for the implementation of successful alcohol programmes.

Key words: Pacific Islands Countries and Territories, Alcohol policies, and Alcohol taxation.

INTRODUCTION

Since its' introduction by European voyagers, alcohol has become embedded into the cultural, economic, and social fabric of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT) [1]. Within this report, PICT will refer to American Samoa, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis, and Futuna. This scoping review aims to examine and to discuss what alcohol policies exist in each PICT. Such research will support the development of consistent and effective alcohol legislation across PICT. This research will also support the creation of a coordinated regional response and targeted domestic programming in the PICT.

METHODS

This review utilises the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses for Scoping reviews' to search and screen for literature on alcohol policies [2]. Eligible citations include information on alcohol policies in at least one of the PICT. Literature from all geographical areas was viewed; however, only publications produced in English or French were included. French publications were analysed using google translate. All publications were analysed using a thematic analysis and cross checked with the supervisor. Suitable literature types included books, dissertations, journal articles, literature reviews, reports, systematic reviews, theses, websites, and other documents. A total of 64 articles were used in this report, ranging from 1963 to 2020. A search of Scopus, Google Scholar, Medline (OVID), Medline (PubMed), Clinical key, Science Direct, ProQuest Research Library, and the Library Catalogue provided potentially relevant citations. Governmental websites and policies supplemented this database search.

RESULTS

The results encountered a number of key themes which is presented below.

Legal Drinking Age

The legal drinking age in PICT varies between 18 and 21 years. PICT with a legal drinking age of 21 years includes American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga [3-17]. PICT with a legal drinking age of 18 years includes the Cook Islands, Niue, Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Tokelau, Tuvalu and Vanuatu [18-26]. Countries with a legal drinking age of 21 recorded a higher rate of youth alcohol consumption than PICT with a legal drinking age of 18 years. The Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSSHS) offers statistics between 2004 and 2018 outlining youth alcohol consumption in PICT [27]. In countries with a legal drinking age of 21 years, 32.3% of youth reported on average consuming alcohol at least once in the past 30 days compared with 23.17% in PICT with a legal drinking age of 18 years [27]. The Federated States of Micronesia recorded the highest rate of youth alcohol consumption in the past 30 days at 76.3% compared with Vanuatu at the lowest rate of 8.3% [27-28].

Environment Regulations

Environmental regulations on alcohol can protect people from alcohol-related harm. Environmental regulations include restrictions on the sale, supply, or consumption of alcohol at work, near schools, churches, and the public. In American Samoa, the 2019 Drug policy prohibits the use of alcohol at work [29]. In French Polynesia, there are prohibitions on the sale of alcohol near churches and high schools [4]. Guam and Nauru prohibit alcohol consumption in designated alcohol-free zones [15,16]. New Caledonia prohibits public drunkenness. Papua New Guinea prohibits the sale of alcohol, where there are unlawful games [22]. Tonga prohibits the sale of alcohol in areas where it is likely to harm the well-being of the community [5].

Alcohol Taxation

The excise tax on spirits and beer differs across PICT, with alcohol taxes on spirits being generally higher than beer across all PICT. This difference is significant as spirits are much stronger in terms of alcohol per volume than beer [30]. In the Cook Islands, the import levy on beer ranges from 90c to \$22.592 per litre; for spirits, it is \$8.04 to \$43.68 per litre [31]. In the

Federated States of Micronesia, the import duty on beer is 25c per 0.35 litres, and for spirits, it is \$12 for every 4 litres [31]. In Fiji, the excise duty for beer is \$3.43 to \$3.99 per litre, and for spirits, it is \$75.47 to \$132.17 a litre [32]. In Guam, beer not locally manufactured is 7c per 0.35 litres; for spirits, it is \$18 for every 4 litres ¹⁶. In Kiribati, the excise rate for beer is \$3 per litre; for spirits, it is 30c to \$15.60 per litre [33] ³³. In the Marshall Islands, the tax rate on beer is 35c per 0.3 litres and \$15 for every 4 litres [34]. In Nauru, the beer tariff is 7c per 0.35 litres; for spirits, it is \$10 per litre [35]. In Niue, the tax on beer and spirits is 10% [35]. In the Northern Mariana Islands, the tax rate on beer is 2c per 30ml; for spirits, it is 18c per 30 ml [36,37]. The import tariff is 5c per can of beer; for spirits, it is \$15 for every 4 litres [37]. In Palau, the import tax on beer is 3c, and for spirits, it is 30c per 30ml [37] ³⁷. In Papua New Guinea, the excise duty for beer is 71.61 and 122.27 PGK per litre, and for spirits, it is 129.71 and 139.16 PGK per litre [38]. In Samoa, the excise tax on beer is \$2.40 per litre; for spirits, it is \$10 to \$32 per litre [39]. The import excise rate on beer is 55%, and for spirits, it is 60% [40]. In Tonga, the tax rate on beer is \$10 to \$50 per litre [41]. In Tokelau, the import duty rate on alcoholic beverages is 109 per cent ad valorem [42]. In Vanuatu, the excise tax rate on beer is 140 to 300 vatu per litre; for spirits, it is 200 to 1200 vatu per litre [43] .

There are various responses from PICT on the use of alcohol taxes. Understanding these responses can support the formulation of successful tax strategies. Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Niue, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Wallis and Futuna use alcohol taxes strategically to decrease access and to mitigate alcohol-related problems [16,19,44-49]. For example, in New Caledonia, alcohol tax rates increased from 20% to 30% in 2017 to curb the accession of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related deaths, violence, and youth delinquency [19]. In Guam, Niue and French Polynesia, alcohol taxes is earmarked for alcohol prevention activities; doing so maximises the potential of alcohol taxation schemes to mitigate alcohol consumption and the harms associated with its misuse [16,46, 50-55]. By contrast, alcohol taxes in American Samoa are generally unpopular, alcohol in the Marshall Islands remains inexpensive, and Samoa has faced issues implementing a sustainable tax rate without disabling the local liquor industry [56-58].

Disaggregating the data by region we can see differences in the success and difficulty of implementing an alcohol tax strategy successfully. PICT of Micronesia and Polynesia have maximised the potential for alcohol taxes to decrease alcohol consumption by earmarking funds towards preventions activities [16,46,50,53,54]. Alternatively, Melanesia and Polynesia have had difficulties implementing an effective tax strategy without disabling the local liquor industry [56,58].

Alcohol Regulations

Regulations on commercial alcohol, such as alcohol taxes have increased home-brew consumption. This is because, home-brew is not regulated and more affordable than alcoholic beverages [1,59-62]. In light of these unintended consequences, many PICT have implemented strategies to regulate the use of home- brew. In Papua New Guinea, fines on home-brew increased from 200 Papua New Guinean kina (PGK) to 50,000 PGK following an alcohol tax increase in 2019. In Micronesia, the effect of alcohol taxes on home-brew consumption has led to increasing fines [63].

On the other hand Nosa, Duffy [64] emphasises the importance of health promotion campaigns centred on individuals, families, churches, community groups, and health professionals to highlight the severity of home-brew on health and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This review provides important information on alcohol use in PICT. The research also shows different policies in place for different PICT. A key recommendation from this research is that alcohol taxation needs to be strongly enforced at a governmental level. Alcohol taxation decreases alcohol consumption but also increases home-brew consumption. While it is encouraging to see tax on spirits is higher as opposed to beer taxes more tax regulation policies is still needed. While the restriction of alcohol outlets is generally limited to workplaces, schools, and churches more work is still needed to enforce these restrictions. For many PICT, there needs to be more research around what the accepted legal drinking age is appropriate. PICT that had a higher drinking age tended to drink more than countries with a lower drinking age. More population evidence-based research is needed to determine how effective alcohol policies are in PICT. By understanding what alcohol policies exist in each PICT can contribute towards a decrease in alcohol consumption and the harms associated with its misuse

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