

# Barometer 2020

## Research Paper Series

Families, Alcohol & COVID-19 - A detailed analysis of the drinking practices of adults in households with children during the ongoing pandemic

Drinkaware, June 2021

**DRINKAWARE**

# Acknowledgements

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As with all Drinkaware's work, the collective efforts of the team in supportive research, ideation, editing and proofing, is both critical and much appreciated.

The Barometer Research Paper Series is managed by Research & Impacts Manager, Dr Ann Stokes, and this paper is led by Dr Stokes with the assistance of Research Intern Brendan Joy.

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## Foreword by Sheena Horgan, CEO

Drinkaware's mission is to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol, and tackle underage drinking. We deliver this by seeking out the motivations, attitudes and behaviour that drive alcohol consumption and misuse, and then applying that data with analysis, to generate insights and deeper knowledge that shape our education, outreach and engagement work.

The purpose and power of data is that it can guide us regarding what we do next. Research therefore is a critical and core part of what we do and is central to ensuring that Drinkaware, as a national charity, makes a meaningful contribution to the broader understanding, thinking and most importantly, learning, around alcohol and positive behaviour change.

We already have a growing repository of proprietary research that we cross reference against other data in order to better understand all of the elements involved in alcohol use and misuse in Ireland. Since 2017 we have conducted an annual national survey, called the Drinkaware Barometer, with Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A). Each survey elucidates significant patterns, as well as revealing emerging trends, regarding the behaviour and attitudes to alcohol amongst the general public. Both are critical to address alcohol misuse and to reduce and prevent alcohol-related harms. We also conducted an Index in conjunction with B&A that comprehensively analysed hazardous drinking in Ireland, published in May 2019.

The Drinkaware Barometer Series, has been created to deliver a dynamic set of research papers that will investigate specific aspects of the collective data in the annual surveys, alongside other studies, to extrapolate and explore important themes and perspectives regarding the use and misuse of alcohol in Ireland.

This study - Families, Alcohol & COVID-19 – A detailed analysis of the drinking practices of adults in households with children during the ongoing pandemic - is the first in the Series. It takes select data sets from the Drinkaware Barometer 2020, which was the annual national survey conducted in April 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdown, and interprets, through analysis, these findings against a wider set of related data and research that is both national and international.

The Drinkaware Barometer 2020 was an important research study in the context of COVID-19 as it examined not just people's behaviour, but also their emotional wellbeing during the initial stages of the pandemic. Juxtaposing this important data alongside other studies, has unlocked valuable perspectives, that provide deeper understanding regarding the complexities of alcohol use and misuse during this difficult period. The findings have further potential regarding how they may be applied going forward as we progress through this pandemic, to pre-empt and address both protective and challenging factors regarding alcohol consumption – at an individual, community and societal level.

At Drinkaware, we are cognisant of the statistical norms regarding alcohol use and misuse. But we are also extremely aware that averages within a society or community do not adequately tell the full story, and a deeper appreciation of the attitudinal and behavioural nuances are required if misuse is to be prevented and/or reduced.

**To this end, this paper is the first examination of household type with regard to alcohol consumption and as such has significant validity in furthering the knowledge and understanding regarding families and alcohol. The findings and discussions reveal 'household type' to be an emerging determinant of alcohol use, which in turn has serious implications to expedite knowledge and understanding of how children and young people can be supported regarding alcohol use.**

The Drinkaware Barometer Series, and this inaugural paper, fortifies Drinkaware's increasingly important position as a valuable information and insight bank. As with all of our data, the Series is open access and we welcome all opportunities for research scrutiny, sharing and collaboration. To quote Edward de Bono, "the analysis of data will not by itself create new ideas"... and to address the issue of alcohol misuse requires discussion, debate and co-operation.

## Executive Summary

In April 2020, Drinkaware commissioned leading market research agency Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A) to undertake its latest in a series of Barometers examining Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. Using a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people aged 18+, and internationally recognised and standardised questionnaires, the information gathered was broken down further by life stage/household type, allowing for further examination of the impacts in the unique context of COVID-19 and the initial lockdown phase. The focus of this specific paper is on the impact of the initial lockdown phase for Irish households with children (n=356).

We determined that alcohol cannot be examined in isolation owing to the multi-dimensional aspect to both society's and people's relationship with alcohol. Some of the multiple and powerful social, economic and environmental determinants of alcohol usage/experience, and especially harm, are therefore examined in this paper. And as the timing is April 2020, the context is COVID-19 acting as an additional environmental stressor.

Research tends to cover alcohol and the individual, but the importance of household context - and the interplay of factors within households - is also critical. Therefore, rather than examine 'families' as a homogenous household type, the data in this paper is broken down further into 3 'households with children' categories: pre-school, primary school and teenagers.

Our comprehensive data set also provides more than just a snapshot of the early impacts of the ongoing pandemic by family life. It highlights factors that precede changes in drinking patterns due to pre-COVID-19 data collected as part of the Index and Barometer series. The importance of trends and patterns is crucial in considering likely trajectories in terms of (un)healthy behaviours related to alcohol and the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions. Key findings for different households with children from the Barometer 2020 are therefore presented alongside relevant statistics from both our own pre-COVID-19 data and other national research as well as COVID-19 specific research that is currently available.

Collectively, this evidence-informed resource of our Barometer data alongside other available research, provides a series of key implications for practice, as well as lessons for consideration for all stakeholders working

with/for families and children as well as the prevention and reduction of alcohol misuse and harm. These are presented overleaf as implications of this research.

Ultimately the comprehensive evidence presented in this paper shows some of the unintended consequences of the protective measures taken to contain COVID-19 during the initial lockdown phase and specifically how they have had a substantial effect on families' lives and livelihoods particularly for those with younger age children. In so doing, this paper provides important evidence of how such households are likely to react during additional lockdown phases or any lesser restrictions during the ongoing pandemic.

The timing of this paper is crucial too - the 'third wave', school closures between December 2020-March/April 2021 and the subsequent lockdown seem different, darker and deeper. Parents are tired and their resilience is being tested the longer the pandemic continues. At the same time, there is a sense of optimism and hope with the continued roll out of the vaccination programme during 2021 and lifting of level 5 restrictions in May/June.

# Barometer 2020 – Drinking Behaviour & Attitudes By Family Household (n=356)

## Pre-School (n=138)

### Of households with children, most likely to

- Drink on at least a weekly basis (56%)
- Cite coping as a main motivation to drink (77%)
- Have a small number of drinks at home with others (45%)
- Say they'd would like to drink less (31%)
- Report an increase in household tension 58% (National average 47%).

### Also

- 1/3 are drinking more (National average is 25%)
- 21% binge drink at least weekly (National average is 15%)
- 56% could be classed as propensity to increasing or hazardous drinking
- 44% have already experienced or likely to experience negative economic impact in the last 12 months.

## Primary (n=150)

### Of households with children, most likely to

- Drink alone among all households with children (39%)
- Have made small positive changes to their drinking (36%)
- Have already experienced or likely to experience negative economic impact in the last 12 months (59%) (National average 43%).

### Also

- 1/3 are drinking more (National average is 25%)
- More than half (53%) report drinking on a weekly basis (National average is 52%)
- 36% have a small number of drinks at home with others.

## Teens (n=68)

### Of households with children, most likely to

- Have had a drink in the last month 78% (National average is 73%)
- Lowest reported low mental wellbeing 56% (National average is 37%).

### Least likely to

- Drink on a weekly basis (42%)
- Report drinking more (16%)
- Binge drink weekly 6% (National average is 15%).

### Also

- 24% have a small number of drinks at home with others
- 53% have already experienced or likely to experience negative economic impact in the last 12 months.

## Research Implications



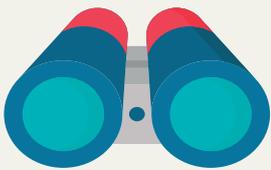
### Who is drinking more

Much of the research says circa 25% are drinking more, but the Barometer and this paper explain 'who' that 25% are and the social practices involved i.e. how they are drinking as well as providing key indicators as to why they are drinking. The findings provided in this paper are in keeping with both national and international research regarding families, alcohol and COVID-19.

### How much these households drink

Volume becomes more important than frequency i.e. how often they drink. Similar trends were reported among pre-family and families with younger age children and this may reflect the adjustments that they are making, such as changes in lifestyles and transition to parenthood.

This research shows concerning contradictions where families with younger age children (pre and primary school ages) report lower levels of consumption but higher levels of excessive or binge drinking during lockdown than any other households with children, and also than the national household average.

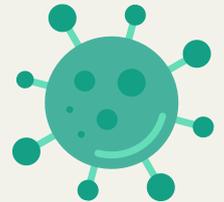


### Looking beyond average

Other data talks of averages, which can obscure what's really happening, and therefore this study looks beyond average. It is also too easy to dismiss homogenous data of 'households with children' so the household profiles provided in this paper, help to tell a clear story of the pressures on the various family segments and of the impact on families and specific family grouping as an unintended consequence of restrictions.

### COVID-19 a new determinant of alcohol consumption

The paper clearly demonstrates the interplay between the pandemic crisis, the ensuing restrictions, and the determinants of alcohol consumption. Stress plays a significant role in alcohol consumption for households with children. Data provided also elucidates the already known and proven negative connection between wellbeing and binge drinking.



### Embedding 'drinking less' is an opportunity

On a positive note, there is a clear opportunity, that is consistent across time, where 1 in 4 adults are drinking less – an indication of the potential to speed up the re-writing of Ireland's relationship with alcohol.

### Role modelling is critical

Whether parents are drinking more or not, their children are more likely to see them drink simply because we are all at home during 2020 and much of 2021. This has in turn the potential to influence future intergenerational transmission of habits and attitudes regarding positive or negative effects of alcohol and warrants further research investigation that we look forward to exploring during 2021.



### New habits may be long term

The evidence reported here is crucial and cautionary: If the short-term changes that were reported during the initial lockdown phase become more entrenched, then longer-term habits may form as the restrictions continued into 2021, and in turn negatively impact Irish adults' health and wellbeing post-COVID-19.

## Key Findings

The key findings of the study are presented below under 8 themes:

### Theme 1:

#### Patterns of alcohol consumption

Families with teenagers were the most likely across the three households with children (pre-school, primary school/pre-teen and teen) to report consuming alcohol over the past month, with over 3 out of 4 doing so (78%). However, they were less likely to report weekly consumption of alcohol at 42%, compared with over half of households with pre-school children (56%) and primary school children (53%) doing so.

One third of pre-school and pre-teen (primary school) family households say they are drinking more. These households also reported the highest levels of other adults in their household drinking more. Families with teenagers were the least likely to report that they were drinking more, with only 16% doing so.

### Theme 2:

#### Prevalence of hazardous drinking

1 in 5 (21%) households with pre-school-aged children reported binge drinking on at least a weekly basis i.e., four occasions in the past month. This level of binge drinking is notably higher than reported in homes with primary school children (10%) and teenagers (6%) and versus the national average (15%). Over half of both pre-family (57%) and pre-school (56%) household types scored 5+ on the AUDIT-C scale (this is a classification that indicates a propensity to hazardous drinking, which means the person is at increasing risk of experiencing harm, though they may have yet to experience any). We know from pre-COVID-19 research that Irish adults do not associate binge drinking with at-home drinking even if they are unknowingly doing so while at home (Drinkaware 2020).

### Theme 3:

#### Household stress and tension

47% of all households reported an increase in stress/tension at home during the initial lockdown phase and households with pre-school children reported the highest increase across all household types with nearly 6 in 10 (58%) doing so.

### Theme 4:

#### Economic impact

The occurrence of any actual or likely negative economic impact such as job loss, salary reduction and/or working fewer hours as a result of the initial lockdown was higher across all households with children with nearly 6 in 10 families with primary-school children reporting the highest occurrence (59%).

## Theme 5:

### Motivations for drinking alcohol

Coping was the main type of motivation reported for drinking among households with children, peaking among households with pre-school children at 77%. However, when motivations are broken down further, differences across households with children are apparent as the main reason given for drinking during the initial lockdown phase. For instance, the motivations for drinking cited by adults in households with pre-school-aged children include: 1 in 3 reported drinking 'to cheer up when in a bad mood or stressed' (vs 23% with primary school children, 16% with teenagers, 23% national average); 22% reported drinking 'because it helps when you feel depressed or anxious' (vs 15% with primary school children, 13% with teenagers, 17% national average).

## Theme 6:

### Occasions for consumption

Households with pre-school children were most likely to report having a small number of drinks at home with others in the household during the day or night on a weekly basis across all household types including those without children, with over 4 in 10 doing so (45%). This figure compares with 24% of teenagers and 36% primary school households. Worryingly almost 4 out of 10 households with primary school children reported drinking at home alone (39%) on a weekly basis.

## Theme 7:

### Mental health

Family households were more likely to report low mental wellbeing than other households. Whilst teenage households were less likely to report alcohol consumption and using alcohol as a coping strategy compared to pre-teen families, low mental health peaked among families with teenagers with over half reporting a low score (56%) versus national average of 37%.

Both COVID-19 and pre-COVID-19 research has identified a clear link with binge drinking and low mental wellbeing. Among Irish adults that reported any binge drinking during the initial lockdown, 44% also reported low mental wellbeing (15% reported a high mental wellbeing alongside any binge drinking).

## Theme 8:

### Drinking less / positive changes

While at least one in five Irish adults would like to drink alcohol less often, up to one in three pre-school family households would like to do so (31%). At 36%, primary school households are the most likely among families to say that they have made small positive changes to their drinking habits by drinking less in the initial lockdown phase.

## Background

Rapidly emerging research and evidence into the current impacts and longer-term consequences of the global pandemic continue to gather pace and in April 2020, we commissioned B&A to undertake its latest in a series of Barometers examining Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol<sup>1</sup>. The urgent need for evidence should not hinder quality and in this regard, using a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people aged 18+ and internationally recognised and standardised question models<sup>2</sup>, the information gathered in our study was broken down further by life stage/household type (single -45, single 45+, pre-family, family pre-school, family pre-teen, family teen, empty nester) thus allowing us to further examine impacts in the unique context of COVID-19.

COVID-19 provides a unique context in which to examine Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. However, we cannot examine alcohol in isolation and there are multiple and powerful social, economic and environmental determinants of alcohol use that must be considered (as well as other unhealthy behaviours). According to Dahlgren & Whitehead (2007), the main determinants of health encompass individual lifestyle factors (age, sex and constitutional); social and community networks (living and working conditions) and general socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions. In particular, social determinants in turn are attributable to differences in health-damaging behaviours and are factors that interact as the root of inequities in alcohol-related harm (WHO 2014).

Our data therefore also provides an important insight into some of these key determinants and the 'wider picture' in which adults experienced the initial lockdown period in Ireland e.g., stress/ tension, mental health, economic impact, health impact, household dynamic as well as the behaviour of other adults. In so doing this study specifically sought and measured specific cohorts of Irish

adults' reaction to an unprecedented set of restrictions, how we reacted to the initial lockdown of 2020 and to the massive and broad curtailment of how we live our lives. As our study is part of a series of Barometers that have been conducted to date, such pre-COVID-19 data is also important as it highlights factors that precede changes in drinking patterns. The Barometer has now been conducted by B&A on behalf of Drinkaware on five different occasions over the last four years, namely January 2017, June 2017, January 2018, April 2019 and most recently in April 2020<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.drinkaware.ie/latest/one-quarter-of-irish-adults-drinking-more-during-covid-19-14-drinking-4-times-a-week-new-drinkaware-ba-research>

<sup>2</sup> Three internationally recognised and standardised questionnaires were used in our Barometer 2020: Alcohol Disorder identification Test- C (AUDIT-C) (Modified 3 Q version); Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) (with additional options to reflect COVID-19 context); The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS).

<sup>3</sup> Further details on our Barometer Series are available from [www.drinkaware.ie/research](http://www.drinkaware.ie/research)

## 'Household' in context during COVID-19

COVID-19 brought about a sudden and dramatic change to the daily routines of billions of people across the world. Since March 2020, residents across Ireland were required to stay at home and observe both physical and social distancing and once again required to do so in January 2021 with the re-closure of schools and return to online learning.

Family life is the most important web of meaning for most people (Inglis, 2014). During the initial 'lockdown', many parents faced juggling competing demands of limiting social interactions, remaining at home, working from home where possible, while also providing both care and 'home schooling' to their children as well as protecting both the physical and mental health of their family. However, families are not a homogenous group.

### What does 'family' look like?

The concepts of family and households are evolving and across the EU, people are forming households in more diverse ways and more frequently over a lifetime – with increases in divorce, remarriage and cohabitation (Eurofound, 2019). For Census purposes, a family is defined as a couple with or without children or a one parent family with one or more children (CSO, 2017). In 2019, there were 1,203,103 children living in Ireland. This accounted for 24% of the total population (Government of Ireland 2020).

There are three types of households with children, nuclear families (couples with children), lone-parent households and blended families (that form after a first family unit has broken up). The average children per family in Ireland remained unchanged between Census 2011 and 2016 at 1.38 (CSO 2017). 7% of all households in Ireland had 3 or more children under 18, the highest proportion across the EU (EU figure 3%). Cross-country statistical data shows that the number of nuclear families is declining, and the proportion of lone-parent households has increased. For

instance, in Ireland, 36% of all households are nuclear families (vs 28% across the EU) and 12% are lone-parent families (vs 9% across the EU) (Eurofound 2019). Irish data found that in 2016, 16% of children lived in a lone-parent household in Ireland (Government of Ireland 2020).

Census data also shows that in Ireland children in families of cohabiting couples have a younger profile with 76.6% of this family type having all children under the age of 15 compared with just 47% of married couples. Children in one parent families were likely to have an older age profile, in particular for one parent fathers, where in 73% of families, all children were aged 15 years or over. The number of young adults living with their parents has also increased with nearly half a million (458,874) adults 18+ doing so in Census 2016 (CSO 2017). Specific household type also relates to a range of outcomes in terms of life satisfaction, social exclusion and wellbeing with parents in nuclear families having the best subjective wellbeing across all household types and lone-parents at higher risk of poverty and deprivation (Eurofound 2019).

Specific issues were faced during the initial lockdown phase by households with children depending on age of child and we can assume that similar has taken place as school closures were once again implemented in January 2021 alongside a return to full lockdown/level 5 as the country battled with an unprecedented level of COVID-19 in the community. For instance, research conducted by CSO during the most recent Level 5 and closure of schools in early 2021 found that seven in ten (70.3%) respondents who are employed and who have a child in primary school reported that the closure of primary schools since Christmas has had an impact on their work pattern (CSO 2021a). Primary, pre-school, Leaving Certificate and 5th

year students began a phased return to school in early March 2021 with the remainder of secondary school students returning to in-class learning on 12th April following a period of online learning that commenced in January 2021.

Parental engagement in aspects of daily life is generally higher among families with young children compared with those with older children and teenagers and therefore the impact of COVID-19 is likely to differ among families. For instance, in terms of home schooling, research in the UK from the initial lockdown period found that 45% of parents helped primary students for two or more hours

a day compared with 14% at secondary level and only 2% having the same involvement with post-16-year-old students (Benzeval et al. 2020). In addition, the number of children living with a parent/guardian is important as existing evidence shows that an increased number of children contributes to parental stress or strain that may have since been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Weerakoon et al 2021).

## Impact of inequities on households

Prolonged learning in the home is also more challenging for some families such as disadvantaged groups, SEN (special educational needs) and migrant children in terms of the extent to which parents can assist with their child's learning and have both the resources and skills (ESRI, 2020). The inability to attend school for lengthy periods is particularly isolating for more hidden groups of children such as those that experience abuse and neglect and may heighten the risk of unnoticed serious neglect (Irish Times 2021). Parents of teenagers may now also be facing specific challenges for those due to sit state examinations later in the year. According to recent research conducted by the CSO (2021), almost one in two (48%) respondents with a child in senior cycle secondary education (fifth or sixth year) reported a major negative impact on their child's learning. A new Growing Up in Ireland Report has found that the pandemic is negatively affecting children and young adults from low-income families in Ireland. Children and young adults from low-income families have more trouble with internet access, finding quiet places to study and they are more likely to live with someone vulnerable to severe COVID-19 disease. These findings highlight the extent of changes to everyday life for children and young adults and provide indicators of likely inequalities of impact of the pandemic (GUI/ESRI 2021).

## Working households

During the initial lockdown period of March-June 2020, many parents faced competing demands of limiting social interactions, remaining at home, working from home where possible, while also providing both care and 'home schooling' to their children. Internationally, school and day-care closures resulted in a 'disruptive exogenous shock' to family life (Huebener et al. 2020). Parents who do continue to work outside the home are likely to be working in environments that place them at high levels of personal risk such as hospitals, clinics, grocery stores, and pharmacies (Griffith, 2020). In total, 22% of our sample reported working in essential services. However, higher numbers of some households with children reported doing so with 36% of families with pre-teens/primary school children and 26% of families with pre-school children working in essential services. Only 18% of families with

teenagers reported working in essential services. These parents were also working externally/outside of the home thus creating an added stress.

## Family relationships

Family relationships may in turn be put to the test during COVID-19 restrictions. Recent research in Canada identified multiple factors that influenced family stress during the current pandemic including balancing work with childcare/ homeschooling responsibility, employment and financial instability as well as concerns over contacting the COVID-19 virus (Carroll et al. 2020). An Irish study found that 64% of families were experiencing 'ups and downs' of feeling physically and emotionally disconnected during restrictions in 2020 (Barnardos, 2020).

In the CSO Social impact of COVID study conducted in April 2020, 89% of households with children were concerned about the impact of interrupted education (CSO, 2020a). Children are also experiencing negative impacts with a 2020 study reporting 84% missed seeing their friends and 68% miss school (Barnardos 2020). Uncertainty about state examinations was cited among a sample survey of parents of second-level students in Ireland (NPCPP, 2020).

## Positive changes

However, the initial lockdown has also been shown to have had some positive impacts on family dynamics and wellbeing such as strengthening family bonds (Clayton et al. 2020). In other studies, time with family, connecting to friends, as well as physical activity, were all related to lower loneliness beyond COVID-19 stress among adolescents (Ellis et al. 2020). 46% of Irish adults reported having increased positive family time in April 2020 (CSO, 2020a). In November 2020, 53.3% of respondents living in households with children reported an aspect of their lives had changed for the better (CSO 2020b). Social patterning of positive changes (such as more quality time with family, developing new hobbies, more physical activity and better-quality sleep) has also been reported among specific groups of the population (females, younger age groups, those married or living with their partner, employed, and in better health) during the initial lockdown in Scotland (Williams 2021). COVID-19 has also involved an intensive period of change in fathers' roles with many fathers spending more time doing childcare duties (Fatherhood Institute & Nuffield Foundation, 2020) and to some extent home schooling particularly for those that worked from home or used flexitime (Chung, 2020). The events of 2020 (and 2021 so far) are in turn leading to a profound shift in caring responsibilities (Topping, 2020).

## Households with Children and Barometer 2020

The data gathered in our Barometer 2020 study<sup>4</sup> provides an in-depth and comprehensive insight into the impact of the initial lockdown phase for a sample of **356 Irish households with children** (total sample size = 1015) that are broken down further into three categories:

1. Pre-school (households with children aged 0-5 that have yet to start primary education (***n=138***))
2. Primary school (households with children generally aged 5-12 that are attending primary level education) (***n=150***)
3. Teenagers (households with children generally aged between 13-18 and that are attending full-time secondary level education) (***n=68***)

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<sup>4</sup>The full sample breakdown is available in the Appendices.

## Findings by Theme<sup>5</sup>

The key findings for the different households with children will now be presented across 8 key themes, namely: patterns of alcohol consumption, prevalence of hazardous drinking, household stress and tension, economic impact, motivations for drinking alcohol, occasions for consumption, mental health as well as drinking less/positive changes.

This will be followed by a discussion of the key findings in relation to wider literature as well as key implications.

For contextual purposes, data will be presented alongside figures for pre-family households and the national average<sup>6</sup>. Relevant statistics from our own pre-COVID-19 research e.g., Barometer series and Index and other relevant national research e.g., Healthy Ireland will also be included for comparative purposes as well as reference to other relevant COVID-19 specific national research that is currently available such as the CSO Social Impact study series from April and November 2020 as well as from February 2021.

### Theme 1: Patterns of alcohol consumption:

#### Self-reported consumption in last 30 days<sup>7</sup>:

When asked about having consumed alcohol in the last 30 days, families with teenagers were the most likely across households with children to report doing so. Families with pre-teens (primary school), while slightly less were also above the national average across all adults that reported consuming alcohol in the last 30 days. However, the percentage of families with pre-school children that reported consuming alcohol in the last 30 days was lower than the national average.

**Table 1:** Self-reported consumption of alcohol in past 30 days<sup>8</sup>:

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
69%	75%	<b>78%</b>	76%	73%

Our findings are in line with those reported in the initial CSO Social Impact survey that found 80.6% respondents stating that they consumed alcohol in April 2020. We also found that 13% of our total sample reported that they never drink alcohol, while 15% did not consume alcohol in the past 30 days. In terms of pre-COVID-19 data, Healthy Ireland 2018 identified that overall, 75% of the population (sample age 15+) consumed alcohol in the past 12 months (DoH 2019).

However, when asked specifically about weekly consumption, consumption patterns during the initial lockdown typically peak among pre-family & pre-school life stages with both slightly higher than the national average. Across households with children, families with teenagers were less likely to report consuming alcohol on at least a weekly basis in the past 30 days. The highest reported weekly consumption across all life stages was pre-families.

<sup>5</sup> The highest occurring %, score etc across household types is highlighted in red in each table.

<sup>6</sup> 52 participants identified themselves as 'Pre-Family' Households in Barometer 2020. Pre-family' couples are defined for census purposes as couples without children where the woman was aged under 45 (CSO 2012). Given the smaller base size for this household type, we acknowledge that these results should be interpreted with a level of caution. Nonetheless, they are important in terms of providing a context for the transition in household type that occurs.

<sup>7</sup> We acknowledge that self-reporting may underestimate the prevalence of alcohol consumption (Hogan et al 2020)

<sup>8</sup> A standard drink is a measure of alcohol. In Ireland, one standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Common examples include a half pint of 4.5% lager, 100ml glass of 12.5% wine and pub measure of 40% spirits. The number of standard drinks is based on the size of the drink and its alcohol strength, usually shown on labels as alcohol by volume (%ABV). The higher the alcohol strength, the higher the standard drink content. Alcohol guidelines differ by country and are typically set by the Department of Health. If you see unit content displayed on a can or bottle label, this will show the alcohol content in a UK unit, not an Irish standard drink. For people in Ireland, the result will be an underestimation of how much alcohol was consumed. This means that you may be drinking more than the low-risk guidelines without realizing (For more information see <https://www.drinkaware.ie/what-is-a-standard-drink/>)

**Table 2: Self-reported consumption of alcohol weekly+:**

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
56%	53%	42%	<b>58%</b>	52%

According to our Index (2019), 44% Irish adults reported that they drink alcohol on at least a weekly basis when data was collected in 2018. From an age perspective, at 50% the 35-49-year-olds were most prone to weekly consumption, followed by under 25s, 46% of whom drink on a weekly basis (Drinkaware 2019). Healthy Ireland 2018 found that 55% of drinkers reported drinking at least once a week in the past 12 months (DoH, 2019).

### Drinking more (or less):

One third of pre-school and pre-teen family households say they are drinking more in the past 30 days (highest reported across life stages and higher than national average). Pre-school and pre-teen family households also reported the highest levels of other adults in their household drinking more across all life stages as well as higher than the national average figure. However, across all life stages, families with teenagers, were the least likely to report that they were drinking more.

At the same time, a quarter of participants say that they are drinking less in the past 30 days and slightly lower figures were reported across the different households with children. However, primary school households were the most likely to report that another family member in the household was drinking less in the past 30 days.

**Table 3: Drinking more or less in past 30 days (personal, other adults in households)<sup>9</sup>:**

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
Any more personal	<b>34%</b>	32%	16%	29%	25%
Any more other	<b>30%</b>	26%	19%	24%	19%
Any less personal	20%	24%	23%	19%	<b>25%</b>
Any less other	22%	<b>28%</b>	18%	26%	25%

The findings reported above are in line with, and expand on, other Irish COVID-19 research conducted by the CSO (2020a) that found households with children reported the highest proportion across all household composition in an increase in alcohol consumption at 27.3% during the initial lockdown phase.

In terms of pre-COVID-19 data, the Drinkaware Index (2019) also found that a consistent 1 in 4 Irish adults were drinking less when compared with their levels of drinking two years ago - 24% reported drinking less, 53% about the same and 6% more.

However, average doesn't tell the whole story, 25% underplays the fact that just over 1 in 3 households with young children were drinking more during the initial lockdown period according to our 2020 Barometer. As part of the National COVID-19 Food Study, researchers found 30% of adult participants reported drinking more frequently, while 17% were drinking less (UCD 2020). In a subsequent study on the social impact of COVID-19 during the second lockdown phase, the CSO found that a proportion of respondents reporting that their alcohol consumption is higher than before the COVID-19 crisis remained relatively unchanged between April and November 2020 (22.2% and 21.1% respectively) (CSO, 2020b). Research conducted by Mental Health Ireland during the home-schooling phase in February 2021 found that nearly 1 in 5 (19%) parents say their alcohol consumption has increased. Some positive changes to consumption have also occurred between the initial lockdown and second lockdown phase in Ireland with an increase in those that report decreasing alcohol consumption since the onset of COVID-19, 26.8% reporting that they have done so in November 2020 compared with 17.2% in April 2020 (CSO, 2020b).

<sup>9</sup> A table documenting any more personal and other household members is available in the Appendices.

Survey context is therefore important as there appears to be a difference in results reported to date both depending on when research is conducted (i.e. at which phase of the pandemic) and with whom (general adult population vs breakdown including parents). For instance, international research conducted such as in France and Belgium found that the closure of bars and restaurants during the initial lockdown period was associated with an overall reduction in alcohol consumption, especially among young adults. At the same time, other population groups (such as people aged 35-50 and parents of young children) reported having drunk more than usual during confinement (Sciensano, 2020; Santé Publique France, 2020 as cited in OECD 2020). In the UK, parents of children aged under 18 were also more likely to have drunk more than usual earlier in lockdown (34% compared with 14% of those with no children under 18) (Drinkaware UK 2020). In Australia, those with children at home were less likely to be in the decreased consumption group and a higher percentage of increased consumption was also reported when compared with other household groups (Ritter et al 2020).

### Intensity/volume of consumption:

When those, who in last 30 days had drunk alcohol, were asked how many standard drinks were consumed on a typical day, the mean (average) reported across households with children was highest for families of pre-school children, followed by families with pre-teens<sup>10</sup>. Both figures reported are higher than the national average. Pre-family households had the highest mean number of standard drinks across all life stages, with families with teenagers reporting the lowest mean.

**Table 4:** Mean (average) number of standard drinks on typical day drinking in past 30 days

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
4.22	3.88	3.06	4.99	3.64

Among Irish adults, the average standard drinks consumed on a typical day of drinking that was reported pre-COVID-19 was 0-2 (28%), 3-4 (33%) (Drinkaware 2019) vs May 2020 with 0-2 (45%), 3-4 (28%) (Drinkaware 2020). This means that overall, Irish adults are reporting that they are drinking more when they are consuming alcohol during lockdown when compared with pre-COVID-19.

## Theme 2: Prevalence of hazardous drinking

### Binge (heavy episodic) drinking:

Pre-school households reported the highest levels of binge drinking<sup>11</sup>, at least once a week in the past 30 days (i.e., at least four occasions in the past month) among different family type with children. While pre-family households reported the highest levels of binge drinking across all households, the pre-school figure reported was higher than the national average. However, fewer family households are binge drinking on a typical day of drinking than pre-family households, but notably higher than the national average reported for both pre-school and primary school households. The average amount of times that adults reported binge drinking in the past 30 days also peaks in pre-family and pre-school households.

**Table 5:** Levels of binge drinking in past 30 days

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
Binge on at least four occasions in past 30 days	21%	10%	6%	30%	15%
Binge on typical day of drinking in past 30 days	21%	23%	18%	27%	20%
Mean binge occurrence in past 30 days	2.17	1.27	0.95	2.32	1.59

<sup>10</sup> Note that all participants were shown a photo prompt of what a standard drink is.

<sup>11</sup> Heavy episodic drinking is defined as the proportion of adult drinkers (aged 15 and older) who have had at least 60 grams or more of pure alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days. An intake of 60 grams of pure alcohol is approximately equal to 6 standard alcoholic drinks. Consuming six or more standard drinks of alcohol in one sitting is classified as binge drinking or excessive drinking.

Pre-COVID-19, 19% of Irish adults reported drinking more than 6 standard drinks in the past year on at least weekly basis (Drinkaware 2019) versus an equivalent in 2020 of 20% drinking 6 or more standard drinks in past 30 days (note change in wording so hard to compare directly). In addition, weekly binge drinking pre-COVID-19 was reported by 1 in 5 Irish adults versus an equivalent 1 in 3 Irish adults in the Barometer 2020. According to Healthy Ireland 2018 findings, 37% of drinkers binge drink on a typical drinking occasion in the past year, with 22% of drinkers binge drinking at least once a week and 39% doing so at least once a month (DoH, 2019). Data from the Healthy Ireland Survey 2016 used in reporting in the WHO Status Report 2018 shows that in 2016, 37% of the total population in Ireland aged 15+ years reported consumption of at least 60 grams or more of pure alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days i.e. heavy episodic drinking.

While the national average for levels of binge drinking reported during the initial lockdown above may be lower than pre-COVID-19, we know from other research that Irish adults do not associate binge drinking with at-home drinking even if they are unknowingly doing so while at home (Drinkaware 2020). Therefore, with the closure of all licensed premises such as pubs, nightclubs and restaurants as a consequence of physical and social distancing measures, Irish adults may believe that there are less opportunities for them to partake in binge drinking.

### Hazardous drinking:

Hazardous drinking may also occur where consumption exceeds the recommended HSE weekly low-risk alcohol guidelines<sup>12</sup> (17 standard drinks for men and 11 standard drinks for women, spread across the week with at least 2 drink free days) but harm may not yet have been experienced. In other words, drinking in a hazardous manner means that although they have not yet experienced harm, the person is likely to in the future. It is also possible to drink hazarously by binge drinking (six or more standard drinks in one sitting), even if the guidelines are adhered to.

The AUDIT tool, developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Babor et al 2001), is used to measure an individual's level of risk and/or harm in relation to their alcohol consumption patterns<sup>13</sup>. The AUDIT-C was completed in the Barometer 2020 based on consumption in the last 30 days. It is a modified, three question version of the AUDIT instrument used to provide a measure of consumption only. A score of less than 5 indicates lower risk drinking and scores of 5+ AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking.

Alongside pre-family households, over half of families with pre-school children were more likely to score 5+, higher than other households with children as well as the national figure. Higher mean scores were also reported for pre-families (and followed by pre-school households) thus acknowledging that these households are more likely to be in the hazardous drinking group (and also binge drinking) than other family households.

**Table 6:** AUDIT-C scores based those that consumed alcohol in last 30 days

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
5-	44%	57%	66%	43%	58%
5+	<b>56%</b>	43%	34%	<b>57%</b>	42%
Mean score	5.29	4.50	3.84	5.63	4.66

Pre-COVID-19 research also examined hazardous consumption through application of the AUDIT-C. For example, in the Drinkaware Index (2019) the AUDIT establishes that, among Irish adults who drink, 21% exhibit alcohol-related behaviours that are hazardous and of increasing risk (Zone 2). A further 4% are in the harmful/higher risk and possible dependence cohorts, Zones 3 and 4. The AUDIT also located 75% of Irish drinkers, in Zone 1, defined as low risk. However, applying this additional test to the initial low risk category, Zone 1, reveals that 31% of drinkers in this group can be defined as AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking. This refines the findings in relation to the overall drinking population, dividing the low-risk group into two more distinct groupings: Zone 1: low risk and Zone 1 (AUDIT-C positive): potential risk (Drinkaware 2019). Other research conducted

<sup>12</sup> <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/alcohol/improve-your-health/weekly-low-risk-alcohol-guidelines.html#:~:text=Drinks%20should%20be%20spread%20out,developing%20alcohol%20related%20health%20issues>

<sup>13</sup> Analysis categorises respondents into four graduated categories of alcohol related risk and/or harm: • Low risk; • Hazardous/increasing risk; • Harmful/higher risk; • Possible dependence.

by HRB found that 73% of men and 41% of women met the criteria for hazardous drinking using the AUDIT-C (Mongan et al 2020). In this study, almost one half of drinkers had a hazardous or harmful pattern of drinking; 38% engaged in monthly risky single occasion drinking (RSOD) and 10.5% met Diagnostic and Statistical Manual version IV (DSM-IV) criteria for alcohol dependence (Mongan et al 2020). The second Irish Health Survey (2019) also found that more men (37%) than women (28%) reported drinking 6 or more units of alcohol in one sitting at least once a month (CSO 2020c).

### Theme 3: Household stress and tension

Dramatic changes occurred to daily life with the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, with the domains of family life, work, childcare and school suddenly coinciding and families facing an unforeseen increase in time spent together at home due to lockdown measures taken (Jannesen et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have faced issues such as remote working or unemployment alongside new responsibilities of caring for their children during school hours with the effects varying considerably depending on the contextual factors to which parents are exposed to (Cusinato et al 2020). COVID-19 has also resulted in tensions and stresses being exacerbated for many families with issues that may have already been bubbling beneath but since triggered to rise to the surface (Parentline 2020). Parents of teenagers are dealing with specific issues such as compliance with school rules and protocols, worries and fears about school setting, reluctance/refusal to engage with school, sometimes alongside the problem of their adolescents displaying anger, aggression and/anxiety (Parentline 2020). In our study, the highest levels of stress/tension reported during lockdown was in pre-school households with nearly 6 out of 10 reporting an increase in the past 30 days.

**Table 7:** Increase in levels of stress/tension in past 30 days

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
58%	50%	32%	41%	47%

In other Irish research, the CSO (2020a) found higher levels of stress among multiple person households in their study, with the majority (79.9%) 'somewhat' or 'very' concerned about household stress from confinement, while 6% were 'somewhat' or 'very' concerned about violence in the home in April 2020. In line with the national average reported in our study, the CSO Social Impact Survey (2020a) found that more than 4 in 10 (41.8%) respondents that were very concerned about household stress from confinement, reported an increase in alcohol consumption.

Exacerbated consumption of alcohol and other substances during confinement is also associated with the perpetration of domestic and family violence, with women and children being the main victims who in turn may increase alcohol use to cope (WHO 2020, Garcia & Sanchez 2020). Parental problem alcohol use results in adverse childhood experiences disrupting the lives of children and families across all areas of society (Alcohol Action Ireland 2020). Pre-COVID-19, alcohol-related harm to others as a result of someone else's drinking were examined in the first dedicated Irish survey on this subject in 2015 and launched by the Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2018. More women than men reported the psychological harm items of stress, family problems, feeling threatened at home, feeling depressed, and having financial trouble due to the drinking of known drinkers (as cited in HRB 2021).

### Theme 4: Economic impact

Across the total sample, over four out of ten Irish adults reported that during the initial lockdown phase, any negative economic impact (actual/likely) has occurred or foresee as likely to happen in the near future to themselves or someone in their household. This was higher among households with children with the highest negative economic impact reported among families with pre-teens and encompassed loss of job temporarily/permanently, salary reduction and/or working fewer hours with a lower salary.

**Table 8:** Any Negative Economic Impact

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	National avg
44%	59%	53%	43%

To put these figures into context, according to the CSO Labour Market Insight Series, absences from work in Q4 2020 were up by 70.5% to 324,900 from Q4 2019. This resulted in a fall of 8.5% or 6.6 million in the number of actual hours worked per week over the year to 70.8 million hours in Q4 2020 and demonstrates the diverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (CSO 2021c). At the end of December 2020, the number of persons aged 15-74 years who were unemployed, was 468,655 with an associated COVID-19 Adjusted Unemployment Rate of 19.4% for those aged 15-74 years. By the end of January 2021, the COVID-19 Adjusted Measure of Unemployment was estimated to have been 607,190 with an associated COVID-19 Adjusted Unemployment Rate of 25.0%. (CSO 2021c). Research conducted by Eurofound on living, working and COVID-19 across Europe found that respondents in the 35-49 age category are more financially vulnerable than other age groups during the current pandemic. Female respondents, more than male respondents, reported difficulties in combining work and private life and with the burden of care responsibilities increasing as well as women being impacted more in terms of a reduction in work hours and job losses versus that of men (Eurofound 2020). The CSO (2020a) found that households with children are most likely to be negatively financially affected by COVID-19, with 23.0% reporting major or moderate negative financial impact during the initial lockdown phase. The situation has changed further during the third wave, with highest numbers of Irish adults in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) recorded since June 2020 with nearly 460,000 receiving the payment in early January (Halpin, 2021). Pre-COVID-19 data collected as part of the Irish Health Survey 2019 found an association between unemployment and poor mental health, with over a fifth (21%) of unemployed persons reporting some form of depression compared to 9% of those in employment (CSO 2020c).

## Theme 5: Motivations for drinking alcohol<sup>14</sup>

The Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) consists of 12 motivations for drinking and a five-point response scale (Kuntsche & Kuntsche 2009). An individual's responses are used to determine the extent to which they drink for social reasons, enhancement reasons, conformity (e.g. to be liked) or coping reasons. This measure was included in the survey to enable responses to be analysed according to the different motivations. To reflect the unique 'Lockdown' circumstances, the presented motivations were updated for the purposes of this study:

1. **Social reasons** - because it makes social gatherings more fun, to celebrate and because it improves social gatherings.
  2. **Enhancement reasons** - Because you like the feeling, to get a buzz, because it's fun and to get drunk.
  3. **Coping reasons** - Because it helps you when you feel depressed or anxious, to cheer up when you're in a bad mood, because you feel lonely, to help manage social distancing/isolation, to help with sleep, to help with boredom/isn't much to do and/or to help relax/unwind<sup>15</sup>.
  4. **Conformity reasons** - to fit in with a group you like, to be liked and/or so you won't feel left out.
- The percentages below represent responses under 'always/most/half the time', coping was the main type of motivation cited for drinking among households with children, peaking among households with pre-school children.

**Table 9:** Drinking motivations in past 30 days:

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
Coping	77%	59%	44%	73%	60%
Enhancement	68%	57%	39%	70%	57%
Social	60%	49%	38%	54%	49%
Conformity	19%	10%	10%	20%	13%

<sup>14</sup> To reflect the unique 'Lockdown' circumstances, the presented motivations in The Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) were updated for the purposes of this study.

<sup>15</sup> The change in design taking into consideration the specific COVID-19 context led to more coping variables in 2020. We acknowledge that this in turn may have facilitated more responses under this motivation.

In pre-COVID-19 data there were differences in the motivations cited for drinking among adults who drink with 58% citing enhancement as the main motivation (always/most/half the time), followed by social at 56%. 27% of Irish adults cited coping, while conformity motivations were at 31%. Among 35-49-year olds, enhancement 55%, social 53%, coping 26% and conformity 31% (Drinkaware, 2019)<sup>16</sup>. Our 2020 data therefore points to a sharp rise in coping motivations for drinking alcohol. The other big change is in the decrease in conformity motivations reported in 2020 that may in turn be associated with the lack of opportunities to socialise beyond the household as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions.

When motivations are broken down further in Barometer 2020, the main reason given for drinking in the past 30 days always/most/half the time was the same but over-indexed for households with pre-school children<sup>17</sup>. 7 out of 10 parents of younger children reported drinking 'to help relax and unwind' during the initial lockdown phase.

**Table 10: Drinking 'to help relax and unwind'**

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
70%	49%	41%	62%	54%

Pre-school family households were also most likely to cite 'because you like the feeling' as main motivation always/most/half the time:

**Table 11: Drinking 'because you like the feeling'**

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
55%	38%	32%	58%	43%

Overall, these figures represent a significant drop on pre-COVID-19 with 72% of Irish adults citing because you like the feeling as their main motivation for drinking always/most/half the time (Drinkaware, 2019).

At the same time, more pre-school family households cited 'to cheer up when in bad mood/stressed' and 'because it helps when depressed or anxious' as a motivation always/most/half the time. In both instances, this was the highest reported figure across all life stages<sup>18</sup>.

**Table 12: Drinking 'to cheer up when in bad mood/stressed' and 'because it helps when feel depressed or anxious'**

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
to cheer up when in bad mood/stressed	33%	23%	16%	31%	23%
because it helps when feel depressed or anxious	22%	15%	13%	21%	17%

These figures are also lower than those cited among Irish adults pre-COVID-19, whereby 42% noted drinking to cheer up when in bad mood/stressed and 29% because it helps when feel depressed or anxious always/most/half the time (Drinkaware, 2019).

Pre-school families were also most likely to cite 'to help sleep' as a motivation to drink always/most/half the time across different household types with children as well as across all life stages.

**Table 13: Drinking 'to help sleep'**

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
15%	8%	3%	12%	10%

<sup>16</sup> Motivations previously reported in the Index refer to any motivations (almost/most/half the time as well as some of the time). B&A undertook additional analysis in order to ensure consistency of the Index and Barometer data sets and so those reported here are main motivations (reporting of always/most/half the time).

<sup>17</sup> Participants were asked 'Thinking of when you have drank in the past 30 days, how often would you say that you have drank for the following reasons? (as above) and the % outlined the following tables represent their responses under: Always/most/half the time.

<sup>18</sup> Note the % reported drinking in past 30 days 'because it helps when depressed or anxious' was also 22% for single -45 households

To put this motivation into the context of the current pandemic, other research has found that half of Irish adults (49%) are sleeping badly with an increase to 54% in the 35–44-year-old cohort – meaning that we are finding it harder to cope with psychological and emotional pressures during our waking hours (Amarach Research 2020). Regularly drinking alcohol can also disrupt the quality of sleep and sleep cycle (Roehrs & Roth 2001).

A higher proportion of families with pre-school children also reported drinking ‘to get drunk’ always/most/half the time in the last 30 days, while pre-families reported the highest incidence across all households.

**Table 14:** Drinking ‘to get drunk’

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
18%	16%	10%	25%	15%

## Theme 6: Occasions for consumption:

In terms of occasions where alcohol was consumed in past 30 days, households with pre-school children were most likely to report having a small number of drinks at home with others in the household e.g. with a partner/housemates during the day or evening (might be less than an hour) and higher than the national average. This was followed by households with pre-school children that reported having had a small number of drinks at home with family/housemates over mealtimes/dinner, again slightly higher than national average (note joint top occasion cited by this group alongside drinking alone). Families with teenagers were more likely to report either having a small number of drinks at home with others in the household during the day or evening (might be less than an hour) or several drinks at home with others in the household during the day or evening (maybe 1 to 3 hours)<sup>19</sup>.

Households with children were all less likely to report drinking alcohol together with family/friends online (Facetime, Zoom, Houseparty, WhatsApp, Skype) when compared with younger households without children (such as pre-family).

**Table 15:** Occasions where alcohol consumed in past 30 days, weekly +

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
Small no of drinks at home with others in household during day or evening	45%	36%	24%	43%	35%
Small no of drinks at home with others in household over mealtimes	43%	39%	22%	50%	39%
Several drinks at home with others in household during day or evening	33%	31%	24%	49%	25%
Drinking together with family/friends online	20%	15%	11%	30%	16%
Drinking at home alone	30%	39%	20%	33%	36%

<sup>19</sup> Note we did not include a definition of what either a ‘small number of drinks’ or ‘several drinks’ denotes in the questionnaire.

Worryingly almost 4 out of 10 households with primary school children reported drinking at home alone weekly+ in the past 30 days. This figure is higher than the national average reported. Families with primary children rate of drinking at home was the second highest reported level of drinking at home alone across all lifestages (highest being single 45+ at 60%). This represents an increase on total figure reported in pre-COVID-19 with 15% of Irish adults reporting drinking at home alone and 19% of 35-54 year olds doing so (as well as 19% for those 55 years +) (Drinkaware 2019). A recent systematic review and meta-analysis found that solitary drinking has a small positive association with alcohol problems, while it is significantly associated with negative affect, for adolescents and young adults (Skrzynski & Creswell 2020).

## Theme 7: Mental Health<sup>20</sup>

Family households are more likely to report low mental wellbeing than other households. Low mental health peaked among families with teenagers with over half reporting a low score, though this household cohort came under pre-teen families regarding alcohol consumption and using alcohol as a coping strategy.

**Table 16:** Low mental wellbeing by household type

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	National avg
43%	30%	56%	37%

All three categories of family households were below average in terms of reporting high mental wellbeing.

**Table 17:** High mental wellbeing by household type<sup>21</sup>

Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	National avg
13%	15%	19%	20%

In terms of emotional wellbeing, in line with our research, findings from the CSO found that in February 2021, more than four in ten (41.7%) respondents rated their overall life satisfaction as low. This is the highest rating for low overall life satisfaction captured in these surveys to date (comparable rates in April and November 2020 were 29.6% and 35.6% respectively) (CSO, 2021b). Similarly, the percentage of respondents that felt downhearted or depressed all or most of the time doubled between April and November 2020, from 5% to 11%. In addition, 27% respondents reported feeling lonely vs 17% in 2018 (CSO, 2020b). Other research conducted in the UK found that parents of under 18s were more likely to report a negative impact on their mental health as a result of the initial lockdown with 81% doing so compared with 72% of those without children under 18 (Drinkaware UK 2020). In our pre-COVID-19 research, 63% of Irish adults reported high, 27% medium and 11% low mental health wellbeing (Drinkaware 2019). Our 2020 Barometer figures as presented above therefore point to a dramatic drop of 43% in Irish adults reporting high mental wellbeing and a 26% increase in low mental wellbeing when compared with pre-COVID-19.

Both COVID-19 and pre-COVID-19 research has identified a corroboration between low mental wellbeing scores and an increase in alcohol consumption. For instance, the CSO (2020a) found that 29.5% of respondents that felt downhearted or depressed at least some of the time in the past four weeks (April 2020) reported an increase in alcohol consumption. US research found that while 29% of respondents increased alcohol use during March and April 2020, those with depressive symptoms had greater odds of doing so (Capasso et al 2021). Worryingly in our Barometer 2020, we found that among Irish adults that reported any binge drinking in the past 30 days during the initial lockdown (April 2020), 44% also reported low mental wellbeing (15% reported a high mental wellbeing alongside any binge drinking).

<sup>20</sup> The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) tool with 7 items was used to allow for analysis of any difference in response patterns according to mental wellbeing. Each of the 7 items carried a score between 1 and 7, giving individual participants an overall score between 7 and 35, with a lower score denoting a lower level of mental wellbeing.

<sup>21</sup> Binge and low mental wellbeing is available in the Appendices.

## Theme 8: Drinking less / positive changes<sup>22</sup>:

### Would Like to drink alcohol less often:

At least one in five households would like to drink alcohol less often and up to one in three pre-school family households would like to do so. Households with teenagers are the least likely to want to do so - though as this household cohort's lowest 'drinking more' figures (16% versus 34% pre-school) may account for this (See table 3).

*Table 18: Would like to drink alcohol less often by household type*

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	National avg
Like to drink alcohol less often	31%	25%	20%	24%

In previous Barometer data, we found a higher proportion of Irish adults overall reporting that they would like to drink alcohol less often with 30% doing so in April 2019 and 31% in June 2017. There was a slight peak in both January 2018 and 2017 Barometer data with 33% of adults in agreement with the statement. Physical health, physical fitness and finances were the strongest drivers of this sentiment in 2019 (Drinkaware 2018, 2019).

### Made small positive changes:

When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement 'I have made small positive changes to my drinking habits (i.e. drink less) in the past 30 days' families with primary school children were most likely to agree among the household types with children, as well as a higher incidence than the national average reported.

*Table 18: Made small positive changes by household type<sup>23</sup>*

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	National avg
Made small positive changes	27%	36%	28%	31%

Previous Barometer data is available on total sample, while not family specific: On three occasions, over four out of 10 Irish adults agreed that 'I have made small positive changes to my drinking habits (i.e. drink less).' For instance, 44% of Irish adults did so in April 2019, while in January 2017 there was a slightly higher level of agreement at 46%. In January 2018, agreement peaked to just under one half of Irish adults at 49%. However, in June 2017, the same figure fell to the lowest level recorded across the four time periods at 39%.

International research has found that parents of under 18s are more likely to report that they intend to cut down drinking as restrictions ease (30%) compared with those without children (20%) (Drinkaware UK 2020). It is important to also note that in our 2020 study, overall, 20% of those who reported drinking 'more' during Lockdown believe they 'have made small positive changes to my drinking habits (i.e. drink less)' in the past 30 days, while 22% of others in household that reported increased consumption were in agreement with the statement too (pointing to potential misunderstanding of how much they were actually consuming).

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the information provided here, we are planning on publishing a specific paper on behaviour change challenges during 2021

<sup>23</sup> Those that made small positive changes and an increase in consumption is available in the Appendices.

## Discussion of Relevant Literature

The findings outlined in this paper clearly demonstrate the experience of the first stage of lockdown for households with children particularly when examined alongside pre-COVID-19 data such as the Drinkaware Index and Healthy Ireland 2018, with significant differences and the impact of COVID-19. We have also included other COVID-19 data where appropriate in order to corroborate our findings e.g. CSO Social Impact Survey series (2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b). In so doing, the evidence provides important lessons as the pandemic continues and with a full lockdown enforced again with closure of schools in January 2021 followed by a gradual re-opening from March 2021 onwards.

### Unintended consequences of protective public health measures taken

Our study is important as it highlights factors that precede changes in drinking patterns. Pre-COVID-19 we know a complacent and complicit attitude toward excessive consumption of alcohol among Irish adults prevailed, with 74% believing drinking to excess is 'just part of Irish culture' (Drinkaware 2019). Growth in home-based drinking was also in motion before the pandemic took hold (Drinkaware 2020; Nicholls & Conroy 2021). We also knew that people used alcohol pre-COVID-19 as a coping strategy with half of Irish drinkers (50%) identifying any coping element to their drinking (Drinkaware 2019)<sup>24</sup>.

Collectively the comprehensive evidence presented in this paper shows how these three issues have played out in the context of the unintended consequences of the protective measures taken to contain COVID-19 during the initial lockdown phase, and specifically how they have had a substantial effect on families' lives and livelihoods particularly for those with younger age children. In so doing, this paper provides important evidence of how such households are likely to react during subsequent lockdown phases or any lesser restrictions during the ongoing pandemic.

It demonstrates the interplay between the crisis, initial restrictions and determinants of alcohol consumption. For instance, while a higher prevalence of unhealthy alcohol consumption was identified during lockdown, there was a peak in households with pre-school and primary school children (pre-teens) when examined on a weekly+ basis. Our research also shows concerning contradictions with lower levels of consumption reported among younger age children families, while also being more likely to binge drink during lockdown than any other households with children, and higher than the national average reported.

Other research conducted in the US during the initial phase of the pandemic found that living with children was associated with lower odds of binge drinking (Weerakoon et al. 2021). However, this data was not broken down by age of child and as the findings in our paper have demonstrated, this analysis is crucial.

### Parents as role models

Similar trends were reported among pre-family and families with younger age children in terms of weekly consumption, intensity/volume of consumption, average amount of times binge drinking reported as well as some overlap in motivations and occasions for drinking during the initial lockdown phase. This may reflect the adjustments that this household type is making such as changes in lifestyles, transition to parenthood etc. There was a higher propensity of both families with pre-school children and pre-families scoring 5+ on the AUDIT-C indicating a potentially worrying inclination to increasing, or hazardous drinking among these cohorts. In the context of lockdown, there may be more opportunities for parents of younger children to consume alcohol with their children in bed earlier. UK research found that while there was no change for the typical number of drinks consumed on a typical day drinking among adults during the initial lockdown phase, there was an increase in the number of days alcohol was consumed per month, and this in turn may help to explain the increase in the overall AUDIT-C score that was reported (Naughton et al 2021).

Our previous qualitative research that examined at-home drinking pre-COVID-19 found 'role modelling' among parents was commonplace with adults not consuming alcohol in their children's presence, particularly teenagers (Drinkaware 2020). There is increasing evidence of the important role that parents play in shaping their children's attitudes towards alcohol and use of alcohol including both as a protective factor and facilitator (Litt et al. 2020;

<sup>24</sup>.Responses under 'any' i.e. incorporating always/most/half the time as well as some of the time.

Sawyer 2018). For instance, recent evidence from the 3-year independent evaluation of our Junior-Cycle Alcohol Education Programme conducted by Maynooth University found that a sizeable proportion of students (50%) were of the view that their parents “don't really mind about them drinking as long as they don't drink too much” (McGilloway & Weafer 2021). In this sense, parents are potentially, however inadvertently, enabling or being seen to enable their children's drinking. However, whether parents are drinking more or not, their children are more likely to see them drink simply because we are all at home and this has in turn the potential to influence future intergenerational transmission of habits and attitudes regarding positive or negative effects of alcohol (Sigman, 2020). Throughout much of 2020 and so far, continuing into 2021, children of all ages are spending more time than ever at home and with family.

## Self-regulation tested across range of unhealthy behaviours

Alongside alcohol, other harmful health behaviours may be more likely to be initiated by individuals affected by economic shutdowns, quarantines and curfews during 2020 (Lange and Nakamura 2020). For example, in the CSO study on the social impact of COVID-19, 51% of households with children reported an increase in their consumption of junk food and sweets in April 2020. Overall, the percentage of respondents reporting an increase in the consumption of junk food and sweets since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis has since fallen from 45.4% in April to 41.3% in November 2020 (CSO 2020b). Researchers in the National COVID-19 Food Study found that 42% respondents said they were eating more snacks (UCD et al. 2020). Self-awareness and self-regulation have therefore been tested in other unhealthy behaviours during both physical and social restrictions in 2020 and continuing into 2021. International research has identified that the psychological distress of the current pandemic is associated with emotional eating (Bemanian et al 2021). A recent UK study identified negative changes in dietary, physical and alcohol use behaviour during the early phase of the COVID-19 lockdown relative to pre-pandemic levels (Naughton et al 2021).

With extensive periods of time at home, healthy eating routines have been disrupted alongside all other areas of 'normal' life and it is a human reaction to being house-bound and restricted to graze/snack and then follows consumption. Research conducted by the Marie Keating Foundation (2021) found that a direct result of our lifestyle decisions since lockdown, one third (32%) of Irish adults say that they have put on weight. In addition, 26% of Irish adults noted that since the COVID-19 pandemic,

they have found it harder to remain motivated to make healthy choices (Marie Keating Foundation 2021). While the return of children to school in September 2020 may have helped families to put a healthier routine back into life, other unhealthy behaviours may have increased yet again during subsequent lockdown phases that were accompanied by Winter and fewer opportunities to get outdoors in daylight. For instance, over 44% of Irish adults reported that time spent watching television had increased and 59% reported spending more time on the internet during the initial lockdown in 2020. Those who had reported either feeling downhearted and depressed, very nervous or lonely at least some of the time, were most likely to have increased time spent watching television (52.5%, 50.1% and 62.2% respectively) (CSO, 2020a). Smoking levels have also increased, with two thirds (66%) of those who smoke claiming they are now smoking more per day than they were before the pandemic (Marie Keating Foundation 2021).

## Worrying/unhealthy motivations for drinking alcohol

Anxiety, depression and stress are common reactions to the current situation (Rajkumar 2020). Research on drinking and mass stress in the aftermath of 9/11 found that people with a history of drinking to cope with stress, drank more heavily in the year following the terrorist events (Hasin et al 2007). Health emergencies, such as previous epidemics, have also been found to have negative and long-lasting impacts on people's mental health (Tucci et al 2017).

However, the events of 2020 are hard to compare to previous economic crises that have occurred due to the stop-start nature of physical and social restrictions, creating and adding uncertainty (Wright et al 2020). The data presented in this paper also shows the negative impact of lockdown in terms of economic impact, mental wellbeing, household tension, and using alcohol to cope with stress, more prevalent in households with children and significantly age dependent. For instance, the highest levels of stress/tension during the initial lockdown phase were reported in pre-school families. In March 2020, abrupt changes happened with all 'normal' routines and everyday practices and structures disrupted as many parents assumed additional caring and 'home school' responsibilities for particularly younger children, hence creating a uniquely stressful situation for these households. It is likely that many families with younger children were undertaking more of these responsibilities during this initial lockdown phase. Almost one in five (19%) of those in a survey conducted in the UK during the initial phases had drunk alcohol as a way to handle stress

or anxiety, particularly parents of younger children and heavy drinkers (Alcohol Change 2020).

Some worrying motivations for drinking alcohol were also cited in our research particularly among families with younger age children e.g. to cheer up, because I feel depressed, to help sleep. Alongside these motivations, high levels of low mental wellbeing were reported in families with children representing a dramatic change in levels pre-COVID-19. In this regard the HSE (2020) highlights that “During this time we may drink more alcohol than usual. But alcohol has a negative impact on our mental health. It can make stressful times feel even worse.” International research identified that those with more severe symptoms of depression or anxiety were more likely to report increased alcohol consumption during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia (Tran et al 2020).

Low mental health peaked among families with teenagers in our data, yet they are the household group with children, that are not drinking as much as other household groups with children. Therefore, the question lies what were they doing to cope during the initial lockdown phase? It may well be the case that teenagers acted as a buffer for these parents to using alcohol in that they were constantly at home due to social and physical distancing restrictions. Pre-COVID-19 parents spoke about the importance of parents' role modelling behaviour towards their teenagers (Drinkaware 2020). Parental role modelling of alcohol use is important in influencing alcohol consumption in adolescence and in later life (Bowden et al. 2019).

## Coping with a Changing Normal

As the pandemic continues to evolve since our Barometer 2020 and schools reopened between September-December 2020, data from the CSO (2020b) points to the increased frequencies of those that reported feeling lonely, depressed and nervous during the second lockdown period in November 2020. All of these are unhealthy motivations to drink such as drinking to cope as reported here. Being resilient and coping with the normal stresses of life is an important attribute of wellbeing. It also involves feeling good about yourself, the world around you and functioning well in everyday life, most of the time (Mental Health Ireland 2020). In turn what households with children were coping with back in April 2020 was an unprecedented crisis and set of stresses, worries and restrictions, albeit with an underlying assumption that this would pass. International research found that families with children experienced a slight decrease in their levels of social isolation following the gradual reopening of schools

and day-care institutions after the initial lockdown period (Clotworthy et al 2021). Now these households have a growing set of things to 'cope with' as restrictions first eased and were then ramped up again in October 2020, although schools did remain open at that time. So too had the breath of concerns such as children returning to school, COVID-19 cases in school, isolation and testing, elderly parents, Wintertime, job insecurity, protracted lack of social connection and networks (through work, families, travel, friends, sport), lack of daylight, increased screen time usage as well as transformation in daily routines.

Ultimately the knowledge that what had been termed the 'new normal' in the early days of the pandemic by the media, is what is evolving with no visible, articulated or conceptualised end goal. On the one hand individuals may have adapted to the 'new normal', while others may feel increasingly strained due to the length of stress endured (Weerakoon 2020). What we are being asked to cope with is anything but normal. Ireland since entered another lockdown phase in January 2021 when faced with a third wave of the pandemic, worse than the first, and schools were closed once again with the country placed at Level 5 alongside the double impact of Winter darkness and the uncertainty and fear surrounding what would happen in the future weeks and months ahead despite the hope of a vaccination roll out commencing in late 2020.

From the outset, the expectation that 2021 would bring change did not take hold. Instead, health experts from the Independent Scientific Advisory Group called this the 'biggest and nastiest wave of the pandemic so far with the health service at serious risk of being overwhelmed (Finn, 2020).

As the pandemic has evolved, individuals who may have adapted may now feel increasingly strained due to both the length of stress endured since March 2020 and that may have intensified further since January 2021. The third wave and lockdown in the first half of 2021 seems different, darker and deeper. Parents are tired and jaded and their resilience is being tested the longer the pandemic is going on. At the same time, there is a sense of optimism and hope with the continued roll out of the vaccination programme during 2021. As a consequence, data in this paper shows that pre-COVID-19 Irish adults drank to cope, during the initial lockdown Irish adults in households with children drank more to cope and as the COVID-19 pandemic continues these individuals may continue such behaviour in finding ways to cope with the stresses associated with the 'new norm'.

International research has found increases in consumption among those experiencing more stress including those

with dependent and home-schooling children suggesting that some people may be drinking to cope during the epidemic (Callinan et al 2021). Alcohol consumption was identified as a maladaptive strategy employed by adults in a qualitative study in the UK during the same time period as our own (Ogueji et al 2021). In our study, the one in 10 who reported drinking to help them sleep during the initial lockdown phase may since be higher as Covidomnia is now an acknowledged new phenomenon. The prevalence of sleep problems during the COVID-19 pandemic is high (Jahrami et al 2021). For instance, an increase in sleep restriction, sleep deprivation and/or sleep disruption patterns from insomnia to hypersomnia, night terrors to the misuse of sleep medications are continuing to be reported by people that have had their lives turned upside down because of the events of 2020 (Hurley 2020). The emergence of these sleep difficulties is taking place alongside a wide range of co-occurring factors including family responsibilities, higher stress levels, as well as heavier alcohol use (Robillard et al. 2021).

## Gender gaps and the uneven impact of COVID-19

The uneven impacts of COVID-19 by gender have also been reported. Women have been found to have a greater decline in mental wellbeing including lower-life satisfaction and increase in mental distress (Etheridge & Spantig 2020, Huebener et al. 2020, Pierce et al 2020). In our Barometer, we found 39% of women reporting low mental wellbeing during the initial lockdown phase (higher than national average of 37% and men of 34%). Other Irish data from November 2020 shows that during the second lockdown phase women are twice as likely to report feeling downhearted or depressed all or most of the time than men (15.5% versus 7.3%) (CSO, 2020b). Possible explanations include women taking on the majority of additional workload such as childcare and housework as well as adjusting working hours to do so (Andrew et al 2020, Etheridge & Spantig 2020, Ohlbrecht & Jellen 2020), increased feelings of loneliness (Etheridge & Spantig 2020) as well as being more likely to experience job loss as well as salary losses during the pandemic (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020; Ohlbrecht & Jellen 2020).

US research conducted during the initial phases of the pandemic in 2020 found that the loss of full-time childcare for parents of young children and participation in home-schooling by parents of school-age children was associated with adverse employment outcomes for mothers but not fathers. In addition, fathers' involvement in childcare substantially buffered against negative employment outcomes for mothers of young children and for parents with school-age children (Petts et al

2020). The current COVID-19 crisis is having detrimental effects on working women with the tangible risks of disengagement from the labour market and a rolling back of recent gender equality gains raised at EU level (Bisello et al 2020). In recent Irish research conducted by the CSO (2021), female respondents were more likely to report an impact of the school and childcare closures in early 2021 as part of the re-introduction of lockdown and Level 5 on their work pattern. For instance, two in three (66%) women reported this, compared with less than one in two (47%) men.

Such disproportionate heavy burdens on women are important especially given the association between maternal health and child psychological health (Burke, 2020). Pre-COVID-19, females generally reported a more positive health experience than males in the Irish Health Survey 2019 (CSO 2020c). For instance, data from the Index found that 12% of men reported a low mental wellbeing versus 9% of women (Drinkaware 2019). While it is not possible to breakdown our COVID-19 data further on households of children by gender, overall, there was a higher incidence of women that reported consuming more alcohol during the initial lockdown phase versus men (28% and 22% respectively) (Drinkaware 2020). Similarly changes in both frequent and heavy episodic drinking with pre-COVID-19 levels were largest in a number of sub-groups in the UK and US including women in April 2020 (Daly & Robinson 2020). Other UK research found that while women drank more frequently during the initial lockdown period, men drank more in quantity (Naughton et al 2021). Significantly we also found higher binge drinking levels reported among men (58%) than women (35%) in our Barometer (Drinkaware 2020) .

## Low mental wellbeing and binge drinking

Other international research has found that those living with dependent children (under 15 years) reported an increase in mental health problems (Banks & Xu 2020). People living with young children have been identified as a specific cohort experiencing an increase in mental distress when compared with pre-COVID-19 data in the UK (Pierce et al 2020). Poor mental wellbeing has previously been found to be higher in those who binge drink once a month (Parackal & Parackal 2017) and it follows that pre-school households had the lowest mental wellbeing scores in our study.

In terms of alcohol promoting depression, the intensity rather than the frequency of alcohol has previously been found to predict risk (Churchill, 2017). Therefore, how much these households drink becomes more important

than how often they drink. Previous research has also found that among people drinking to cope, those drinking in more harmful ways are more likely to have low well-being compared to less harmful drinkers (Appleton et al. 2018). Heavy episodic drinking to reduce feelings of anxiety or stress negatively influences mood as well as leading to increased anxiety overall (Gunn et al. 2020; Marsh et al. 2019). As the pandemic continues to progress the intensity and long-term exposure may be an issue as was identified following 9/11 with long-lasting effects including an association with binge-drinking several years after the event (Welch et al. 2007).

## Behavioural change challenges

We also found several behavioural change challenges in our research of households with children, regarding their understanding of what and how much they were drinking. Irish adults typically do not know what a “standard drink” is and therefore the number of drinks on a typical day of drinking is, in all probability, underestimated both in our data as well as the other data referenced in this report. Overall, 1-2% of Irish adults correctly identified the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for men or women (Drinkaware Barometers 2017-2020).

It is very encouraging to see the increase in decreases in alcohol consumption from the initial lockdown phase reported by the CSO in November 2020 (CSO 2020b). However, it is important to highlight that in our study 17% of those who said they were drinking less in April 2020 were also binge drinking. In addition, households with younger age children, were the highest across households with children, in terms of that they would ‘like to drink alcohol less often’ (31%). But were also the household with children cohort most likely to binge drink (21%). Therein lies a contradiction but also scope to intervene and assist these families in their understanding and knowledge of alcohol misuse and knowing how much these households are drinking.

Other Irish pre-COVID-19 research found that among those with a hazardous or harmful pattern of drinking, 67.9% were unaware of this and misclassified themselves as being either a light or moderate drinker that did not binge drink (Mongan et al. 2020). Similarly, low-risk, harmful, hazardous and dependent did not register among the participants in our recent qualitative study on at-home drinking (Drinkaware 2020).

## Limitations

The potential limitations of our study findings must be acknowledged. While it comprises comprehensive data from a representative sample of Irish adults aged 18+ as well as use of several internationally recognised and robust questionnaire tools, data collection took place during the initial lockdown phase (April - May 2020) and the impact of the pandemic on these households may have since differed i.e. lesser in summer months as restrictions were eased and exacerbated further as we returned to another 'lockdown' period with the introduction of Level 5 in October 2020, easing in December and return to lockdown in January 2021. However, the findings presented in this paper are important in terms of helping to explain people's reactions post lockdown to lessening restrictions that have since been followed by increasingly confining restrictions in the latter half of 2020 and during the first four months of 2021.

Alongside our additional pre-COVID-19 data (e.g. Index 2019, earlier Barometer series), we can collectively continue to examine important lessons for future progression as well as post-COVID-19 and the current situation provides an opportunity to assess the impact on families in future research. In this regard, quality evidence such as that reported in this paper is more important than ever to inform preparedness for any future lockdowns. In so doing, the findings reported in this paper provide much more than just a snapshot into the early impacts of the pandemic.

However, we also acknowledge other potential limitations of this research. Families may have multiple children of different ages/across the three categories and in turn, face multiple issues that may be exacerbated further with larger family size. In addition, with a self-reporting methodology applied, we can assume a certain level of under-reporting occurred particularly due to social desirability bias.

## Recommendations

Drinkaware is acting on some of the stated recommendations and will continue to do so during 2021. Drinkaware welcomes co-operative and collaborative opportunities to work alongside other organisations given the multiple issues and overlaps identified in this paper.

We also look forward to sharing future publications from our Barometers as we continue with our Barometer series with the data collection for the next phase in April 2021 'Barometer 2021, A Year into Covid-19'.

There are several recommendations arising from this paper:

1. The evidence provided in this paper to be considered in future discussions regarding alcohol misuse preventions and interventions, specifically related to families and with regard to inequities affecting the determinants of alcohol use. Drinkaware offers open access to this and all the charity's research data.
2. Further research assessing how drinking among households with children of different ages changes as we continue to live with COVID-19 and beyond. This is proposed to be a regular element of the annual Barometer while also requiring further in-depth analysis as a specific subject area of focus.
3. The importance of language and definitions in informing peoples' understanding and misunderstanding merits further in-depth investigation. There is a disconnect between individuals wanting to drink less and understanding what harmful, hazardous and dependent drinking means. Engaging with Irish adults including parents of children of different ages through a qualitative methodology would form a key element of this proposed body of research.
4. The gender findings within this paper to be extrapolated and further contextualised to ascertain a broader understanding of the specific experiences of women and alcohol. Engaging with women (as above) is a crucial part of this process.
5. Cross-referencing of the data within this paper, and other related findings, to be conducted in light of Maynooth University's Evaluation of Drinkaware's Junior Cycle Alcohol Education Programme (2018-2020) (especially as the third year of the three year evaluation was conducted mid-pandemic).
6. The findings within the paper will be used to contextualise and inform a parents-focused information, awareness and positive behaviour change campaign. Principles of behavioural science will help inform the future direction of work in this regard.

## Conclusion

The intention of the paper was to share our knowledge on the robust data gathered on alcohol and households with children during 2020. Research is a core element of what we do and core to making a meaningful contribution to the thinking and learning around alcohol and behaviour change. Understanding the motivations, attitudes and behaviour that drive consumption and misuse is crucial in order to apply these insights, data and knowledge to our education and outreach and engagement work.

This evidence-informed paper opens several key issues and directions for consideration for further discussion for our future work-focus, and for all stakeholders working in the area of prevention and reduction of alcohol misuse.

### Understanding the contextual complexities is key to planning

Ultimately the data presented in this paper has important implications for families' experiences of the impact of COVID-19 in the medium term. The unique needs of families with children provide crucial markers for where supports may need to be targeted to mitigate the effects of the ongoing pandemic. However, there is no directly comparable precedent and how the current pandemic is going to play out in the long-term is difficult to assess given its scale (ESRI 2020). Research examining people's emotional wellbeing during the pandemic is valuable in terms of helping to understand how people are faring and to inform actions that may promote wellbeing (Lades et al. 2020). Having the data is important but so too is an understanding of the contextual complexities of the data and here in lies the purpose of this paper.

The current crisis has also resulted in a dramatic increase on the burden placed on women's care work, 'the care economy' through cooking and raising children (Power, 2020) and we look forward to examining further the behaviour and attitudes of women towards alcohol in this regard.

### Contradictions in behaviour/adults wanting to change/unaware of harms

COVID-19 has driven a fork in the road with resulting concern over the trajectory of Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. Pre-COVID-19 there was a small but growing number of people wanting

to drink less and starting to take steps to change their behaviour (Drinkaware 2019). However, COVID-19 data demonstrates that sub-populations including households with children, face higher levels of risk. Added to this mix are the contradictions that are apparent in 'intention' and 'action', with adults inadvertently drinking more at home and with a lack of awareness of how hazardous and/or harmful their drinking may be. In our vital outreach and engagement role, we will continue to support and build bridges for households with children between information and intention, and then in turn translating this into action.

Our role as behaviour change experts in this space, is to gather and apply the evidence, to help us understand how best we can listen and respond to what is happening on-the-ground. The evidence supports the identification of prevention and early intervention of alcohol misuse opportunities, and Drinkaware can support Irish adults to change their relationship with alcohol both during COVID-19 and beyond, through the provision of clear information, calls-to-action and empowering resources, that are easy to understand and apply.

At the same time, we must bear in mind that short-term changes that were reported during the initial lockdown phase may become more entrenched and longer-term habits may form as restrictions continue and in turn negatively impact Irish adults' health and wellbeing.

### Unintended consequences of public health measures taken

Numerous study findings are emerging and COVID-19 is the subject of intensive research across many disciplines examining the health, social, cultural and economic impact of the pandemic. In Ireland, evidence is evolving such as that from the CSO Social Impact Series (CSO 2020b, 2021a, 2021b). Our Barometer as well as that from the growing body of evidence cited in this paper points to some of the unintended consequences of the public health need for the initial lockdown such as poor mental wellbeing, household tension, negative economic impact and the need to find coping strategies. For instance, households with children are most likely to be negatively financially affected by COVID-19 (CSO, 2020b). The inclusion of the relevant findings of the CSO survey series in this paper are crucial as they help demonstrate how the situation for subpopulations such as households

with children may have compounded further in terms of mental health and wellbeing since the initial lockdown phase. At the same time, there are some unintended positives to wellbeing in this public health call/greater good as we continue to live with COVID-19 and beyond that must also be considered in any interventions targeted at families. However, it is imperative that we are particularly mindful and examine how changes in health behaviour such as alcohol consumption impact specifically on more vulnerable groups such as those that may be experiencing existing disadvantage and health inequalities (Naughton et al 2021).

## Research is vital to understanding the short, medium and long-term impacts of COVID-19

Collectively, quantitative and qualitative research will help us to comprehensively understand the intersecting social, cultural and economic shifts that are happening and how they impact people's lives, livelihoods and alcohol consumption (Wright et al. 2020). Recent research published in the US identified two COVID-19 related stressors that are related to increased alcohol consumption – length of time spent at home by order and previous diagnosis of depression (Weerakoon et al. 2021). Future research is vital in order to assess how drinking among households with children of different ages changes as we continue to live with COVID-19 and beyond.

## Parent's role

As part of our education activities going forward, we must consider changes to children's normative beliefs that may occur in the medium to longer-term as a consequence of seeing their parents drinking at home during the pandemic. For instance, parents that may have increased their alcohol consumption at home, drinking more frequently or in greater quantity as demonstrated in this paper contribute to changing their children's normative beliefs, who can interpret drinking as routine (Garcia & Sanchez 2020). Specifically, in the context of COVID-19, whether parents are drinking more, their children are more likely to see them drink simply because we were all at home during 2020 (and so far into 2021). It is clear from 2020 data that this work needs to be tailored to age of children and different experiences and innovative responses may be required. For instance, in the area of parents as role models, there is merit to explore further in the context of COVID-19/post-COVID-19 during 2021, alongside findings from the Maynooth University evaluation of our Alcohol Education Programme. Low mental health peaked among families with teenagers in

our data, yet they are the household group with children not drinking as much. Therefore, the question lies, what were these households doing to cope during the initial lockdown phase? It may well be the case that teenagers acted as a buffer for these parents to using alcohol in that they were constantly at home due to social and physical distancing restrictions and we look forward to opportunity to explore this issue in 2021.

## To Summarise

Data collected during COVID-19 offers the opportunity to continue to build our understanding of the social practice of drinking in the home and the urgency for more research attention in this regard has never been greater (Callinan & McLean 2020). The Drinkaware Barometer Series allows us to comprehensively explore drinking practices over time and how they relate to other practices within daily life by offering insights into both stability and changes in drinking trends, patterns and related activity and potentially how public health interventions can address future misuse (Meier et al. 2018). Understanding both the short and long-term consequences of COVID-19 is crucial to examining how people may change their relationship with alcohol both now and post-pandemic and what the unintended long-lasting population health consequences may be (Nicholls & Conroy 2021; Weerakoon 2020).

As the national charity working to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol in Ireland, it is imperative that we continue to gather and analyse evidence-informed research on the COVID-19 experience for families and the wide-ranging and significant impact it has had (and is continuing to have) on many aspects of their lives and livelihood and in turn behaviours including alcohol consumption. The evidence provided here has also important implications in terms of the potential impact for families of any likely/expected experiences of further lockdowns as well as post-COVID-19 as we progress into 2021. The specific timing of this paper is important given the re-introduction of school closures in Ireland in January 2021 and the increasing strain/uncertainty associated with Ireland's 'third' wave that we are now starting to emerge from as we exit Level 5 restrictions during May 2021.

## Appendices/Supplementary material

### Appendix 1: Full sample breakdown Barometer 2020

Base: All adults aged 18+ n=1,015

		%		n
Gender	Male	49	Household type	
	Female	51		Single –45
Age	18-24	11	Single 45+	147
	25-34	17	Pre-family	52
	35-49	32	Family pre-school	138
	50-64	21	Family pre-teen	150
	65+	19	Family teen	68
Social Class	ABC1F	49	Empty nester	221
	C2DE	51		
Region	Dublin	29		
	Leinster	27		
	Munster	27		
	Conn/Ulster	18		
Area	Urban	66		
	Rural	44		

### Appendix 2: Drinking any more personal and other household members

	Pre-school	Primary school	Teen	Pre-family	National avg
Either personal or household any more	39%	37%	21%	34%	29%
Both personal or household any more	21%	18%	13%	17%	12%

### Appendix 3: Binge drinking and low mental wellbeing

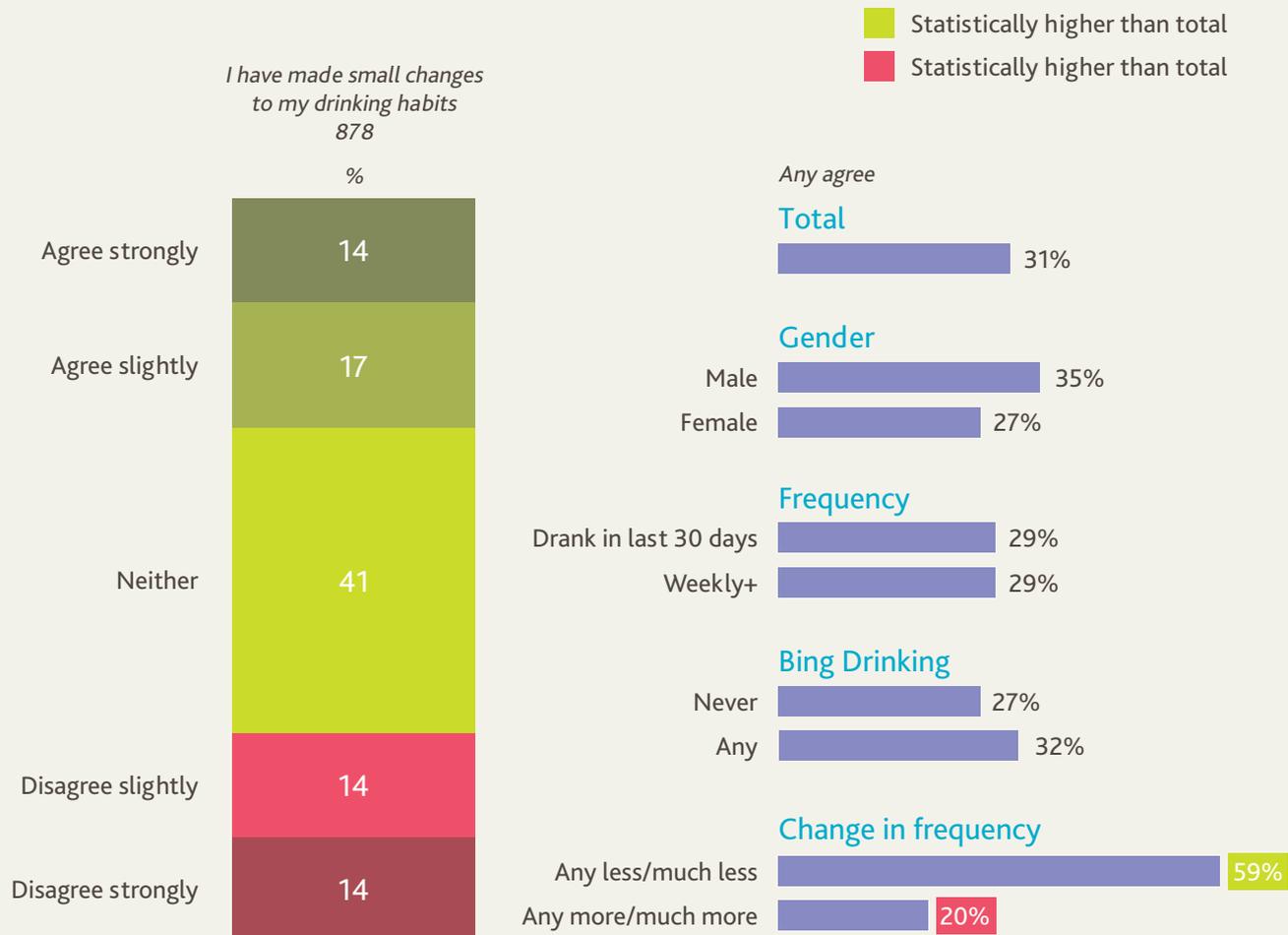
	Total	Binge drinking	
		Never	Any
UNWTD	1015	380	360
Mental Wellbeing Scale	%	%	%
High	20	24	15
Medium	44	48	41
Low	37	28	44

## Appendix 4: Made small positive changes and increase in consumption

### Attitudes to Current Alcohol Consumption

#### I have made small positive changes to my drinking habits

Base: Ever Drink Alcohol n=878



20% of those who are drinking 'more' during Lockdown believe they 'have made small positive changes to my drinking habits (i.e. drink less) in the past 30 days'

Q.10 Thinking about the past 30 days, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

## Appendix 5: Breakdown of drinking more and binge drinking by gender

	Total	Gender	
	%	Male	Female
Personal consumption any more	25	22	28
Others in household any more	19	18	21
Consuming 6 or more standard drinks in past 30 days			
Never	54	42	65
Any	46	58	35

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