

The Interplay between Alcohol and Adults' Mental Health and Wellbeing in Ireland: An Overview of Findings from the 2023 Barometer

Introduction

The Barometer has now been conducted by Ipsos B&A on behalf of Drinkaware on eight different occasions over the last seven years, namely January 2017, June 2017, January 2018, April 2019, April 2020, May 2021, June 2022 and July 2023. We also conducted a Drinkaware Index in conjunction with Ipsos B&A during 2018 that comprehensively analysed hazardous drinking in Ireland and was published in May 2019. Pre-COVID-19 data is important in highlighting factors that precede changes in drinking patterns. Collectively, extensive data gathered since commencement of the Barometer series in 2017 allows for an annual examination of drinking practices over time and how they relate to other practices within daily life. However, we cannot examine alcohol in isolation as there is a multi-dimensional aspect to both society's and/or people's relationship with alcohol. There are multiple powerful social, economic, and environmental determinants of alcohol usage/experience. This study therefore also examines the 'wider picture' in which adults experienced 2023 e.g., stress/tension, mental health, household dynamics, as well as the behaviour of other adults.

We felt that there was merit in starting to ask additional questions in 2023 rather than simply repeat the same questions from previous years to help build up a more comprehensive understanding of specific issues across the Barometer series. For example, this was the case when considering how to incorporate and provide further data on mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing reported in 2022 had not returned to pre-pandemic levels of high wellbeing identified in 2018 while we also identified some worrying findings for specific cohorts during 2020-2022. This included young adults and those that increased the amount or frequency of alcohol they consumed since March 2020. In 2022, low mental wellbeing peaked among those 25-34 years (45%) and those who had increased their alcohol consumption since COVID-19 (42%). Overall, 30% of adults reported low mental wellbeing in 2022 compared with 11% in 2018/ pre-COVID-19. Alongside the internationally validated tool, the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009), we decided for 2023 to ask several questions capturing both the potential 'legacy' of COVID-19 data in terms of impact on wellbeing but also information regarding adults' anxieties relating to the current context of the rising cost of living, while remaining cognisant of the sensitivity required for these questions. For instance, participants were asked whether they agreed/disagreed with

the following statements '*My daily routine has changed since COVID-19*' and '*My social circle is smaller since COVID-19*'.

Following the planning phase and decisions regarding specific questioning, in June 2023, Drinkaware commissioned Ipsos B&A to undertake its latest in the series of national surveys - Barometers - examining Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. The objective of this specific study was to examine Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol in the unique context of post COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis during 2023. This study also sought to examine some of the key determinants of the public's attitudes and behaviours regarding alcohol, and the 'wider picture' of adults' experiences in Ireland e.g., stress/ tension, mental health, economic impact, household dynamic as well as the behaviour of other adults. Ultimately, the main objectives of the research were to understand the who, what, where, when, how and why of drinking among adults in Ireland in 2023.

A quantitative research design was employed. A quota-controlled sampling procedure was utilised to deliver a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+ (n = 1,012). Online surveys were conducted July-August 2023. Information gathered was broken down further by both age cohort (18-24 year, 25-34 years, 35-49 years, 50-64 years, 65+years) and life stage (single -45, single 45+, pre-family, family pre-school, family pre-teen, family teen, empty nester) allowing for further examination of the impacts for different age and household types in the unique context of post COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. Questionnaire design incorporated internationally recognised question models including:

- AUDIT-C (Babor et al. 2001)
- Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) (Kuntsche & Kuntsche, 2009)
- Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009)

The focus of this paper is to provide an outline of the specific findings relating to adults' mental health and wellbeing that we identified in our latest Barometer¹. We recently published a comprehensive paper that provides a detailed overview of the findings from the [2023 Barometer](#), can be accessed here.

Findings:

Mental Wellbeing Scale

The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009) 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. Mental wellbeing scores provide an extraordinary representative picture of broad culture at a certain point in time.

The structure of the mental wellbeing scale continues to be vastly different to the benchmark level pre- COVID-19 pandemic in 2018 when 11% of adults reported low mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing plummeted when COVID-19 hit in 2020, with over 1 in 3 (37%) adults reporting low mental wellbeing at that time. The mental wellbeing scale then stabilised since the dramatic shift that occurred at the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, albeit at very poor levels' with over one third of Irish adults (35%) indicating low mental wellbeing in 2021. While there was a drop in in 2022 with 30% of adults reporting low mental wellbeing, prevalence of low mental wellbeing has again increased in 2023 to 34% of adults.

The incidence of the low group is significantly higher among adults aged under 50 years in 2023 with over 4 in 10 adults in these age cohorts reporting low mental health. For instance, high figures of low mental health scores peak among the following age cohorts - 44% of 18-24-year-olds, 45% of 25-34-year-olds and 41% of 35-49-year-olds.

¹ In line with previous years, it is envisaged that the full data table and library of Barometer data since COVID-19 will be available to those wishing to view further details. We welcome secondary analysis of this data following permission and completion of a declaration. Please contact research@drinkaware.ie for more information.

Those rating their mental wellbeing as ‘high’ dropped from 63% in 2018 to just 20% during the initial lockdown phase in 2020. Since then, just over 1 in 4 adults report high mental wellbeing (26% in both 2021 and 2022), with 27% doing so in 2023.

39% of adults that report any binge drinking in the past 30 days report low mental wellbeing in 2023 (23% report a high mental wellbeing alongside any binge drinking). 44% of adults that report increased consumption in the past 12 months also had a low mental wellbeing score, while 18% reported a high mental wellbeing alongside increased consumption.

Table 1: Mental wellbeing scale 2023 (n=1012)

MWS	Total %	Male	Female	Age range					Binge drinking		Increased past 12 months
				18-24	25-39	35-49	50-64	65+	Never	Any	
High	27%	27%	27%	14%	18%	24%	29%	47%	32%	23%	18%
Medium	38%	37%	39%	42%	37%	35%	42%	37%	37%	38%	37%
Low	34%	35%	34%	44%	45%	41%	29%	16%	30%	39%	44%

Additional questions asked in the 2023 Barometer provide more indicators on adults’ wellbeing in Ireland in 2023.

For example,

- 21% of adults with low mental wellbeing state that they are more likely to drink alcohol during the daytime in past 12 months (vs 14% overall drinkers)
- 20% of adults with low mental wellbeing state that they are buying more alcohol than they did a year ago (vs 15% overall drinkers)
- 30% of adults with low mental wellbeing state they are more likely to drink alcohol during the week in the past 12 months (vs 23% overall drinkers)

- 47% of adults state my daily routine has changed since COVID-19 (rising to 55% of 25-34-year-olds)

Stress and tension

Of adults that reported reduced consumption in past 30 days in 2023, 31% cited mental health as strongly influencing them to drink less in 2023. While those with low mental wellbeing reported statistically significant higher levels of increased stress/tension (43%).

Thankfully, the measure of stress and tension in the household has shown a significant improvement since 2020; however, almost one quarter of Irish adults (24%) continue to indicate an increase in stress/tension in the past 30 days when asked in 2023 (47% in 2020, 27% in 2021, 26% in 2022).

Table 2: Increase in household stress/tension 2023 (living with family/friends n=844)

Stress/tension	Total	Under 50 yrs	+50 yrs	Statistically significant peaks
Increased	24%	29%	17.5%	35% family pre-school, 39% increased frequently past 12 months, 43% low mental wellbeing

Across gender, age, and household type, over 1 in 3 families with pre-school children reported significantly higher levels of increased stress/tension (35%) Those who reported increased frequency in consumption in the past 12 months also reported a statistically significant increase (39%), as did adults with low mental wellbeing (43%).

Drinking to Cope

The Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) consists of 12 motivations for drinking and a five-point response scale³. The individual's responses are used to determine the extent to which they drink for social reasons, enhancement reasons, conformity, or coping reasons. A revised version of this measure was included in the survey to enable responses to be analysed according to the different motivations.

Over half (55%) of adults that drank alcohol in the past 30 days report doing so for coping reasons always/most of the time/half of the time (i.e. high frequency). While there has been

a rise in the incidence of drinking motivations across practically all criteria this year, the biggest rises relate to coping motivations - in particular, stress (19% +6 rise), anxiety (16% +5 rise), boredom (16% +5 rise) and sleep (14% +5 rise). However, significantly larger portions of some cohorts such as younger adults and household types including families with younger children and pre-school families report higher incidences of reasons for drinking across almost all of the categories when broken down further in 2023, including some potentially concerning peaks. For instance, over a quarter of 18-24-year-olds and families with younger children that currently drink report drinking in the past 30 days (high frequency) as it helps when they feel depressed or anxious (27% of 18-24-year-olds and 26% of families with pre-school children). Worryingly, while 17% of drinkers report drinking to get drunk in the past 30 days (high frequency), 47% of 18-24-year-old drinkers and 29% of drinkers in families with pre-school children report doing so.

Mental health as an influence in drinking less:

- In 2023, we added a new question focused on understanding in further detail the key influences for those who have reported reducing their consumption in the past 30 days and/or past 12 months (n=578). Participants were asked to pick from a list of both general and detailed options which had strongly influenced them to drink less. In both iterations of this measure, sentiments relating to health and personal finances are the most prominent.
- Overall, nearly 2/3 of adults (63%) who had reduced consumption cite physical health or fitness as a reason for drinking less with 31% citing mental health as an influence for reduced drinking. Mental health as an influence, peaks among 25-34-year-olds who had reduced consumption at 46%.
- Finances are a significant influence to drink less with 45% citing personal finances as a general reason for doing so. In terms of detailed responses, 52% of drinkers that had reduced consumption saying they would rather spend their money on other things or 32% saying they cannot afford to drink as much as they used to.
- In further detail, almost 1 in 4 (24%) cite the behaviour of others as a consequence of excessive drinking as an influence for drinking less. 14% had a bad experience when drunk that they do not want to repeat, while this peaks among 18-24-year-olds who had reduced consumption with 24% citing it as an influence for drinking less.

Table 3: Influences to drink less 2023 (n=578)

In general		In detail	
Physical health/ fitness	63%	I'd rather spend my money on other things	52%
Personal finances	45%	I'm more conscious now about the health harms associated with alcohol	48%
Mental health	31%	I can't afford to drink as much as I used to	32%
Impact on family/ relationships	19%	Behaviour of others as a consequence of excessive drinking	24%
My job/career	12%	I've had a bad experience when drunk that I don't want to repeat	14%
Other	8%	Other	6%

Awareness of (mental) health effects of excessive alcohol:

Participants were shown a list of negative effects from drinking alcohol over the recommended levels on both short and long-term health and asked which they were aware of prior to the survey, including mental health effects. Alcohol use worsens feelings of depression and anxiety (HRB 2024). The negative effects listed were in line with those on the Drinkaware website. In line with 2022, liver disease remains the health effect most prominently associated with excessive drinking in 2023 with 86% adults citing their awareness (84% in 2022). Five other effects are recognised by at least two thirds of adults in 2023, namely impaired judgement (72%), depression (68%), dehydration (68%), lack of concentration (67%) and headache (66%). Just over half (55%) of adults cited their awareness of anxiety as a negative effect.

In 2023, participants were also asked to 'spontaneously' list any short/long-term health effects of alcohol that they can think of. In so doing providing insight into awareness (or lack

thereof) of such negative effects, including feelings of depression and anxiety. Overall spontaneous awareness rates were lower, while liver disease remains the most cited health effect by over half of adults (56%). This is followed by a quarter of adults (25%) who referred to brain fog/memory loss/mental health. Only 14% of adults refer to heart disease and stroke and 13% refer to cancer, while only 9% adults cite depression and 3% cite anxiety. Adults spontaneously cited a range of other negative effects that were not on the list of negative effects provided - for instance, skin conditions (2%), obesity (9%), high blood pressure (4%), hangover (4%), kidney disease (6%), affect relationships (4%), addiction (7%) and death (1%).

Table 4 Awareness of (mental) health effects of excessive alcohol 2023 (n=1012)

Health Effect	Spontaneous awareness	Total awareness (listed)
Impaired judgement	1%	72%
Depression	9%	68%
Lack of concentration	1%	67%
Headache	3%	66%
Disturbed sleep	2%	64%
Anxiety	3%	55%

Attitudes to drinking practices and wellbeing

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements relating to their attitudes surrounding drinking practices and in so doing this also provides some further insight into their wellbeing.

In terms of place of consumption, 38% of adult drinkers agree that they are more likely to drink at home in the past 12 months and rising to 45% among weekly drinkers and 44% of binge drinkers. On timing, only 14% of adults that drink state that they are more likely to drink alcohol during the daytime in the past 12 months. However, this peaks among several cohorts including young adults and families with younger age children - with 24% of those aged 18-24 and 25% of 25-34-year-olds that drink as well as 23% of families with pre-school children. Similarly, those that report binge drinking in past months (20%) as well as adults with low

mental wellbeing (21%) are more likely to report drinking during the day. Overall, 23% of adults that drink state they are more likely to drink during the week in the past 12 months. Likelihood of drinking during the week is statistically higher among young adult drinkers (35% 18-24-year-olds and 33% 25-34-year-olds), any binge drinkers (34%), families with primary school children (35%), as well as adults with low mental wellbeing (30%).

Conclusion

Data gathered in the Barometer 2023 study and presented in this paper provides insight into a range of significant issues relating to mental health and wellbeing and adults' current drinking behaviours in Ireland and their attitudes and motivations regarding alcohol.

Mental wellbeing scores for 2023 provide indicators on the impact of COVID-19 throughout 2020-2021 and continue to do so in terms of the potential legacy of COVID-19 Pandemic and the current series of crises that adults in Ireland are facing. With 1/3 of adults (34%) reporting low mental wellbeing and just over 1/4 (27%) reporting high mental wellbeing in 2023, the structure of mental wellbeing scoring continues to be vastly different to the benchmark set pre-COVID-19 in 2018 (63% of adults reported high mental wellbeing and 11% low mental wellbeing in the Drinkaware Index (Drinkaware 2019)). The measure of tension in the household has shown a significant improvement since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (47% increase in 2020 vs 24% increase in 2023). However, the clear link between the mental wellbeing scale and household stress/tension is identified again in 2023, with over 40% of those with low mental wellbeing more likely to report an increase in household stress/tension (43% in 2023, 46% in 2022).

Additional questions in 2023 provide important indicators of adults' wellbeing and the interplay with alcohol. 62% of EU citizens think that recent world events (the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the climate crisis, unemployment, and rising food and energy costs) "somewhat" or "greatly" affected their mental health (Eurostat 2023). The same Eurobarometer study found that 46% of EU citizens had an emotional or psychological problem (such as feeling depressed or feeling anxious) in the last 12 months (June 2022-2023) (Eurostat 2023). Drinking to cope reported the biggest rise in motivations for drinking among adults in the 2023 Barometer. Alcohol is commonly used to cope with difficult situations (HRB 2024). The corroboration between low mental wellbeing and an increase in alcohol consumption during the pandemic has previously been highlighted in the

potential use of negative coping strategies to deal with the stress, as identified by Irish and international research (Capasso et al. 2021, CSO 2021, Smyth & Nolan 2022, Roberts et al. 2021). Of those participants in the Healthy Ireland Survey 2021 whose mental health had worsened since the beginning of the pandemic, 20.6% reported that they had also increased their drinking (Department of Health 2021). In addition, a serious lack of awareness of mental health effects from excessive consumption from spontaneous was identified in the 2023 Barometer with only 3% of adults referring to anxiety and 9% referring to depression. However, the mental health impact is cited as a driver/influence for nearly one third (31%) of adults wanting to drink less.

It is imperative that we continue to gather and analyse evidence-informed research on patterns of alcohol consumption and the aspects of Irish adults' lives and livelihoods. Indicators such as those identified in this survey prove that the impact of COVID-19 still forms a key part of telling the 2023 story and how we are feeling right now, set within a continued time of heightened turbulence such as the high cost-of-living at both national and international levels, and threats from global insecurity and war that is taking place.

The findings reported here from our Barometer series are based on quantitative evidence and so do not provide insight into adults' relationship with alcohol in practice. However additional questions added in 2023 also provide important indicators of adults' wellbeing and the interplay with alcohol. Understanding how people experience alcohol in their everyday lives is crucial in reducing alcohol misuse and harm, with qualitative data required to do this.

As the national independent charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse in Ireland, Drinkaware's work is grounded in research, evidence and rigorous evaluation. The findings from our Barometer series will help to inform the design of appropriate behaviour change interventions to help prevent and reduce alcohol misuse and harm in Ireland going forward and therefore Drinkaware's stated mission.

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