



ALCOHOL

A SUCCESSFUL SWEDISH LIBERALISATION

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SUMMARY

"We were able to handle an increased alcohol supply. That's actually pretty interesting news. Who has read that?"

Anders Bolling, Apokalypsens gosiga mörker (The Cuddly Darkness of the Apocalypse)

In the past 20 years Sweden has experienced a number of liberalisation measures in the alcohol field, mostly thanks to EU membership.

- Systembolaget's assortment has since 1990 been expanded to include ale, cider, "Alcopops" and boxed wine. The number of brands and varieties has multiplied since 1995.
- In 1997 the tax on beer was reduced by 38 percent, representing a 20 percent price reduction.
- Systembolaget has been open on Saturdays (2001) and in the evening and has expanded its opening hours before weekends and holidays (gradually).
- In Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, Uppsala and Helsingborg, entertainment venues may remain open after 3:00 a.m since the mid-1990s.
- The number of licences issued for liquor, wine and beer has increased from about 2,000 in 1985 to about 10,000 in 2009.
- Prior to EU membership in 1995 the Swedish ration that could be brought into the country was 1 litre of spirits or 2 litres of fortified wine (including sparkling wine), 4 litres of wine or 16 litres of beer. Since 2004, a Swede may bring in 10 litres of spirits, 20 litres of intermediate products, 90 litres of wine (including up to 60 litres of sparkling wine) and 110 litres of beer when travelling within the EU.

After 20 years of alcohol liberalisation, we note that many of the concerns were ill-founded.

- Alcohol consumption rose between 1996 and 2004 from 8 to 10.5 litres of pure alcohol per person. But although experts believed that it would continue to increase, consumption had fallen gradually to 9.3 litres in 2009. (SoRAD)
- Since 1987, the trend for alcohol-related mortality is stable and in recent years, slightly decreasing for men. (Board of Health and Welfare)
- Alcohol-related injuries show no clear trend. It is clear that the measurable harm caused by alcohol for several indicators does not appear to have increased in proportion to actual consumption. (CAN)
- The proportion of those who report that they have been victims of violence in public places has not increased since the early 1990s, quite the opposite. (BRÅ) Neither the later opening hours in pubs nor the additional opening hours on Saturdays at Systembolaget has been linked to increased violence. (SOU, National Public Health Institute)

- The total amount of deadly violence – and in particular alcohol-related deadly violence – has decreased in Sweden in both the 1990s and 2000s. According to BRÅ 2011:5, this may be due to the fact that we do more of our drinking in restaurants. (BRÅ)

Sweden has been able to implement a significant liberalisation of entertainment and alcohol sales without increases in violence, disease and mortality as feared. The conclusion of this should be to question the relevance of the old models, restrictions and monopolies, and to discuss the future of alcohol policy liberalisation that can make Sweden more fun and enjoyable.

SWEDISH LIBERALISATION POLICIES

"What contributed to the increased availability of the 2000s includes free traveller imports, trade in alcohol over the Internet, multiplied serving permits, lower real prices of alcohol and increasing purchasing power. Alcohol advertising is also a factor."

Sarah Wamala, National Institute of Public Health

It is one of the last days of 1991. Around the block hour-long queues wind up to the only Systembolaget state liquor store in Karlskrona. Hopefully, those standing in line not only have time and patience, but also know what to buy. All products are kept behind the counter. They are not even displayed behind glass in the store; you can only find them in a directory with an identification number. The personnel have received training to be able to serve as a guide to the assortment, which is limited. You cannot buy, for example, Belgian beer, ale and other beer with higher alcohol content than regular beer. Cider has recently been allowed, as of May of 1990. The long lines leading up to the checkout counter are also hardly conducive to a long conversation with the clerk. Everything is set-up to discourage impulse buying.

Buying alcohol over 20 years ago was a very different experience compared to today. Systembolaget has retained its monopoly, but has a much wider range of products, more outlets and longer opening hours on Saturdays, evenings and before major holidays. Restaurants have also gained a broader assortment, more serving permits and extended hours. In addition, individuals can bring 10 litres of spirits, 90 litres of wine and 110 litres of beer over the border when travelling from another EU country or import it themselves from abroad if they pay Swedish tax. Advertisements for beer, wine, and spirits on international TV channels and social media, provide increased product recognition. Below are some of the aspects of liberalisation that have occurred over the past 20 years.

Retail sale of alcohol

In 1991, Systembolaget opened the first self-service store — as a test. Now, over 20 years later, work is underway to renovate the remaining stores so that all stores have self-service. Systembolaget indicates that in this way the staff can work in a more customer-focused manner and the customers will be better able to view and choose from the assortment. The number of Systembolaget stores increased from 345 in 1990 to 412 in 2009, and there are now stores in 288 (of 290) municipalities, compared to 234 (of 284) municipalities in 1990.¹

EU membership in 1995 brought many changes to the conditions for state-owned alcohol sales.

Systembolaget lost its monopoly on sales to restaurants and Vin & Sprit's [Wine & Spirits] monopoly on imports, exports, manufacturing and wholesale trade was abolished. The change resulted in a

¹ SOU 1998:8.

significant broadening of Systembolaget's product range, here described in a government investigation:

In the past Systembolaget dealt with one vendor (V & S Vin & Sprit AB) for wine, spirits and imported beer. At the end of 1996, nearly 200 licensees of alcoholic beverages delivered to Systembolaget. In 1995, Systembolaget was offered more than 18,000 new products. Of these the company tested just over 5,000 products after which between 1,200 and 1,500 were purchased. In January 1992, there were 998 products in the assortment, while at the end of 1996 there were 2,609 brands or 3,050 articles in stock. In 1996, Systembolaget launched 1,338 new articles. Its order range increased to 1,500 articles in the same year.²

Since then, the number of firms eligible to undertake wholesale trade in spirits, wine and beer or to manufacture spirits has risen from around 200 in 1995 to over 1,000 in 2009.

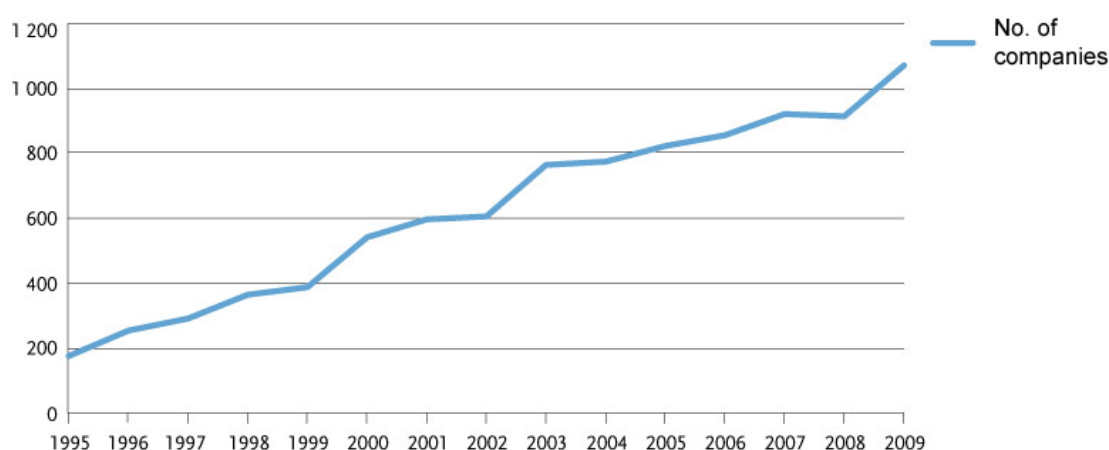


Figure 1: The number of firms eligible to undertake wholesale trade in spirits, wine and beer. Source: National Institute of Public Health R 2010: 11 Alcohol Statistics 2009, Chart 7, page 26.

This change prompted an expanded assortment in stores via the newly established Alcohol Selection Board. In a number of rulings in 1996-1997, for example, Alcopops and strong spirits were approved, as were some cider packaging (one bottle in the form of dynamite f e) and more importantly, bag-in-box wines. Systembolaget previously refused to sell these alcohol and packaging varieties, or they would simply not be imported from Vin & Sprit's import monopoly. With the EU's competition rules and impartial review, new importers could win their case and the monopoly was forced to expand its assortment of these products.³ With EU membership the alcohol limit for beer of 4.5 percent volume was also abolished. This had previously put a stop to ales and Belgian beers.

As an experiment, Saturday opening hours were allowed in six counties in 2000. In July 2001, stores were allowed to be open on Saturday throughout the country. There have also been changes in

² Institute of Public Health 2010, Table 7, page 38.

³ Ibid, pp. 237-246.

opening hours in the evening and around major holidays. In 2007, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* reported on Systembolaget's dilemma with staying open around Christmas so that people could shop, but at the same time hesitating to provide information about the extra opening hours so as not to encourage consumption. Alcohol researcher Börje Olsson recalls the attitude of the 1980s: "At that time they thought that "It's best if we're closed a little more often if people like to drink so much."⁴

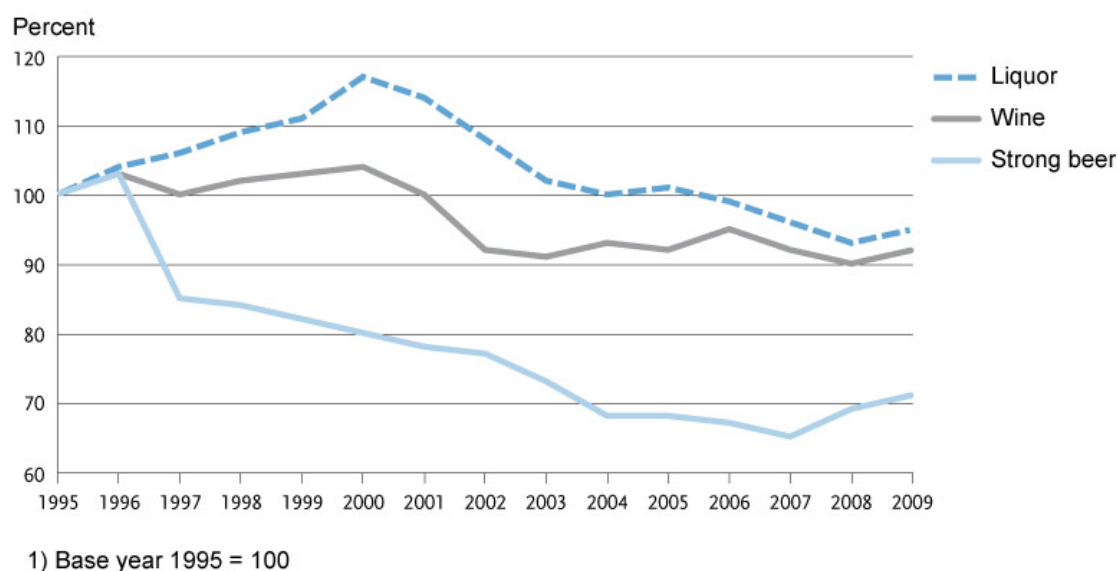


Figure 2: Price Indices for alcoholic beverages retail 1995-2009. Source: National Institute of Public Health R 2010: 11 Alcohol Statistics 2009, Chart 5, page 25.

Prices of alcohol in the retail sector have been reduced. In 1997, the tax on beer was lowered by 38 percent, representing a 20 percent price reduction. In 2001, taxes were raised again slightly for beer, but were reduced for wine in order to achieve proportionality under EU rules. The price index of retail alcohol is today below the 1995 prices, beer at 71 percent of 1995 prices, wine at 92 percent and spirits at 95 percent, although in recent years a number of tax increases on alcohol have been implemented.⁵ However, it is primarily in relation to beer that one can speak of a liberalisation in the tax area.

Another tax change was introduced on 1 July 1992, which meant that the alcohol tax was levied in proportion to (the amount of) alcohol instead of as previously when it was in proportion to the price of the goods. This made beer cheaper, and wine and spirits more expensive, but the change also meant that the price of fine wines and whiskey went down and that these products became more attainable to more people.⁶

⁴ *Dagens Nyheter* 2007.

⁵ Institute of Public Health 2010, Table 16, page 44.

⁶ Government Bill 1994/95: 56, page 45.

Buy alcohol yourself

Prior to EU membership in 1995, the Swedish import ration was 1 litre of spirits, 1 litre of wine and 2 litres of beer. In the EU the allowance is 10 litres of spirits, 20 litres of intermediate products, 90 litres of wine (including up to 60 litres of sparkling wine) and 110 litres of beer. A higher ration may also be granted, for example, for a family gathering. The Swedish import rations were stepped up gradually from 2000 to be the same as in the rest of the EU as of 1 January 2004. Traveller imports outside the EU have also become somewhat more generous and you can now take 1 litre of spirits or 2 litres of fortified wine (including sparkling wine), 4 litres of wine and 16 litres of beer into Sweden.

Another change came with the so-called Rosengren decision 2007. In that case, the European Court of Justice established the right of Swedes as individuals to import alcohol from abroad, as long as Swedish alcohol taxes are paid. Since then a number of companies have been established to handle private persons' imports and often pay their taxes, which can otherwise be a complicated process. Importers fall into two categories. First, there are wine clubs that import a range of quality wines that are not available at Systembolaget. These usually pay the alcohol taxes in advance. Then there are importers with a narrower range of bargain-priced alcohol. These usually disclose the individual's obligation to pay alcohol taxes, but do not include it in the price and do not pay it in advance.

Restaurants

Both through practice and amended laws, the rules for serving alcohol have become more generous. The number of licences issued for liquor, wine and beer has increased from about 2,000 in 1985 to about 10,000 in 2009. Although there have been slightly fewer permits that apply only to beer and wine serving, and somewhat fewer temporary permits, altogether there is a significant increase. The rules have also become more relaxed and serving permits are now granted, for example, to sushi and vegetarian restaurants.

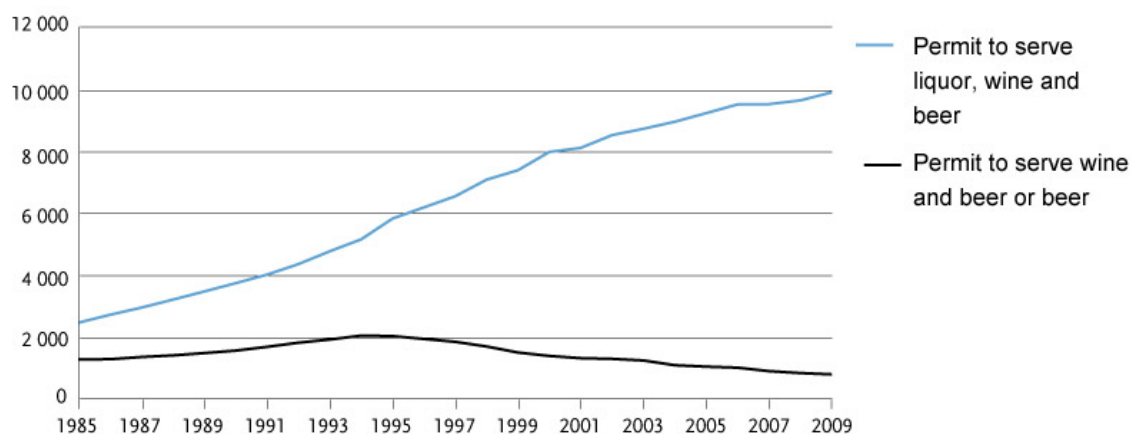


Figure 3: Restaurants permanently licensed 1985-2000. Source: National Institute of Public Health R 2010: 11 Alcohol Statistics 2009, Chart 4, page 24.

A further liberalisation policy applies to opening hours. The City of Stockholm decided in 1993 to extend the allowed hours of operation from 3:00 to 5:00 a.m. This was a direct consequence of

liberal activism in the form of the Freedom Front's underground club Tritnaha, which despite constant police raids organised well-attended celebrations in the wee hours of the morning. The temporary permit was made permanent in 1999. Malmö, Gothenburg, Uppsala and Helsingborg also granted permits in the 1990s to stay open until 5:00 a.m.

The rules have been tightened by expensive requirements such as staffing, leading to the number of hotspots with a "5:00 a.m." permit declining during the 2000s. In Stockholm, 33 venues had a permit to stay open until 5:00 in 1996, and that dropped to 13 in 2006.⁷ In Gothenburg, the number of "5:00 a.m." permits increased from 10 to 26 from 1998 - 2004 and then decreased again slightly. Compared to the situation before 1993, this is still a significant liberalisation.

Privacy and freedom of expression

EU membership in 1995 meant that Customs could no longer subject travellers from other EU countries to random inspections of goods. Previously, Customs performed routine checks of returning Swedes to check if they had more than the stingy alcohol ration allowed in their luggage. With EU entry, commercial shipments were no longer required to notify at the border crossing within the EU.⁸

Since 2003 advertisements for alcohol below 15 volume percent are allowed in print media. This is thanks to a legislative amendment that followed a ruling by the Market Court in which *Gourmet* magazine was acquitted after publishing an alcohol ad in 2002. Ads must, however include a warning. On TV channels from abroad, as well as in social media like Facebook, ads for alcohol do occur. This advertising is part of the freedom of expression and provides consumers with information about new products.

⁷ This information from 1996 is found in SOU 2000:59 and the figure from 2006 is from Realtid.se in 2007.

⁸ Kühlhorn, Björ & Hradilova Selin, eds. 1998, page 18.

THE CONSEQUENCES

Swedes are drinking more, but consumption never got out of control

Total alcohol consumption, expressed in litres of pure alcohol (100%) per inhabitant aged 15 and over increased between 1996 - 2004 from 8 to 10.5 litres. Since then, the level has fallen gradually to 9.3 litres per year by 2009 and a preliminary estimate for 2010 indicates 9.1 litre.⁹ This means that during the liberalisation period until 2004 there was a 30 percent increase in the average consumption. Thereafter, consumption declined again, although it still remains at a high level in Sweden and 15-20 percent above the level in the mid-1990s.¹⁰

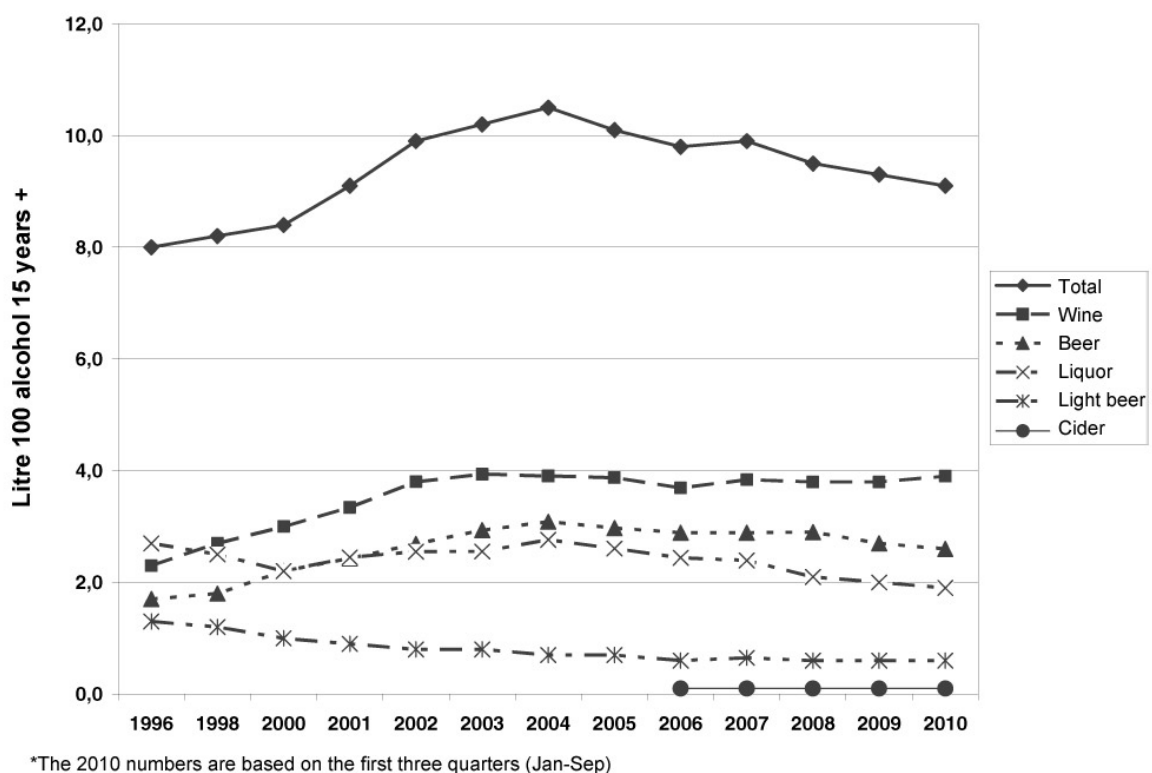


Figure 4: Total of beverage-specific alcohol consumption 1996-2010. Source: SoRAD Speech on Alcohol (2010), Report of Investigation 60, Chart 2, page 3.

Liberalisation seems to mean that people drink more. But the new policies do not seem to have provided a self-reinforcing process for ever-increasing drinking, for example by widespread alcoholism. On the contrary: 2004, the first year when a full ration from our European travels was permitted, marks the culmination of consumption. Before that time, traveller imports were at a much higher level than they are today. In the early 2000s, over 60 percent of travellers brought in alcohol, while in 2009 the number was 46 percent. Expressed in litres of pure alcohol, traveller imports increased from about 1.1 litres in 1996 to 2.7 litres per year in 2004, and then declined to

⁹ Ramstedt 2010.

¹⁰ Ibid.

around 1.3 litres a year in 2009. Smuggling increased along with traveller imports from about 0.2 litres in 1996 to about 1 litre of pure alcohol in 2005, then decreased to 0.6 litres. Another illegal source — home distilling — has completely lost its importance with increased traveller imports. From 0.7 litres of pure alcohol in 1996, home distilling in 2009 accounted for 0.1 litres.¹¹

Thus many Swedes are making use of the possibility to purchase alcohol, but the novelty has worn off. The freedom to bring in a large ration of alcohol, contrary to fears that it would cause uncontrollable excesses, has become part of everyday life that Swedes have become accustomed to and do not use as often as before. Smuggling has also declined, and illicit distilling has basically disappeared. There may be other partial explanations for consumption decline since 2004, including some alcohol policy restrictions.¹² But as the example of traveller imports shows, it is not at all clear that greater freedom in the alcohol field leads to increased drinking.

The expert believed in increased drinking

The year when the Swedes drank the most (2004), alcohol expert Eckhart Köhlhorn of SoRAD (Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs) was surprised: “I was almost expecting an even larger increase” was his comment, when the figures were presented in 2005. The Swedes had

In 2004 the full traveller imports were allowed, in Finland alcohol taxes had been reduced and our neighbour Estonia became a EU member, with the Union's lowest liquor taxes.

And the professor's forecast was an increase in drinking during the coming year:

“[I]t would surprise me if we do not reach a Danish or German level [11.5 to 12 litres of pure alcohol per person]. It doesn't have to be that way. This is only conjecture, but it would be strange if it did not turn out that way.”

Source: Leif Svensson/TT, 12 January 2005.

Fears

"It's just a gateway to unleash the whole mess. It is only the beginning of the hell we are going to experience!"

The Social Democrat Rinaldo Karlsson's warning in Parliament in 1993 of the consequences of abolishing Vin & Sprit's monopoly.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

¹² Information campaigns, age verification and police efforts to reduce underage drinking may be one reason that young people's drinking decreased more than the average. The decline since 2004 has occurred in the age groups under 40 and mostly among men, see Ramstedt 2010, page 9.

Prior to and with Swedish EU membership, with libertarian and market-friendly public opinion after the fall of socialism, many supporters of the then-current Swedish alcohol policy warned of the significant effects of changes. In an election pamphlet on alcohol and drugs that was distributed by the temperance and anti-drug organisations before the 1994 EU- membership referendum it was stated, for example: "As the Swedish Research Council panel concluded: EU membership will cost Sweden a doubling of alcohol consumption, four times as many heavy drinkers, and four times as many deaths from alcohol abuse."¹³

In the booklet prepared by the Research Council committee being referred to here (*How much can Swedes take?*, Source No. 36, 1991) alcohol researcher Ole-Jørgen Skog was interviewed. He dismissed as a myth that Swedes would reduce their alcohol consumption when we incorporate beer and wine culture from the rest of Europe. With figures from post-war Norway, he warned of the consequences, saying that both excess drinking and wine and beer drinking had doubled there. Another theory from this period is that the harm caused by alcohol increases more than average consumption. Alcohol doctor Sven Andreasson estimated 3,000-12,000 more alcohol-related deaths, albeit primarily as a result of price reductions to the European level that never became a reality.

The alarms came even after EU membership. "If we drop the [Swedish alcohol policy], several thousand more people will die. We will see more violence in homes and on the streets. Life will become less secure for all of us," warned the social worker Erik Lindberg in a polemical book from 1997.¹⁴ And many shared these fears. Mats Gellerfelt expressed his concerns on the culture pages of the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1996:

The risk now is that excess drinking reaches the proportions it had when the Bratt system was introduced. It is with trepidation you imagine the economic and medical implications, increased crime and family tragedies. An anxiety-laden, ashamed queue is then to be preferred.¹⁵

There are good reasons why we might expect negative consequences from people drinking more. Alcohol is associated with accidents and fatalities, and the risk of injury in traffic, at work and in recreation increases. Drinking more alcohol increases the risk of becoming an alcoholic. There is a relationship between high consumption of alcohol and social problems of various kinds. Violent

13 Background: *How much can Swedes take?* (Source No. 36, 1991) says Ole-Jørgen Skog: "Numerous studies show that as a kind of rule of thumb a doubling of alcohol consumption leads to a quadrupling of the number of heavy drinkers. Similarly, a doubling in consumption also entails a fourfold increase in mortality, in chronic alcohol damage liver cirrhosis and other diseases."

This is, first, not an assessment by the Research Council committee, but an interview with an individual researcher, and second, not an assessment that EC membership will result in this level of drinking or damage.

14 Lindberg 1997, page 7.

15 Quoted in Lindberg 1997, page 152. Note the ignorance. The Bratt system was introduced during World War I, when drinking was at a uniquely low level and had been going down since the turn of the century. "Sales declined in the early 1900s, reaching a deep decline at the end of World War I with the resulting problems of supply and rationing". (CAN 2009, page 56)

incidents often occur in conjunction with alcohol intake. Alcohol can also damage the body's organs and give rise to various illnesses as a result.

That is probably why the same gloomy forecasts are still echoing today. 1600 deaths per year, 14,000 assaults, and 16 million sick days are what the ads for Systembolaget use to promote the fear that Sweden would experience if we perchance also liberalise retail sales of alcohol. This is because alcohol consumption is projected to increase by 30 percent.¹⁶

There are good reasons to question these figures.¹⁷ And to question that things would really “go to hell” with increasing violence and insecurity. After the liberalisation policies carried out in Sweden, the problems that Systembolaget are warning about should already be seen. Overall, the question is whether the liberalisation measures undertaken over the past 20 years are not more extensive than the elimination of the retail monopoly, which would mean that you could buy alcohol in regular stores. And as we have seen, consumption increased by exactly the 30 percent that Systembolaget warns will lead to increased death, injuries and sick leave. So what happened?

¹⁶ Holder, ed., 2008.

¹⁷ The Swedish Public Health Institute claims that they engaged international researchers who are said to have conducted a review of the liberalisation of wine sales in the U.S. and Canada, but the evidence is a letter from two of the researchers. The studies reported have often drawn very different conclusions about the effects on consumption and harm than those claimed by the Swedish Public Health Institute. One example is the liberalisation in Alberta, Canada, which meant that the number of outlets that may be open until 2:00 a.m. more than doubled. This led to increased consumption, but with no impact on traffic accidents, which were also measured. Several of the studies referring to the abolition of the wine monopoly showed no significant increase in overall consumption. See appendix 2 and Munkhammar 2009. Then of course it is strange to use theoretical calculations from Canadian studies when Sweden had just experienced a 30 percent increase in alcohol consumption, without the predicted adverse impact.

Alcohol-related deaths have not increased

"The expected increase in alcohol mortality has thus far not materialised, which is very positive". SOU 2005:25, p. 82.

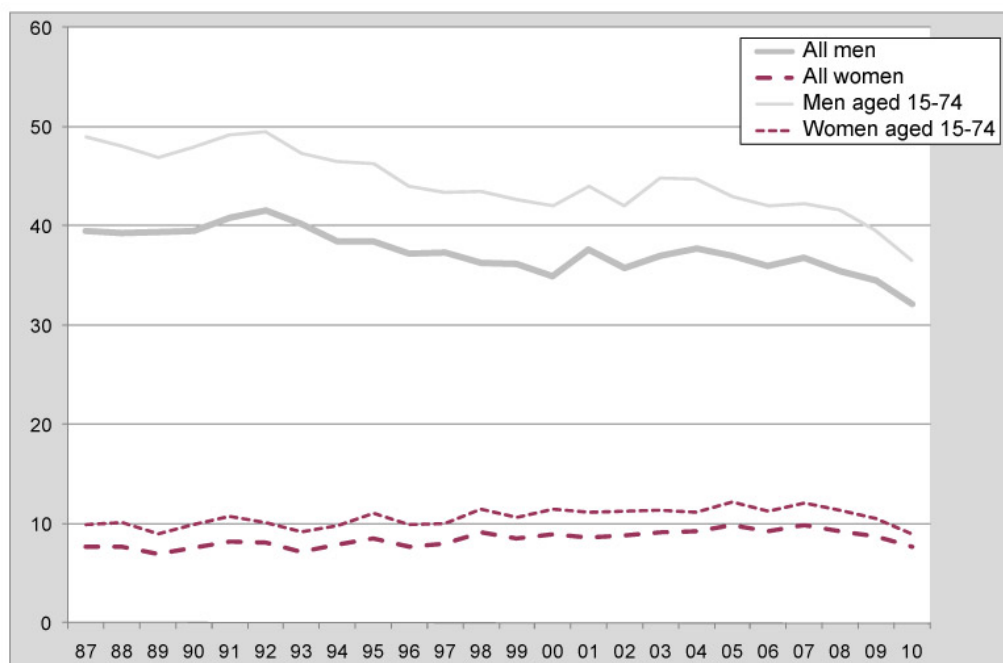


Figure 5: Alcohol-related deaths from 1987 - 2010. Source: National Board (2011), *Causes of Death 2010*, Chart 46, page 54.

Alcohol-related mortality is defined by the National Board of Health and Welfare as deaths in which alcohol or alcohol-related organ damage has been mentioned as either a contributing or underlying factor. In the compilation *Causes of death in 2012* it was noted that the trend since 1987 is stable and in recent years had slightly decreased for men. The increasing consumption has left some marks on mortality, which increased slightly in the early 2000s. This was even more evident at the regional level. The southern counties of Skåne, Blekinge and Kronoberg, where border trade has been most intense, saw alcohol-related mortality increase by 40 percent from the periods 1987-1990 and 1999-2002. This prompted a government inquiry in the mid-2000s to warn of "an obvious risk that a development similar to the southern parts of the country may also take place in other parts of the country".¹⁸ Instead, we see a slight reduction in mortality in recent years. For men, the mortality rate in 2010 is significantly below the level at the end of the 1980s and for women the level is almost the same. This is despite the fact that consumption is at a higher level.

None of this should be interpreted as that the current level of alcohol consumption is healthy or that alcohol does not cause death. Alcohol is a widespread cause of death globally and in Sweden. However, we can conclude that the increased alcohol-related mortality that was predicted as a result of the liberalisation in Sweden in recent decades has failed to materialise.

¹⁸ SOU 2005:25, page 78.

No clear trend for alcohol-related harm

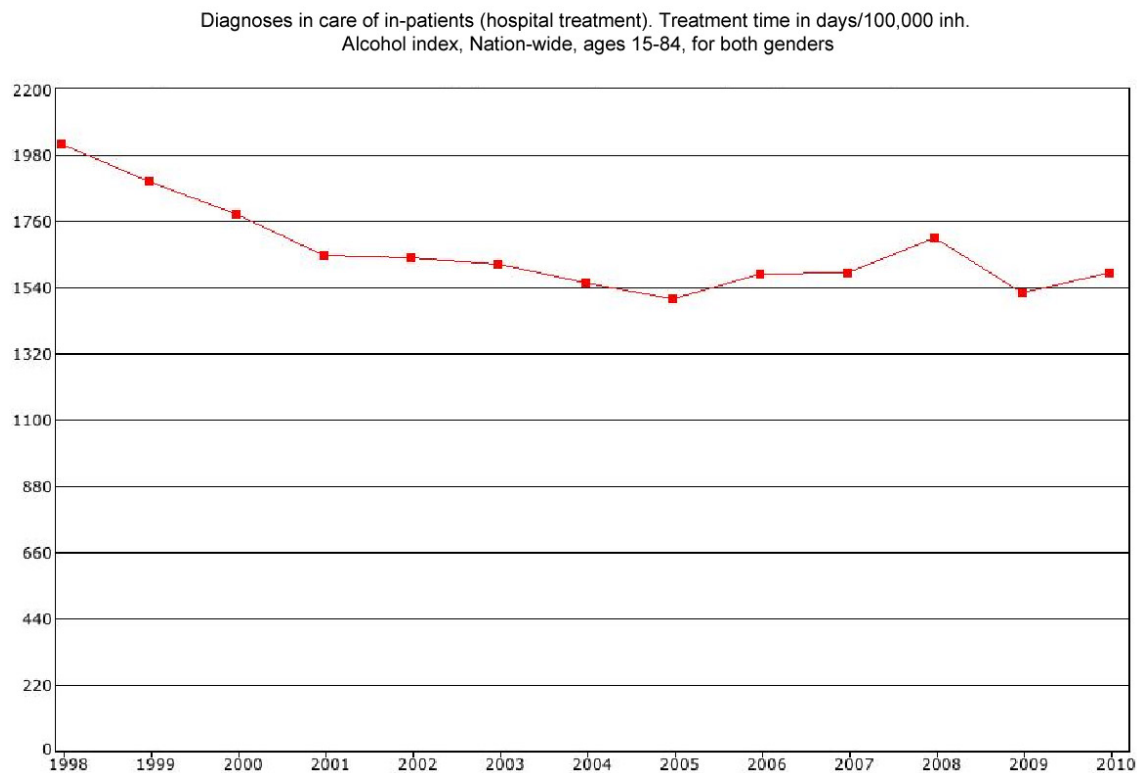


Figure 6: Graph: Alcohol-related injuries since 1998 Source: National Board of Health database, 2012

Has increased drinking in recent decades left a mark on disease statistics? It's hard to say. Central Association for Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN) points out in *Drogutvecklingen i Sverige 2010* [Drug Developments in Sweden 2010] that there is no significant trend in the measure of alcohol-related problems and treatments in the 2000s. Two things can be said, according to CAN: 1. "[A] previous positive trend seems to be marking time"; and 2. That "The measurable harm caused by alcohol for several indicators does not appear to have increased in proportion to the actual consumption".¹⁹

Taken together, this suggests that there has been a negative development as a result of the increase in drinking, but that it mainly manifests itself in that the damage does not continue to decline and may have increased slightly. But it was nowhere near as bad as was feared based on the great increase in consumption. It may be that there are additional groups who drink and those who have increased their consumption the most, such as middle-aged and older people, but these are not at risk of injury to the same degree as the younger men. A contributing factor may also have been that liquor consumption has decreased as a proportion of total drinking.

A related issue is absenteeism due to illness. As we have seen above, Systembolaget warns, with figures from the National Institute of Public Health, that sick leave will increase by 16 million more days if Systembolaget loses its monopoly on sales. This is strange because government experts, both on the Social Council and the Swedish Council on Health Technology Assessment (SBU) in reviews of

¹⁹ CAN 2010.

existing research in 2010, found it impossible to prove any connection between alcohol consumption and sickness absence:

"After having weighed the studies in this literature review with studies in the previously conducted literature review from SBU, we note that we cannot draw conclusions about the scientific evidence for the relationship between alcohol consumption and sickness absence. We found several studies of relatively high scientific quality, but results in the different studies were contradictory."²⁰

Violence has probably not increased

"The data that the general public provides in various Swedish victim surveys show that exposure to violence in general has not increased since the early 1990s".

BRÅ 2008: 23

Looking at the number of reported crimes, they seem to confirm the well-known relationship between alcohol and violence. From 1981 - 2007 the number of reported assaults tripled. The increase is even greater for assaults that took place outdoors between strangers, a crime which to almost 70 percent are committed by people who had drunk alcohol and where an even higher proportion among the victims are suspected of having been drinking.²¹

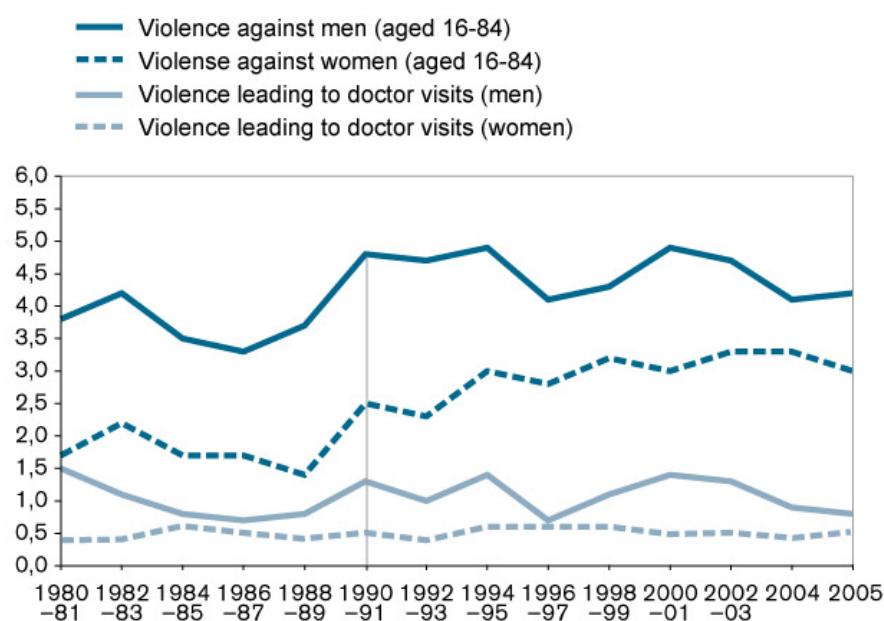


Figure 7: Proportion of victims of violence and the violence that prompted the visit to the doctor, by sex. SCB ULF surveys the years 1980 - 2005. Percent. Source: BRÅ Report 2008: 23 Crime Trends in Sweden until 2007, Figure 5, page 95.

²⁰ SOU 2010:47.

²¹ The data that reports 70 percent comes from BRÅ 2009, page 6; the increase in notifications can be found in BRÅ 2008, page 93–94.

"When you have an alcohol trend such as the one we've had, it's pretty much obvious that there will be an increase in violence," says Eckart K hlhorn. Especially, when the Swedish news program *Ekot* notes that the reported violent crimes increased by 4 percent in 2004."²²

There is just one problem with the analysis. Neither in the victim surveys nor in the hospitals is it possible to note that the number of assaults have increased during this period, and in fact quite the opposite has occurred. The Crime Prevention Council (BR ) concludes in its report *Crime Trends in Sweden until 2007* that violence does not seem to have increased: "The data that the general public provides in various Swedish victim surveys show that exposure to violence in general has not increased since the early 1990s."²³ Concerning violence in public places, the conclusion is certain: "The level of street violence has fluctuated over the period. What seems clear is that the proportion who indicated having experienced violence in public places has not increased since the early 1990s, quite the contrary."²⁴ According to these surveys men were less subject to violent assault in the period 2000-2005, the period with the highest alcohol consumption, compared with the early 1990s. Violence in the home increases from the late 1980s until 1995 and then remains at a constant level during the subsequent period, when alcohol consumption first increases markedly between 1996 - 2004 before declining somewhat.²⁵

Data from the health service also describes a fluctuating trend. The number of people hospitalized due to violence increases in the early 1990s reaching a peak in 1994 with about 3,000 people and then decreases, it then increases slightly in the early 2000s but is still significantly below the levels of the early 1990s.²⁶ These figures, in contrast to the victim survey, would thus provide support that violence increased slightly over the years when the Swedes drank the most. Meanwhile, violence is more common in the early 1990s, when people drank less.

There is a clear link between night life, alcohol and abuse. The typical assault between strangers "takes place on weekend evenings and nights between two men who are on their way to or from a bar or private party. The reason is usually that they end up in some kind of dispute."²⁷ More than 50 percent of all reported violence against men in Gothenburg takes place in central Gothenburg on Saturday and Sunday between the hours of 12:00 - 6:00 a.m. (for women the figure is 37 percent).²⁸ And 70 percent of those who assault strangers are suspected of having consumed alcohol.

22 *Ekot* 2005.

23 BR  2008, page 86

24 *Ibid*, page 97.

25 *Ibid*, page 95.

26 *Ibid*, p. 100.

27 BR  2009.

28 Spak, Kadesj  & Berander 2011.

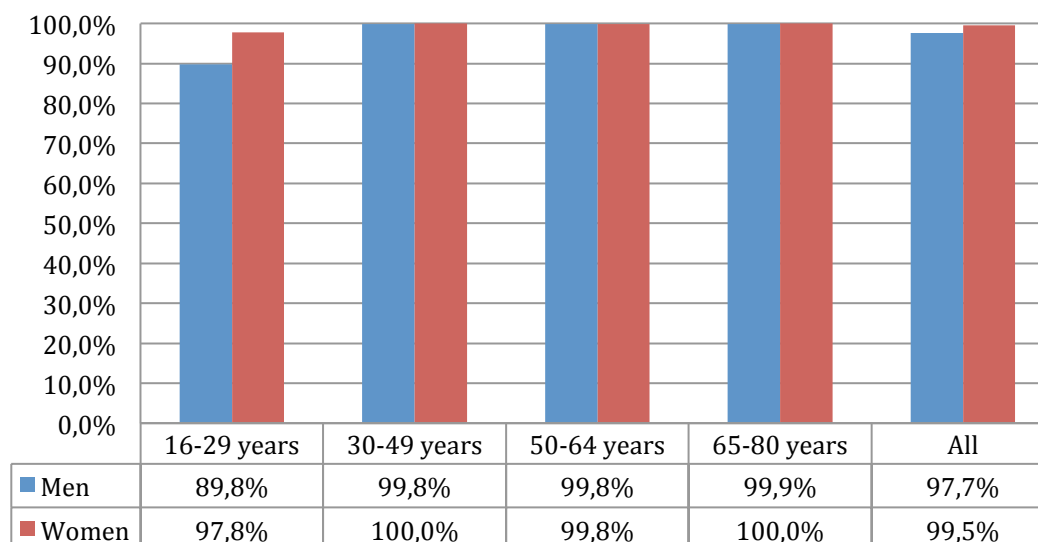


Figure 8: Proportion of drinkers who have not been in a fight at least once during the last twelve months in connection with drinking 2010. Source: CAN, Statistics on Alcohol 2010, Table 22, page 51

Meanwhile, it's also true that alcohol consumption is rarely associated with violence. A report from SoRAD shows that 99.8 percent of the drinking population over age 30 has not gotten into a fight when drinking in the last twelve months, either as perpetrators or victims. This is also true for 90 percent of the principal risk group, young males (16-29 years) and 98 percent of women in the same age group.²⁹ These are numbers to keep in mind before using alcohol-related violence as an argument for general restrictions on drinking.

The figures on how many people get into fights when drinking do not indicate that this would have been more common during the years of high consumption and longer opening hours. The figures during the 2000s fluctuate around 10 percent for men aged 16-29 around 2-3 percent for women aged 16-29, and around a few parts per thousand and a maximum of one percent for all other age categories. In 2009 and 2010 young men appear to have been involved in more fights than in 2004 when alcohol consumption was at its highest, and thus there should have been the most trouble. Thus it does not seem possible even in these surveys to argue that the increased drinking in recent years led to increased alcohol-related violence.

Being open on Saturday did not increase violence

Two changes in alcohol policy have been more explicitly paired with increased violence. Firstly, having Systembolaget open on Saturday has been linked to domestic violence, and secondly, longer bar opening hours, which is linked to violence in public places.

²⁹ Ramstedt 2010, Table 22, page 51. Figures for 2010. I have of course reversed the numbers in the table, indicating how many who got into fights.

The experiment with Saturday opening had barely begun in 2000 before the tabloid newspaper *Aftonbladet* reported on dramatically increasing violence, including a doubling of the number of reported cases of domestic violence in the County of Västernorrland.³⁰

"The increase is worse than I expected it to be," said Swedish Public Health Institute's then Director General Gunnar Ågren, and Lovisa Lantz from the Young People's Temperance Association stated that: "This is what we warned about even before the trial".

The alarm turned out to be misleading.³¹ Research follow-up to the Saturday opening of Systembolaget stores in seven test counties showed the contrary, that while alcohol sales increased by 3 percent they were unable to observe any increase in domestic violence or other abuse in the experimental counties: "None of the results show a clear increase in the indicators of abuse."³² Nor do BRÅ figures give any support to the theory that violence against women has increased as a result of Saturday opening of Systembolaget stores. Women's vulnerability to violence rose steadily in the 1990s and then remains at a stable higher level since 2000.³³ Thus, the increase occurred before Systembolaget stores were open on Saturdays, which was introduced nationwide in 2001.

Later opening hours do not seem to have increased violence

Another common belief is that later opening hours will increase violence. This may be the result, especially if many more people enjoy the nightlife. Both outcomes are found in international studies. Most evaluations of England's free opening hours show "no apparent impact on violent crime and disorder".³⁴ In Reykjavik, Iceland by contrast, violence and injuries did increase when going from a 2:00 a.m. closing time to basically free hours and a late night life. At the same time the workload of police and health professionals was reduced because everything does not happen simultaneously in all places precisely at 2:00 a.m., and the city's nightlife has become a tourist magnet.³⁵

Because the major Swedish cities experienced a surge in nightlife with later opening hours it could have been expected that violence would have increased. This is not what the evaluations revealed.

30 *Aftonbladet* 2000.

31 Just in February 2000 there was a peak for the year with regards to the number of reported cases of abuse against women over the age of 15 in Västernorrland, 53 (BRÅ, statistics database). This is likely a statistical aberration and, given that the number of reported cases of violence against women overall was lower in 2000 than the previous year, not linked to the Saturday opening at Systembolaget. The example shows in retrospect how uncritical most newspapers act when they search for outrage and how easily non-profit and government agencies confirm their preconceptions.

32 Norström & Skog (2001), appendix 3.

33 BRÅ 2008, page 95.

34 Hough & Hunter (2008).

35 Ragnarsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir & Davidsdóttir 2002. Although policing has increased by 14 percent in the inner city, and emergency clinic load has increased by 3 percent overall (31 percent on assessed nights) due to more alcohol-related harm, there was not the same concentration as when bars closed early and at the same time. For taxi drivers the advantage was even clearer. Even restaurateurs are happy; 48 percent claimed to have more guests after liberalisation, and that they stayed longer, even though they arrived later.

The Swedish Institute of Public Health says in a report in 2003 that violence has not increased in Stockholm: "There is no evidence that the late serving times led to more crime, crimes occur now at other times". In Malmö violence decreased according to injury data and the report mentions that this almost exclusively affects young men, as women were "only a very small percentage of patients". In the rest of Skåne and in Umeå, injuries were constant.³⁶

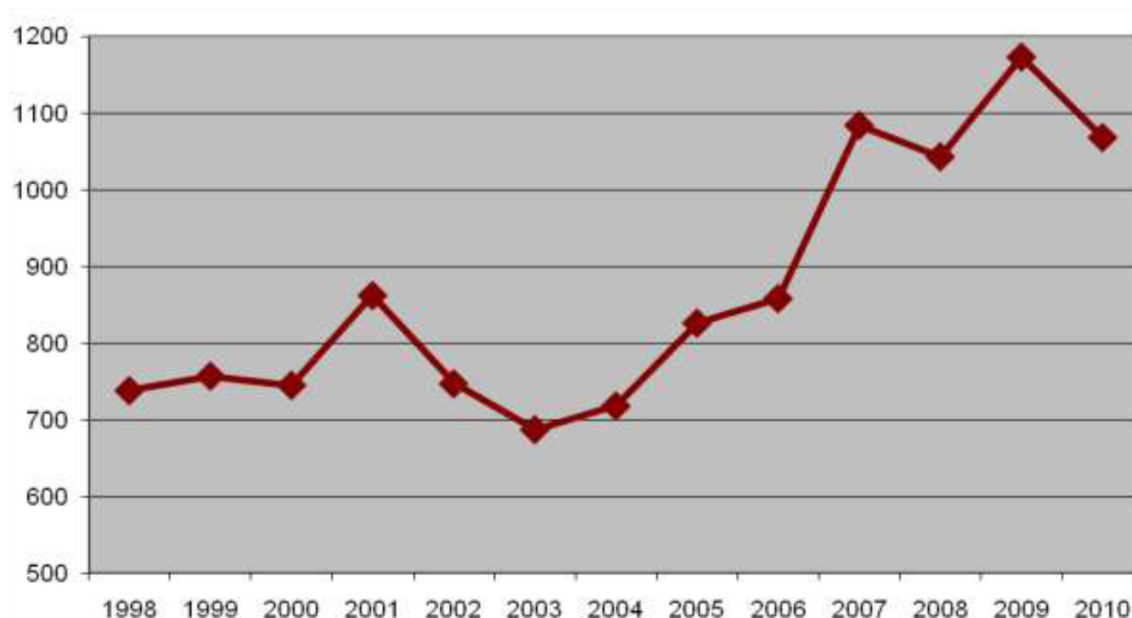


Figure 9: Number of reported violent incidents 1998-2010. Source: Spak, Kadesjö, Berander Krog och hälsa [Bars and Health], Gothenburg 2011

Year	1995	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2008	2009	2010	2011
Number	8	10	14	16	21	24	24	26	21	17	21	21	20	16

Figure 10: Number of permits to serve alcohol between 3:00 and 5:00 a.m. Saturday and Sunday in Gothenburg. Source: Spak, Kadesjö, Berander Krog och hälsa [Bars and Health], Gothenburg 2011

A later report that received much attention, *Krog och hälsa* [Bars and Health], by Fredrik Spak et al., argued that the restaurants in Gothenburg should close at 2:00 a.m. rather than, as at present, and no later than 5:00 a.m.³⁷ The irony is that the report's (imperfect) data show that between 1998 - 2004 the number of places in Gothenburg open until 5:00 increased from 10 to a high of 26, while the reported violence in the city decreased slightly during the same period (the exception is in 2001, but the slightly higher reported rate is explained by that year's EU summit). From 2005, violence reports increased in Gothenburg, interestingly enough, while the number of bars open until 5:00 has decreased. Queues and crowds around fewer places could be a contributing factor to more reported incidents of violence, however, it is argued in the report that this is due mainly to an increased tendency to report. Thus not even Spak's report maintains that violence has increased in Gothenburg, let alone can violence be linked to the number of bars open until 5:00 a.m.

³⁶ Swedish Institute of Public Health 2003.

³⁷ Spak, Kadesjö, Berander 2011.

Alcohol-related lethal violence has decreased

"[T] he consummated deadly violence - and particularly that which is alcohol-related - has declined in Sweden".

BRÅ 2011:5 *Det dödliga våldets utveckling* [Trends in Lethal Violence]

Lethal violence has decreased steadily in Sweden throughout the 1990s and 2000s, by about 25 percent (including the fact that the population has increased during this period). Much of the deadly violence still consists of alcohol-related incidents and the most common is a crime of passion at home between parties who are family, friends or acquaintances. Nearly half of offenders are deemed to be intoxicated and one third are considered to be alcohol abusers. But there are proportions that have significantly decreased and that explain much of the decline.

In the BRÅ report *Det dödliga våldets utveckling* [Trends in Lethal Violence] a number of possible explanations were discussed. One is what we drink. Even if we drink more, the consumption of liquor has decreased, and beer and wine are not correlated with violence in the same way. Another is how we drink. The same report mentions that alcohol use is decreasing among persons under the age of 50 and binge drinking among people under the age of 40. And finally, where we drink. The fact that more people drink in restaurants has also been brought forward as one of the reasons that alcohol-related deadly violence has steadily declined. Lethal violence usually takes place at home, and this number has decreased as Swedes go out more.³⁸

38 BRÅ 2011, pp. 6-8, 47-49.

CONCLUDING HYPOTHESIS: FREEDOM IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

This report has shown that alcohol policy could be liberalised without the fears of disease, violence and death being even close to coming true. Having come this far, it may sound as if it was not as bad as we feared. This is a major understatement. The bottom line is that it was possible to make Sweden freer, more fun and more enjoyable in the area of alcohol, without the adverse effects that were feared. The humiliating queues at Systembolaget are gone, as is illicit distilling and customs inspectors going through holiday luggage. Instead, we have ale, cider and boxed wine, thousands of different wines to choose from and big city nightlife until five in the morning.

In connection with the recent debate surrounding entertainment venues open until 5:00 a.m. in Gothenburg, the owners of the jazz club Nefertiti tried to summarise what has happened to Gothenburg nightlife since the 1990s.

Their judgment is that it is "a completely different world":

It is better, nicer, warmer, cooler, sounds better, safer, and not least: What an assortment! Gothenburg is now an event city to be reckoned with, a music town, a restaurant town and a really hot club city - everything that many of us see as some of the attractions when we talk about our favourite cities like New York, Berlin or London. We at Nefertiti are happy to brag about our 200 concerts a year, but I think that many of the other players involved can and should do so as well.³⁹

In discussions of alcohol policy these aspects are often completely omitted. Most surveys of alcohol tend to conclude that the epidemiological literature have no measure for "the more experiential side", and then totally ignores everything that for most people is the reason to drink, which is to socialise and have fun.⁴⁰

Instead, the assessment is mainly focused on the downside of alcohol: disease, violence and death. To assess alcohol according to such parameters is a part of the so-called total consumption model. It boils down to the idea that the more alcohol is consumed in the general population, the more all the negative parameters associated with alcohol increase: disease, violence and death. The reasoning behind the model is that once more alcohol is consumed in the community, there is a special temptation for those who drink large amounts: alcohol is a social drug. This model has been considered sufficient grounds to justify almost any kind of restrictions in the area of alcohol.⁴¹

39 Brink, Nordwall & Lundin 2012.

40 To quote Edwards, ed., 1996, a frequently referenced standard work.

41 A plea for the total consumption model as a political ideology is Edwards, ed. (1996). A critique of this ideology developed in Svensson 2011, especially pages 177-186.

In the light of the Swedish experience there are three reasons to question an alcohol policy based solely on the total consumption model.

1. The relationship between drinking and harmful effects, or between liberalisation and drinking, does not seem to be as strong as previously suggested. Projections based on the total consumption model of what would happen with a Swedish EC (don't you mean EU) membership or that the increase in consumption that actually took place has not been met. As we have seen, it is uncertain whether mortality, morbidity, and violence have increased at all, although it has long been assumed that abuse and mortality increase at about twice the rate as average consumption.

However, the model's supporters will probably always be able to claim some sort of connection. In addition to alcohol-related lethal violence, which after all — and fortunately — is rare, no apparent reduction in alcohol-related problems has occurred in connection with a growth in consumption. Nor would this be expected. Everyone, however, seems to agree that the problems in Sweden have increased far less than the total consumption model predicted, which may be explained by increased drinking in groups with less risk and that the share of beer and wine has grown at the expense of hard liquor.

2. The total consumption model has a one-sided focus on the disadvantages that are the exception when drinking.

As we have seen the most common link between alcohol and violence is to drink without getting into fights. Even among young men, about 90 percent in one year do not get into trouble when they drink. Most alcohol-related illnesses and deaths require long-term addiction. Even most alcohol-related accidents occur with extreme drunkenness. Of all driver fatalities, for example, at least 3 percent had alcohol levels equivalent to drunk driving (above 0.2 parts per thousand), while at least 18 percent had levels equivalent to aggravated drunk driving (over 1 per thousand).⁴²

The point is that the alcohol-related problems that are the focus of the total consumption model are exceptional and affect only a small minority among those who drink. It is an ideological, not a scientifically founded conclusion to base alcohol policy solely on data that consider and measure problems, especially as restrictive policy measures affect everyone who drinks. The political ideology that follows from only taking the parameters of the total consumption model into account is restrictive, and unfavourable to a population that generally handles alcohol well, and parameters that measure the latter are largely ignored by the model.

3. The total consumption model misses that freedom can reduce the negative effects related to alcohol.

Judging by the Swedish liberalisation, a richer and freer range of alcohol does not seem to have the same negative effects as increased alcohol consumption while preserving constraints. People seem to take less harm when entertainment becomes more fun, even if they drink and go out more

42 CAN 2010.

frequently. This is of course no more than a hypothesis, but a few correlations have been proposed in the above material.

- a. The fact that serving permits increased fivefold and opening hours extended means that more people go out to drink, which in turn may have contributed to there being fewer drunken brawls at home that lead to someone's death.
- b. The fact that beer is no longer synonymous with just "a lager," that the wine selection has multiplied and is also available in a box and over the Internet, and that advertising can entice us to try something different, is probably a contributing factor to Swedes drinking less hard liquor and thus to violence and ill health not increasing as feared.
- c. During the period when the quota on imports of alcohol from the EU to Sweden increased, so did imports and the share of foreign-bought alcohol Swedes drank. But once the right to bring in large amounts of alcohol was established imports decreased again.

There is also some evidence outside the Swedish experience that liberalisation generally alters alcohol consumption in a desirable way. Economist Mark Thornton has shown a correlation called the *iron law of prohibition*: The more stringent the legal restrictions, the more concentrated the drugs are.⁴³ Conversely, we should see that the less stringent the restrictions, the more the concern for the alcoholic content will go away. That's exactly what we can see in the Swedish consumer behaviour when people have more choice and the legal restrictions are fewer.

Also, of course, when you give people options there is also the risk that they do not choose as has been planned or hoped. All liberalisation policies will probably not show the clear-cut beneficial effects that we have seen in Sweden. Lower alcohol taxes in Finland meant that alcohol injuries and deaths increased. In many areas, later opening hours for entertainment have also been accompanied by an increased number of violent incidents.⁴⁴

Another objection might be that further liberalisation can reverse the positive trends. Could the abolition of the Systembolaget monopoly reduce wine selection in the market and reverse the current trend toward decreased alcohol consumption? Such a development is not very probable. Systembolaget boasts a range of over 1,800 different wine items, but many are often sold out. In Denmark, the market can accommodate about 20,000 wines, more than ten times as many, if not in the same store. In France, there is a single wine shop with about 6,000 wines, three times the entire Systembolaget assortment, and also small wine shops with a far more specialised assortment, personal interest behind the choice and opportunity to sample.⁴⁵

43 Thornton 1998, pages 725-740.

44 Although the overall assessment of later opening hours can still be positive because of enjoyable outdoor activities and reduced workload on the same date, see note 35, Ragnarsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir & Davidsdóttir 2002.

45 Karlsson, 2009.

In summary, the data in this report indicate that a nostalgic concern for old restrictions, monopolies and paradigms is misguided. Continued alcohol policy discussion should be about how we can continue and expand the successful Swedish policy of liberalisation.

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