

8/6/24, 9:15 AM

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On doorstep delivery of alcohol

What are the arguments for and against online delivery of alcohol? How much of India consumes liquor? Can such a system make it safer for women to access alcohol? How should governments regulate liquor consumption?

EXPLAINER

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The story so far:

The States of Delhi, Karnataka, Haryana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Goa, and Kerala are or were mulling plans to allow the doorstep delivery of alcohol through platforms like Swiggy, BigBasket, and Zomato. India has seen a steady rise in alcohol consumption. The recorded per capita consumption has increased from 1.6 litres in 2003-2005 to 2.2 litres in 2010, then to 5.5 litres in 2016-2018. With \$52 billion in revenue, India is the sixth-largest alcohol market worldwide. According to a Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment survey in 2019, there were about 16 crore alcohol users in India in the 10-75 year age group in 2018. Medically, the safe limit for alcohol consumption is zero millilitres. Alcohol use causes three lakh deaths in the country every year.

Why doorstep delivery?

There are two main arguments in favour of doorstep delivery of alcohol. First, that excise taxes on alcohol sales can help generate revenue for Central and State governments. Across States, taxes on alcohol sales contribute up to a quarter of all revenue generated for governments. Second, doorstep delivery can help reduce drunk-driving incidents and prevent road traffic crashes and injuries. In India, 6-48% of fatal road traffic fatalities are due to alcohol use.

A third argument is that doorstep deliveries may not threaten the safety of women consumers. There is some evidence from Kerala that shutting bars selling hard liquor reduced on-premise violence against women. Doorstep delivery options might have a similar effect, especially for women who live alone or with other women.



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However, this argument is on a slippery slope: for the majority of India's women, safety cannot be presumed as domestic violence related to alcohol use is rampant. So while doorstep delivery will help women access alcohol without social stigma – a possible advantage in itself – whether it could reduce violence against them is suspect.

What are the arguments against?

Studies to date agree that for India, the costs due to alcohol use exceed economic benefits from alcohol sales. Second, schemes with doorstep delivery of alcohol assume people will change their drinking and socialising behaviours in response to the new option. It is reasonable but requires concrete evidence. There is some evidence that the availability of alcohol on-demand can increase consumption, promote binge drinking, and lead to harms related to alcohol use.

Similarly, it is not straightforward to assume doorstep alcohol delivery can reduce drunk-driving. There are several other, evidence-based policies that can help deal with that issue including sobriety checkpoints, stringent penalties for repeat offenders, and increasing availability of public transport and other ride-share options.

What are the effects of alcohol consumption?

Alcohol is a carcinogen and causes at least seven types of cancers. Alcohol consumption also increases the risk of injuries, abuse of other substances, mental illnesses, diabetes mellitus, liver disease, diseases of the heart and blood vessels, and chronic kidney diseases. Along with health implications for the user, male alcohol misuse increases the risk and severity of inter-partner violence. Treatment of diseases and injuries due

to alcohol consumption are expected to cost India more than ₹3 lakh crore between 2011 and 2050. Adding productivity losses raises this to ₹121.3 lakh crore. The revenue to governments from excise taxes will be only one-fifth of the financial losses. Worldwide, the alcohol industry is known for intense lobbying including efforts to weaken health warning labels. The alcohol industry views low- and middle-income countries as emerging markets. In India, the industry has been known to advocate against alcohol use reduction policies despite evidence of its effectiveness.

What can governments do?

Except for some national policies – including drunk driving laws and health warning labels – alcohol-use policies have been delegated to States, resulting in wide variation in policy framing and implementation. The instruments available to State and Central governments allow them to mitigate harms due to alcohol use through cross-sectoral public health approaches. They include restricting the availability and marketing of alcohol, higher taxes, enforcement of drunk-driving laws, and higher investment in cost-beneficial psychosocial treatments of alcohol-use disorders. So if doorstep delivery is to be offered, for example, States can change the trade-off for consumers from whether they should order in to whether they should drink at all – which they can achieve by setting higher prices and taxes.

In tandem, governments should work with health departments and other organisations to monitor the impact of doorstep delivery on alcohol consumption. Companies offering these services must share accurate data with the government to understand the health and economic burden. The decision should be revised if harms are evident.

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THE GIST

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