Received: 29 August 2024 | Revised: 5 December 2024 | Accepted: 24 January 2025

DOI: 10.1111/dar.14020

ORIGINAL PAPER

Drug and Alcohol REVIEW APSAD WILEY

Comparing alcohol policy environments in high-income jurisdictions with the International Alcohol Control Policy Index

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Abstract

Introduction: Considerable evidence exists on the most effective policy to reduce alcohol harm; however, a tool and index to allow comparisons of policy status of the most effective policies between similar jurisdictions and change over time within a jurisdiction has not been widely used. The International Alcohol Control (IAC) Policy Index is designed to address this gap and monitor the alcohol policy environment with regard to four effective policy domains (tax/pricing, availability, marketing and drink driving).

Methods: This study compares IAC Policy Index scores across 11 high-income jurisdictions: Aotearoa (Māori language name for New Zealand); Australia; Finland; Norway; the Netherlands; (Republic of Ireland; Lithuania; Ontario; Alberta; Quebec; British Columbia). Collaborators in the 11 high-income jurisdictions populated the online Alcohol Policy Tool with available indicators. The team in Aotearoa New Zealand sought to validate information and worked with collaborators to clarify any uncertainties in the data.

Results: Lithuania, Norway, Finland and Ireland scored above average on the IAC Policy Index. The jurisdictions varied in terms of the strength of policy in different domains, with drink driving legislation showing the greatest consistency and marketing the strongest relationship between stringency of policy and impact on the ground.

Discussion and Conclusions: Results in high-income jurisdictions suggested the IAC Policy Index provides a useful overview of core alcohol policy status, allows for comparisons between jurisdictions and has the potential to be useful in alcohol policy debate.

KEYWORDS
alcohol policy, high-income jurisdictions, impact, index, stringency

Key points

- The overall rankings of high-income jurisdictions using the IAC Policy Index aligned with narrative research.
- Jurisdictions differed in the policy domains which scored well.
- Drink driving counter-measures were the most consistent between jurisdictions.
- The correlation between the stringency and impact scores of the index was not significant except in the domain of alcohol marketing.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In monitoring the field of noncommunicable diseases the focus has been predominantly on behavioural risk factors, such as tobacco and alcohol consumption and epidemiological outcomes, and not on assessing accountability for implementation of the World Health Organization's (WHO) cost-effective interventions; this has been critiqued on the grounds that what is not measured is likely to rank as a lower priority by governments [1]. An index measuring the status of the most cost-effective alcohol control policies has been developed as part of the International Alcohol Control (IAC) study.

1.1 | International Alcohol Control collaboration

The IAC collaboration was initiated in 2010 with the development of two research tools, a survey of consumption and policy related behaviour and a protocol for the measurement of the alcohol environment in a collaboration of alcohol scientists from five countries (England, Scotland, Thailand, South Korea and Aotearoa New Zealand [NZ]) [2]. Cross-country analyses were published in a Special Issue of *Drug and Alcohol Review* (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14653362/2018/37/S2). Subsequently, data from 12 diverse countries (Aotearoa NZ; Australia; England; Scotland; the Netherlands; Vietnam; Thailand; South Africa; Turkey; Chile; Saint Kitts and Nevis; and Mongolia) became the basis of the development of the IAC Policy Index using the indicators collected on the most effective policies: controls on availability, drink driving, marketing and taxation/price. The IAC Policy Index is scored using weighting to reflect the evidence on most effective policies [3] (see Appendix, Table A1) and was found to be strongly associated with recorded alcohol consumption per capita, and related to levels of abstention and to lower levels of self-reported consumption in the initial participating jurisdictions [4–6]. The intention of the IAC study is to provide a collaborative platform to assess policy status of jurisdictions allowing comparisons between jurisdictions and over time. An innovation of the IAC Policy Index is that scores incorporate the stringency of regulation (i.e., policy settings) and also the impacts on the alcohol environment, such as trading hours and prices available [4].

The 2022/2023 phase of the IAC collaboration, included 11 high-income jurisdictions (Aotearoa NZ; Australia; Finland; Norway; the Netherlands; Republic of Ireland; Lithuania; Ontario; Alberta; Quebec; and British Columbia). This is a convenience sample with participation from jurisdictions chosen to be roughly similar to Aotearoa NZ; all of the researchers approached agreed to participate.

Data on the alcohol policy environment were collated using an online tool, the Alcohol Policy Tool (APT) (the APT was derived from the previous data collection on the alcohol policy environment [7], but differed in that it relied on administrative data, observational and website data collection; the APT does not require, or preclude, interviews with expert informants).

1.2 | Comparing high-income jurisdictions

The IAC Policy Index can be used to compare policy status between similar jurisdictions. Previously this has been carried out for middle-income jurisdictions in WHO regions where efforts are being made to support countries to enhance alcohol policy [8–10]. In the current comparison, 11 high-income jurisdictions that collected data using the APT in 2022/2023 are compared.

2 | METHODS

The design of the study was descriptive. The APT was used to collect data in 2022/2023 and these data were used to calculate the IAC Policy Index in 11 high-income jurisdictions.

2.1 | Data collection

The IAC APT enabled a standardised documentation and assessment of the alcohol policy landscape. The APT assesses the presence and stringency of key policies, and the proximal impacts of these policies (but does not incorporate outcome measures like consumption or harm). Each policy area and the indicators used are detailed in Table 1.

2.2 | Policy stringency

Data on policy stringency were sourced from legislative texts and administrative records. Measures for physical availability included regulations on the location and number of alcohol outlets, including specific geographic and proximity provisions and trading hour restrictions.

Drink driving regulations were analysed using a scale ranging from no blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit to a BAC of 0–0.03%. The implementation of sobriety and random breath testing checkpoints was also documented.

Tax policies were evaluated based on the proportion of lowest retail price attributed to taxes for beer, wine and spirits, weighted by their market share. The presence or absence of minimum unit pricing was also included.

Marketing policies were categorised into traditional advertising, digital platforms, product placement, sponsorships and sales incentives. Three scores were possible, ranging from no legal restrictions to full bans, with the latter scoring highest for stringency.

2.3 | Policy impact assessment

Impact data were collected through a range of methods reflecting availability of data.

Actual operational days and hours were typically collected via telephone surveys and observation incorporating a range of outlet types and average trading hours calculated. Listings of a small sample of on-premises hours were taken from Google maps for one location (Norway). In Canadian provinces, Ireland and Lithuania only hours set in alcohol monopoly or state regulations were provided.

Outlet density and drink driving enforcement data was drawn from national licensing and policing datasets respectively, however, these data were only available in a minority of the jurisdictions.

The affordability of alcohol was gauged by documenting available retail prices through telephone surveys and in some cases via online research including retailer websites (Ireland, Canada) or national statistics (Lithuania). Prices were transformed to US dollars and normalised against the GNI per capita for a measure of economic accessibility.

The presence of alcohol marketing was documented across various channels through physical and online observation, interviews with informants (typically one or two people experienced in alcohol research or regulatory roles) and in two locations this was supplemented by a review of recent research and government reports (Ontario, the Netherlands and Norway). Digital and sponsorship forms were weighted more heavily to reflect their likely greater impact.

2.4 | Analysis

IAC Policy Index scores are presented for each jurisdiction and by policy domain. Each domain contributed a normalised score from zero to one, where higher scores indicated stricter policies and greater impact on the alcohol envlironment. The maximum score for Stringency is 14, while the maximum score for Impact is 11; these reflect the jurisdictions' data and the weighting according to evidence-based effectiveness ratings (1–5). A sensitivity analysis, undertaken as part of a previous study, validated the robustness of the index against variations in effectiveness weights, with detailed methodology and outcomes referenced in Casswell et al. [4].

Correlations were calculated between stringency and impact scores where data were available.

3 | RESULTS

Table 2 shows the IAC Policy Index scores for the 11 high-income jurisdictions.

TABLE 1 Measures used in the International Alcohol Control Policy Index.

Policy status (legislated)	Stringency of legislated policy		Impact on the ground	
Trading hours/ days of sale	**Description**	**Measure**	**Description**	**Measure**
On-premises	Number of legal trading hours per day	Hours per day averaged over week	Actual trading hours per day	Hours per day averaged over week
	Legally allowed to open 7 days	Yes/no	Latest time alcohol is sold	Number of hours after 12 AM
Off-premises	Number of legal trading hours per day	Hours per day averaged over week	Actual trading hours per day	Hours per day averaged over week
	Legally allowed to open 7 days	Yes/no	Latest time alcohol is sold	Number of hours after 8 PM
Outlet density On-premises	Restrictions on number	Yes/no	Not included—not available for enough countries	
	Restrictions within geographic area	Yes/no		
	Restrictions from certain locations	Yes/no		
Off-premises	Restrictions on number	Yes/no	Not included—not available for enough countries	
	Restrictions within geographic area	Yes/no		
	Restrictions from certain locations	Yes/no		
Pricing				
	Tax	Tax percentage of lowest price[a]	Affordability of alcohol	Percentage of GNI for 100 standard drinks[a]
	Minimum unit price	Yes/no		
Marketing				
	Legally binding restrictions on		On the ground marketing	
	• Traditional • Digital • Sponsorship • Sales promotions	• No regulation • Industry self-regulation • Partial ban • Total ban	• Traditional • Digital • Sponsorship • Sales promotions	Number of modes
			Sanctions for non-compliance	Yes/no
Drink driving				
	Blood alcohol content level	• No blood alcohol content • 0.05%+ • 0·03–0·05% • 0.0–0.03%	Extent of breath tests	Percentage of vehicles stopped for random breath testing
	Enforcement			
	Breath testing	• None • Sobriety checkpoints • Random breath testing		
	Zero tolerance for professional drivers	Yes/no		

[a]Weighted by the percentage of beer, wine and spirits consumed in each country as per World Health Organization: Global Information System on Alcohol and Health.

TABLE 2 International Alcohol Control Policy Index score.

	Stringency	Impact	Total
Lithuania	7.55	3.68	11.23
Norway	7.42	2.85	10.27
Finland	6.11	2.82	8.93
Ireland	6.60	1.92	8.52
Ontario	6.36	0.65	7.01
Quebec	5.88	1.00	6.88
Netherlands	4.82	1.35	6.17
British Columbia	5.42	0.53	5.95
Australia	4.74	1.18	5.93
Alberta	5.01	0.53	5.54
New Zealand	3.77	1.26	5.03

TABLE 3 Hours and days of sale.

	Stringency	Impact	Total
Finland	0.31	0.96	1.27
Norway	0.43	0.81	1.24
Ireland	0.40	0.62	1.02
Quebec	0.32	0.70	1.02
Netherlands	0.35	0.64	0.99
Lithuania	0.27	0.70	0.97
New Zealand	0.22	0.67	0.89
Australia	0.33	0.48	0.81
Ontario	0.28	0.52	0.80
Alberta	0.27	0.40	0.67
British Columbia	0.24	0.41	0.65

The jurisdictions of Lithuania, Norway, Finland and Ireland scored higher in the IAC Policy Index than others and the provinces of Canada. Australia, the Netherlands and Aotearoa NZ scored lower than average.

Examination of the scores in different domains illustrates differences between jurisdictions in terms of the domains which contributed to higher IAC Policy Index scores.

3.1 | Availability controls: Trading hours

Restriction of trading hours was observed to be strongest in Finland and Norway (Table 3). The off-premises in these jurisdictions are controlled by state retail monopolies and are where spirits and wines were available. Trading hours were legally restricted to 56 h per week in Norway and 72 h in Finland. Beer was available in supermarkets and convenience stores, open until 8 PM in Norway and 9 PM in Finland. Norway's bars and restaurants sold alcohol slightly later than in Finland reducing its impact score.

The most liberal trading hours were observed in the Canadian provinces, where off-premises, both alcohol specific stores and supermarkets (selling a different mix of alcohol products in each jurisdiction), were open until 11 PM in Ontario and British Columbia and until 2.00 AM in Alberta.

3.2 | Availability controls: Outlet density

As described above, lack of available data on actual density of alcohol outlets in the sample of jurisdictions whose data contributed to the development of the IAC Policy Index limited indicators in this domain of outlet density to stringency of policy [4].

Most countries scored zero reflecting a lack of any national level legislative or regulatory controls on numbers or locations of outlets (noting that the presence of state monopolies or regional/local level regulation were not scored in this domain).

The higher scoring countries had location restrictions (Lithuania), capped numbers (Ontario) and a moratorium (British Columbia) on new retail stores.

3.3 | Tax and pricing policy

Tax as a proportion of lowest retail price available off-licence (takeaway alcohol products) was highest in Ireland, Finland and Norway (Table 4).

Legislation to enable minimum unit pricing was in place in Ireland, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec (in off-premises), but not in Norway, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Alberta or Aotearoa NZ.

The measure of tax impact: Affordability was calculated based on the retail price relative to income and alcohol was relatively affordable in the Netherlands, Ireland, Quebec and Australia.

The jurisdictions with the least affordable alcohol products were Aotearoa NZ, Finland and Lithuania. Two of the Canadian provinces, Ontario and Alberta, were also above average in terms of alcohol products being relatively less affordable.

3.4 | Restrict marketing

The jurisdictions with the most restrictive alcohol marketing policy observed were Lithuania and Norway (Table 5). In the case of Lithuania this translated into no

TABLE 4 Pricing and tax.

	Affordability[a]	Affordability score	Tax share[b]	Tax/pricing score
Alberta	0.21%	0.13	45%	2.24
Australia	0.15%	0.09	46%	1.46
British Columbia	0.19%	0.12	14%	1.26
Finland	0.25%	0.15	61%	1.95
Ireland	0.12%	0.07	63%	2.82
Lithuania	0.22%	0.14	53%	1.7
Netherlands	0.10%	0.06	34%	1.08
New Zealand	0.26%	0.16	34%	1.08
Norway	0.18%	0.11	60%	1.92
Ontario	0.21%	0.13	42%	2.15
Quebec	0.17%	0.11	27%	1.68

[a]Percent of GNI per capita required to buy 100 drinks.
[b]Tax as a percentage of pre-value-added tax price.

marketing in the modes observed; however, brand sharing in sponsorship was occurring. Despite Norway's ban, marketing was observed in social media and sponsorship. The other jurisdictions had partial bans, or, in the case of Alberta, no regulation. Partial bans usually restricted marketing in some modes or by potency (Finland), and marketing of alcohol products was observed in many channels.

When either partial bans or no regulations were in place, few countries had enforcement mechanisms and the possibility of sanctions. Finland and Norway, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Quebec had official monitoring systems in place, but Quebec did not have the possibility of sanctions being applied. Lithuania, Finland and Australia (which relied on a complaints system) were the only jurisdictions to report sanctions had been applied in the previous 12 months.

3.5 | Drink driving counter-measures

Most jurisdictions that contributed data to the development of the IAC Policy Index did not have data on enforcement of random breath testing, so only stringency scores are included in the IAC Policy Index at this stage.

All jurisdictions had legislation enabling random breath testing in place. Norway's legal limit was lower than average at 0.02% for adults and Lithuania was 0.04%. Most jurisdictions were at 0.05% for adult drivers, but Quebec and Ontario were at 0.08%. Jurisdictions were equally divided on zero tolerance for professional drivers.

TABLE 5 Legislation and presence in marketing modes.

	Stringency	Impact	Total
Lithuania	2.08	2.83	4.91
Norway	2.08	1.85	3.93
Finland	1.85	1.37	3.22
Ireland	1.38	1.17	2.55
Netherlands	1.38	0.59	1.97
Quebec	1.38	0.20	1.58
Ontario	0.92	0.00	0.92
British Columbia	0.92	0.00	0.92
Australia	0.46	0.20	0.66
New Zealand	0.46	0.10	0.56
Alberta	0.00	0.00	0.00

3.6 | Correlations between stringency and impact scores

There was a significant correlation between marketing regulations and the impact score (0.827, $p = 0114$) but not for pricing/tax, hours and days of sale or the overall index score.

4 | DISCUSSION

The high-income jurisdictions scoring relatively highly on the IAC Policy Index were in line with expectations based on narrative reviews of policy. The Nordic countries have a history of stronger policy response to alcohol harm relative to other European countries [11] and maintain some state control over availability. However, Finland's legislative process for reform of alcohol legislation was highly politicised and resulted in liberalisation in 2018 [12]. Ireland and Lithuania have both strengthened their alcohol policy in the past 5 years [13,14].

Ontario and Quebec scored high relative to the other Canadian jurisdictions: British Columbia and Alberta. Previous comparisons of Canadian provinces using a different scale that reflected 11 policy domains, including the four used in the IAC study found, as did this analysis, that Ontario scored more highly than the other Canadian jurisdictions [15].

Examination of the domain scores illustrated that jurisdictions with similar overall IAC Policy scores differed in the contribution different domains made to their score, and a jurisdiction that scored relatively poorly overall could, nevertheless, have a strong score in one domain. This is illustrated by Aotearoa NZ, which had the lowest overall index score but was observed to have low affordability (in a context of high inflation and tax policy that adjusted annually for inflation).

In all of the jurisdictions, the majority of the alcohol market was sold from off premise outlets (takeaway, packaged alcohol) (see Statista [16]) for specific reports on sales volume by market channel for each individual country. There was a wide range in the average hours in a week alcohol was legally sold from these off licences; this varied from 56 to 122 h. Supermarkets and convenience stores provided longer access than alcohol specific stores in some jurisdictions and it was common for supermarkets and convenience stores to be restricted to selling either beer, wine or both, but not spirits.

Few jurisdictions had population-based density controls established in national legislation. However, jurisdictions with state owned retail stores: Finland, Norway, Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec controlled the availability of sale of higher potency alcohol products via restricting the number of these retail outlets. Ontario and British Columbia had caps on grocery outlets and other jurisdictions had legislation regarding restricted location of outlets. Licensing systems may also affect density at the national, regional or local level, and Australia has state level restrictions, but only national level legislation was included in the current index score.

The jurisdictions varied in the nature of the taxes imposed (ad valorem, alcohol specific excise and sales tax). Data on these were used to calculate the tax/share, the tax component of the retail price. This tax/share indicator is commonly used in tobacco research [17] and has been reported in relation to between country comparisons of alcohol taxation [18]. We used this as the measure of stringency of tax/pricing policy in the IAC Policy Index, along with the presence of minimum unit pricing. The stringency score was relatively high for Ireland, Australia, Alberta, Ontario, Finland and Norway but no jurisdiction in this study met the tax/price share recommended for tobacco of 75% of the retail price [19].

Tax and pricing policy is intended to affect affordability of alcohol products in order to influence consumption [3], but there was no correlation between the tax stringency score and affordability. Ireland, for example, had relatively affordable alcohol products despite their high tax/price share. Previous analysis in Europe has also shown no relationship of tax rates with affordability of beer and wine, although tax rates did predict affordability of spirits [20]. Only in Aotearoa NZ, Finland and Lithuania was the affordability of alcohol products relatively low and none of these jurisdictions had minimum unit price in place but did have specific tax. To ensure affordability is controlled it is recommended that alcohol specific taxes be adjusted in line with inflation and income [18].

Overall, there was little regulation of alcohol marketing and most jurisdictions reported marketing in many modes, including digital media and branded sponsorship. The jurisdiction with the most stringent legislation and monitoring was Lithuania and at the time of data collection for the IAC collaboration, research had suggested high compliance with Lithuania's total alcohol advertising ban on social media [21]. This is in contrast with the situation in Norway, the other country with a total ban, in which alcohol marketing was reportedly present in digital media (social media, alcohol industry websites and video streaming services). All the other jurisdictions were either not regulated at all or had in place partial bans, and, in both these situations, marketing was observed in many or all of the 27 modes of marketing asked about. However, overall, there was a positive relationship between the extent of the regulations in place and impact of marketing in the jurisdiction.

The issue of brand sharing and alibi marketing [22,23] is emerging as a key issue as pressures to restrict alcohol marketing increase and the APT explicitly asks about this issue. Norway included a prohibition on the industry marketing its non-alcohol products in their legislation, but Lithuania did not and there was use of alcohol brand logos in both cultural and sports sponsorship in Lithuania [24–26].

Drink driving legislation was relatively consistent as all of the jurisdictions had a per se BAC/breath alcohol content in place and most were at the European Union recommended level [27] of 0.05% or less. All of these jurisdictions also had legislation to allow random breath testing to take place, which is the most effective enforcement measure [3]. However, the extent of enforcement was not measured in the index since administrative records were not available in many jurisdictions. The value of the IAC Policy Index includes highlighting missing data that are potentially valuable to measure the alcohol policy environment, and administrative records of random breath test enforcement is an example of useful data not available in many IAC collaborating countries.

The IAC Policy Index incorporates measures of stringency (legislation and regulation) and indicators of impact on the environment, which is expected to mediate the effect of policy on consumption and harm. While it is not expected there will be a perfect correlation between these two scores due to different contexts of implementation, a lack of any correlation, such as between scores of alcohol pricing policy and affordability, suggests the value in exploring additional or alternative indicators.

The aim of the development of the APT and the IAC Policy Index score is to add value to policy discussion by providing a set of summary scores reflecting indicators related to a limited number of the most effective alcohol policies. Its focus is on specific legal and policy indicators and collects sufficient detail to distinguish the strength of the policies [1]. The design and methods adopted to achieve the IAC Policy Index attempt to meet some of the criteria of 'second generation indicators' based on: relatively non-controversial evidence of effective policy, validity and specificity of indicators, and allowing disaggregation of the data instead of a single aggregate number [28].

A further aim of the development of the APT and IAC Policy Index was to provide a relatively low resource approach that could be used in both high-income and low- and middle-income jurisdictions and to encourage emerging researchers in low- and middle-income jurisdictions to assess alcohol policy and contribute data to alcohol policy debate. The value of the index relies on communication of the results with policy advisors and policymakers and there have been promising responses to date in some middle-income countries. In those contexts, collaborators are now using the data gathered to populate the APT to describe the policy status of their country [29]. The results have been shared in WHO meetings with policymakers and in a report to the Western Pacific Region of the WHO [8]. However, it is not known the extent to which this will translate into support of improved policy, or if the index will be found useful in high-income jurisdictions or in a broader international arena.

4.1 | Limitations

There is a gap in the current index due to the lack of impact data on density of outlets and actual enforcement of random breath testing.

There are limitations in the measures of availability. In some jurisdictions, policy and particularly legislation and regulation controlling availability is at the state or municipal level. This was true of Australia, for example, and the scoring of the index relies on national level regulation so does not acknowledge sub regional differences. Availability is also likely to be controlled via licensing and this is not explored in the APT. The presence or absence of state ownership of retail outlets was not included in the index and was a relevant factor in some jurisdictions in the current sample.

The study was carried out with minimal funding constraining data collection, therefore marketing impact, for example, was based on researchers' awareness of different modes.

This IAC Policy Index did not include indicators pertaining to youth such as minimum purchase age and zero tolerance for drink driving, which may have broader impacts.

The alcohol market is dynamic, for example, online purchase and home delivery has emerged as a major distribution source since the IAC Policy Index was calculated.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Results in high-income jurisdictions suggested the IAC Policy Index provides a useful overview of core alcohol policy status, allows for comparisons between jurisdictions and has the potential to be useful in alcohol policy debate by holding governments accountable for implementation of WHO best buys.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Each author certifies that their contribution to this work meets the standards of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to our collaborators who participated in this research, many without specific funding. The collection of data in Aotearoa NZ and analysis of these data was funded by Te Whatu Ora, Health NZ. Open access publishing facilitated by Massey University, as part of the Wiley - Massey University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The data collection in Aotearoa NZ and analysis for this study was funded by Te Whatu Ora, Health New Zealand.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on reasonable request from author.

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How to cite this article: Casswell S, Randerson S, Parker K, Huckle T, Callinan S, Campbell O, et al. Comparing alcohol policy environments in high-income jurisdictions with the International Alcohol Control Policy Index. Drug Alcohol Rev. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.14020

APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Effectiveness weights.

Stringency	Weights
Hours and days of sale	1
Outlet density	3
Drink driving	3
Pricing	4
Marketing	3
On the ground Impact	
Hours and days of sale	1
Drink driving	1
Price	5
Marketing	4