**The Decline in the Number of Public Houses 2005 to 2023**

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**Executive Summary**

* The objective of this report, which was commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland (DIGI), is to identify and examine the long-term decline in the number of public houses in Ireland over the period 2005 to 2023, at both national and sub-national levels. This report updates a similar report on the same topic for the period 2005 to 2022 published by DIGI in 2023.
* The data source is the database/register of alcohol licences compiled by the Revenue Commissioners. This individual register has been analysed for several years by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI) to identify county and national trends for public house licences.
* Between 2005 and 2023 the number of publican licences declined from 8,617 to 6,563, a decline of 2,054 or 23.8%.
* The decrease between 2005 and 2023 was 2,054 or an average of 114 per year. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 public houses per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2023 the average annual closures rose to 144.
* Current closures are in excess of 100 annually and the number has worsened in recent years. Closures were 102 in 2021, 108 in 2022 and 117 in 2023. This is relative to the very large figure of 247 closures in 2020.
* The 2023 decline of 117 is the second largest since 2013. Decline in public house numbers is a current issue.
* Closures exceeded 200 in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2020.
* Between 2005 and 2023 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 22 or 2.8%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,032 or 25.9%. This compares with a decline of 23.8% in the country as a whole. The rest of the country accounted for 98.9% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2023. Dublin accounted for 1.1%.
* Annual declines in the rest of the country were 216 in 2020, 100 in 2021, 115 in 2022 and 122 in 2023. While lower than 2020, the annual decline increased in the area outside Dublin in 2022 and 2023.
* All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers in the 2005 to 2023 period. The largest decrease was Limerick with 35.6%. Seven counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Roscommon 31.9%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 31,4%, Tipperary 31.2%, Laois 30.6%, Clare 30.6% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 2.8% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 6.7%. Wicklow had a decrease of 8.9% and all other counties were 12% or greater.
* In the most recent year, 2023, nineteen counties had declines in their number of public houses, four had increases and three had no change.
* The economy experienced very different sub-period performances between 2005 to 2023 including the post-2008 economic collapse and the Covid-related decline. Over the whole period, however, the economy grew substantially which, other things being equal, should have supported the alcohol and public house sectors. However, the level of alcohol taxation is very high in Ireland which reduces the commercial viability of public houses.
* Total employment increased by 35.5% between 2005 and 2024. The volume of household expenditure on goods and services increased by 45.4% between 2005 and 2023. The national population increased by 27.8%.
* The alcohol market performed badly relative to these macroeconomic indicators. Between 2005 and 2023 the volume of alcohol consumption measured by Revenue clearances and pure alcohol content, declined by 4.0%. Average per adult consumption of alcohol decreased from 13.505 litres of pure alcohol in 2005 to 9.960 litres in 2023, a drop of 26.2%.

**1. Objective**

In 2023 the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland commissioned a report which examined the decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2022. This report is an update of that 2023 report and covers the period 2005 to 2023.

The objective of this report is to quantify the decline in the number of public houses in Ireland, at both national and sub-national levels over, and within, the period 2005 to 2023. The 2023 public house decline report also considered the causes and consequences of the decline. This is not included in the 2024 report because the analysis is essentially the same as in the previous report.

Data and definitional issues are discussed in Section 2. An overview of the decline in public house licences is presented in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 deal with the geographic aspects of the decline. Section 6 outlines the alcohol market context over the 2005 to 2023 period and examines the change in the number of other licensed premises. Conclusions are presented in Section 7.

**2. Data and definitions**

The data source is the database/register of alcohol licences compiled by the Revenue Commissioners. This register has been analysed for several years by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI) to identify county and national trends for the number of public house licences. The VFI classification identifies seven- day publican licences which are used for public houses, in so far as interpretation of the register allows. The Revenue Commissioners publish aggregate data which refer to publican licences which also include hotels. Consequently, the classification of “publican licence” is not the same in the two sources. The main difference is that the VFI publican licence is an attempt to identify pubs while the Revenue publican classification includes other enterprises such as hotels which operate with a publican licence

The VFI publican figure is 6,680 for 2022 while the Revenue figure for publican licences is 7,380 which includes some hotels with full publican licences. The 2023 Revenue figures are not yet published but Revenue has made available unpublished data which are referred to in Section 3. The long term declining 2005 to 2022 trend derived from the two sources is similar with the VFI classification recording an average annual decline of 114 public houses while the published Revenue classification records an average annual decline of 109. As already noted, only the VFI provides regional and county data for their publican classification.

We use the VFI data as it identifies public houses as usually understood while the Revenue publican licence classification goes beyond the public house category.

The VFI data is available for 2005 to 2023 for the national figures and for 2005 and each year between 2011 and 2023 for the geographic breakdown. The report’s scope is confined to the use of currently available data and does not allow for primary data collection through for example surveys of publicans who have ceased operation to identify the basis for the decision. It also does not allow for the identification of geographic location of closures at the sub county level.

The data refer to the numbers of licences in each year. The change between two years is referred to as the closures in that period or the decline in the number of public houses. The resulting figure is the net change. There may be some new public houses opened and the net change is a combination of closures and openings. In practice, the number of newly opened public houses is very small.

**3. Overview of decline in numbers of public houses**

According to the VFI publican licence database, of the eighteen yearly changes between 2005 and 2023, only one (2019) recorded an increase and the other seventeen years each had decreases.

Table 3.1 contains the national annual data for public house licences for each year 2005 to 2023.

**Table 3.1 Publican licences each year 2005 to 2023**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Total | Increase + or decrease - | Annual absolute annual change |
| 2005 | 8617 |  |  |
| 2006 | 8438 | - | -179 |
| 2007 | 8318 | - | -120 |
| 2008 | 8091 | - | -227 |
| 2009 | 7841 | - | -250 |
| 2010 | 7616 | - | -225 |
| 2011 | 7509 | - | -107 |
| 2012 | 7359 | - | -150 |
| 2013 | 7315 | - | -44 |
| 2014 | 7295 | - | -20 |
| 2015 | 7182 | - | -113 |
| 2016 | 7175 | - | -7 |
| 2017 | 7140 | - | -35 |
| 2018 | 7072 | - | -68 |
| 2019 | 7137 | + | +65 |
| 2020 | 6890 | - | -247 |
| 2021 | 6788 | - | -102 |
| 2022 | 6680 | - | -108 |
| 2023 | 6563 | - | -117 |
| Total decline 05/23 | 2054 |  |  |
| % decline 2005 to 2023 | 23.8 |  |  |
| Average annual decline 05/23 | 114 |  |  |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

The decrease between 2005 and 2023 was 2,054 (23.8%) from 8,617 to 6,563 or an average of 114 per year. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2023 the average annual decrease rose to 144. Between 2019 and 2023 on the VFI classification the number of publican licences decreased from 7,137 to 6,563, a drop of 574 or 8.0%.

On an annual basis, the annual decline peaked in 2009 with 250 closures. However, this was almost matched by the 2020 performance of a decline of 247. 2008, 2009 and 2010 each had decreases of in excess of 200. 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018 each had annual decreases of under 100. Relative to the long term trend, the rate of decline moderated from 2013 to 2019 with only 2015 having a decrease of over 100 and 2019 having an increase. Decreases grew in 2020, 2021 and 2022 compared with the previous few years but the 2021 and 2022 declines were much lower than 2020. The 2022 decline was 108 which as almost the same as 2021 and much lower than the 247 of 2022. The decline continued in 2023 with a decline of 117. This is similar to 2021 and 2022 but a little higher. In terms of actual numbers, the 2023 decline is the largest of the three years 2021 to 2023.

The Revenue public licence data show a somewhat different recent annual performance. The Revenue annual changes for 2020, 2021 and 2022 were -162, -90 and -373 respectively. However, there was an increase in 2023 of 118. The averages of 2022 and 2023 were similar between the two sources, -128 from Revenue and -113 from the VFI database. The 2019 to 2023 period had an average decline of 127 in the Revenue statistics and 144 in the VFI statistics. In summary Revenue shows a very large decrease in 2022 followed by an increase in 2023 while the VFI data show a smaller decrease than Revenue in 2022 and a decrease in 2023. The average annual decline between 2019 and 2023 is similar for the two sources, 127 and 144.

The particularly bad years, defined as years with annual decreases in excess of 200, were 2008 to 2010 which was a particularly poor economic environment and 2020 which was in the midst of Covid. However, as noted, the 2023 decline, while lower than these “particularly” bad years, was the worst since 2021.

The decline referred to here is the number of public houses. The decline in the supply of “publican services” is probably higher. Some public houses, especially in rural areas do not operate for the full period allowed by the licence. The inadequate level of demand, and/or the cost of operation may result in late openings or opening for less than seven days per week. To the extent that restricted opening has increased over time the decline in the number of licences understate the negative impact on rural public houses.

The number of public houses does not take account of the size of establishment. As it is more likely that small public houses would close than large public houses, the decline in the number of public houses probably overstates the decline in the overall supply of public house space. However, the task of this report is to focus on the number of public houses.

**4 Geographic aspects of decline: Dublin and the rest of the country**

There are substantial geographic variations in the pattern of decline in public house numbers. A full examination of all geographic levels is not possible due to the limited availability of data. As noted above, the geographic analysis is based on the data compiled by the VFI from the Revenue alcohol licences register. This is on a county basis. There are additional geographic sub-county classifications which would be useful in this analysis such as number of public houses in specific rural areas and small towns and villages. But this information is not available. There are issues in confining the analysis to the county level because some counties such as Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford also contain large cities and the pattern of public house decline would be different between the rural and city parts of a county.

Despite its limitations the available data provides some substantial insights into the geographic pattern of decline in the number of public houses. The difference between Dublin and the rest of the country is examined first (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1 Publican licences 2005 and 2023 Dublin and rest of country**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2005 | 2023 | % change 05/23 | Absolute change 05/23 |
| Dublin | 786 | 764 | -2.8 | -22 |
| Rest of country | 7831 | 5799 | -25.9 | -2032 |
| Total country | 8617 | 6563 | -23.8 | -2054 |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

Between 2005 and 2023 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 22 or 2.8%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,032, or 25.9%. This compares with a decline of 23.8% in the country as a whole. The decline in the rest of the country was an average annual 113 public houses. The rest of the country accounted for 98.9% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2023. Dublin accounted for 1.1%.

Table 4.2 examines the more recent 2019/2023 Dublin and non-Dublin numbers of public houses. This covers the period between the last year before Covid and the most recent year of data.

**Table 4.2 Publican licences 2019 and 2023 Dublin and rest of country**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2019 | 2023 | % change 19/23 | Absolute change 19/23 |
| Dublin | 785 | 764 | -2.7 | 21 |
| Rest of country | 6352 | 5799 | -8.7 | 553 |
| Total country | 7137 | 6563 | -8.0 | 574 |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

Dublin had a decline of 2.7% or 21 enterprises between 2019 and 2023 while the rest of the country had a decline of 8.7% or 553 enterprises.

In 2023 the national decline was 117. Dublin increased by 5 and the rest of the country declined by 122. The Dublin and non-Dublin performances for each year between 2019 and 2023 are shown in Table 4.3. Dublin had increases in the two most recent years, seven of an increase in 2022 and 5 of an increase in 2023. The non-Dublin area had decreases in all four years, 216 in 2020, 100 in 2021, 115 in 2022 and 122 in 2023. The non-Dublin decreases increased each year from 2020 to 2023. The non-Dublin annual closure level worsened between 2021 and 2023. The public house closure issue in the country excluding Dublin is still current.

**Table 4.3 Publican licences, annual changes 2019 to 2023. Dublin and rest of country**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| Dublin, level | 785 | 754 | 752 | 759 | 764 |
| Dublin, annual change |  | -31 | -2 | +7 | +5 |
| Rest of country, level | 6352 | 6136 | 6036 | 5921 | 5799 |
| Rest of country, annual change |  | -216 | -100 | -115 | -122 |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

**5 Geographic aspects of decline: counties**

The county pattern of public house numbers is now examined. The basic data are presented in Table 5.1. We focus on three periods, the 2005 to 2023 period, the more recent 2019 to 2023 period and the most recent 2023 performance.

**Table 5.1 public house numbers by county 2005 to 2023**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| County  | 2005 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2022/2023 no change NC, + I, or -D | % decline 2019/2023 | % decline 2005/2023 |
| Carlow | 106 | 97 | 95 | 95 | 91 | 91 | NC | 6.2 | 14.2 |
| Cavan | 221 | 194 | 189 | 183 | 183 | 176 | D | 9.3 | 20.4 |
|  Clare  | 373 | 291 | 284 | 281 | 277 | 259 | D | 11.0 | 30.6 |
| Cork | 1221 | 910 | 892 | 873 | 856 | 838 | D | 7.9 | 31.4 |
| Donegal | 453 | 367 | 332 | 334 | 334 | 331 | D | 9.8 | 26.9 |
| Dublin | 786 | 785 | 754 | 752 | 759 | 764 | I | 2.7 | 2.8 |
| Galway | 574 | 472 | 460 | 456 | 452 | 450 | D | 4.7 | 21.6 |
| Kerry | 503 | 448 | 434 | 426 | 413 | 410 | D | 8.5 | 19.5 |
| Kildare | 191 | 171 | 167 | 165 | 169 | 168 | D | 1.8 | 12.0 |
| Kilkenny  | 226 | 195 | 191 | 185 | 177 | 177 | NC | 9.2 | 21.7 |
| Laois  | 157 | 122 | 118 | 109 | 110 | 109 | D | 10.7 | 30.6 |
| Leitrim  | 140 | 108 | 104 | 103 | 100 | 101 | I | 6.5 | 27.9 |
| Limerick  | 478 | 358 | 344 | 339 | 325 | 308 | D | 14.0 | 35.6 |
| Longford  | 113 | 91 | 85 | 84 | 83 | 82 | D | 9.9 | 27.4 |
| Louth  | 227 | 188 | 179 | 181 | 176 | 178 | I | 5.3 | 21.6 |
| Mayo  | 467 | 372 | 355 | 350 | 337 | 332 | D | 10.8 | 28.9 |
| Meath  | 210 | 204 | 204 | 207 | 201 | 196 | D | 3.9 | 6.7 |
| Monaghan  | 121 | 99 | 96 | 97 | 92 | 91 | D | 8.1 | 24.8 |
| Offaly  | 164 | 128 | 119 | 115 | 117 | 118 | I | 7.8 | 28.0 |
| Roscommon  | 254 | 198 | 189 | 182 | 177 | 173 | D | 12.6 | 31.9 |
| Sligo  | 179 | 140 | 137 | 136 | 135 | 134 | D | 4.3 | 25.1 |
| Tipperary  | 525 | 401 | 397 | 387 | 375 | 361 | D | 10.0 | 31.2 |
| Waterford  | 260 | 216 | 205 | 199 | 194 | 194 | NC | 10.2 | 25.4 |
| Westmeath  | 213 | 167 | 159 | 161 | 160 | 149 | D | 10.8 | 30.0 |
| Wexford  | 297 | 261 | 254 | 246 | 242 | 229 | D | 12.3 | 22.9 |
| Wicklow  | 158 | 154 | 147 | 142 | 145 | 144 | D | 6.5 | 8.9 |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers over the 2005 to 2023 period. The decreases ranged between 35.6% (Limerick) and 2.8% (Dublin). In the more recent 2019 to 2023 period, all counties also had decreases. In the most recent year 2023, there was a small improvement. Three counties had no change in 2023, Carlow, Kilkenny and Waterford. Four counties had increases, Dublin (759 to 764), Leitrim (100 to 101), Louth (176 to 178) and Offaly (117 to 118). The remaining nineteen counties each had a decrease in their number of public house in 2023 compared with 2022.

The county details of the magnitude of the decreases between 2005 and 2023 are presented in Table 5.4. The counties are presented in order of magnitude of decrease.

Of the 26 counties the largest decrease was Limerick with 35.6%. Seven counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Roscommon 31.9%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 31,4%, Tipperary 31.2%, Laois 30.6%, Clare 30.6% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 2.8% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 6.7%. Wicklow had a decrease of 8.9% and all other counties were 12% or greater.

**Table 5.4 % Decrease in number of public houses 2005 to 2023 by county, in order of magnitude of % decrease**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rank in order of magnitude of % decline 05/23 | County in order of % decrease in number of public houses 2005/2023 | % decrease  |
| 1 | Limerick | 35.6 |
| 2 | Roscommon | 31.9 |
| 3 | Cork  | 31.4 |
| 4 | Tipperary | 31.2 |
| 5/6 | Laois  | 30.6 |
| 5/6 | Clare | 30.6 |
| 7 | Westmeath | 30.0 |
| 8 | Mayo  | 28.9 |
| 9 | Offaly | 28.0 |
| 10 | Leitrim | 27.9 |
| 11 | Longford | 27.4 |
| 12 | Donegal  | 26.9 |
| 13 | Waterford  | 25.4 |
| 14 | Sligo | 25.1 |
| 15 | Monaghan  | 24.8 |
| 16 | Wexford | 22.9 |
| 17 | Kilkenny  | 21.7 |
| 18/19 | Galway  | 21.6 |
| 18/19 | Louth | 21.6 |
| 20 | Cavan | 20.4 |
| 21 | Kerry  | 19.5 |
| 22 | Carlow  | 14.2 |
| 23 | Kildare  | 12.0 |
| 24 | Wicklow | 8.9 |
| 25 | Meath  | 6.7 |
| 26 | Dublin  | 2.8 |

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register. As derived by author in text

The summary of the overall distribution of 2005/2023 county decreases is:

* Under 10% decrease, three counties, Dublin, Meath and Wicklow
* 10% to 14.9%, two counties, Kildare, Carlow
* 15% to 19.9%, one county, Kerry
* 20% to 24.9%, six counties, Cavan, Louth, Galway, Kilkenny, Wexford, Monaghan
* 25% to 29.9%, seven counties, Sligo, Waterford, Donegal, Longford, Leitrim, Offaly, Mayo
* 30% to 34.9%, six counties, Westmeath, Clare, Laois, Tipperary, Cork, Roscommon
* 35% and over, one county, Limerick

The 2019 to 2023 % decreases ranged from 1.8% in Kildare to 14.0% in Limerick. The distribution of the 2019-2023 decreases is:

* Under 5% decrease, five counties, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Meath, Sligo
* 5% to 9.9%, twelve counties, Wicklow, Offaly, Monaghan, Louth, Longford, Leitrim, Kilkenny, Kerry, Donegal, Cork, Cavan, Carlow
* 10% and over, nine counties, Clare, Laois, Limerick, Mayo, Roscommon, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath, Wexford

**6. National alcohol market and economic context 2005-2023**

The economy experienced very different sub-period performances between 2005 to 2023 including the post-2008 economic collapse and the Covid related decline. Over the whole period, however, the economy grew substantially which, other things being equal, should have supported the alcohol and public house sectors.

Total employment increased from 2.0027 million in Quarter 1 2005 to 2.7134 million in Quarter 1 2024 (seasonally adjusted), an increase of 35.5%. The volume of household expenditure on goods and services increased by 45.4% between 2005 and 2023. The national population increased from 4.1338 million in 2005 to 5.2816 million in 2023, an increase of 27.8%.

The alcohol market performed badly relative to these macroeconomic performances. Between 2005 and 2023 the volume of alcohol consumption measured by Revenue clearances and pure alcohol content, declined from 44.302 million litres of pure alcohol to 42.529 million litres of pure alcohol, a decline of 4.0%. Average per adult consumption of alcohol decreased from 13.505 litres of pure alcohol in 2005 to 9.960 litres in 2023, a drop of 26.2%. The 2023 volume of bar sales is at 55% of the 2005 level.

Allied to this, the role of home consumption and off-licence sales in total alcohol sales increased substantially.

While the main objective of the report is to examine the changes in public house numbers we also outline the performance of other elements of the licensed and hospitality sectors. The broad feature is that other alcohol licence types increased over the long –term and in the case of restaurants declined slightly between 2019 and 2022.

This is reflected in the large increase in alcohol off-licences. In 2005 there were 1,070 spirits off-licences. By 2022 this had increased to 2,271, an increase of 112.2%. In 2005 there were 317 special restaurant licences and this increased to 493 in 2022. Wine on-licences were 2231 in 2005 and increased to 2333 in 2022. The more recent performances in the 2019 to 2022 period are summarized in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1 Alcohol licences, various categories 2005, 2019, 2022**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2005 | 2019 | 2022 |
| Spirits off-licence  | 1070 | 1990 | 2271 |
| Special restaurant on-licence | 317 | 498 | 493 |
| Wine on-licence | 2231 | 2350 | 2333 |

Source. Revenue database

Spirits off-licences increased substantially between 2019 and 2022. Special restaurant licences declined slightly between 2019 and 2022. Wine on-licences also declined slightly.

The VFI database has a slightly different special restaurant licence total than the Revenue database. In 2022 the VFI figure was 526 compared with 493 from Revenue. The 2019 VFI figure was 507 compared to Revenues 498.

The VFI figures for the different recent years are 2019 507, 2020 504, 2021 514, 2022 526 and 2023 527. The number has not declined over the recent period.

The Revenue figure are 2019 498, 2020 483, 2021 514 and 2022 493. Unlike the VFI figures these show a small decrease between 2019 and 2022.

The VFI wine licensed restaurants were 2359 in 2019 and 2355 in 2023, There was a decrease from 2412 in 2022 to 2355 in 2023.

Data collected by the Restaurants Association of Ireland reports 212 restaurant (or food-led businesses) closures in the first three months of 2024 compared with 177 in Quarter 4 2023 and 106 in Quarter 3 2023.

Tax on alcohol in Ireland is high relative to other EU economies and the UK which does not support the public house sector and the overall alcohol sector. On the “league table” basis Ireland has the second highest wine excise rate, the third highest beer excise rate and the third highest spirits rates in the EU and the UK. On the average of the three beverages rates Ireland has the second highest average alcohol excise rate behind Finland. The quantitative gap between Ireland and the large majority of other EU economies on alcohol excise is substantial. The main features of the comparison between Ireland and the EU+UK are:

* Ireland has the second highest wine excise in the EU27 and UK
* Ireland has the third highest beer excise in the EU 27 and UK behind Finland and the UK (using the UK non-draught excise rate)
* Ireland has the third highest spirits excise in the EU 27 and UK after Sweden and Finland
* Fifteen EU economies do not impose any excise on wine
* On an overall composite alcohol excise level (measured by the unweighted average of the different beer, spirits and wine excise rates), Ireland is the second highest behind Finland
* The magnitude of the differences in alcohol excise between Ireland and other EU economies is large. For example, Ireland’s beer excise is 11.4 times that of Germany. Irish spirits excise is 4.4 times that of Spain
* There is a substantial difference between the alcohol excise levels of the four highest alcohol taxed economies, Finland, Ireland, the UK and Sweden, and the remaining 24 countries.
* Lithuania has the fifth highest composite excise rate of €1801 and is 52.1% of the Irish rate.
* Germany’s composite alcohol excise per HLPA is €500 or 14.5% of the Irish level of €3458.
* France’s composite level of €900 is 26.0% of the Irish level.
* Spain’s composite rate is €386 or 11.2% of the Irish level.

**7. Conclusions**

Between 2005 and 2023 there was a substantial decrease in the number of public houses. According to the VFI classification, the decrease between 2005 and 2023 was 2,054 (23.8%) from 8,617 to 6,680 or an average of 114 closures per year. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2023 the average annual decrease rose to 144. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of public house licences decreased from 7,137 to 6,563, a drop of 574 or 8.0%. The report refers to differences between the Revenue and VFI databases in the 2022 and 2023 performances. The averages of 2022 and 2023 were similar between the two sources, -128 from Revenue and -113 from the VFI database.

This decline has occurred against the background of a substantial decrease in average alcohol consumption, a decrease in the volume of alcohol consumed and a good economic environment over the full period, despite the inclusion of economically-weak periods such as post-2008 and Covid. A high level of alcohol taxation compared to other EU countries was also a feature of the period.

There is a substantial difference between the Dublin performance and the rest of the country in public house numbers. Between 2005 and 2023 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 22 or 2.8%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,032 or 25.9%. This compares with a decline of 23.8% in the country as a whole. The decline in the rest of the country was an average annual 113 public houses. The rest of the country accounted for 98.9% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2023. Dublin accounted for 1.1%.

All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers in the 2005 to 2023 period. Of the 26 counties the largest decrease was Limerick with 35.6%. Seven counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Roscommon 31.9%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 31,4%, Tipperary 31.2%, Laois 30.6%, Clare 30.6% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 2.8% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 6.7%. Wicklow had a decrease of 8.9% and all other counties were 12% or greater.

 In the more recent 2019 to 2023 period, all counties also had decreases. In the most recent year 2023, there was a small improvement. Three counties had no change in 2023, Carlow, Kilkenny and Waterford. Four counties had increases, Dublin (759 to 764), Leitrim (100 to 101), Louth (176 to 178) and Offaly (117 to 118). The remaining nineteen counties each had a decrease in their number of public house in 2023 compared to 2022. In the area outside Dublin the annual decline was 100 in 2021, increased to 115 in 2022 and increased again to 122 in 2023. The decline in the number of public houses is not only an historical issue, it remains a current issue.

Foley (2023) discussed the reasons for the declining numbers which include non-replacement of pub operators on retirement or death, low levels of business volume and weak economic and commercial sustainability to which high alcohol excise contributes, regulatory changes such as tighter drink driving laws and enforcement allied with weak or non-existent public transport, population change and distribution, changes in consumer patterns and expectations, alcohol market changes, better alternative economic activities and income opportunities (including alternative land use in urban areas), asset prices for pub licences (which have declined in recent years) to facilitate the opening of new off-licences in sectors such as supermarkets, convenience stores and service stations. The decline in the number of public houses partly reflects the wider problems of rural Ireland in terms of the range, proximity and quality of many private and public services.

Apart from the economic and tourism impact of the closures, there is also a social loss in terms of the local rural public houses’ acknowledged role as “third places” for socialisation and community enhancement.

**Reference**

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