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Australia records highest month in history for alcohol retailer turnover in December

12 February 2021: There is growing concern about the impact of increases in retail alcohol sales during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the influence of largely unregulated alcohol advertising. This was spotlighted in the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education's report, *Alcohol Retail During COVID-19*, released today, which found that Australia registered its highest month ever for alcohol retailer turnover in December, close to an eye-watering \$2 billion.

Recently released Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows alcohol retailer turnover in Australia increased by \$3.3 billion from 2019 to 2020, reaching a record \$15.6 billion in 2020 which represents an increase of 26.7 per cent.

The impact of lockdowns caused by the pandemic was felt across all states and territories, which has likely contributed to dramatic increases in alcohol retailer turnover, especially in Victoria where sales remained elevated over a nine-month period continuing from the first COVID-19 wave to the second.

Caterina Giorgi, CEO of the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) said the data raises serious concerns about the role alcohol retailers played in aggressively advertising to Australians during a time of heightened anxiety in a pandemic.

"Alcohol companies have demonstrated their predatory instincts by aggressively marketing products during COVID-19 and this is resulting in big profits – but at what cost to the health and wellbeing of our families and communities?" she said.

"Action is needed from governments across the country to address marketing practices of alcohol corporations.

"It's also time to look at placing limits on late night and rapid online alcohol product delivery and boost funding for alcohol and other drug services to help reduce alcohol-fuelled harm.

"During COVID-19 we've seen alcohol retailers and online delivery companies engage in prolific marketing that promotes using alcohol as a way to cope during the pandemic. The increase seen by alcohol retailers suggests it's working for them.

"Companies should not be able to use a global health crisis as an opportunity to sell more alcoholic products at the detriment of the health of Australians."

80% of alcohol sold in Australia was already takeaway and delivery before the pandemic and with a COVID-19 spike boosting levels to unprecedented territory, Giorgi is alarmed at what this will mean for hidden harm in the home.

“The pandemic has resulted in more alcohol going into the home than ever before and while that might be good news for alcohol industry executives, it’s certainly worrying news for our community’s health,” she added.

“We’re most worried about what this means for hidden harms in the home, which were already too high before the pandemic. We have a lot of work to do to improve this across our communities.

“We’ve heard from family violence services that they’ve seen an increase in alcohol involvement in family violence and also heard from alcohol and other drug treatment services that they’re seeing more people reach out for help with alcohol.”

In contrasting 2019 with 2020, all months significantly affected by the pandemic (March–December) experienced turnover increases. While these increases were normally around 30 per cent, turnover in the month of May rose by 46 per cent from May 2019, representing a \$428.9 million increase.

Retail giants Coles and Woolworths control 65 per cent of the total alcohol retail market.

Caterina Giorgi, CEO Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education is available for interview.

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Methodology:

FARE’s analysis is based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data from 2017 to 2020, examining the changes in turnover for alcohol retailers during the pandemic.

The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is a not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms. We do this through developing evidence-informed policy, enabling people-powered advocacy and delivering health promotion campaigns.

FARE has been working with communities across the country to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians for 20 years.