



What can we conclude from studies on alcohol and COVID-19?

Pia Mäkelä

18/11/2021

Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

How would a pandemic affect people's alcohol use?

Decrease through:

- Bars closed or close early
- Less travelers' imports
- Fewer social occasions
- Economic hardships



Increase through:

- Stress, anxiety
- Home offices -> Less social control
- More boring nights at home
- More money due to staying at home

Which factors weigh more?

It varies between individuals, groups, countries and stages of the pandemic

Restrictions on alcohol availability varied by country (and stage of pandemic)

- Full prohibition (South Africa)
 - Beneficial impact on hospital stays, e.g. due to traffic accidents and violence
 - ...
- Increased availability (e.g. Canada)
 - Availability could increase through e.g. laxer internet sales rules

What does research say?

Challenges for research I: Statistics

Different components of total consumption changed differentially (in a Nordic context:)

- a) Off-premise sales (↗)
- b) On-premise sales (↘)
- c) Travelers' imports (↘)
- d) Internet orders (↗)

→ Estimated changes can be misleading if e.g. only registered consumption is looked at

Estimates from Finland & Norway

2nd quarter in 2020 vs. 2019

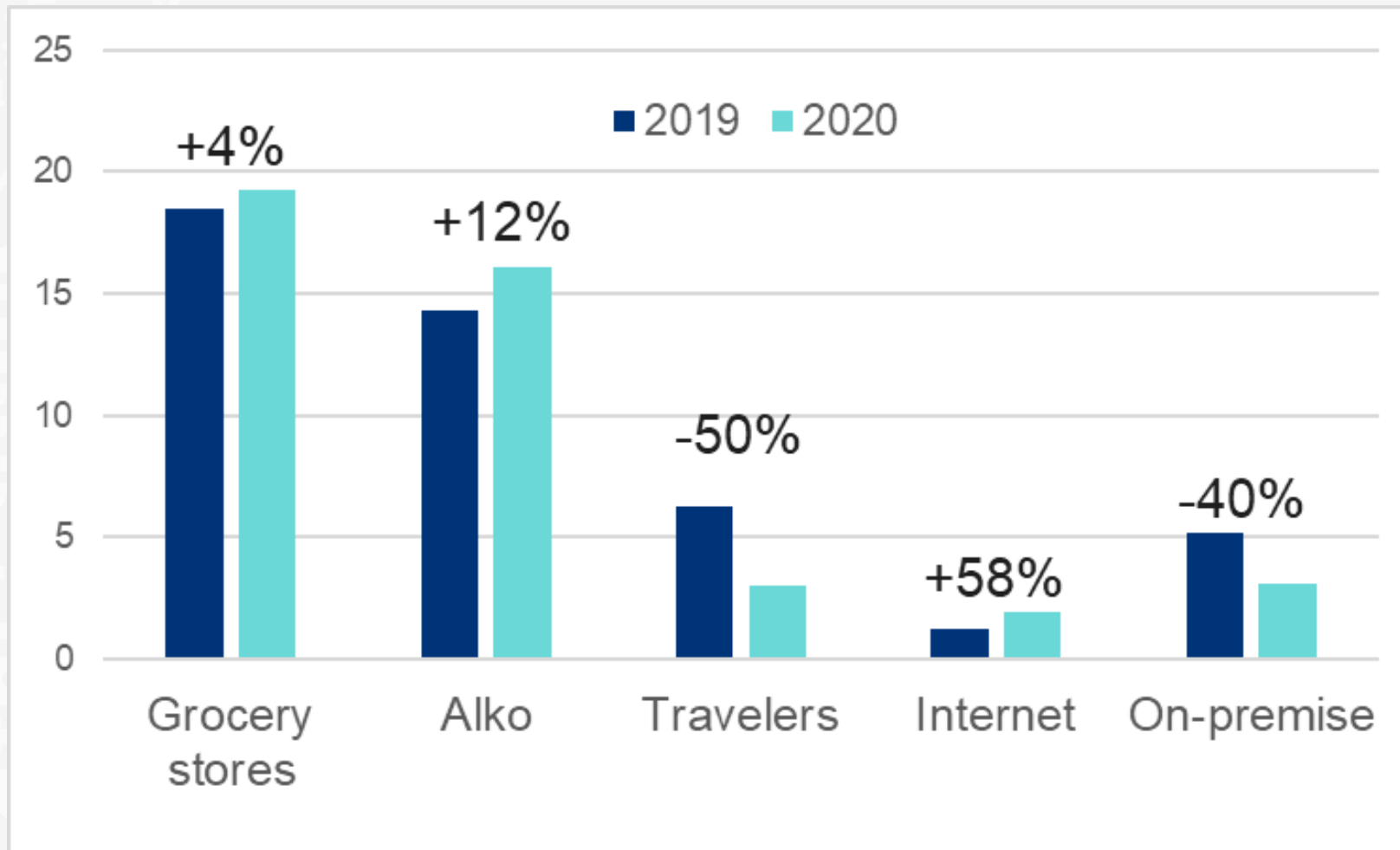
	FINLAND			NORWAY		
	2019	2020	Change	2019	2020	Change
Registered	2.21	2.26	+ 2%	1.61	1.94	+ 20%
Estimated unregistered	0.48	0.19	-60%	0.30 ¹	0.0	- 100%
Total	2.69	2.45	-9%	1.91	1.93	+ 1%

¹ An assumption of 50% under-estimation of alcohol imports has been applied

Source: Mäkelä et al. (2021) Int J Methods Psychiatr Res

Finland, whole 2020 vs. 2019

Change in total consumption: -5%

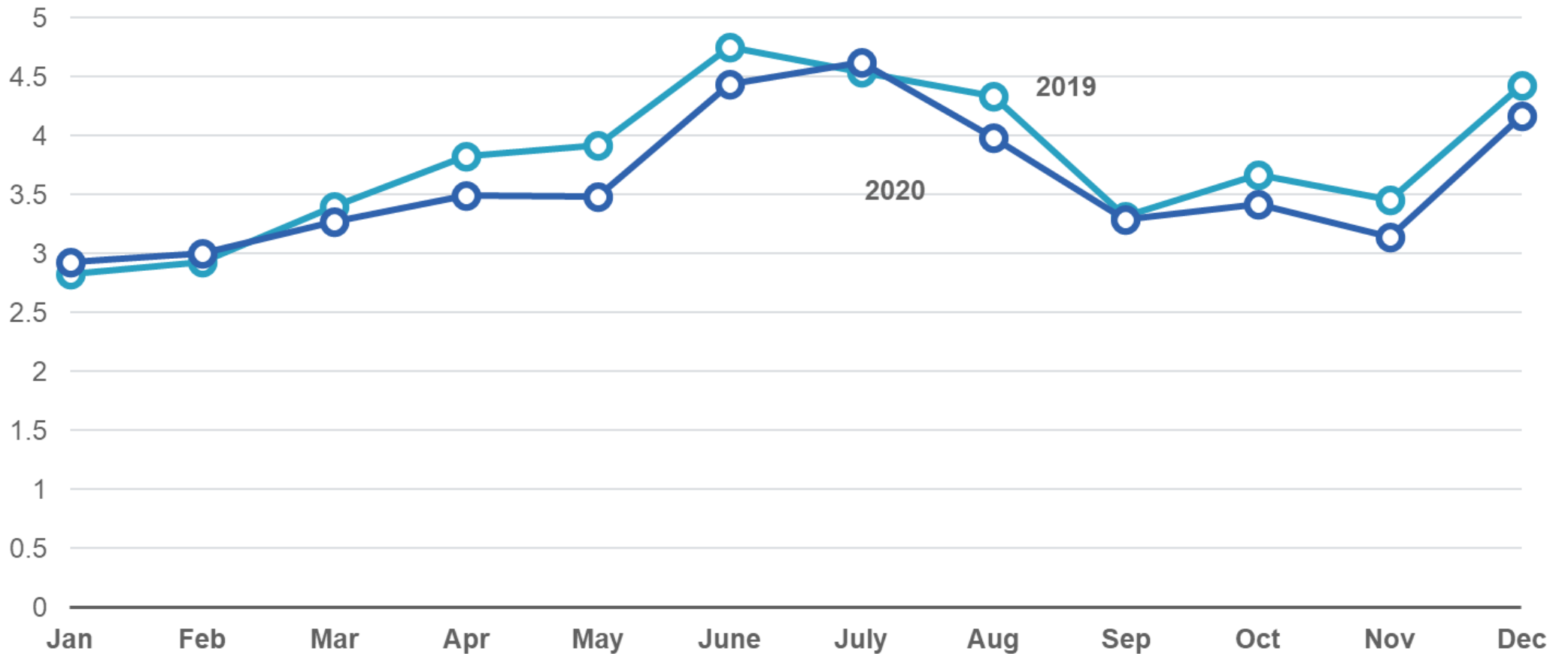


A greater change took place in distribution channels than in total consumption

Source: Mäkelä et al. THL 2021
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-640-4>

Finland, 2020 vs. 2019

100 % alcohol (Million litres)



Source: Mäkelä et al. THL 2021
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-640-4>

What does research say?

Challenges for research II: Surveys

- Many research questions require survey data:
WHOSE consumption increased or decreased?
- Surveys abound

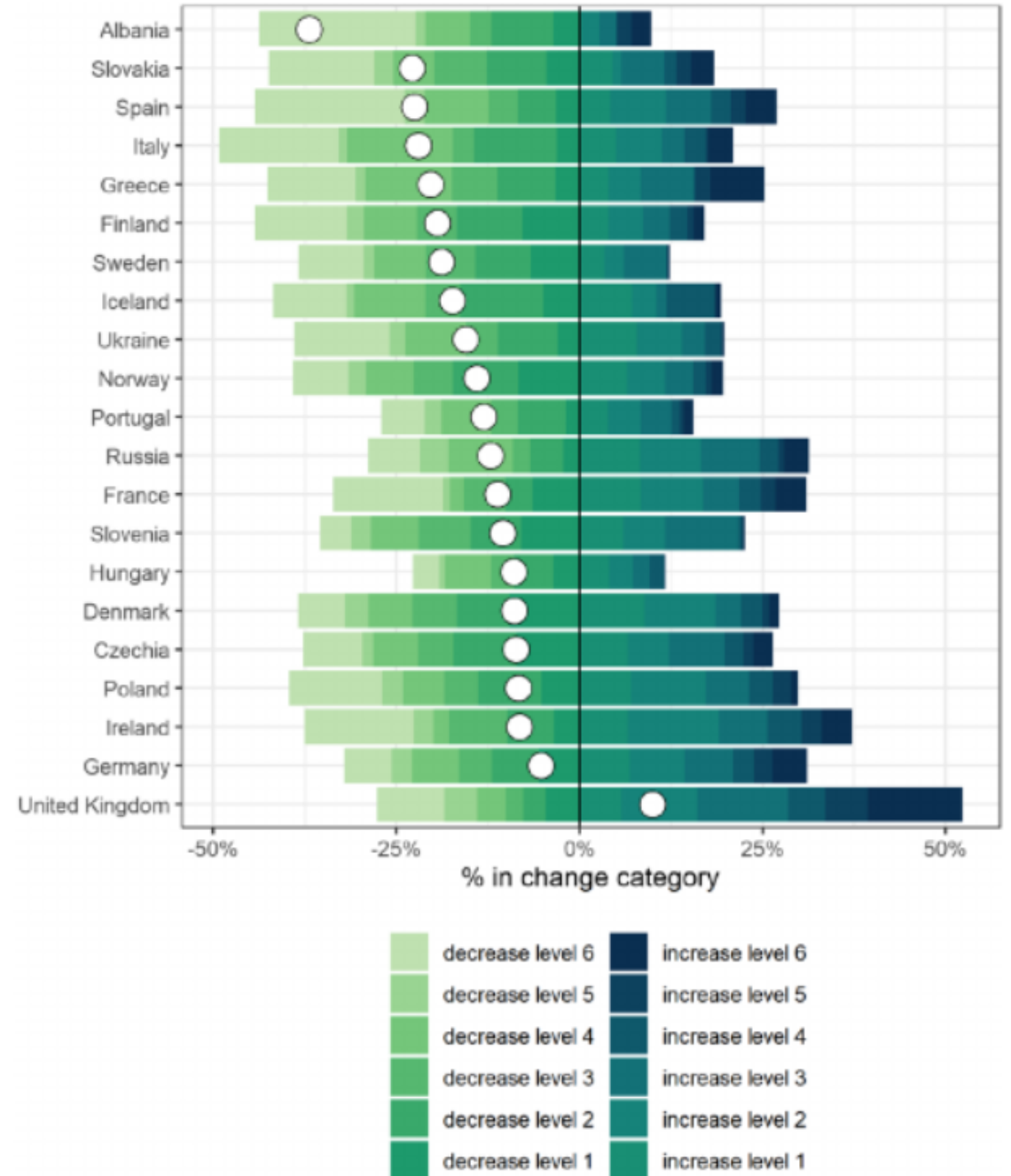
Challenges:

- Most frequently asked question type:
did your alcohol use increase or decrease?
 - Ignores volumes. Difference between whether you cut down from 10 drinks/day or 10 drinks/yr
- Many rapid surveys have used convenience sampling
 - Not necessarily bad, but more uncertainty about who responds & why

Change in alcohol use in a rapid survey of 21 European countries, using convenience samples

Kilian et al. (2021) *Addiction*

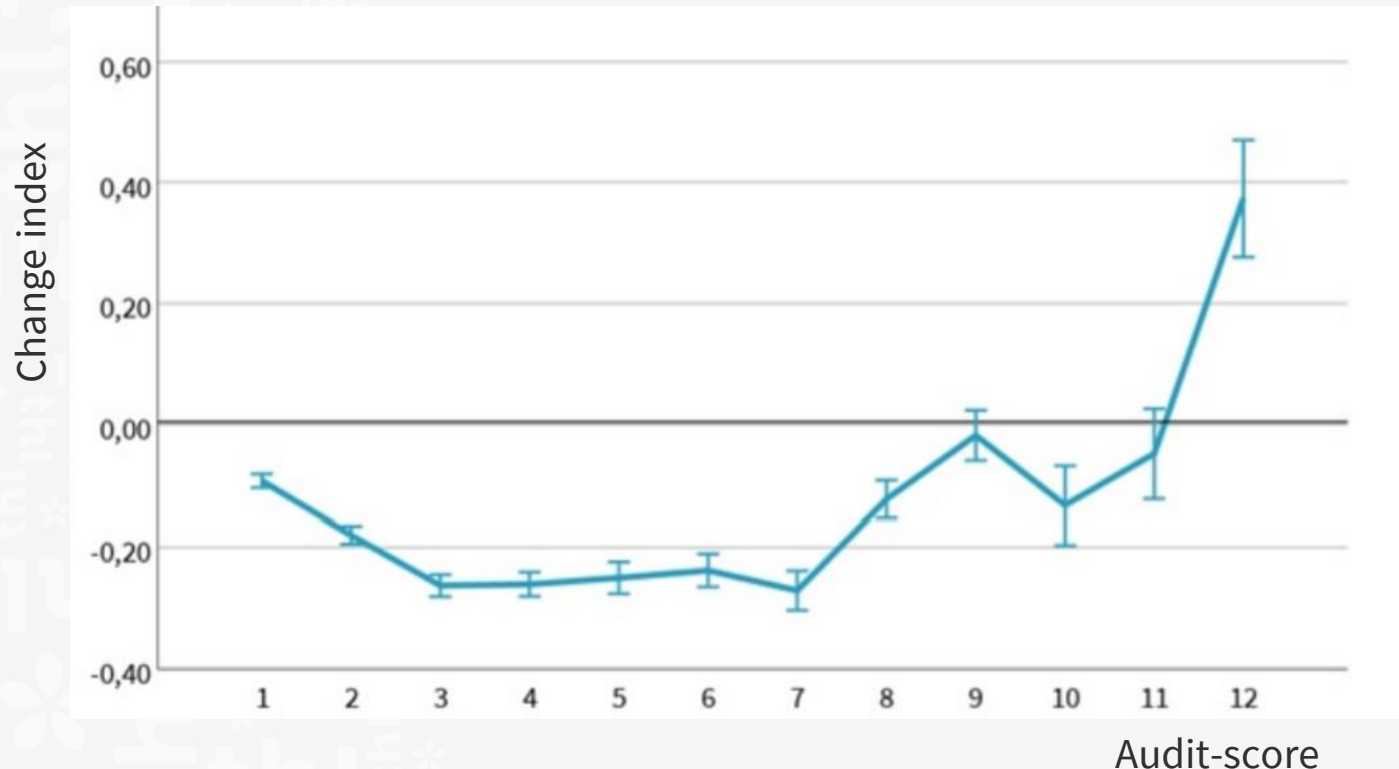
- In most countries, the **majority responded they had cut down** their alcohol use (frequency, typical amounts per occasion or 6+ frequency)



WHOSE consumption changed?

I - Heavy vs. light drinkers: Finland, early summer 2020

Change in alcohol consumption by initial level



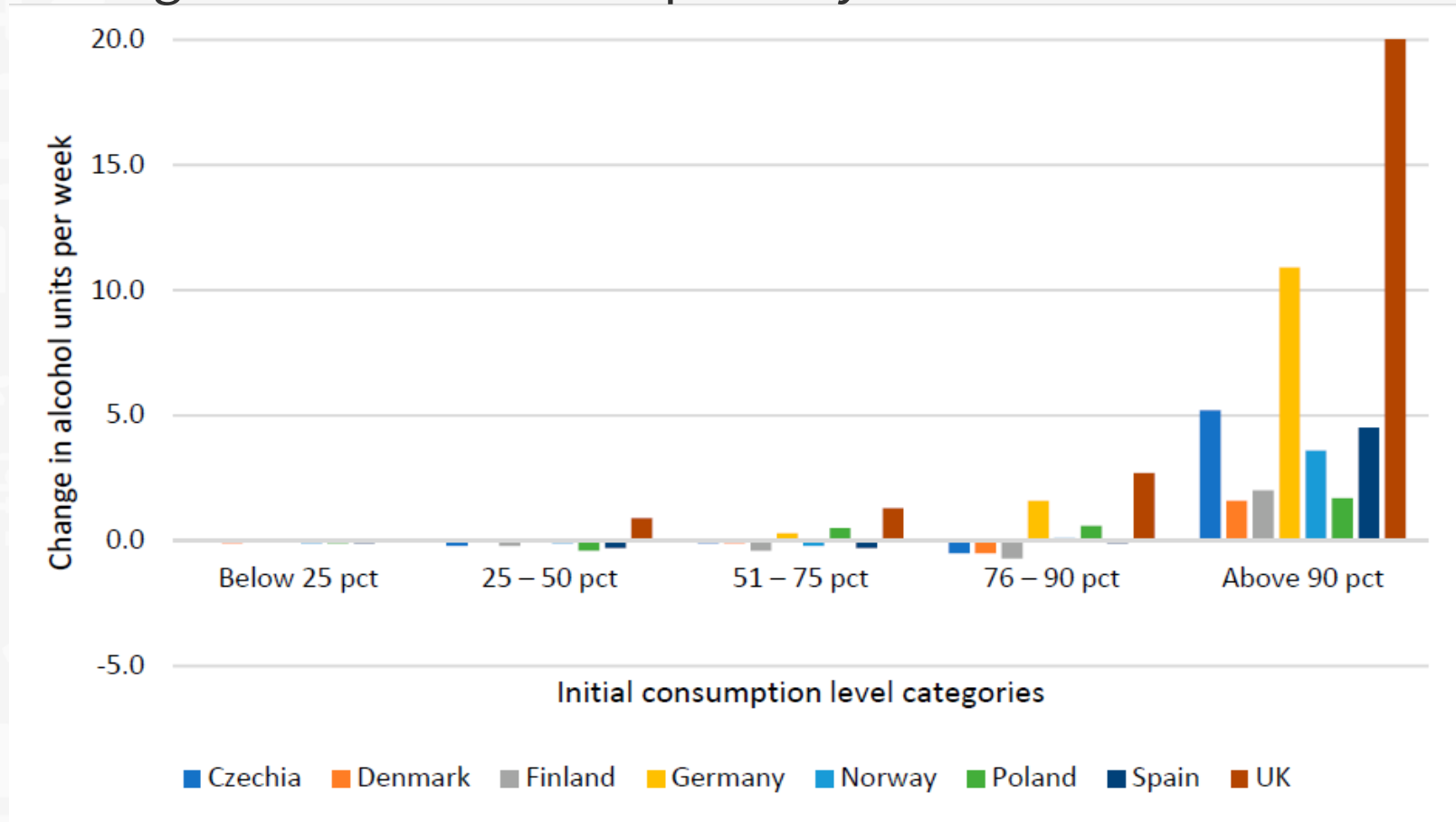
- In most drinking categories, people reported reduced drinking
- This was especially the case among light and moderate drinkers
- The heaviest drinkers reported increased drinking

Source: Mäkelä et al. THL 2021 <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-640-4>

WHOSE consumption changed?

I - Heavy vs. light drinkers: Europe

Change in alcohol consumption by initial level in 8 countries



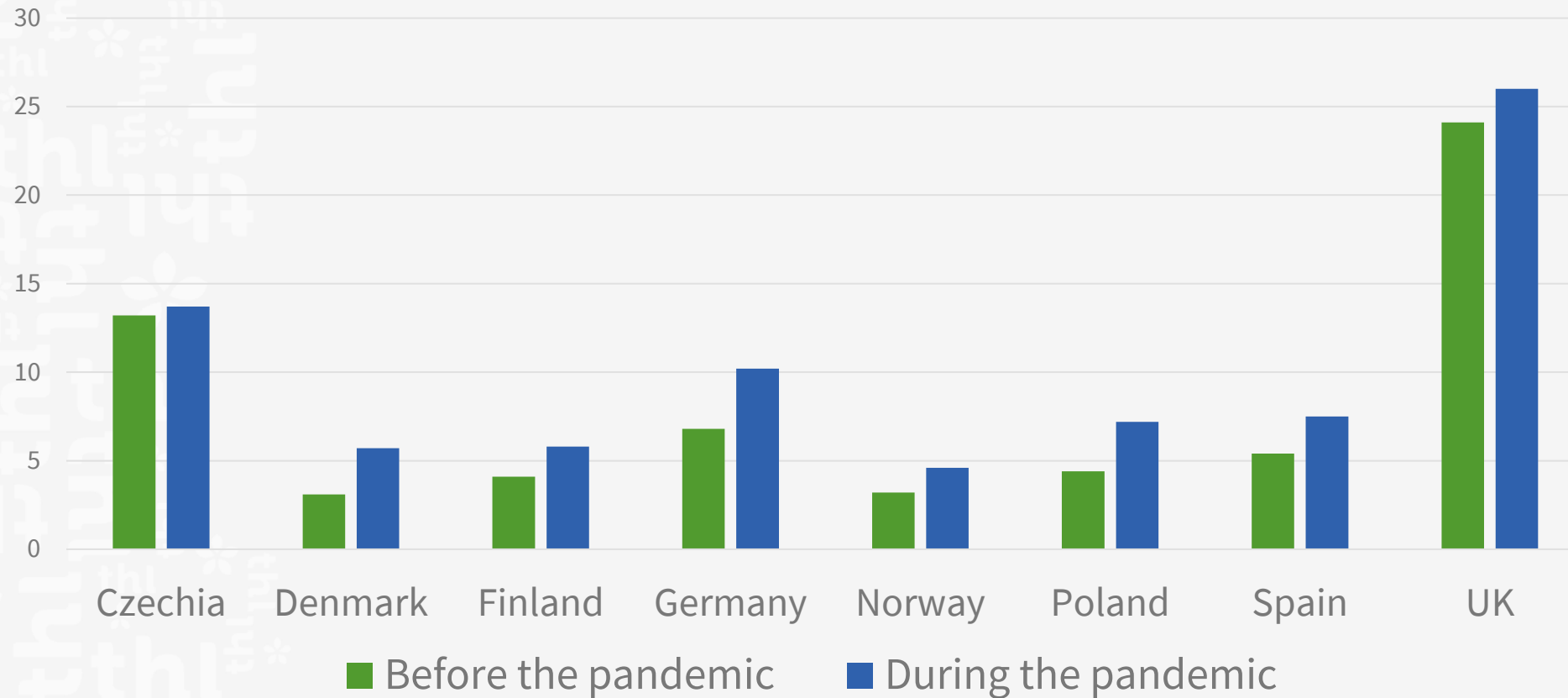
Similar finding as in Finland:

- reduced consumption among light drinkers
- increased consumption among heavier drinkers

Source: Rossow et al. (2021) Int J Env Res and Publ Health

Also the % of heavy drinkers increased

Proportion drinking > 28 drinks per week



Deviation from "normal" - polarization

- In normal circumstances, when total consumption increases (or decreases), the whole consumption distribution moves upwards (downwards) - light and heavy drinkers alike
- During the pandemic, this was different: lighter (social) drinkers reduced drinking, and heavier drinkers (who don't mind drinking at home without a special occasion) increased.

How would a pandemic affect people's alcohol use?

Decrease through:

- Bars closed or close early
- Less travelers' imports
- Fewer social occasions
- Economic hardships



Increase through:

- Stress, anxiety
- Home offices -> Less social control
- More boring nights at home
- More money due to staying at home

Which factors weigh more?

It varies between individuals, groups, countries and stages of the pandemic

WHOSE consumption changed?

II – Other groups

- Young people report more often having reduced drinking.
Likely reason: fewer social occasions
- People whose economic situation worsened:
 - ...report having reduced more often than others
 - ...report having increased more often than others
 - Likely reason:
 - some people with less money save money by cutting down on alcohol
 - other people with less money: more anxiety ->relief by drinking

Source: Mäkelä et al.(2020) <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-556-8>

How about alcohol-related harms?

- No extensive data yet. In Finland:
 - Violence in public places has been strongly reduced in periods when bars have been closed
 - Police: house calls have strongly increased (includes calls due to noise etc.)
 - Police: violence in private places have increased slightly