

Poison in a bottle: Inside the deadly illicit

► Cheap vodka and counterfeit alcohol continue to put drinkers at risk as illicit traders exploit gaps in enforcement.

► A crackdown by agencies seeks to dismantle smuggling networks and protect consumers from dangerous products.

DAVID ODONGO, NAIROBI

A bottle of Aquila Vodka sits on a shelf in a small pub in Uthiru, next to a popular pork joint. It retails for Sh160. A few shelves away, Shakers Vodka carries the same price. Klassic Vodka, Blue Mountain, Bob Vodka, Cresent all sell for between Sh140 and Sh160. The same prices hold in Machakos, Kiambu and Ruiru. But according to the Alcoholic Beverages Association of Kenya (ABAK), producing a single 250ml bottle of spirits costs Sh184.81. It doesn't add up. And when the math does not add up in the alcohol business, people die.

Some of the alcohol have copied names of legitimate drinks with the catch being the price. For example, a legitimate Shakers Vodka 750ml bottle retails at a minimum Sh3,000 and it is found mainly in the US.

Former Industrialisation Cabinet Secretary Moses Kuria, under whose docket alcohol manufacturing fell knows too well about fake alcohol and says the maths many brewers are using is not adding up. Citing industry baseline estimates that manufacturing a millilitre of ethanol-based alcohol costs at least Sh1, Kuria argued that the minimum retail price for a 250ml bottle of spirits should be Sh250, "assuming break-even only". "Any vendor offering a 250ml unit below this floor is likely dealing in tax-evading, uncertified, or dangerous illicit brews," he stated.

The vendors are everywhere. The products have names. The bottles have labels. And the content, according to government lab tests, are often poison.

ABAK's standard costing for a 250ml bottle of spirits breaks down the components any legitimate manufacturer must pay for. The glass bottle costs Sh19. The cap costs Sh3.15. Labels cost Sh1.25. The spirit itself costs Sh16.50. Flavours and ingredients add Sh2. Packaging boxes cost Sh2.80. Taping and sealing add Sh1. Then come government charges. The excise stamp costs Sh2.80. Excise duty costs Sh89. Sub-total: Sh137.60. VAT at 16 per cent adds Sh22.01. Factory cost sub-total: Sh159.61. Transportation adds Sh3.20. Wastage accounts for Sh2.

Overhead costs Sh20. Total production cost comes to Sh184.81. This figure, ABAK notes, does not include manufacturers' margins, distributor margins, retailer margins, or licences paid by distributors and retailers. "A bottle selling for Sh140 is being sold at a loss of at least Sh44.81 before anyone in the supply chain has taken a single shilling of profit. There are only two ways to sell a bottle for Sh140 when it costs Sh184.81

to make. The first is to lose money on every sale, indefinitely. The second is to not make the bottle the way the cost sheet says it should be made. The first option describes a charity. The second describes a crime," says Kuria.

"The economics of this price gap point to one conclusion. These products are not manufactured according to the cost structure that legitimate producers must follow. The largest single component is the Sh89 excise duty, followed by packaging and the spirit itself. A bottle selling for Sh140 cannot cover the statutory costs, let alone the raw materials, transportation, and overheads required for legal production," he adds.

This arithmetic anomaly aligns with enforcement patterns. Government raids have seized counterfeit versions of brands appearing on the list of cheap drinks. In Nakuru, police impounded 79 cartons of Spark vodka and 26 cartons of Bob vodka bearing fake KRA stamps. In Athi River, detectives recovered thousands of bottles of Blue Mountain vodka and over 4,500 litres of ethanol and counterfeit excise stamps. In Murang'a, police uncovered a fake vodka factory producing Supa vodka, Trace vodka, and Kingston vodka. The brands on the list are not merely cheap; they are the same brands that appear in seizure reports.

In March, a multi-agency team descended on Gatitu town in Nyeri. They included officers from the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS), the Anti-Counterfeit Authority (ACA), the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA), the county public health department, and the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI). Each agency collected samples that were independently tested at the Government Chemist. All five beer brands sampled failed to meet national standards.

ACA found the content did not match what was indicated on labels. The Government Chemist found the beverages contained harmful levels of alcoholic substances "deemed poisonous to the human body".

Kui Kinyanjui, chair of ABAK, says: "The products were found on the shelves in branded bottles, raising serious concerns about their origin and authenticity. We must ask, who are the manufacturers behind these brands?"

KEBS insists methanol in Kenya cannot be consumed accidentally. In October 2025, it issued a statement reassuring the public that all methanol in the country is "denatured by adding the bitterest chemical called denatonium benzoate".

KEBS cited standards requiring non-laboratory methanol to contain not less than eight parts per million of the denaturant. "The people dying from methanol poisoning are drinking from bottles branded as vodka, gin, and brandy. The methanol in those bottles, if it came from a denatured source, has either been chemically treated to remove the bitterness, or it came from a source that never passed through KEBS certification at all," says Doctor Isaac Micheni.

The Euromonitor International re-



port on illicit alcohol in Kenya, commissioned by ABAK and published in May 2025, describes the supply chain. Ethanol is smuggled across the border, hidden in drums and disguised as cereal cargo or petroleum products in transit to Nairobi. From Nairobi, agents move the product to "small breweries in day shanties who will transport the product by night or in their own way as they consider safe. This product ends up in the hands of illegal producers tax free," says the report. "Smuggled ethanol bypasses KEBS entirely. It does not pass through the denaturation process. It does not carry certification marks. It is raw, and it is cheap," says Micheni.

ACA Executive Director Robi King'a identified the challenge: "Po-

“Counterfeit and illicit products pose a serious threat to public health and safety. We are working to ensure only genuine, quality products are sold in the market,”

rous borders, diversion of ethanol into illicit production, refilling of genuine bottles, and the growing use of online and social media platforms in the distribution of counterfeit products.”

The ACA's data shows 77 per cent of seized alcohol is locally manufactured. ACA's digital platform, the Anti-Counterfeit Integrated Management System, does not comprehensively capture locally manufactured finished alcohol, local bottling, contract manufacturing, refilling, packaging suppliers, or domestic distribution.

The numbers paint a sad picture. Illicit alcohol volumes grew by 27 per cent between 2022 and 2024, with sales reaching 1,921,921 hectolitres of absolute alcohol in 2024 alone. Homemade brews chang'aa, busaa, and muratina constitute approximately two-thirds of all illicit alcohol consumed, thriving in rural and peri-urban areas where a 300ml serving of muratina can cost as little as Sh20.

In Nyeri, recently, Interior CCS Kipchumba Murkomen identified second-generation alcohol as the government's biggest challenge in the fight against illicit brews. He warned some licensed manufacturers are "misusing their licences to

produce substandard liquor in concealed sections of their premises”.

Last week, Deputy President Kithure Kindiki announced the cancellation of the licenses of eight manufacturers of second-generation alcohol. He said the government reviewed the status of manufacturers of second-generation alcohol whose licences were suspended in 2024 over non-compliance with public health, environmental, security, and quality regulations.

Of the 36 manufacturers whose licences were suspended, Kindiki said eight licenses had been cancelled, while the remaining 26 companies that subsequently complied with the regulations would undergo fresh inspections with immediate effect..

The health consequences extend beyond immediate fatalities. A public awareness campaign in Mt. Kenya warned that illicit brews are "mixed with poisonous industrial chemicals like methanol, formalin, battery acid, mortuary anti-freeze, jet fuel, roundup, car screen wash, nail polish removers, and paint strippers, leading to cancer of the lips, throat, heart, lungs, liver, kidney, pancreas, colon, reproductive systems, and bone marrow”.

The government's response has been aggressive on paper. Between

alcoholic brews trade

January 2024 and May 2026, the Rift Valley region alone recorded 254,272 litres of illicit alcohol seized in 2024, 189,293 litres in 2025, and 49,508 litres in the first five months of 2026.

Deputy Inspector General of Police Eliud Lagat presented these figures to Parliament's Public Petitions Committee in June 2026, describing the declining trend as evidence of progress.

Uasin Gishu County recorded 56 arrests in 2024, which surged to 505 in 2025 before dropping to 111 by May 2026. Seizures followed a similar pattern: 4,417 litres in 2024, 37,524 litres in 2025, and 4,442 litres in early 2026. Such dramatic fluctuations raise questions about whether enforcement is consistent or driven by periodic crackdowns.

ACA reported seizing counterfeit goods valued at over Sh563 million between the first and third quarters of FY 2025/26.

The illicit alcohol trade cannot function at this scale without protection. Rift Valley Regional Police Commander Samuel Ndanyi acknowledged that "Some officers have previously undermined similar efforts by leaking information to suspects."

Interior CS Murkomen has repeatedly warned police officers against collusion. In Elgeyo Marakwet, he directed that "any officer found abetting the sale of illicit alcohol will be sacked". In Nyeri, he linked illicit alcohol proceeds to political violence.

The Euromonitor study identified "weak enforcement and corruption" as key drivers of the illicit market. The Rift Valley's porous borders

with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda have made it a conduit for smuggled ethanol and illicit products.

Families and communities have paid the brunt. In Laikipia, residents of Bondeni village held peaceful demonstrations after two close friends, Anthony Muthiga Ngugi, 50, and William Wanyoike, 48, died moments after a drinking spree at a local den.

The Kiambu County case of Robert Njoroge Kuria, found dead in his home after consuming illicit alcohol, prompted neighbours to accuse local authorities of negligence.

Kenya's alcohol regulation is fractured between national and county governments. NACADA does not license alcohol-selling outlets. That function is devolved to County Liquor Licensing Committees under the constitution. NACADA coordinates enforcement but does not arrest drug barons or offer treatment services, instead referring cases to other agencies. This fragmented system creates gaps that illicit traders exploit.

In a press statement issued in Nairobi, ACA Board chair Nelson Ributhi Gaichuhie said recent multi-agency operations had exposed the scale of the illicit alcohol trade. He said enforcement now extended to counterfeit tobacco and nicotine products, warning that such products are manufactured outside regulatory oversight, meaning their contents cannot be verified, and their trade deprives the government of revenue while undermining legitimate manufacturers.

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REPORT

Nairobi leads in illicit brew seizures amid ACA crackdown

Nairobi has been ranked the leading area in the recovery of illicit and counterfeit alcohol, the Anti-Counterfeit Authority (ACA) has said.

Nyeri and Eldoret are also among the areas where thousands of bottles of suspected counterfeit alcohol and litres of illicit brew were seized between August 20 and September 3.

The authority said a multi-agency Rapid Results Initiative targeting high-risk areas in Nairobi resulted in 36 arrests and apprehensions, the seizure of more than 5,500 suspected counterfeit bottles and the recovery of about 39,580 litres of illicit brew.

In Dagoretti North, officers recovered 27,330 litres of illicit alcohol. More than 5,000 bottles were seized in Kayole, while 868 assorted alcoholic beverages were recovered in Eastleigh.

"On September 15, ACA officers, working with the police, seized 8,459 suspected counterfeit alcoholic products valued at approximately Sh2.1 million in Makindu," said Nelson Ributhi, chair of the ACA Board of Directors.

"Further seizures in Nairobi, Nyeri and Eldoret brought the value of goods recovered in September to Sh3.74 million," he added.

The enforcement operations are also targeting counterfeit tobacco and related products, including cigarettes, nicotine products, electronic cigarettes, vapes, refill liquids, rolling papers and filters. The authority said the illegal trade leads to government revenue losses and undermines legitimate manufacturers.

In a separate crackdown targeting agricultural products, ACA seized illegally repackaged fertiliser in Matungu, Kakamega County, alongside two loaded lorries and industrial packaging equipment. The fertiliser had been diverted from the government subsidy programme and repackaged in counterfeit branded bags for sale at commercial prices.

ACA has also warned it will intensify efforts against pirated textbooks and revision materials, calculators and mathematical sets bearing imitations of registered brands and publishers, during the national examination period.

"Pirated materials may contain errors, omissions or outdated content, while counterfeit calculators and mathematical sets may not meet the required standards of accuracy," he said. "Officers will step up inspections of bookshops and stationery suppliers."

As December approaches, ACA warned that demand for alcohol, tobacco, foodstuff and personal care products could rise, while the planting season is expected to increase demand for fertiliser.

ACA urged consumers to inspect seals, labels and packaging and verify excise stamps and standardisation marks through official channels. "Farmers should buy subsidised fertiliser only through authorised channels. Parents and schools should source learning materials from authorised publishers and suppliers,"

[Pkemoi Ng'enh]



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