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U.S. alcohol sales were down - 3.7% through early September

A Labor Day shopping lift pushed weekly sales to $2.2 billion, with beer showing the sharpest four-week decline.

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U.S. alcohol sales got a short lift from Labor Day shopping, but new NielsenIQ data shows the broader market remained weaker than a year earlier through early September.

In the four weeks ending Sept. 5, total alcohol dollar sales reached $8.4 billion, down -3.7% from the same period a year earlier, according to NIQ's Full View: Total U.S. Alcohol Pulse for August 2026. Case volume totaled 166.0 million, a drop of -5.6%. On a week-to-week basis, sales improved heading into the holiday. Dollar sales for the latest week rose to $2.2 billion, up +5.1% from the week ending Aug. 29, reflecting heavier purchasing before Labor Day weekend celebrations.

The weekly gain did not change the larger picture. NIQ's report points to continued pressure across the beverage alcohol business as summer ends, with every major category posting declines in both sales and volume over the latest four-week period.

Beer remained the weakest large category in the report. Dollar sales fell -4.7% from a year earlier, while volume dropped -5.9%. NIQ said beer has borne the heaviest impact from soft consumer demand late in the summer and posted the sharpest losses among the main alcohol segments.

Wine also stayed in negative territory. Dollar sales declined -3.7% and volume was down -5.1%. The report said wine's slowdown has been largely steady through the summer, without a sustained rebound.

Spirits showed somewhat better resilience than beer and wine, but still lost ground. Dollar sales were down -3.3%, while volume slipped -3.4%. NIQ described spirits as the most stable of the core categories during the period, even though it also continued to trail last year's performance.

Prepared cocktails made from beer, wine, and spirits also remained under pressure. The category's dollar sales fell -1.0% and case volume dropped -5.1%. NIQ said that segment has now posted slight declines for about a month after a period of steadier growth. The report pointed to a split within ready-to-drink products, saying gains for spirits-based and wine-based cocktails are no longer enough to offset ongoing declines in malt-based RTDs, including flavored malt beverages and hard seltzers.

The data suggests that the industry’s main problem is not limited to one segment. Even with a holiday-driven sales burst, the broader market remains below year-earlier levels, and the weakness is spread across categories, states, and retail channels.

That pattern was visible in major state markets. All of the top 10 states tracked in the report posted declines in both dollar sales and volume. Michigan recorded the smallest dollar sales decline among those markets, at -1.6%, though its case volume still fell -3.8%. New Jersey showed the strongest volume performance, with cases nearly flat at -0.3%, while dollar sales declined -1.9%.

NIQ said New Jersey’s results reflect a growing divide between volume stability and revenue growth, a sign that consumers may be shifting toward lower-priced products or value-focused purchases. That gap matters for suppliers and retailers because stronger unit movement does not necessarily translate into stronger sales dollars.

At the other end of the scale, Washington posted the weakest volume performance among the major states covered in the report. Case volume there dropped -14.3%, and dollar sales fell -8.8%. NIQ said the contrast between relatively stable markets such as Michigan and much steeper declines in states such as Washington shows how limited category strength remains across the country.

The same broad softness appeared across retail channels. Food stores posted the largest dollar sales decline, at -6.1%. Club stores followed at -3.3%, convenience stores at -3.2%, mass retail at -2.9%, and liquor stores at -2.7%. The only group to post a sales increase was the “all others” category, which includes drug, military, and dollar stores, where dollar sales rose +1.3%.

Volume trends across those outlets closely tracked the sales picture, though the declines were often steeper. Food stores again showed the largest drop, with volume down -8.2%. Convenience stores fell -5.9%, liquor stores -4.3%, mass retailers -3.6%, and club stores -0.9%. The “all others” category was the only one to post growth in volume as well, rising +3.3%.

The gap between dollar and volume declines in several channels also points to a market where price and mix are still influencing results. In food stores, for example, volume fell much faster than sales, suggesting some support from pricing, even as fewer cases moved. In New Jersey, the reverse dynamic was more visible, where volume held relatively steady but dollar sales fell more sharply, indicating weaker revenue per unit sold.

The latest numbers add to signs that the alcohol industry has not yet found a clear recovery path after a soft summer. Holiday weekends can still create short-term demand spikes, but NIQ’s data indicates those bursts are not enough to reverse the broader slowdown. Beer remains under the most strain, wine continues to lose momentum at a steady pace, spirits are holding up somewhat better but still declining, and prepared cocktails are no longer delivering the growth that once helped offset weakness elsewhere.

NIQ’s figures are based on retail measurement data for the four weeks ending Sept. 5. In the report, prepared cocktails include spirits-based prepared cocktails, wine-based cocktails, flavored malt beverages, and seltzers.