

Local Government Alcohol Policy: Community sentiment and the policy development process

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Executive Summary

Background

International research evidence, including studies conducted in New Zealand, shows that strategies restricting the availability and promotion of alcohol are the most effective for reducing hazardous drinking. Increased prices via excise taxes, a minimum purchase age of 20 or 21 years, restrictions on trading hours and outlet density, and lowered blood alcohol limits for driving are particularly effective. Treatments for high-risk drinkers are less effective, while education programmes are found to be ineffective.

New Zealand governments have liberalised alcohol availability in recent decades, removing many effective alcohol controls. Communities have come to rely on local government to manage alcohol-related problems. Various options are available to local government, including restricting trading hours, implementing drinking bans in public places, removing alcohol advertising from council property and assets, and security initiatives such as closed-circuit television and safety officers.

Policy theorists suggest that public opinion is an important consideration in determining the activities of government. It legitimises government action and helps determine the viability of policy options. It is also recognised that policies designed to modify behaviour, such as alcohol controls, are more likely to be adhered to if they are well supported by the public.

Research Objectives

This thesis presents research undertaken to:

- (1) Measure public sentiment towards local government alcohol policies in selected New Zealand communities.**

Public sentiment was measured in seven New Zealand communities: Alexandra, Dunedin, Selwyn District, Wellington, Palmerston North, Hamilton, and North Shore. Residents in these areas were randomly selected from the electoral roll and invited to participate in a postal survey.

- (2) Identify factors underlying public sentiment towards local government alcohol policies.**

- (3) **Examine the association between public sentiment and local government alcohol policies.**
- (4) **Investigate local government responses to community alcohol issues and the alcohol policy development process.**

Case studies involving interviews with staff and councillors were undertaken to investigate local government responses to alcohol issues in three of the seven communities.

Key Findings

The survey response rate was 59% (range: 46% to 69%).

Community sentiment towards local government alcohol policies

24-hour trading:

- Fewer than 15% of respondents in each community agreed that on-licensed premises should be allowed to operate 24 hours-a-day. Over 70% (range: 71% to 89%) supported opening hours being restricted.

Drinking in public areas:

- Most respondents (range: 81% to 95%) disagreed that people should be allowed to drink in public spaces around their city or town centre.
- In each area (range: 73% to 87%) except Selwyn District (45%), most respondents agreed that their local government should use bans to control drinking in public places.

Enforcement of server laws:

- There was strong agreement that local government personnel and police should be stricter in their enforcement of alcohol server laws (range: 69% to 81%).

Advertising bans:

- The majority of respondents agreed that their local government should ban alcohol advertising on local government property (range: 56% to 69%).

Restrictions on outlet density:

- Support for local governments to restrict the number of alcohol outlets in the community was mixed (range: 27% to 49%). In six of the seven communities, more respondents agreed with this policy than disagreed.

Factors underlying support for local government alcohol policies

- Respondents whose drinking behaviour would be most affected by controls (i.e., hazardous drinkers), and who are perhaps more tolerant of the adverse consequences of alcohol (e.g., young males), were less supportive of local government alcohol controls.

- Respondents who were more exposed to alcohol problems, or are at least more aware of them, were more supportive of local government alcohol controls.

Agreement between public opinion and local government alcohol policies

- Agreement between public support and local government alcohol policies varied from moderate in the largest metropolitan area to high in the two rural areas.

The development of local government alcohol policies and strategies

- The three case-study communities (Alexandra, Dunedin and Wellington) had experienced similar alcohol-related problems in recent years.
- Possible reasons for variation in opinion-policy consistency and the number of strategies used in the three communities include differences in: 1) the agenda-setting process, 2) the views and political mix of local government politicians, and 3) the ability of politicians and local government departments to compromise in developing a plan of action.
- Adoption of alcohol policies and strategies is facilitated by an open agenda-setting process where there are no “gate-keepers” determining what is put on the agenda.
- A sentiment expressed by all three local governments was that central government needed to be taking a greater role in dealing with alcohol problems.
- Dealing with alcohol problems is expensive for local governments in terms of consultation on bylaws and implementation of safety initiatives. Administering the Sale of Liquor Act is also expensive and costs are not covered by liquor licensing fees. Current legislation prevents local governments setting fees to recover such costs.
- The ability of local governments to adopt policies that restrict the availability of alcohol, and other strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm, would be facilitated by more enabling central government legislation (e.g., legislation that allows local governments to feasibly restrict the number of alcohol outlets in their community, establish guidelines on what constitutes irresponsible alcohol promotions, and set liquor licensing fees).

Conclusions

- New Zealand communities are supportive of policies that restrict the availability and promotion of alcohol.
- Local governments would be acting in accordance with public opinion if they adopted strategies shown to be effective in reducing alcohol related harm; however, their actions are constrained by legislative and resource limitations.
- Central government would be assisting communities in reducing alcohol-related harm by adopting legislation that reduces the availability and promotion of alcohol and facilitates local government in dealing with alcohol-related problems locally.