



Maintaining a Public Health Approach to Alcohol Policy During COVID-19

Many provinces and territories have relaxed alcohol sales and consumption regulations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health measures implemented to control its spread. For example, to mitigate the economic impact of lockdown measures on the hospitality industry, most jurisdictions have expanded alcohol sales through restaurant takeout orders. However, governments need to assess the economic benefits of expanding access to alcohol against the costs and harms of alcohol consumption. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction has prepared this policy brief with recommendations to support policy makers in taking a public health and safety approach to alcohol regulation in the context of the pandemic.

Key Recommendations

- Ensure that temporary regulatory adjustments that increase access to alcohol are not made permanent.
- Prioritize evidence-based public health measures when considering regulatory and policy changes, including adjustments to pricing and availability of alcohol.
- Maintain funding to enhance and strengthen the range of substance use supports and services, including virtual care, community supports and treatment services.
- Collect and analyze data to monitor changes in alcohol consumption and sales, and related impacts.

Why We Must Consider the Harms of Alcohol Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Alcohol sales increased across Canada in the initial stages of the pandemic (Alexander, 2020; Lortie, 2020; Myran et al., 2020). Self-reported consumption levels for certain populations have also followed this trend. Between 25 to 26 percent of Canadians reported consuming more alcohol during the early phases of the pandemic (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2020a; Canadian Red Cross, 2020). Emerging evidence shows this trend has continued throughout the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020, June 4; Mental Health Research Canada, 2020).

Driving the increase in self-reported alcohol use are such factors as boredom, stress, changing routines and increased anxiety due to the pandemic (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2020a). Furthermore, certain groups are at higher risk for increased alcohol use during the pandemic. Those with a pre-existing alcohol use disorder or lower self-rated mental health are more likely to report increases in alcohol consumption since the start of COVID-19 (Kim et al., 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020). Parents of school-aged children have also reported higher rates of alcohol use as a coping mechanism during the pandemic (Wardell et al., 2020).



There are a number of acute and chronic health impacts associated with increased alcohol use that can impact an over-burdened healthcare system. In fact, alcohol use costs the healthcare system in Canada over \$5.4 billion annually (Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms Working Group, 2020). Acute impacts include increased emergency room visits due to intoxication, alcohol-related injury and impaired driving, while chronic impacts include cardiovascular conditions, alcohol-related cancers and liver cirrhosis (Sherk, Thomas, Churchill, & Stockwell, 2020). Increased alcohol use is also associated with higher rates of domestic violence (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2020b). This relationship is of particular concern given evidence of increased domestic violence and reduced access to social services and supports during the pandemic (Women's Shelters Canada, 2020). Reducing strain on the healthcare system, while limiting public health and safety harms, are overarching policy considerations during the pandemic and beyond.

Implications of Policy Changes During the Pandemic

There are effective policy levers to reduce alcohol consumption rates through accessibility, physical availability, density of alcohol outlets and minimum unit pricing. Evidence indicates that these policy levers are best applied as a comprehensive set to effectively promote reduced alcohol consumption (National Alcohol Strategy Working Group, 2007; World Health Organization, 2019a).¹ During the pandemic, the use of these levers has been relaxed, largely to support businesses that sell alcohol.

Essential Service Designation and Hours of Sale

The availability of alcohol, determined by the number in a given area of on-premise establishments (bars and restaurants) and off-premise retail outlets (liquor and beer stores), and their hours of operation, plays an important role in alcohol consumption rates (Stockwell et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2019b). Since the onset of the pandemic, all 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions have designated alcohol retail an essential service.² This designation allows for off-premise sales to continue in either an online or in-person format. While most jurisdictions initially introduced reduced hours of sales (see appendix), some have since permitted extended hours (Government of British Columbia 2020, April 15).

Takeout and Home Delivery

Government control of alcohol distribution, including denying sales to minors and intoxicated people, can serve as a mechanism to provide protective measures for alcohol consumption levels (Stockwell et al., 2019). Throughout the pandemic, regulations on alcohol availability and sales have been relaxed. These changes include allowing liquor licensees such as bars and restaurants to sell alcohol through takeout and delivery, often using third-party delivery services that operate outside the more highly regulated government sales and enforcement system (see appendix). As a result, the number of alcohol sales outlets has increased, while government controls have been reduced.

Reduced Minimum Pricing

Minimum unit pricing has been identified as a key policy intervention to reduce alcohol sales, risky and harmful consumption, and alcohol-related harms (Babor et al, 2010; Sherk, Stockwell, et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2019b). In response to the pandemic, Ontario has reduced minimum pricing for spirits sold by licensed establishments (Alcohol and Gaming Commission of

¹ These policy recommendations align with those in Canada's National Alcohol Strategy (National Alcohol Strategy Working Group, 2007).

² Prince Edward Island initially closed alcohol retail outlets during the pandemic, but later reversed this decision and declared alcohol retail an essential service.



Ontario, 2020) and British Columbia has introduced wholesale pricing for the hospitality industry (Government of British Columbia, 2020, July 20). These changes allow licensed establishments in the hospitality industry to offer alcohol at prices closer to off-premise retail outlets.

Public Consumption Regulations

A high density of alcohol sales and consumption spaces is associated with increased alcohol-related harms (Stockwell et al., 2019). Various levels of government have allowed changes to zoning regulations to increase the amount of outdoor space permitted for alcohol consumption; for example, through the expansion of restaurant patio sizes to promote physical distancing (Alberta Liquor and Gaming Commission, 2020; Government of Ontario, 2020; British Columbia Liquor and Cannabis Regulation Branch, 2020; City of Ottawa, 2020; City of Edmonton, 2020). Maintaining these zoning changes for the long term could result in a net increase in alcohol use. Laws restricting the consumption of alcohol in public spaces have also been the subject of increased debate, which has resulted in city councils in North Vancouver, Port Coquitlam and Penticton, British Columbia, and La Prairie, Quebec, relaxing public consumption regulations (Jabakhanji, 2020; City of North Vancouver, 2020; City of Port Coquitlam, 2020; City of Penticton, 2020; Girard, 2020).

Mitigating the Risks Associated with Increased Alcohol Use and Availability

Evidence-based public health and safety responses are needed to reduce the harms and risks associated with policy change around alcohol. Many of the policy measures introduced since the start of the pandemic were designed to be time-limited, intended to alleviate the impacts of temporary lockdowns and physical distancing requirements on citizens and businesses. However, there is increasing momentum toward maintaining these measures on a permanent basis (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2020; Platt, 2020; Government of Ontario, 2020, Dec. 9). This momentum could signal a shift towards greater availability of alcohol and fewer government controls on sales and consumption.

In addition to following best practices for alcohol sales and availability, investment in health prevention public messaging around the use of alcohol, including how to reduce the risks and harms associated with both short- and long-term use, will support Canadians in making informed decisions about alcohol consumption. This messaging should include communicating healthy coping strategies for stress and boredom during the pandemic and beyond. Providing targeted information on accessing services and supports for all populations is also important to ensure those who need help are able to receive it.

Investing in health services and supports, medical interventions and treatment, including virtual care community supports, will provide Canadians who are impacted by alcohol use with necessary resources for harm reduction and treatment. Enhancing data collection, monitoring and surveillance will support more effectively directing treatment and intervention resources, although greater coordination of data collection at local, sub-national and national levels is needed (Rush, Tremblay, & Brown, 2019).

Monitoring and assessing the impact of policy changes during the pandemic on alcohol consumption is critical to determining whether these changes should be temporary or permanent, and to supporting a public health approach that reduces the health, social and criminal justice costs of alcohol use.



Appendix: Alcohol Policy Measures by Jurisdiction in Response to COVID-19

A detailed table comparing policy changes by jurisdictions during COVID will be available in January 2021 at www.ccsa.ca.

Jurisdiction	Reduced hours for off-premise sales introduced March 2020	Establishment licensee adjustments for takeout or delivery
British Columbia	✓	✓
Alberta		✓
Saskatchewan		✓
Manitoba	✓	✓
Ontario	✓	✓
Quebec	✓	✓
New Brunswick	✓	✓
Nova Scotia	✓	✓
Prince Edward Island	✓	✓
Newfoundland and Labrador	✓	✓
Yukon		
Northwest Territories		✓
Nunavut	✓	



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