

# Community Alcohol Conversations Project Grey Bruce Health Unit, 2017

A special thanks to the residents of Grey and Bruce Counties who participated in these conversations, shared their thoughts and identified solutions to support a culture of alcohol consumption in moderation.



# What is going on?

For many, drinking is a social activity that is involved in entertainment, celebrations and relaxation. However, risky drinking increases the risk of violence, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, crime and traffic accidents (Taylor, 2016). Alcohol is related to injuries, chronic health issues and social related harms affecting family, friends, and employment. Alcohol misuse and its related harms are a public health issue that require action locally, provincially and nationally.

18%

of Grey Bruce residents have heard of Canada's Low Risk Drinking Guidelines (Grey Bruce Health Unit, 2015)

30.9%

of the population exceeds the weekly and daily Low Risk Drinking Guidelines compared to the Ontario rate of 20.7% (GBHU, 2018)

The first Low-Risk Drinking Alcohol Guideline recommends a limit of 10 drinks a week for women, with no more than 2 drinks a day on most days, and 15 drinks a week for men, with no more than 3 drinks a day on most days. In 2015/16, just under one third of Grey Bruce residents aged 19 and older were drinking in excess of this guideline (GBHU, 2018).

# What did we do?

In 2012, the Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU) released a position paper providing guidance for the work related to alcohol use prevention in our region. This resource outlined recommendations including policies to address the issues surrounding alcohol use in Grey Bruce. One of these recommendations was to engage the community to raise awareness of the problems associated with alcohol sales and distribution, advocate for provincial initiatives and foster support for community coalitions (Barclay, 2012).

Community alcohol conversations are an engagement strategy to mobilize community members' ideas and solutions. Engaging community members in solutions builds deeper and stronger communities. Community conversations are a response to the discrepancy between the complexities of societies' needs and what's available to fix them. The Grey Bruce Health Unit used this concept to facilitate discussions with community members about alcohol use, its impacts and possible changes to address these concerns.

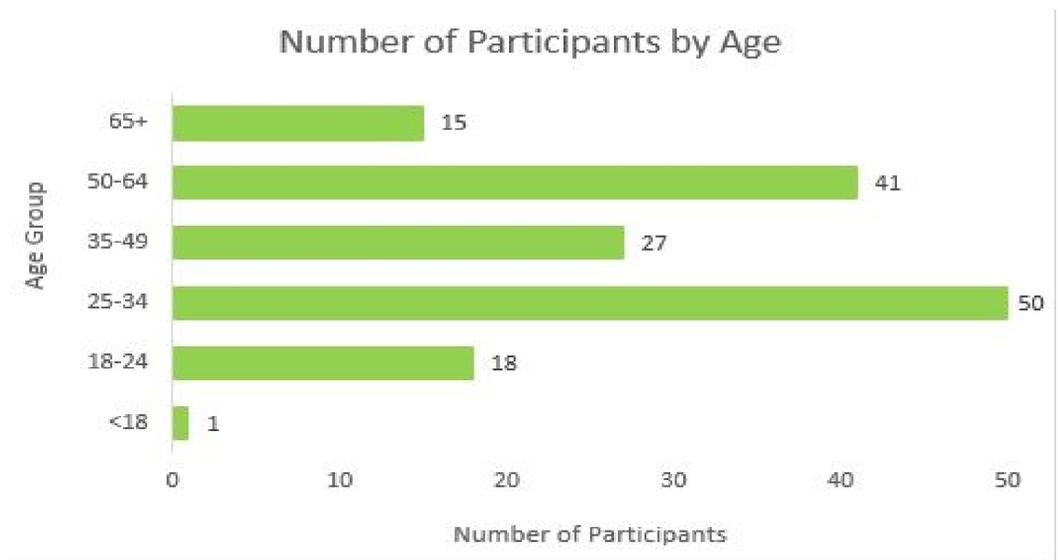
# What did we ask?

To guide the conversations, 5 questions were chosen to understand community views and focus on solutions for moderation. Each participant completed a survey to elicit further thoughts and to gather demographic information.

1. What does the drinking culture look like in your community?
2. Have you or others been affected by alcohol use in your community?
3. What is an example of moderation in your community?
4. How can your community move towards a culture of moderation?
5. What would you like to see changed?

# Who did we hear from?

A total of 18 conversations were conducted between April and August, 2017. This involved a total of 152 participants.



# What did we learn?

From the conversations, 5 main themes and several sub-themes were identified. These themes include:

1. Drinking Culture
2. Drinking and Driving
3. Impacts
4. Challenges
5. Potential Solutions



# Drinking Culture

## Local History

Prohibition was a significant time in the area especially within the City of Owen Sound. The City of Owen Sound observed prohibition until 1972. It was mentioned that this history may influence current culture of alcohol use.

## Generational Habits

It was clear that almost everyone believed there is a higher rate of drinking in Grey Bruce than other areas. Many people described this as a binge drinking culture. People believe it is socially acceptable to drink in large amounts on weekends and in certain workplaces, especially those that are privately owned. One person said "At the end of the day my partner and his co-workers close the shop door and that's what they do [drink]". There was a sentiment that you grow up seeing adults drink and "...[kids] learn it from their parents".

## Underage Drinking

Participants identified children as young as grade 7 are drinking. There was a mix of opinions on whether exposure of alcohol to underage drinkers is acceptable. There also seemed to be a wide range of parenting styles. One participant said "Is it moderation to give 15-16 year olds a couple of beers? I don't think so, I think that establishes a pattern".

"My friends in the city are shocked by the tolerance that adults here have for teen drinking but I guess that's what people...grew up around."

29.8% & 13.3%

of Grey Bruce men and women 18+ binge drank at least once a month in the past 12 months (GBHU, 2017)

# Drinking and Driving

There were two main sub-themes found in this section:

1. Drinking and driving is a problem. "In the cities, people have stopped drinking and driving. In the country, beer cans are seen on the side of gravel roads. You sometimes see people weaving. It is quite shocking that it clearly happens on a regular basis."

2. Many people noticed younger generations are responsible in using a designated driver. "The new generation designates someone to drive. They are way more responsible. Our generation would take a chance and be more likely to say, "I've only had 2 or 3. But the kids have a designated driver. That is a good sign of change.""

6.8%

of Grey Bruce respondents report drinking 2 or more drinks in the hour before operating a recreational vehicle (GBHU, 2017)



# Impacts

Each conversation had at least one person who disclosed that they were negatively affected by alcohol. The alcohol related harms revealed in the conversations include: loss of loved ones, health problems, public disturbances, arrests, violence and abuse.

“It is especially a problem if you come from a family that has had drinking issues. It can be bad for family members. A person that has been drinking can hurt you. It is a cycle that goes through generations.”

“I have a neighbour who is a drinker. I don't want my children exposed to that...it is hard to say no, because they are friends.”

# Challenges

Consumption in moderation is complex and everyone has a different definition. Some believe that binge drinking on weekends is considered moderation while other believe that being able to maintain a job illustrates moderation. When asked about examples of moderation in the community many responded that there is no moderation.

“Moderation is not a concept for me as an alcoholic – I tried all my life and learned that I was powerless over alcohol...”

“Moderation is just a glass of wine for me to relax. For my neighbour, it is to pass out...it is different for everybody.”

One issue that was identified as requiring change was how alcohol is portrayed in the media. People found it problematic to have alcohol normalized and glamorized through television and advertising.

Several people talked about their frustration in accessing services, especially in smaller communities and that there is a need for services for youth (under 18) that suffer from addiction. “We need to reduce that stigma [around addiction services].”

In these conversations community members raised concerns about the complexity and challenges in tackling the issue of alcohol. People expressed concern about the difficulty in changing cultural norms and the financial profit it provides to restaurants and governments. A few people thought the low-risk drinking guidelines allowed for too much alcohol.

76.3%

of Grey Bruce respondents think alcohol should be sold with a health warning label (GBHU, 2017)

## Contributing factors

There is a social pressure to drink. "If you don't have a drink you get asked if you're pregnant" one participant said. Lack of alternative activities was identified as a reason for the drinking culture and providing alternative activities was seen as a large part of the solution.

"Can't go to the movies, don't even have a skate park here yet."

"In the winter it's grocery store, then liquor store BUT tons of drinking in the summer because they have lots of money then."

Alcohol consumption is a normal behaviour at sporting events - even children's hockey tournaments. Respondents said that there is a perception that there must be alcohol to fundraise. One participant stated that "Drinking is attached to almost every social event. It is like food in that sense."

"I'm selling raffle tickets for an LCBO gift card because alcohol sells."

"In a way, we are hypocrites because we don't want youth to drink, but we want their money. There is big fundraising component."

## Identified Solutions

### Youth Education

People believed that providing education to youth could change the drinking culture. Teaching parents how to have conversations with their kids about making safe choices. "Teaching young people about peer pressure and how to not drink and still be cool or have fun. For young people to have confidence to say no and it's okay." Another moderation strategy is taking SmartServe - many people found it was an informative tool. It was identified that drinking in a surrounding where food is available creates moderation.

"More training for our servers about how to cut someone off or deal with confrontation."

Enforcement was a solution related to drinking and driving on back roads and in areas where there are a high density of alcohol outlets. Smaller communities felt they needed community policing to more closely monitor drinking and driving. Community members suggested innovative solutions such as a personal breathalyzer that would teach people about their limit. At events people would like to see the amount of drinks sold regulated either by issuing a limited number of drink tickets or by putting a cap on the number of drinks served. Transportation was identified as a solution to drinking and driving.

"A bar here gives gift certificates to people who leave their cars overnight after drinking, \$10 off your next meal for being responsible - recently a band had it happen to them and put it on social media."

### Policy and Systems Change, Accessibility, Enforcement, Pricing and Marketing

Community members offered many solutions that are tied to policy and systems changes. Many believed that increasing accessibility through grocery stores in Ontario is a problem. Others believed in more open regulation policies like lowering the age limit. A few compared Canada to countries with more lenient regulations - "in other countries, youth don't have the urge to drink because it is more accessible".

“I think it was a huge mistake to put alcohol in grocery stores.”

“I would like to see alcohol and drug use questions as part of conversation with health care providers. It is a regular question health care providers should be asking.”

“You can have a credit card ... live on your own, drive and are an adult before you can buy alcohol. Need to take away the novelty by having lower drinking age. Instead of when you turn 19 you go and buy so much because you can.”

Another policy solution was to increase the price of alcohol. Especially when there is higher content of alcohol or larger packaging.

“Only a few dollars difference between alcohol sizes. It makes people choose bigger. Make the bigger bottle more expensive by a significant amount – if it’s twice as big it should be twice as much.”



62.1%

think the price of alcohol sold at retail outlets should increase each year by the same rate as other retail items (GBHU, 2017)

## Limitations

A total of 18 conversations were conducted in 2017. In total, there were 152 participants. Purposive sampling was used to identify pre-existing groups in the community (e.g., sports teams, service clubs, community organizations and volunteer groups) with whom the conversations were held. Therefore, it is likely that the results in this report under- or over-represent particular groups and should not be generalized to the overall Grey Bruce population.

## Conclusion

Alcohol is a serious public health issue. One of these recommendations in the paper "Reducing Alcohol Related Harms: Moving Towards a Culture of Moderation in Grey Bruce" was to engage the community to raise awareness of the problems associated with alcohol (Barclay, 2012). Engaging community members in solutions builds deeper and stronger communities.

Five main themes were identified throughout the conversations including the drinking culture, drinking and driving, impacts, challenges and potential solutions. In order to effectively change behaviour and reduce the harms associated with alcohol use in Grey Bruce, a comprehensive health promotion strategy is required (Barclay, 2012). The strategy must include education, awareness and skill building but must also focus on creating healthy public policy to move toward a culture of moderation.

## Moving Forward

The Grey Bruce Health Unit looks forward to continuing the alcohol conversation with Bruce and Grey residents. Findings from this project will be shared with conversation partners and other community stakeholders in an attempt to elicit further feedback on this topic.

Through continued community engagement, awareness raising and policy development, the goal of changing the culture of alcohol use, while limiting alcohol related harms, can become a reality for Grey Bruce.

For more information on this project, please email: [info@publichealthgreybruce.on.ca](mailto:info@publichealthgreybruce.on.ca)

## References

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