

OPHA Issue Series

Alcohol Outlet Density

Strategies to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms in Ontario

Background

The regulation of alcohol outlet density is supported by research as a useful public health tool for the reduction of excessive alcohol consumption and related harms. Alcohol outlet density refers to the number of locations where alcohol is legally available for purchase either by geographic area or by population. On-premise outlets may include bars, clubs and restaurants, while off-premise outlets may include liquor stores, beer stores, grocery stores, breweries and wineries. In 2015, the density of on- and off-premises alcohol outlets in Ontario was 17.2 for every 10,000 people age 15 and older.¹⁴

Facts

Alcohol-related harm

- A large body of research has accumulated associating alcohol outlet density with harms such as assaults, suicide, public disorder and violent crime.^{1,3,5,6,9,11}
- Studies assessing the relationship between alcohol outlet density and motor vehicle crashes produced mixed results.^{3,10}

Individual alcohol consumption

- Findings linking outlet density to alcohol consumption are mixed, though there is some indication that higher density may be associated with elevated alcohol consumption, particularly heavy drinking.^{1,2,3,6,9,10}
- The strongest evidence for changes in individual consumption comes from natural experiments where substantial policy changes were made (e.g. privatization) as opposed to gradual changes in outlet density.¹
- Outlet density has been shown to be related to heavy episodic drinking by youths and young adults.^{1,2,10}
- Currently there is little evidence that outlet density is strongly related to individual alcohol consumption by residents living nearby.⁶

Violence

- Numerous well-designed studies have established a “strong positive association”⁵ between the density of on-premise drinking locations (e.g. bars) and violence across a range of studies and settings.^{5,9} There is some evidence that these effects are magnified in marginalized communities.⁵
- Evidence is inconsistent regarding what type of outlet is associated with what type of violence⁶ however, greater density of “bars excluding restaurants” has been linked to increased violent crime.⁵ Off-premise outlet density has also been linked to violent assaults and hospital stays.¹⁰
- Findings regarding the association of intimate partner violence and alcohol outlet density have been mixed.^{5,6}

Local-level characteristics

- There is some evidence to suggest that in rural settings, violent offenses rates are linked to higher densities of off-premise (retail) outlets.⁵
- There is evidence to suggest that neighbourhoods with a higher concentration or “clustering” of alcohol outlets into higher density areas (e.g. entertainment districts) is associated with increased violence, particularly in relation to on premise outlets (bars).^{5,6,11}
- Elevated levels of violent crime were seen with >25 establishments in a given postal code region in at least one well-designed study.⁵

Other considerations

- The mechanisms that give rise to these associations are less well understood due to limitations in study design. Much of the evidence relies on cross-sectional studies using aggregate-level data which do not permit conclusions as to causality.⁶ The evidence base to date demonstrates positive associations between alcohol outlet density and harms, the general hypothesis being that increased physical availability is linked to increased excessive alcohol consumption and related harm.³ However, greater analysis of neighbourhood and community-level factors (e.g. outlet types and community demographics) is needed.^{2,3,6,8}
- The theoretical basis of outlet density research is still being developed. A number of theories have been proposed that take into account local level factors such as the types of outlets, size of the community, location of outlets and neighbourhood characteristics.^{7,9}
- Some studies have suggested that young drinkers and marginalized drinkers may be more susceptible to over consumption and alcohol-related violence, respectively, as a result of increased alcohol availability.^{5,9,10} Additionally, increased outlet density has been linked to higher rates of violent offenses with effects magnified in economically deprived areas.⁵

The evidence clearly supports limiting alcohol outlet density to reduce alcohol-related harms at the population level. Regulating alcohol outlet density is therefore a recommended strategy to control alcohol availability. The recent OPHA Issue Series Controlling Physical Availability of Alcohol includes restrictions on outlet density in its proposed policies.

Formulating specific policy recommendations is challenging especially due to the competing economic interests of provincial and municipal governments. Researchers have established a positive link between density and alcohol harms but for the most part fall short of recommending specific density thresholds due to the great diversity of study settings, outcomes measured and methods used. However, some recommendations relevant to policy-making can be proposed.

Regulating alcohol availability through restrictions on alcohol outlet density		
Proposed policy, rationale and current Ontario landscape		
Proposed Policy	Rationale	Current Ontario Landscape
Restrict density of alcohol outlets per geographic unit or per population	<p>An increase in the numbers of retail outlets for alcohol is associated with an increase in alcohol consumption and associated harms such as violence, assault, and injuries.^{1,3,5,6,9,11}</p> <p>The impact of outlet density on high-risk drinking is especially concerning among young drinkers and marginalized drinkers.^{9,10}</p>	<p>The Province of Ontario does not currently have a provincial policy limiting the density of alcohol outlets. Under the current system, applications for on premise outlets are required to be posted publicly and are dealt with on a case by case basis. The density of alcohol outlets (on and off premise), in 2015, was 17.2 for every 10,000 people 15 years and older¹⁴ The ongoing “modernization” of alcohol sales initiated by the Ontario government has led to increased availability and privatization in the province. The provincial government announced a new round of authorizations on May 9, 2017, increasing alcohol sales to 76 additional grocery stores beginning June 30, 2017, bringing the total to 206 grocery stores authorized to sell alcohol. Daily drinking has increased from 5.3% to 8.5% between 2002 – 2013.¹⁴ Cancer Care Ontario recently called for the province to “halt the increase in the density of alcohol retailers per 10,000 people”.¹³</p>
Limit the clustering of alcohol outlets, particularly bars and clubs to avoid over-concentration.	<p>Research supports limiting the clustering of alcohol outlets, particularly bars and clubs, to prevent and reduce alcohol-involved violence.^{5,6,9}</p> <p>Restricting alcohol outlet density to <25 per postal code region can lead to “substantive reductions in violent crime/injury occurrences.”⁵</p>	<p>Recent regulatory changes have allowed more types of businesses to apply for liquor licenses including salons, farmers markets, barber shops, cafes and movie theatres. Downtown “entertainment districts” are becoming more common in cities across the province.</p>
Participate in active public health surveillance of outlet density and associated harms to better understand the local context and influence policy development. Also consider the impact of alternate channels such as online sales and liquor delivery services.	<p>Local level surveillance and analysis is recommended by the LDCP report as an action that can be undertaken by local health units.⁴</p> <p>Public Health Units recognize alcohol access as a key issue affecting alcohol harms. Public Health Units are positioned to coordinate efforts to address excessive consumption including planning, implementation and evaluation relative to outlet density.</p>	<p>At the municipal level, public health units are working to affect alcohol availability through policy, advocacy, awareness, partnerships and municipal regulation.¹⁵ Health units can also support local alcohol control strategies by working to strengthen local zoning regulations, alcohol availability at municipal events and encourage members of the public to use the existing AGCO Public Notice system to register their opposition to new outlets.</p>

- Control physical availability of alcohol through restrictions on alcohol outlet density at the local and provincial level.
- Limit the clustering of alcohol outlets to avoid over-concentration.
- Support local level strategies to regulate physical availability based on local data.
- Research appropriate thresholds for alcohol outlet density and develop guidelines.
- Research impacts of increased privatization and new store locations in Ontario.

Call to action for the Province of Ontario:

- ✓ Develop and implement a provincial Alcohol Strategy.
- ✓ Conduct a formal review and impact analysis of increased alcohol availability in Ontario.

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