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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Key stakeholder perspectives of drink restrictions in Newcastle, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The problems associated with alcohol consumption in or around licensed premises in the nighttime economy are extensive. One intervention designed to address these problems is drink restrictions. The aim of the current study is to gain different key stakeholder perspectives on drink restriction interventions, including their ability to reduce alcohol-related harms.

**Method:** This study involves an analysis of key stakeholder perspectives on the introduction of drink restrictions. Interviews were conducted with 23 key stakeholders, including venue licencees, security, and police from Newcastle, Australia. Drink restrictions, including limits on shots and number of drinks, were part of a mandatory set of interventions, which were implemented as a result of legislative change in New South Wales. As such, key stakeholders were able to provide insight into the implementation and practicality of the restrictions. All interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** Overall, key stakeholders were mixed in their support for drink restrictions, particularly because of the issues associated with customer preloading and practicality of enforcement. Stakeholders remained unconvinced of the impact of the restrictions on reducing harm.

**Conclusions:** Key stakeholders believe that drink restrictions would almost certainly be more likely to reduce alcohol-related harm in the nighttime economy as part of a larger intervention. However, it is unclear how much impact they have as a standalone harm reduction measure.

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There is considerable evidence of an association between the excessive alcohol consumption and a range of social, health, and economic harms (Collins & Lapsley 2008; Davoren et al. 2016). Alcohol-attributed disease and injury accounts for a significant number of hospitalizations each year (Pascal et al. 2009). The general link between intoxication and aggression has been widely confirmed internationally (Homel & Tomsen 1993; Ireland & Thommeny 1993; Graham & Wells 2003; Wells & Graham 2003; Graham & Homel 2008; McKay et al. 2015), and research has found a significant proportion of assaults, which involve people affected by alcohol, either as victims or offenders (Plant et al. 2002; Doherty & Roche 2003; Morgan & McAtamney 2009). Conservative estimates suggest that in 2004–2005, the total cost attributable to alcohol-related crime in Australia was \$1.7 billion (Collins & Lapsley 2008). Revised estimates in 2010 indicate the cost to the criminal justice system of \$2.958 billion and a further cost of \$3.662 billion for alcohol-related traffic accidents (Manning et al. 2013), with almost two-thirds of these costs borne by policing (38%) and prisons (21%) (Manning et al. 2013). The relationship between violence and the nighttime economy (NTE) is also well documented (Chikritzhs et al. 2007; Graham 2009; Babor et al. 2010; Miller et al. 2013), with research consistently finding strong positive correlations between assault rates and the number of licensed venues in urban areas (Gruenewald & Remer 2006;

Livingston 2008). However, scientifically reliable evidence on the effectiveness of various regulatory and enforcement strategies aimed at producing sustained reductions in aggression and violence in and around licensed premises is limited (Graham & Homel 2008).

The term ‘drinks restrictions’ normally refers to conditions placed on, or voluntarily entered into by, licensees, whereby the type or amount of alcohol being served is limited, such as not allowing ‘shots’, or the purchase of more than four drinks by any single customer. Drink restrictions are based on the rationale that much violence and disorder in the NTE is due to rapid or high levels of alcohol consumption (Graham et al. 2006; Hughes et al. 2011; Kypri et al. 2011). Over the past 14 years, licensees in the Australian city of Newcastle have implemented overlapping interventions that introduce some form of drinking restrictions. First, from 2001 Newcastle had a voluntary Liquor Accord involving the venues located within the Central Business District (CBD). In many parts of Australia, voluntary and localized Liquor Accords have involved some form of drink restrictions (Curtis et al. 2016). In the Newcastle CBD, participating venues agreed to implement a variety of drink restrictions that included a prohibition on serving spirits in shot glasses after certain hours. Records of these initial attempts to restrict alcohol supply and consumption within late-night venues could not be obtained. These

**Table 1.** Section 104 conditions imposed on Newcastle hotels in March 2008.

<b>Trading restrictions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reduced trading hours:</b> all premises are prohibited from trading later than 3.30am</li> <li>• <b>Lockout:</b> patrons must be prohibited from entering after 1.30am</li> </ul>
<b>Alcoholic drink restrictions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Venues are prohibited from supplying the following alcohol products after 10pm: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No shots</li> <li>• No mixed drinks with more than 30mLs of alcohol</li> <li>• No ready to drink drinks with an alcohol by volume greater than 5%</li> <li>• Not more than four drinks may be served to any patron at one time</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Responsible service of alcohol (RSA) actions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional RSA actions included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free water stations on all bar service areas</li> <li>• RSA Marshall from 11pm until closure (sole responsibility of supervising RSA practices and consumption)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• No stockpiling of drinks and a patron may only purchase up to four drinks at one time</li> <li>• Ceasing the sale and supply of alcohol at least 30 min prior to closing time</li> </ul>
<b>Compliance audits</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent compliance audit at least every 3 months</li> </ul>
<b>Management plan</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development and submission of a Plan of Management to the Liquor Administration Board</li> </ul>
<b>Communication strategies</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All venues subjected to the conditions must enter into an agreement for the sharing of a radio communications network to be used by management and security</li> </ul>

restrictions were often fragmented and inconsistent due to the voluntary nature of the Liquor Accord.

Due to a variety of formal complaints in 2007 by the NSW police and members of the community about violence, damage to property and disorderly behavior as a result of intoxicated persons in the Newcastle CBD, a raft of licensing conditions were placed on 14 venues located in Newcastle's main entertainment precinct in 2008 (Kypri et al. 2011). As these conditions were enforced under Section 104 of the *Liquor Act*, all licensees were legally bound to comply. Table 1 outlines the main conditions implemented under these reforms, which were designed to limit alcohol related violence. Specifically, drink restrictions prohibited venues from serving shots, mixed drinks with more than 30mls of alcohol, ready to drink<sup>1</sup> products containing greater than 5% pure alcohol and more than four drinks to any patron in a single transaction after 10 pm. These mandatory drink restrictions were implemented despite there being no evidence demonstrating that placing restrictions on the types or number of drinks able to purchase would reduce alcohol-related violence.

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of these interventions, or their relationship to other similar harm reduction initiatives. For example, drink restrictions were one of several interventions implemented in Newcastle as a result of the reforms to Section 104, with reduced trading hours and the introduction of venue lockouts making identification of success or failure of a singular intervention indeterminable. However, anecdotal evidence from NSW Police has reported significant reductions in alcohol-related crime as a result of this combination of *Liquor Act* amendments.

<sup>1</sup>Ready to Drinks refer to pre-mixed alcoholic spirits with soft drink, for example bourbon mixed with cola.

## Prior studies of the Newcastle intervention

A range of prior studies have documented the impact of the 2008 legislation in terms of reducing assaults reported to police (relative reduction of 37% (Kypri et al. 2011, 2014)), and hospital emergency department presentations (Miller et al. 2014). Further impacts were documented in terms of impact on pre-drinking (Miller et al. 2016), and that patrons in Newcastle went out earlier than in a comparison site (Miller et al. 2012). Studies examining the effectiveness of mandated alcohol supply restrictions have generally focused on the sale and promotion of packaged take-away liquor (Chikritzhs et al. 2007), prohibitions on the possession or consumption of alcohol in specifically defined public places (Hunter et al. 2004; Webb et al. 2004), or restricting trading hours (Kypri et al. 2011). Research specifically examining the impact of drink restrictions in reducing alcohol related harms in and around licensed venues remains to be undertaken.

This study addresses this gap by examining the insights of local stakeholders about drink restrictions imposed in Newcastle. The aim is to provide an analysis of key stakeholder perspectives on drink restrictions, including their ability to reduce alcohol related harms, given key stakeholders (i.e. licensees, police, licensing authorities) either directly implemented the intervention and experienced it first hand, were advocates of implementing drink restrictions to reduce alcohol-related disorder, or directly witnessed the outcomes after this intervention was implemented. As such the insights provided by different stakeholders in the nighttime economy, all of whom are concerned to reduce alcohol-related violence, are unparalleled. The approach taken in this study does not seek to determine the effectiveness of drinking restrictions as an intervention in its own right. Rather, we sought to elucidate different stakeholder perspectives on the major issues involved in the implementation of this strategy in light of the broader suite of reforms introduced under Section 104 of the *Liquor Act*.

## Methods

### Ethics

The current study was approved by a University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Setting

The current study was conducted using key stakeholders from Newcastle, NSW. Newcastle is a city of ~308,308 people and is located 160 km north of Sydney (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2011). It is the second most populated area in NSW and comprises five Local Government Areas (LGA). When this study was conducted in 2009, there were 75 hotel licenses in the Newcastle LGA and 21 hotels in the main entertainment precincts of Newcastle (Miller et al. 2015).

### Subjects

As part of a larger study (Miller et al. 2012), key stakeholders were interviewed about a variety of interventions that

had been introduced to address alcohol-related harm in Newcastle. A research assistant contacted key stakeholders from relevant organizations inviting them to participate, or to nominate alternative representatives from their organization. A total of 23 of these key stakeholders from Newcastle were asked specifically about the effectiveness of the drink restrictions. These stakeholders included police ( $n=3$ ), licensees/venues managers ( $n=11$ ), security personnel ( $n=3$ ), industry representative ( $n=1$ ), and licensing authorities and council workers ( $n=6$ ). The key stakeholders included 19 males and four females, and the years of experience within their respective roles ranged from one year to 37 years ( $M=9.97$  years).

### Data collection

A research assistant contacted each respondent and provided a brief description of the study and the purpose of the interview. All interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of interviewees. The recordings were fully transcribed and the files were then returned to each interviewee for review to allow for corrections, additions or expansion on any points raised during the discussion. An open-ended question schedule was followed, to enable a dialog between interviewer and respondent based on a series of prompts rather than a strict set of chronologically ordered questions. As such, not all stakeholders commented or elaborated on exactly the same issues. The overall objective of this qualitative approach was to enable the narratives of key stakeholders to depict the various benefits, impediments, and limits of drink restrictions as a strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm.

### Analyses

Thematic analysis was undertaken using the software package NVIVO 11 (QSR International 2015). This program enables researchers to identify and explore themes arising during analysis of the data and classify key points emerging in text narratives. In the present study, once a theme was identified in the interview transcripts, the content of each transcript was reanalyzed to detect common themes (Kellehear 1993). Additional categories were developed during each analysis phase to reflect the nuances of each original interview (Pope & Mays 1995). All data relevant to each category were identified and examined using constant comparison, in which each item is checked or compared with the rest of the data to establish clear and consistent analytical categories. The number of responses in each category has been provided for simplicity and transparency, although we do not assert these reflect general attitudes emerging in each interview (Stenius et al. 2008). The analysis is framed around discrete key stakeholder perceptions of:

- i. The ability of drink restrictions to reduce overall and rapid intoxication levels in licensed venues;
- ii. Specific drink restriction strategies that have achieved reduced intoxication levels in licensed venues; and

- iii. The limitations of drink restrictions in terms of their ability to minimize levels of patron intoxication in licensed premises.

## Results

Three main themes emerged from the analysis; reduced levels of intoxication, limitations of drink restrictions, and the practicality of drink restrictions.

### Reduced levels of intoxication amongst patrons

Some key stakeholders reported that overall intoxication levels of patrons in licensed premises were reduced because of the drink restrictions imposed in Newcastle under Section 104 of the *Liquor Act*. The respondents indicating reduced intoxication included licensees/managers/security or an industry representative of licensed venues as well as government employees and the transport industry.

In expressing their support for the drink restrictions, one Licensee stated:

I think they have been effective in all honesty [Licensee].

In identifying how the drink restrictions impacted overall intoxication levels of patrons, one key stakeholder found that the strategy had an effect on the cultural behavior of drinking:

... that [drink restrictions] really it's probably a significant part I think in the reduction in intoxication and the changing of people's culture about how they drink and what they were going to drink, particularly late at night [Police Officer].

In addition, some stakeholders believed that drink restrictions specifically reduced levels of rapid intoxication amongst patrons in licensed venues. A key restriction attributed to the decline in rapid intoxication was limiting the sale of shots and drinks containing high alcohol content. A security guard stated: because they are not getting double strength drinks inside and shots it is slowing it [rate of intoxication] up slightly [Security].

In a similar vein, one key stakeholder involved in licensing identified that:

Prior to the conditions being imposed we observed patrons consuming high strength Ready To Drink's – those 7–9% Ready To Drink's, shots and bombs and all those sorts of drinks that are likely to cause rapid intoxication. We actually observed several people consuming two or three bombs in a 45 min period and would be rapidly intoxicated. So those conditions being imposed – yes certainly we've seen an improvement in intoxication levels in that they are not getting access to those high strength products or products that allow people to slam down and consume rapidly [Government Employee].

In identifying specific drink restrictions that were effective at curbing rapid and overall rates of intoxication, many key stakeholders supported banning patrons buying shots. When asked what restriction they would voluntarily keep in place, one licensee expressed that they: would keep all of them in

place except for the four drink limit. So I think it's sensible not to have the shots and the doubles [Newcastle Licensee].

Further, security personnel emphasized the belief that patrons drink shots with the specific intention of getting drunk:

... you're only really getting a shot to get ripped. You are not having a shot... oh maybe a celebratory one or something, but 90% of shots are to get hammered [Security].

### **Limitations of drink restrictions**

Several of the key stakeholders expressed the opinion that the drink restrictions had no effect on levels of patron intoxication. When asked if there had been a noticeable difference in levels of intoxication after the imposition of drink restrictions, one stakeholder stated:

Well when we say we noticed, we noticed there was no change... they still get drunk [Transport Industry Employee].

Another key stakeholder simply responded:

No. It's more annoyed the customer than anything else and for us to give that customer service was very hard [Licensee].

In observing why drink restrictions did not have an effect on the reduction of patron intoxication, various key stakeholders conjectured that there were severe limitations that prevented drink restrictions to achieve the desired outcome of curbing levels of patron intoxication.

### **Practicality of restrictions**

In addition to preloading, some interviewees identified a further limitation in the practicality of implementing drink restrictions. A common issue was the impracticality of enforcing limits of four drink per customer per transaction. Some key stakeholders identified that in practice, this type of drink restriction does not reduce overall levels of intoxication. When analyzing the effectiveness of the various restrictions put in place, one key stakeholder stated that given the choice, they would forgo this particular strategy:

The four drink restriction though is at times doesn't make sense. I know what it is seeking to achieve but you have... people that are on Christmas shows and they are in a big group and the bar is really crowded so one person goes up with their bosses money to buy a round of drinks – you can clearly see that there is ten of them and you have to make them – I can only serve you four, you've got to line back up again. So that is probably the bartenders face a bit of conflict with that which is unnecessary and I don't think it helps intoxication or society or violence or anti-social behavior [Licensee].

In providing an example of how difficult it is to implement a four drink restriction, a key stakeholder stated:

If I went out with Charles and said oh I could only get four drinks; then we'll both go to the bar and get four each. It makes no difference except your friend's got to come with you [Security].

## **Discussion**

The current study investigated key stakeholder views regarding drink restrictions placed on licensed venues in Newcastle. Overall, key stakeholders were mixed in their support for drink restrictions, particularly because of the practicality of enforcement. Some stakeholders felt that placing restrictions on shots and double strength drinks specifically would help to reduce overall and rapid intoxication, however also felt the four-drink per person policy was a practical concern, given that it was more of an inconvenience to patrons than a way of preventing them from becoming intoxicated.

Most stakeholders who supported drink restrictions were government employees or security staff, rather than venue licensees. It is not surprising that security staff support drink restrictions, given they have to deal with highly intoxicated persons when it is time to remove them from the licensed premises.

The combination of interventions introduced by reforms to Section 104 of the New South Wales *Liquor Act* makes it difficult to assess whether drink restrictions had a discernible standalone effect in reducing disorder within the Newcastle NTE, though given the findings by Kypri et al. (2014) it is unlikely. As such, further investigation into drink restrictions as a standalone measure would be useful, though this might be difficult given it is unlikely for drink restrictions to be implemented as a measure on its own.

## **Conclusions**

Drink restrictions appear to have some key benefits, including the reduction of overall intoxication within the venue. Key stakeholders were particularly supportive of some of the mandated restrictions, such as the banning of shots, which has the ability to prevent rapid intoxication. However, limits on the amount of drinks able to be purchased at one time tends to have negative implications for bar staff, and was identified by some stakeholders as having little impact on levels of intoxication.

Reconciling the effective drink restrictions with other interventions, such as reduced trading hours, will invariably have a greater impact on reducing assaults, keeping in mind the diverse roles and perspectives of distinct stakeholders in the liquor, law enforcement, and security industries that comprise the NTE.

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