

A PUBLIC HEALTH
PERSPECTIVE ON ALCOHOL
ESTABLISHMENTS:
**LICENSING, DENSITY
AND LOCATIONS**

BRIEF ⑧, NOVEMBER 2022

SNAPSHOT SERIES ON
ALCOHOL CONTROL
POLICIES AND PRACTICE

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CONTROL POLICIES AND PRACTICE

A public health perspective on alcohol establishments: licensing, density and locations. Brief 8, November 2022

(Snapshot series on alcohol control policies and practice)

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ABOUT THE SERIES

In 2022 – more than a decade after adopting the [WHO global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol](#) – attention has been called to accelerate the implementation of high-impact interventions for alcohol control. A [global action plan for 2022–2030](#) aims to leverage the available evidence and policy know-how and quicken progress in tackling alcohol consumption and its effects. Making evidence accessible and spotlighting real-world experiences is a core component for advancing the implementation of effective policy interventions. Doing so requires a multipronged approach that addresses the social and cultural acceptability of alcohol consumption, its availability and affordability.

In 2021, WHO launched a series of advocacy briefs about *blind spots* related to reducing alcohol consumption. The resulting topic-specific briefs were considered starting points for navigating the evidence and its use in practice, forming the first edition of the “Snapshot Series”. [Topics covered in 2021](#) included socioeconomic inequalities, unrecorded alcohol, conflicts of interest, labelling, digital marketing and per capita alcohol consumption.

Now, in its second edition, the series continues its aim to create topical “snapshots”, serving as a compass for navigating critical topics related to the high-impact and innovative interventions to accelerate progress in reducing alcohol consumption. This second edition of the series provides a portfolio of policy, system and practice guidance for tackling the determinants driving the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol. It explores, among other topics, alcogenic settings and adolescents, gender-responsive alcohol control policies, zero and low alcoholic beverages and policy options to response to emergencies and pandemic situations.

How was this brief developed?

The 2022 series has evolved in its approach to best meet the information needs of its readership, applying

a four-step process to explore each topic. First, leading experts were engaged in searching and consolidating the available scientific evidence. Second, the first-hand experiences of countries related to the topic were sampled and documented. Third, stakeholders were brought together in webinars to discuss the evidence and country experiences. Lastly, the literature, experiences from countries and insights from discussions were brought together in a brief report that forms the varied issues of the “snapshots”.

Audience

The series is intended for a wide audience, including people working in public health and local and national alcohol and tobacco policy, policy-makers from national, regional and local administrations, government officials, researchers, civil society groups, consumer associations, the mass media and people new to alcohol control policy, research or practice.

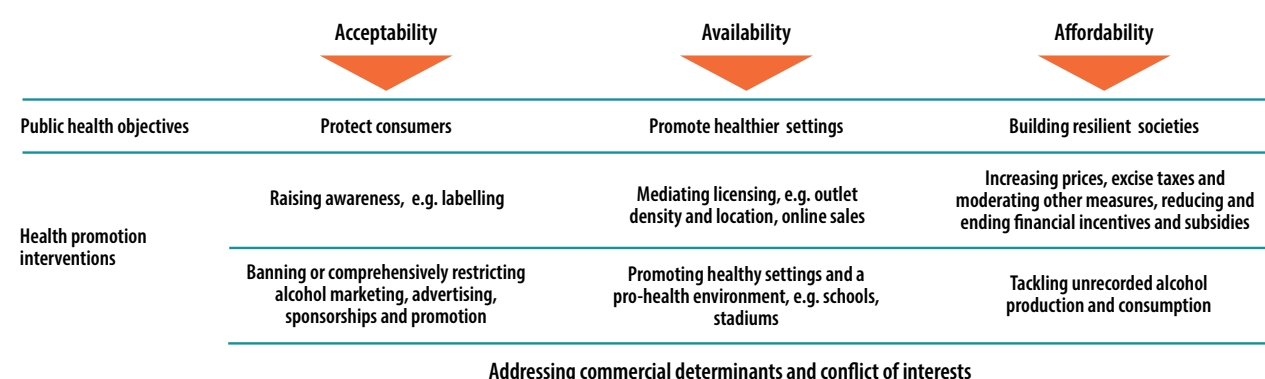
What is a health promotion approach to reducing alcohol consumption?

Drinking has multidimensional connotations. Robust and growing evidence demonstrates that cultural, social and religious norms influence alcohol consumption – acceptability, ease of purchase (availability) and price (affordability). Addressing this multidimensional causality chain requires a portfolio of health promotion interventions to moderate the determinants driving alcohol consumption and, in turn, enable populations to increase control over and improve their health to realize their full potential.

Interested in other topics?

Visit the [Less Alcohol webpage](#) for other briefs in this series and forthcoming webinars. Subscribe to [Subscribe to our newsletter](#) to be informed of new releases of briefs and notified of webinars to take part in these conversations. If you have a suggestion for a topic that has yet to be explored, contact the team at lessalcohol@who.int ■

Determinants driving the consumption of alcohol



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GLOSSARY

- ▶ **Alcohol establishment.** Places that sell alcohol to consumers, such as pubs/bars, nightclubs, grocery or liquor stores, and hotels (also called “alcohol outlets”).
- ▶ **Alcohol outlet density.** The number or concentration of businesses that sell alcohol (i.e., alcohol establishments) in a defined location. This is often measured relative to the number of people or land area, but it can also be measured as a number with no denominator.
- ▶ **Alcohol retail license.** Any license, permit, certification, registration, or other approval legally required to sell alcoholic beverages to customers, also called a “liquor license”.
- ▶ **Conditioning.** The process of limiting the operations or business practices of an alcohol establishment.
- ▶ **Direct shipping.** Alcohol purchased and shipped from an alcohol establishment using a common carrier directly to an adult consumer’s home or office address for personal use.
- ▶ **Home delivery service.** Alcohol purchased and delivered, from an alcohol establishment using their employees or a third-party company, to the customer’s home or office address for personal use.
- ▶ **Land use.** Controls on land use (if countries have these) apply to how land or buildings on a given piece of land may be used, e.g. for agricultural, commercial or residential purposes. Land use balances the needs of an occupant with the potential of the land and ultimately defines the activities that may be carried out on a piece of land.
- ▶ **Licensing authority.** Any agency, bureau, commission, department, ministry, office or other government entity responsible for developing, implementing and enforcing alcohol retail licensing policies.
- ▶ **Licensing board.** A group of experts who grant alcohol retail licenses, place conditions on new or existing alcohol establishments, or withdrawal a liquor license. Licensing boards generally report to the licensing authority.
- ▶ **Licensing process.** The steps that follow a liquor license from the original application to the time that the licensed premises closes including application criteria, licensing fees, and renewal.
- ▶ **Monopoly.** The complete control maintained by a government over a segment of the alcohol supply chain, e.g. production, distribution, and retail sales.
- ▶ **Natural experiment.** A research study that evaluates outcomes associated with natural circumstances that cause a rapid exposure to change and allows a “before-and-after” comparison or for random groups of subpopulations.
- ▶ **On-premise establishments.** Businesses that sell alcohol to customers for on-site consumption, e.g. bars, restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, and cantinas. On-premise establishments cannot sell take-away alcohol unless they also have off-premise privileges.
- ▶ **Off-premise establishments.** Businesses that sell alcohol to customers for off-site consumption, e.g. package stores, grocery stores, bottle shops, mini-marts. Drinking alcohol on the premises of off-premise establishments is generally prohibited unless it also has on-premise privileges.
- ▶ **Physical availability of alcohol.** How easy or hard it is for people to obtain alcohol to consume, including regulations such as the licensing structure, how many alcohol establishments there are, where establishments are located, and the minimum legal purchase age.
- ▶ **Privatization.** The process of a government replacing a monopoly with licensing allows private businesses to operate in one or more segments of the alcohol supply chain.
- ▶ **Protest.** Written declaration of community objection(s) against a specific liquor license. These are often issued during license applications, renewals, or disciplinary hearings.
- ▶ **Selection.** The process of determining which alcohol retail licenses to grant in accordance with the law, regulations, and license application.
- ▶ **Third-party delivery service.** A delivery service run by a company that is not an alcohol establishment. These online or app-based sellers connect customers to alcohol establishments and deliver products.
- ▶ **Withdrawal.** The process of cancelling an alcohol retail license when there is a clearly demonstrated need to close an alcohol establishment, e.g. for violating rules or because the current alcohol outlet density is higher than the density threshold.
- ▶ **Zoning.** Zoning is a planning tool that divides a city, town, or municipality into zones (e.g. commercial, industrial, residential). The location of each zone is established in the predetermined plan. It may have accompanying rules for how occupants may use land (e.g. the type of buildings allowed) or define where people can build new facilities or what type (e.g. size and height of buildings, or distance from the street) ■

BRIEF AT A GLANCE

This brief provides a public health perspective on alcohol establishments. It scopes alcohol establishments' contribution to inequalities, the policy options to regulate alcohol establishments and the considerations for designing, implementing and enforcing policy options to govern alcohol retail licensing, alcohol outlet density and alcohol establishment locations.

The problem

The harm caused by alcohol consumption is higher in deprived communities and in those with higher exposure to establishments that sell alcohol. As numbers in alcohol establishments rise, so too do alcohol consumption and the attendant violent crime, traffic crashes, sexually transmitted diseases, suicide and deaths. Alcohol establishments tend to be more heavily concentrated in more deprived areas, even though overall, residents of these communities may consume less alcohol. These neighbourhoods bear the burden of customers who cluster in and around the alcohol establishments and cause harm ranging from excessive noise and litter to public intoxication and interpersonal violence.

The evidence

Different alcohol establishments have different associations with violence and other harm caused by alcohol consumption. These dissimilarities arise because some types of alcohol establishments sell more alcohol than others and alcohol establishments bring people together in time and space differently. Specifically, alcohol tends to be cheaper at off-premise establishments, so most alcohol is bought there. Consequently, there is a strong association between alcohol consumption and the density of off-premise retail outlets, such as grocery stores, convenience stores and pharmacies. In off-premise establishments that sell other goods along with alcohol, customers are more likely to "bundle" the purchase of alcohol with their other shopping. Selling alcohol in

places where people drink alcohol. In addition, people consume alcohol alongside others on-site at on-premise outlets. Bringing consumers together is one reason for a strong association between violence and the density of bars and nightclubs. Many homicides, aggravated assaults and robberies occur after people consume alcohol in public settings. In contrast, intimate partner violence often occurs after consuming alcohol in a private setting, such as a person's home. The delivery of alcohol to people's homes influences the relationship between alcohol establishments and the site of harm. Harm from alcohol tends to occur near the point of consumption, but alcohol delivery services shift the point of consumption from on-premise establishments to private settings. This change may also alter the types of harm that manifest because consumers no longer interact with each other in alcohol establishments, thereby decreasing the occurrence of harm from bringing people together but likely increasing private harm, such as intrafamily violence.

Policy options

Policy options to govern alcohol establishments include addressing their practice, density and placement. Alcohol retail licensing regulates sales using selection, withdrawal and conditioning. Policy options addressing the density of alcohol establishments may establish a threshold for the density of alcohol outlets, which can be set as the number of establishments per land area. Restrictions on minimum distance target specific settings and population groups to prevent these groups from interacting with alcohol establishments.

Driving policy changes

In designing, implementing and enforcing policy options to restrict the physical availability of alcohol, policy-makers must balance the competing interests of diverse stakeholders. There is a trade-off between the

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