Reducing Alcohol Harms: A Primer for Municipalities

When building a healthy community, local governments are in a unique position to foster healthy environments and healthy behaviours. This document provides an overview of the health implications of alcohol use, supporting communities to continue to have informed conversations about reducing harms.

Risks to community safety and well-being[1,2]

Alcohol is the most used drug in Huron and Perth counties. Alcohol consumption by Huron Perth residents aged 12 and older is also significantly higher compared to Ontario. Its use is under-reported across Canada, therefore rates of alcohol use are even higher than available data.

36% of Huron Perth residents aged 12 and older are drinking alcohol above what is considered a low-risk level (have had 3 or more standard drinks in the past seven days) according to **Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health.**

Alcohol causes injuries, violence, and health harms[3,4]

Alcohol consumption is linked to more than 200 health-related and injury conditions, including cancers, physical injuries, liver disease, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Alcohol consumption strains our already overburdened healthcare system. Those who don't drink can experience secondary harms through impaired driving, intimate partner violence, and public disturbances.

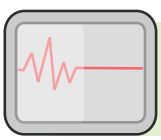
Alcohol exposure impacts youth[5,6,7]

Having alcohol available in areas frequented by youth normalizes and encourages use due to increased exposure and access to alcohol. Early alcohol initiation has clear harms for youth. Regulating alcohol availability is a tool to effectively addresses these risks and harms.

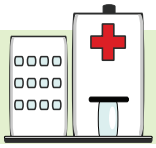
In 2023, almost half (47%) of secondary school students in Ontario reported alcohol use initiation before grade 9.

Deaths, hospitalizations, and emergency department visits attributable to alcohol among Huron Perth residents aged 15+[8]

(% is an average year estimate based on the most recent five years of data available)



51 deaths (3.7%)



248 hospitalizations (1.9%)

2,473 emergency department visits (3.0%)

Retail density affects consumption[6,9]

On-premises:
Licensed establishments such as restaurants and bars.

Off-premises:
Retail outlets such as LCBO, the Beer Store, convenience stores, and grocery stores.

Research shows there is a relationship between **density** of on-premises establishments and off-premises outlets and **alcohol harms**.

More alcohol outlets result in more alcohol consumption and associated harms including injuries, illness, assaults, suicide, public disorder, and violent crime at the population level.

As of 2022, Huron Perth has a higher number of **off-premises** alcohol outlets (5.1 outlets per 10,000 capita age 15+) than recommended in the best practice guidelines for off-premises alcohol outlet density levels (two or fewer outlets per 10,000 capita age 15+).

Any increase in alcohol outlet density in Huron and Perth will continue to increase alcohol availability above best-practice guidelines.

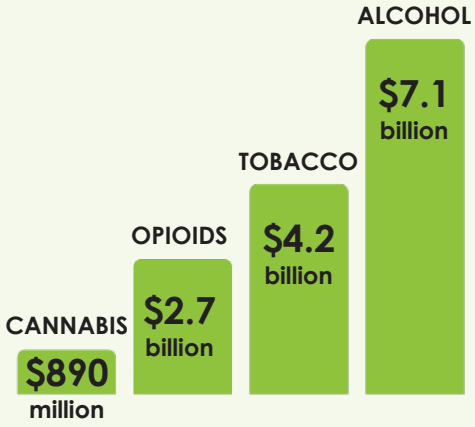
Costs[10,11]

In 2020/21, alcohol cost Ontario taxpayers over **$7 billion** in direct (e.g., healthcare and enforcement) and indirect (e.g., lost productivity) costs.

Despite perceptions that alcohol is a large revenue generator, in 2020/21 **alcohol generated just over $5 billion in returns** for Ontario, creating a **nearly $2 billion deficit for the province.**

Substance use-attributable costs, Ontario, 2020

In comparison to all other substances, the societal burden of alcohol is the greatest.



Provincial alcohol retail landscape

2015	2019	2020	2024
Expansion of alcohol sales to grocery stores, with approximately 450 participating stores.	Expansion of LCBO convenience outlet stores.	Expansion of alcohol delivery.	Expansion of alcohol sales to grocery, convenience and big box stores (with no cap on number of outlets).

Reducing harms related to physical availability of alcohol
Currently there are no plans for provincial restrictions on retail outlet density, regulations to limit clustering of alcohol outlets, or proximity restrictions (e.g., distance between alcohol outlets and schools or healthcare facilities).

What can local governments do?

Local governments are uniquely situated to create healthy environments and foster healthy behaviours. Through healthy public policies and partnerships, they can support the local economic and social benefits of alcohol, while reducing negative impacts.

Modify land use planning[5,6,12,13]

A greater density of alcohol outlets (on and off-premises) can increase community-level harms such as injury, poor mental health, and acute and chronic diseases.

Possible actions:

- Explore zoning options related to alcohol retail locations and density.
  - Consider minimum separation distances between alcohol outlets (on and off-premises) and sensitive land use areas, such as schools, and parks.

Less alcohol available → **Decreased consumption** → **Decreased alcohol-related harms**

Work with other levels of government[13,14]

Municipalities know their communities best and see community-level impact from policies at all levels. Municipalities can advocate to the provincial and federal governments for evidence-based policies that work to reduce alcohol harms.

Possible actions:

- Advocate to keep municipal control over alcohol policy that impacts the well-being and safety of the local community, such as keeping the public notice requirement for liquor license applications and allowing municipalities to have more input on alcohol retail outlet density and location decisions.
- Advocate for a provincial alcohol strategy, where a public health approach to access, pricing, marketing, and labelling are implemented across the province.
- Advocate for other measures to reduce potential harm, such as increased fines and license fees and progressive enforcement of regulations.

Regulate alcohol at public spaces & events[5,6,13]

Permitting alcohol use on public property can create a sense of normalcy and increase consumption, resulting in public safety risks and increased risk of health and social harms. Event organizers can reduce alcohol-related harms by managing the availability of alcohol and strategically designing environments where alcohol is served.

Possible actions:

- Avoid any changes to alcohol consumption in public areas (e.g., parks), particularly given the increased number of alcohol outlets in Ontario.
- Regulate, manage, and evaluate alcohol consumption on municipally owned and managed properties during public and private events, through up-to-date municipal alcohol policies. Contact HPPH to discuss the Quality Measurement Tool for Municipal Alcohol Policies (MAPs) and accompanying gold standard template. These tools help to measure how effective a MAP is compared to best practice.
- Restrict or prohibit alcohol imagery, marketing, and sponsorship locally (e.g., on public transit, in arenas, at outdoor special events, etc.).
- Promote health by providing alcohol-free spaces, restrict or prohibit alcohol imagery and offer incentives for alcohol-free events (e.g., lower booking fees, priority dates, etc.).

Monitor for alcohol harms[14]

Understanding the local impacts of alcohol use is crucial to supporting healthy public policy decisions.

Possible actions:

- Collaborate with public health to monitor local alcohol availability and alcohol-related harms.

Contact

To **municipal@hpph.ca**

For:

- Support with local policy development, including bylaws and Municipal Alcohol Policy review.
- Opportunities to collaborate on strategies to reduce alcohol harms in our community.
- Information on the health impacts of alcohol use.

References

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