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Lockdown and licensed premises: COVID-19 lessons for alcohol policy

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Abstract

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated unprecedented changes in alcohol availability, including closures, curfews and restrictions. We draw on new data from three UK studies exploring these issues to identify implications for premises licensing and wider policy.

Methods

(i) Semi-structured interviews ($n = 17$) with licensing stakeholders in Scotland and England reporting how COVID-19 has reshaped local licensing and alcohol-related harms; (ii) semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$) with ambulance clinicians reporting experiences with alcohol during the pandemic; and (iii) descriptive and time series analyses of alcohol-related ambulance callouts in Scotland before and during the first UK lockdown (1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020).

Results

COVID-19 restrictions (closures, curfews) affected on-trade premises only and licensing stakeholders highlighted the relaxation of some laws (e.g. on takeaway alcohol) and a rise in home drinking as having long-term risks for public health. Ambulance clinicians described a welcome break from pre-pandemic mass public intoxication and huge reductions in alcohol-related callouts at night-time. They also highlighted potential long-term risks of increased home drinking. The national lockdown was associated with an absolute fall of 2.14 percentage points [95% confidence interval (CI) $-3.54, -0.74$; $P = 0.003$] in alcohol-related callouts as a percentage of total callouts, followed by a daily increase of $+0.03\%$ (95% CI $0.010, 0.05$; $P = 0.004$).

Discussion and Conclusions

COVID-19 gave rise to both restrictions on premises and relaxations of licensing, with initial reductions in alcohol-related ambulance callouts, a rise in home drinking and diverse impacts on businesses. Policies which may protect on-trade businesses, while reshaping the night-time economy away from alcohol-related harms, could offer a 'win-win' for policymakers and health advocates.

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