

## Alcohol availability in Victoria: strategies to reduce harm

### Summary

Victoria has experienced a proliferation of liquor licences over past decades, including an explosion in 'big box' packaged liquor stores. This has coincided with extensions in liquor trading hours. Together, this has led to widespread availability of alcohol in Victoria, and resulted in dramatic increases in alcohol-related harm and violence.

Evidence establishes that increases in liquor outlet density are associated with rises in violence, family violence, injury and alcohol-specific chronic disease. Evidence also shows that liquor outlet trading hours are related to levels of alcohol-related harm.

Restricting alcohol availability by reducing liquor outlet density and trading hours would have immediate impact in reducing the high levels of alcohol-related harm and violence in Victoria.

### Key recommendations

1. Require liquor licence applicants to show that licences will not contribute to harm and are in the public interest.
2. Prevent further liquor licences in 'alcohol harm zones', where there are high levels of alcohol harm.
3. Prohibit the sale of packaged liquor after 10pm, and on-premises liquor after 2am.

### *Alcohol availability and harm in Victoria*

The number of liquor licences in Victoria has increased dramatically over the past three decades – from fewer than 4,000 in 1986<sup>1</sup> to more than 21,000 in 2017.<sup>2</sup> This has included a substantial increase in packaged liquor licences, and an explosion in large 'big box' stores offering cheap alcohol and bulk discounts. Over the past 15 years, the number of packaged liquor outlets in Victoria has increased by 49.4 per cent, and the number of big box stores has increased dramatically from three to 68 – an increase of 2,000 per cent per capita.<sup>3</sup>

Victoria is now the liquor licence capital of Australia, with more licences than any other state or territory overall and behind only South Australia in licences per capita. Victoria, along with New South Wales, has the highest level of packaged liquor availability of all states and territories,<sup>4</sup> and packaged liquor outlets are clustered in disadvantaged areas of the state.<sup>5</sup>

The increase in alcohol availability has led to dramatic increases in alcohol-related harms in Victoria, including increases in alcohol-related family violence, assaults, ambulance attendances and treatment episodes.

### *Evidence linking liquor outlet density with harm*

A strong body of Australian and international research shows that increases in liquor outlet density are associated with increases in violence, family violence, injury and chronic disease.<sup>6</sup> This includes a series of Australian studies:

- An Australian longitudinal study found that liquor outlet density was significantly associated with assaults in Melbourne.<sup>7</sup>
- A Western Australian study found that the density of pubs and bars, particularly late night outlets, was significantly associated with alcohol-related injury rates.<sup>8</sup>
- Victorian local level studies have shown that increases in packaged liquor outlet density are associated with increases in hospitalisations for assault, police records of family violence<sup>9</sup> and rates of alcohol-specific chronic disease.<sup>10</sup>
- A Victorian longitudinal study found that the higher density of liquor licences in a neighbourhood, particularly packaged liquor licences, is associated with higher rates of family violence over time.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Evidence linking liquor trading hours with harm***

There is a large body of Australian and international research clearly establishing the relationship between liquor outlet trading hours and levels of alcohol-related harm.<sup>12</sup> The research shows that for every additional hour of trading, there is a 16-20 per cent increase in assaults. For every hour of reduced trading there is a 20 per cent reduction in assaults.<sup>13</sup>

The research includes two recent Australian studies:

- A study in Newcastle, New South Wales showed that changing liquor outlet closing times (from 5am to 3am and then to 3.30am) produced a 37 per cent reduction in assaults compared to a control area.<sup>14</sup>
- An evaluation of interventions in Sydney CBD and Kings Cross, including 3am last drinks, found that the interventions resulted in a 45.1% per cent reduction in non-domestic assaults in Kings Cross and a 20.3% per cent reduction in Sydney CBD, with most nearby areas showing no increase in assaults.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Policy environment***

The proliferation of liquor outlets in Victoria has been facilitated by a weak and ineffective liquor licensing process, which does not allow effective consideration of harm or community impacts, and is heavily weighted in favour of the liquor and hospitality industry.

Victoria's liquor licensing legislation also enables liquor trading hours that are among the longest in Australia. Many outlets trade past 1am, and some outlets trade for 24 hours.

### ***Strategies to reduce harm***

There is clear evidence that strategies to restrict the physical availability of alcohol, such as reducing liquor outlet density and trading hours, are effective in reducing alcohol harm.<sup>16</sup>

Strategies should include changes to the liquor licence application process to require greater consideration of harm and community impacts of new licences. In addition, an 'alcohol harm zone' mechanism should be introduced to prevent further licences in areas with high levels of alcohol harm.

These reforms would have immediate impact in reversing the trend of increasing alcohol harms in Victoria, and reduce the significant burdens of alcohol on communities, police, emergency services, hospitals and others, and the enormous social and economic costs of alcohol in Victoria.

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## Recommendations

1. Reverse the burden of proof in liquor licensing decisions and require licence applicants to show that licences will not contribute to harm and are in the public interest.
2. Create a power for the Minister to designate 'alcohol harm zones' in areas with high levels of alcohol harm, creating a presumption against further liquor licences.
3. Prevent the sale of alcohol for off-premises consumption after 10pm, and for on-premises consumption after 2am.

Please see the Alcohol Policy Coalition's [submission to the Review of the Liquor Control Reform Act](#) for more information.

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<sup>1</sup> Alcohol Working Group 2009, *Australia: the healthiest country by 2020, Technical Report 3: Preventing alcohol-related harm in Australia*, Preventative Health Taskforce (Cth), p. 21, figure 8.

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation 2016, *Victorian liquor licences as at 30 April 2017*, <[http://vcglr.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/liquor\\_licences\\_category\\_30\\_April\\_2017.pdf](http://vcglr.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/liquor_licences_category_30_April_2017.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Livingston, M. (2017). *Packaged liquor in Victoria: 2001 to 2016*. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.

<sup>4</sup> Livingston, M. (2017). *Packaged liquor in Victoria: 2001 to 2016*. Canberra: Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.

<sup>5</sup> Livingston, M 2012, 'The social gradient of alcohol availability in Victoria, Australia', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 41-7.

<sup>6</sup> Livingston, M, Wilkinson, C & Room, R 2016, *Community impact of liquor licences*, Sax Institute for the Ministry of Health (NSW), <<http://www.saxinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Community-impact-of-liquor-licences-1.pdf>>.

<sup>7</sup> Livingston, M 2008, 'A longitudinal analysis of alcohol outlet density and assault', *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 1074-9.

<sup>8</sup> Liang, W & Chikritzhs, T 2011, 'Revealing the link between licensed outlets and violence: counting venues versus measuring alcohol availability', *Drug and Alcohol Review*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 524-35.

<sup>9</sup> Livingston, M 2011, 'A longitudinal analysis of alcohol outlet density and domestic violence', *Addiction*, vol. 106, no. 5, pp. 919-25.

<sup>10</sup> Livingston, M 2011, 'Alcohol outlet density and harm: comparing the impacts on violence and chronic harms', *Drug and Alcohol Review*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 515-23.

<sup>11</sup> Livingston, M 2011, 'A longitudinal analysis of alcohol outlet density and domestic violence', *Addiction*, vol. 106, no. 5, pp. 919-25.

<sup>12</sup> See Wilkinson, C, Livingston, M & Room, R 2016, 'Impacts of changes to trading hours of liquor licences on alcohol-related harm: A systematic review 2005–2015', *Public Health Research & Practice*, vol. 26, no. 4 (online); Miller, P 2013, *Patron Offending in Night-Time Entertainment Districts (POINTED)*, monograph series no. 46, National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund, p. 220; Manton, E, Room, R & Livingston, M 2014, 'Limits on trading hours, particularly late-night trading', in Manton, E, Room, R, Giorgi, C & Thorn, M (eds.) 2014, *Stemming the tide of alcohol: liquor licensing and the public interest*, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, pp. 122-36; Miller, P, Tindall, J, Groombridge, D & Lecathelinais C, 'Effective measures for dealing with alcohol and the night-time economy (DANTE)', in Manton, E, Room R, Giorgi C & Thorn, M (eds.) 2014, *Stemming*

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*the tide of alcohol: liquor licensing and the public interest*, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, pp. 196-210.

<sup>13</sup> Kypri, K, Jones, C, McElduff, P & Barker, D 2011, 'Effects of restricting pub closing times on night-time assaults in an Australian city', *Addiction*, vol. 106, no. 2, pp. 303-10; Rossow, I & Norstrom, T 2012, 'The impact of small changes in bar closing hours on violence. The Norwegian experience from 18 cities', *Addiction*, vol. 107, no. 3, pp. 530-7.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, P, Tindall, J, Sønderlund, A, Groombridge, D, Lecathelinais, C, Gillham, K, McFarlane, E, de Groot, F, Droste, N, Sawyer, A, Palmer, D, Warren, I & Wiggers, J 2012, *Dealing with alcohol and the night-time economy (DANTE)*, National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund, cited in Miller, P, Tindall, J, Groombridge, D & Lecathelinais C, 'Effective measures for dealing with alcohol and the night-time economy (DANTE)', in Manton, E, Room R, Giorgi C & Thorn, M (eds.) 2014, *Stemming the tide of alcohol: liquor licensing and the public interest*, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, pp. 196-210.

<sup>15</sup> Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (2016). *Lockouts and last drinks*. NSW Department of Justice. Retrieved from [http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar\\_news/Lockouts-Forthcoming-Research.aspx](http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_news/Lockouts-Forthcoming-Research.aspx).

<sup>16</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Report (2012), *Effectiveness of justice strategies in preventing and reducing alcohol-related harm*; Babor, T, Caetano, R, Casswell, S, Edwards, G, Giesbrecht, N, Graham, K, Grube, J, Hill, L, Holder, H, Homel, R, Livingston, M, Österberg, E, Rehm, J, Room, R & Rossow, I 2010, *Alcohol: No ordinary commodity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford University Press; Miller, P, Curtis, A, Chikritzhs, T, Allsop, S & Toumbourou, J 2016, *Interventions for reducing alcohol supply, alcohol demand, and alcohol-related harms*, research bulletin no. 3, National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund.