RESEARCH ARTICLE

City-based action to reduce harmful alcohol use: review of reviews [version 1; referees: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

Peter Anderson 1,2, Eva Jané-Llopis3,4, Omer Syed Muhammad Hasan4, Jürgen Rehm4,9

1Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, Maastricht University, P. Debyeplein 1, Maastricht, 6221 HA, Netherlands
2Institute of Health & Society, Newcastle University, Baddiley-Clark Building, Richardson Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 4AX, UK
3ESADE Business School, Ramon Llull University, Av. Esplugues 92-96, Barcelona, 08034, Spain
4Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, CAMH, 33 Russell Street, Toronto, ON M5S 2S1, Canada
5Campbell Family Mental Health Research Institute, CAMH, 250 College Street, Toronto, ON M5T 1R8, Canada
6Institute of Medical Science (IMS), University of Toronto, Medical Sciences Building, 1 King’s College Circle, Room 2374, Toronto, ON M5S 1A8, Canada
7Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto, 250 College Street, 8th Floor, Toronto, ON M5T 1R8, Canada
8Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, 155 College Street, 6th Floor, Toronto, ON M5T 3M7, Canada
9Institute for Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, TU Dresden, Chemnitzer Str. 46, Dresden, 01187, Germany

Abstract

Background: The World Health Organization global strategy on alcohol called for municipal policies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. Yet, there is limited evidence that documents the impact of city-level alcohol policies.

Methods: Review of reviews for all years to July 2017. Searches on OVID Medline, Healthstar, Embase, PsycINFO, AMED, Social Work Abstracts, CAB Abstracts, Mental Measurements Yearbook, Health and Psychosocial Instruments, International Pharmaceutical Abstracts, International Political Science Abstracts, NASW Clinical Register, and Epub Ahead of Print databases. All reviews that address adults, without language or date restrictions resulting from combining the terms (“review” or “literature review” or “review literature” or “data pooling” or “comparative study” or “systematic review” or “meta-analysis” or “pooled analysis”), and “alcohol”, and “intervention” and (“municipal” or “city” or “community”).

Results: Five relevant reviews were identified. Studies in the reviews were all from high income countries and focussed on the acute consequences of drinking, usually with one target intervention, commonly bars, media, or drink-driving. No studies in the reviews reported the impact of comprehensive city-based action. One community cluster randomized controlled trial in Australia, published after the reviews, failed to find convincing evidence of an impact of community-based interventions in reducing adult harmful use of alcohol.

Conclusions: To date, with one exception, the impact of adult-oriented comprehensive community and municipal action to reduce the harmful use of alcohol has not been studied. The one exception failed to find a convincing effect. We conclude with recommendations for closing this evidence gap.
Corresponding author: Peter Anderson (peteranderson.mail@gmail.com)

Author roles: Anderson P: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; Jané-Llopis E: Writing – Review & Editing; Hasan OSM: Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing; Rehm J: Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: JR, EJL and OSMH report no conflict of interest. PA has received fees from AB InBev Foundation.

How to cite this article: Anderson P, Jané-Llopis E, Hasan OSM and Rehm J. City-based action to reduce harmful alcohol use: review of reviews [version 1; referees: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations] F1000Research 2018, 7:120 (doi: 10.12688/f1000research.13783.1)

Copyright: © 2018 Anderson P et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

Introduction

In response to the 2011 United Nations declaration on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (United Nations General Assembly, 2011; United Nations, 2014), the World Health Organization proposed a target to reduce the harmful use of alcohol by 10% between the years 2010 and 2025 (World Health Organization, 2014a), based on three possible indicators, adult per capita alcohol consumption, prevalence of heavy episodic drinking, and measurements of alcohol-related morbidity and mortality (World Health Organization, 2014b).

The bulk of alcohol-related severe health problems, including mortality, occurs in middle age (Office for National Statistics, 2015), and it is amongst this age group that policy and programme interventions are likely to bring the greatest health and productivity gains (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). Heavy drinkers are responsible for the majority all alcohol-related harm (Rehm et al., 2013). It is also amongst this group, compared with lighter drinkers, that disproportionally greater health gains can be made for the same absolute reduction in alcohol consumption (Rehm & Roerecke, 2013). Thus, if alcohol policy is to be most efficient in reducing the harmful use of alcohol, it should preferentially address adult drinkers, and, in particular, those who drink heavily.

Driving the NCD alcohol target are WHO’s Global Strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (World Health Organization, 2010), and WHO’s three ‘best buys’ (World Economic Forum & World Health Organization, 2011; World Health Organization, 2013). One of the ten target areas within the global strategy is community action, with a specific call to: “strengthen capacity of local authorities to encourage and coordinate concerted community action by supporting and promoting the development of municipal policies to reduce harmful use of alcohol, as well as their capacity to enhance partnerships and networks of community institutions and nongovernmental Organizations” (World Health Organization, 2010).

Cities are a potentially important setting and jurisdictional level for reducing NCDs (De Leeuw et al., 2015; Farrington et al., 2015). There is a range of evidence-based interventions that fall within municipal jurisdictional responsibility and which could be implemented at city level to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006; Anderson et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012; Burton et al., 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Martineau et al., 2013). Despite a long history of calls for city-based policies and action plans (Mathrani & Anderson, 1998; Ritson, 1995; World Health Organization, 1998), and an equally long history of research endeavour (Giesbrecht et al., 1990), a systematic review of the impact of alcohol policies, undertaken prior to the launch of the WHO global strategy, was unable to include community actions within its cost-effectiveness estimates, due to insufficient evidence of impact (Anderson et al., 2009).

Spurred by a target of a global beer producer to reduce the harmful use of alcohol by 10% over the five-year period 2016–2020 in pilot cities in at least nine different middle- and high-income countries (ABInBev, 2016), we have undertaken a review of reviews to investigate the potential impact of city-based action to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. In our review, we have focused on reviews that summarize the literature of comprehensive community and municipal action, often based on a municipal comprehensive strategy and action plan, as put forward by the World Health Organization (Anderson, 1991; Ritson, 1995). Because we anticipated very few such reviews, we have supplemented our findings with an overview of what could be implemented within a comprehensive municipal strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol, based on the published evidence base (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006; Anderson et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012; Burton et al., 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Martineau et al., 2013).

Methods

During July 2017, we conducted a systematic literature search on OVID Medline, Healthstar, Embase, PsycINFO, AMED, Social Work Abstracts, CAB Abstracts, Mental Measurements Yearbook, Health and Psychosocial Instruments, International Pharmaceutical Abstracts, International Political Science Abstracts, NASW Clinical Register, and Epub Ahead of Print databases to identify reviews that addressed community and municipal alcohol interventions. With no language or date restrictions, the search used the following combination of terms: (“review” or “literature review” or “review literature” or “data pooling” or “comparative study” or “systematic review” or “meta-analysis” or “pooled analysis”), and “alcohol” and “intervention” and (“municipal” or “city” or “community”), supplemented with hand searches of included reviews.

Our inclusion criteria were reviews and overviews (whether or not systematic) that discussed the implementation of comprehensive policies and programmes to reduce the harmful use of alcohol at the community or municipal level. We excluded reviews of specific alcohol policy interventions, for example restrictions on hours and days of sale, that may or may not have been part of a city action plan. Two authors (OSMH and PA) independently reviewed titles and abstracts for selecting papers for full text review and selecting papers to include. Discrepancies, which only related to whether or not the publication addressed comprehensive approaches, were resolved with discussion. The result of the search, analysed during July 2017, is summarized in Figure 1. As only five relevant reviews were identified, three of which were by the same author, we did not attempt to analyze them for their quality, but rather describe their methods and findings.

Results

Only five relevant reviews were identified (Giesbrecht et al., 2014; Giesbrecht & Greenfield, 2003; Giesbrecht & Hayden, 2006; Gorman & Speer, 1996; Toomey & Lenk, 2001). Three included the same first author, and the most recent publication (Giesbrecht et al., 2014) included all publications of, and reached similar conclusions to, the previous four reviews. None of the reviews were systematic and none adhered to standard guidelines. Subsequent to the publication dates of the reviews, our search identified one further large randomized study of the effectiveness of community action (Shakeshaft et al., 2014).
Of the 23 individual studies mentioned in the 2014 review (Giesbrecht et al., 2014), twelve included adults, mostly with a focus on younger adults. Six were from North America, two were from Nordic countries, and four were from Australia/New Zealand. Four of the 12 studies targeted bars, three media campaigns, two drink-driving, one overall access, one a specific location (a beach), and one primary health care-based brief advice programme. No studies reported comprehensive community or municipal interventions. The four bar studies found an effect in reducing violence, which tapered off over time. The three media studies found no impact. The two drink-driving studies led to reduced alcohol-involved traffic crashes. The access and location study led to reductions in the harmful use of alcohol, but the brief advice initiative did not.

The large study, outside of the reviews, was a randomized trial comprising 20 communities in Australia that each had populations of 5,000–20,000 inhabitants (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). Communities were pair-matched, and one member of each pair was randomly allocated to the experimental group. Thirteen interventions were implemented in the experimental communities from 2005 to 2009: community engagement; general practitioner training in...
alcohol screening and brief intervention (SBI); feedback to key stakeholders; media campaign; workplace policies/practices training; school-based intervention; general practitioner feedback on their prescribing of alcohol medications; community pharmacy-based SBI; web-based SBI; Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services support for SBI; Good Sports program for sports clubs; identifying and targeting high-risk weekends; and hospital emergency department–based SBI. The study failed to detect an impact of the interventions in reducing the harmful use of alcohol in routine data, but found a significant reduction of average alcohol use in surveys. Unfortunately, the study appeared under powered for the routine data, and had low response rates to measurement surveys. The community interventions were not able to be fully comprehensive and were not able to include a range of potentially impactful interventions, including sales taxes and restrictions on availability. Further, no process evaluation was reported; thus, whether or not the included interventions were implemented as planned, or the extent to which they were implemented is not reported.

One of the five reviews that we identified included a summary of feasible intervention options at the local and municipal level (Giesbrecht & Haydon, 2006). We have included and expanded on these in Table 1, adding an overview of the evidence base (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006; Anderson et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012; Burton et al., 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Martineau et al., 2013), with implementation illustrations at the city level. Dependent on jurisdictional responsibilities, city-level interventions that might have a meaningful contribution to reducing the harmful use of alcohol include sales taxes, restrictions on density of outlets and days and hours of sale, drink-drive restrictions, and scale-up of individual level advice and treatment programmes.

### Table 1. Feasible adult-oriented policies and programmes implementable at city level dependent on jurisdictional responsibilities, with evidence of impact and opportunity for city implementation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy measure</th>
<th>Evidence of impact</th>
<th>Opportunity for city implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pricing policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol taxes</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Many cities have opportunity to set alcohol beverage sales taxes, which can bring in municipal revenues (KPMG LLP, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews and meta-analyses find that increases in the price and taxation of alcohol reduce consumption and alcohol-related harm for all groups of drinkers, and in high, middle and low-income countries (Anderson et al., 2009; Dhalwani, 2011; Elder et al., 2010; Fogarty, 2008; Gallet, 2007; Sorpa Sarn et al., 2013; Wagenaar et al., 2009; Wagenaar et al., 2010; Xu &amp; Chaloupka, 2011).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlet density</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Licensing of alcohol sales outlets allows local governments to control where alcohol is sold to the public, with restrictions on density related to less crime (de Vocht et al., 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews (Bryden et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2009; Gmel et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2014; Livingston et al., 2007; Popova, 2009) and individual studies (Fone et al., 2016; Morrison et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2015) find that greater alcohol outlet density is associated with increased alcohol consumption and harms, including injuries, violence and crime.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days and hours of sale</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Licensing of alcohol sales outlets allows local governments to control when alcohol is sold to the public, with restrictions on hours of sale related to less crime (de Vocht et al., 2016; Wittman, 2016a; Wittman, 2016b).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews find that days and hours of sale are related to alcohol consumption and harms (Hahn et al., 2010; Middleton et al., 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Individual studies find that restrictions on hours of sale reduce harm (Duailibi et al., 2007; Kyprin, 2014; Rossow &amp; Norström, 2011).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bar policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training of bar staff, responsible serving practices, security staff in bars and safety-oriented design of the premise</td>
<td>Mixed effectiveness</td>
<td>Drinking environments can be foci of alcohol-related harms (Hughes &amp; Bellis, 2012). Ongoing enforcement is the required ingredient to reduce harm in drinking environments (Brämmström et al., 2016; Florence et al., 2011; Månsdotter et al., 2007; Wallin et al., 2001; Warpenius et al., 2010; Trolldal et al., 2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A systematic review found limited impact unless backed-up by police enforcement and licence inspectors (Ker &amp; Chinnock, 2008).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advertising policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume of advertising</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Cities have the opportunity of restricting advertising, including billboards, in the public places that they own or through the public services, such as transportation, that they provide (Fullwood et al., 2016; Swensen, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic reviews find associations between volume of advertising exposure and alcohol-related consumption and harm (Bryden et al., 2012; Booth et al., 2008; Gallet, 2007; Stautz et al., 2016).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Drink-drive restrictions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Limited evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sobriety checkpoints and unrestrictive (random) breath testing</td>
<td>Cities have the opportunity to step-up sobriety checkpoints and random breath testing (Voas, 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designated driver campaigns</td>
<td>Whist a seemingly attractive approach, there is insufficient evidence to warrant widespread investment in designated driver campaigns.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Screening, advice and treatment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Largely ineffective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital interventions</td>
<td>Off-the-shelf applications can be deployed at city level (Crane et al., 2015; Garrett et al., 2015), enhanced with context awareness and use of ecological momentary assessments (Freisthler et al., 2014; Morgenstern et al., 2014; Wray et al., 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary health care</td>
<td>Tailored screening and brief advice programmes embedded within community and municipal action are more likely to be scaled-up (Anderson et al., 2017; Heather 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Although business cases are made for workplace-based programmes (Martinic, 2015), the evidence appears insufficient to justify a city-based investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary health care</td>
<td>Treatment services can be embedded within comprehensive care pathways (NICE, 2016) at the city level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education and information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ineffective</th>
<th>Limited evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School-based programmes</td>
<td>Whilst a popular intervention, and a necessary part of school education, investment in school-based education programmes should be proportionate, given the evidence for lack of effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public information campaigns</td>
<td>Media campaigns should focus on changing behaviour in relation to existing programmes, such as drink driving (Yadav &amp; Kobayashi, 2015), rather than acting in isolation, where there is evidence of ineffectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing social norms</td>
<td>Social norms campaigns should focus on topics that are the subject of behaviour change programmes, such as drink driving (Perkins et al., 2010).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Product reformulation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited evidence</th>
<th>Cities could set limits on beverage container sizes (Jones-Webb et al., 2011; McKee et al., 2012).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol content and packaging</td>
<td>A systematic review indicates the theoretical likelihood that reductions in the average alcohol content of beverages would reduce alcohol-related harm (Rehm et al., 2016).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**References**

null


Sallis JF, Ceniz E, Conway TL, et al.: Physical activity in relation to urban
Open Peer Review

Current Referee Status: ✔️❓

Version 1

Referee Report 26 February 2018

doi:10.5256/f1000research.14982.r31220

R.H.L.M Bovens
Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands

I think this paper contributes very much to the discussion what to do about reducing alcohol problems in society among adult people.
It shows in the world there is little effort to focus these problems in an integrative way, using evidence based interventions as the ‘three best buys’: reducing advertisement, availability and raising taxes. Authors did their job accurate.

I just have one comment:
The paper focuses on adult people. In the research were, as far as I know only reviews that address adults.
Why do the authors do not discuss the gap between the policy used focussing youth and the policy focussing adults?
The thing is many countries are focusing only on youth, I think that is the main reason there are so few researches about community interventions in the adult world.
This is the reason why I chose ‘Partly’ in the first question: accurate: Yes, but in my view not complete. Paying attention to the gap between the policy regarding youth and regarding adults would improve the paper seriously.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

---

**Author Response 01 Mar 2018**

**Peter Anderson**, Newcastle University, UK

Author response: Thank you for this important comment. We have added a paragraph to the discussion that stresses, from a health perspective, the importance of addressing adults as opposed to adolescents. We noted that there is considerably more research that focuses on community-based action to reduce the harmful use of alcohol among adolescents rather than among adults and suggested that this is due to an undue focus of existing alcohol policy on youth-oriented actions, that have tended to strengthen during the first decade of the 21st century, at the expense of policies that would address adults.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

---

**Referee Report 05 February 2018**

doi:10.5256/f1000research.14982.r30366

**Joan Ramón Villalbí**

Public Health Agency of Barcelona (ASPB), Biomedical Research Centre Network for Epidemiology and Public Health (CIBERESP), Health and Life Sciences Unit, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

This is a relevant paper providing needed perspectives on interventions to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. It is presented as a review of reviews, but in fact it goes a bit beyond it, as the contents of table 1 are in themselves a valuable side-product.

I think the paper is acceptable to be indexed in its current form, and may be useful to many practitioners.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

The benefits of publishing with F1000Research:

- Your article is published within days, with no editorial bias
- You can publish traditional articles, null/negative results, case reports, data notes and more
- The peer review process is transparent and collaborative
- Your article is indexed in PubMed after passing peer review
- Dedicated customer support at every stage

For pre-submission enquiries, contact research@f1000.com