

Countries that limit alcohol sales save lives

HAYLEY HAMILTON, SAMANTHA WELLS AND LESLIE BUCKLEY

The Ontario government is planning to increase the number of alcohol retail locations in the province by nearly 300 per cent. This change is being described as “modernizing Ontario’s outdated alcohol retail options” and getting rid of “antiquated restrictions” on its sale.

However, when we consider the best available scientific evidence, this change appears to be rooted in outdated views on alcohol and substance use rather than current scientific data. Additionally, it falls short of reflecting a modern, science-informed public health policy. This is in stark contrast to growing efforts around the world to support data-informed decision-making in alcohol policy.

Drawing on the best scientific evidence, here are some things we know about alcohol that we didn’t a few decades ago:

- Alcohol is classified a Class 1 carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Globally, about four per cent of all cancers are attributable to alcohol consumption.

- As per-capita consumption goes up, alcohol-related harms rise as well. The main driver of per-capita consumption is availability; that is, ease of access to alcohol, as measured by retail density and hours/days of sale. When it comes to alcohol, to increase convenience is to increase harm;

- Private stores don’t have a good track record selling alcohol. Research shows they are much more likely to sell to minors and intoxicated people than public stores.

Other countries are using the best available scientific evidence to truly modernize their approach to alcohol and improve public health. In Europe, from Ireland and Scotland to Lithuania and Poland, governments are going in the opposite direction, putting in place policies that raise the price of alcohol, restrict where and when it can be sold, and how it can be advertised. Correspondingly, we are already seeing reductions in alcohol-related harms and associated health costs in these jurisdictions.

The Ontario government’s plans are expected to increase the number of alcohol retail locations from just under 3,000 to more than 11,000, catapulting this province to the top of the list in terms of alcohol retail outlets per capita in Canada despite solid research on the harms of this approach.

Consider a few examples: A study in British Columbia found that for every 10 per cent increase in stores selling alcohol, there was a 15 per cent increase in alcohol consumption. Meanwhile, another B.C. study found that for every 20 per cent increase in privately owned stores selling alcohol, alcohol-related deaths increased by 3.25 per cent.

B.C. and Ontario are not the same, and the relationship between alcohol availability and harm may not be linear, but for the sake of discussion we can crunch these numbers. In 2020, there were more than 6,000 alcohol-attributable deaths in Ontario. The government’s plans could result in nearly 3,000 additional alcohol-attributable deaths per year — a nearly 50 per cent increase.

That’s without even getting into the burden on our already overstretched health system. There are more than 700 emergency department visits because of alcohol every single day in this province. Increasing the number of retail locations by as much as 300 per cent will increase that number. It’s not a question of whether, but of how much.

And a reminder to taxpayers: we will be paying for these additional costs. It would have been great if some of the \$225 million the government is giving to the Beer Store went to the health system instead.

Scientific evidence from the United States shows that neighbourhoods with higher alcohol outlet density have 40 per cent higher rates of alcohol dependence. Therefore, wait times for alcohol dependence treatment are likely to increase as well.

To return to the question at hand: what would it look like to actually modernize our approach to alcohol, drawing on the latest science?

We would recognize that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity — it is a psychoactive substance that comes with risks and considerable harms. We would have a provincial alcohol strategy in place that considers the best available evidence and embraces a public health perspective.

We would also be cautious about expanding alcohol sales. But if such expansions were to take place, we would implement key harm mitigation measures: for example, a minimum distance buffer between schools and alcohol retail locations, and make it possible for municipalities and local communities to opt out of allowing corner stores to sell alcohol in their neighbourhood.

This government’s approach to alcohol is outdated. There’s still time to modernize it by making science-based decisions to advance public health.

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JEAN CHAMBERLAIN FROESE PHOTO

Young leaders from Ontario Pioneer Camp gather in 2022. Jonathan Froese, then 17, is seated in front, second from left. Hannah Froese, then 16, is seated in front, fourth from left. “It’s a place where young people figure things out,” writes Thomas Froese while commenting on summer camp and growing up.

Reflecting on summer camps and Olympic ‘distractions’



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

One day early this summer, my teenage son asked to host a party. Friends from camp lived far away, so they’d stay overnight, he explained.

How many for the party? “Not many,” he told me. “About 30.” “Uhh,” I said. “And the overnight?”

“Not many,” my dear boy repeated. “About 15.”

He talked to neighbours. Gave reassurances. I nodded. I wanted to be a good sport, you know? I imagined our house stretching. Exploding. Burning down. At minimum, I knew something would break. (It did. My boy, apologetic, covered its repair.) I also knew I’d scream all night at someone. (Namely my boy.) So my bride and I left. Stayed the night elsewhere, nearby.

I’ve broken things too. Who hasn’t? Once, at summer camp, I dropped a strikingly-beautiful piece of Blue Mountain pottery, a fine jumping dolphin, onto a cement floor.

It broke into a million pieces. My tears also fell hard.

It was a family gift I’d bought off-site, some distance away, now broken forever. The lake and forest and stars couldn’t help put it back together. But at week’s end, a giant young man named Tiny Tim, my camp counselor, hugged me and

gave me a new jumping dolphin, an exact replacement, new and intact, that he’d found and bought for me.

Yes, there’s something about friendship and camp, even when things go sideways. Things you might remember for life.

This weekend, the Paris Olympics, another sort of camp, finish. But before going there, let me say that if you ever get the chance to send your kid to summer camp — an overnight camp preferably in the middle of nowhere — do it. If you can help another kid go, do this too.

It’s a place where young people figure things out. Together. For better or worse. By pulling their weight. Rising early. Adjusting to the day. The weather. By sharing at campfire. Creating fun. By supporting each other. Loving each other, really. Challenging themselves on that lake, in those woods, under those stars, respecting creation. Without phones. Older kids leading (did I mention loving?) younger ones, everyone stretched to see surprising things about themselves.

This summer, my kids, now university-aged, are camp leaders again. It’s helped them mature greatly, pointing them to that responsible, adventuresome life. They can thank their mother and her strong endorsement. At camp, I just break things. Which isn’t a bad way to think about the natural order of things before the world’s tiny giants — that’s you and me on a good day — help repair what we can.

But about the Paris Olympics? They had their distractions. Will we

ever forget Canada’s women’s soccer drone-cheating scandal? And what of the opening ceremonies, including the drag queen parody with the striking resemblance to Da Vinci’s well-known “The Last Supper” painting, and the predictable backlash?

Talk about not reading the room. Yes, western nations like France are largely secular. Still, thoughtful faith and spirituality are deeply important to many people around the planet.

This is the beauty of the Olympics. It’s for the entire world in all its colours and shades. Which includes about 2.4 billion Christians, the world’s largest faith.

“We’re French. We have our culture and freedom!” rationalized one ceremony organizer. Gosh, I couldn’t help but think of some half-baked teen still figuring out life, and the comical title of a parenting book called, “Get out of my life, but first can you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?”

Yes, we all have our God-given freedom. But as my own father asked me once, “Is it really that hard to grow up?” Maybe we won’t all be coached to run the good race and fight the good fight. But surely we can respect each other with a measure of good sense. That’s proper pluralism.

Because it’s common for people, for any one of us, to be broken in this world. Even as any one of us can be healed and restored.

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LETTERS

Sad story is just the tip of the iceberg

Re: Len King could walk and talk when he waved goodbye to his family from the ambulance. He ended up bedridden, incoherent and died in hospital, Aug. 8

I am compelled to address the pressing issue of overcrowding in Ontario’s emergency rooms, particularly as it pertains to our senior population. Joanna Frketic’s article on Len King’s experience shines a much-needed light on a problem that is both pervasive and under-reported.

As the chief operating officer of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, I receive daily accounts from members about the struggles they face within our health-care system. I have witnessed this with my own elderly parents. My father, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, was left in a hallway for days, leading to delirium, the use of restraints and sedation. These experiences are not isolated incidents, but rather indicative of a systemic failure.

We are merely seeing the tip of the iceberg as our health-care system crashes into a crisis, exacerbated by the growing number of older adults requiring care. Emergency rooms are beyond capacity and ageism plays a significant role in the lack of action from authorities. There is

an urgent need for comprehensive reform to address these issues and ensure our elderly citizens receive the dignity and care they deserve.

As I advocated for my father, I felt an overwhelming sense of shame — not only for his treatment but for the countless other older adults who were on their own, left without a voice in the understaffed emergency rooms and overcrowded hallways, unable to navigate a broken system.

It is imperative we address this growing crisis. Our elders, who have contributed so much to our communities, should not have to endure such indignities.

Thank you for bringing attention to this dire situation. I hope that, through continued reporting and advocacy, we can spur the necessary changes to improve our health-care system for all, particularly our aging population.

Anthony Quinn, Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP)

Provide relief where it’s needed

Premier Doug Ford was successful with pushing through his plan to allow alcohol products to be sold in grocery stores and gas station convenience outlets. That is fantastic economic news, especially for some of his business friends. We all know that oil companies and large grocery

chains have been suffering and barely scraping by for years. Maybe now, with Doug’s help, they might finally be able to post a tiny little profit at year’s end!

Pete Wignall, Burlington

City hall needs to tighten its belt

Re: Should businesses in construction zones get financial help from the city? Aug. 8

We have a tax crisis in our city. Ask any resident or business owner. Should businesses be compensated during prolonged construction? Of course. Destroying small businesses will never return the city to a more balanced tax system we so desperately need. But where does the money come from? How about eliminating unnecessary spending?

Recently we had a speed bump installed on our street at the request of our councillor. No traffic study required. No public consultation. Governance by edict. Entire sidewalks are being replaced rather than repaired. Why? Every day I witness hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings without any impact on services. Is the city waiting for more people to move or default on their taxes before they realize they need to prioritize projects to reduce our deficit? The silence from councillors on this issue is truly astounding.

David Borsellino, Hamilton