

COMMENTARY

COVID-19 and alcohol in Australia: Industry changes and public health impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on every aspect of our lives, including the way we drink alcohol. The Australian Government has implemented strict social distancing measures to contain and prevent the spread of the virus, including requiring all food and drink premises to close or only offer takeaway and home delivery [1]. New South Wales (NSW) Liquor and Gaming has responded to these measures by temporarily relaxing liquor licensing restrictions to allow any licensed premises, including restaurants, cafes and small bars, which do not usually have the authorisation to sell alcohol for off-premise consumption, to sell alcohol for takeaway and home delivery [2]. Similar measures have also been introduced in South Australia [3], Victoria [4], Queensland [5], the Australian Capital Territory [6] and Western Australia [7].

With families already under financial and psychological stress as a result of the pandemic, increased alcohol use at home has the potential to exacerbate problems further. Harmful alcohol use is linked to a range of negative effects in families, from adults modelling poor drinking behaviours to children, to domestic violence and child neglect [8]. According to data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, around 30% of recorded domestic violence-related assaults in 2019 were flagged by NSW Police as alcohol-related [9]. Harmful alcohol use by carers is also a factor in an estimated 21–54% of child abuse and neglect cases in Australia, with alcohol more likely to be involved in more serious cases [10].

Increased purchasing of online and take-away alcohol

There are reports of increases in purchasing of alcohol by Australian consumers [11–13], supported by recent credit and debit card data from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia [14]. The Commonwealth Bank data shows an overall contraction in spending over the week to 27 March 2020 compared to the same week in the previous year, but a 34% increase in spending on alcohol [14]. The following week saw a 28% increase in

spending on alcohol compared to the same week in 2019 [15], although the high spending does appear to be volatile as data from the week ending 10 April 2020 shows a 13% decline in spending on alcohol [16]. Regardless of overall alcohol spending trends, one segment of the market that is undoubtedly growing with the current social distancing measures in place is online sales and home delivery. Online alcohol sales were experiencing rapid growth in Australia before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis [17] and, according to liquor industry news website ‘the Shout’, there has been a significant boom in sales in recent weeks—some Australian online retailers have reported 50% to 500% increases in sales compared to the same period in 2019 [18]. Data from the United States suggest that similar trends are occurring there, with overall alcohol sales up 55% in the week ending 21 March 2020 compared to the previous year, and sales in the online alcohol delivery subsector up 243% [19].

Risks associated with online alcohol sales and delivery

With online sales and home delivery likely to continue to make up a considerable portion of the alcohol market in Australia for at least the next 3–6 months, it is worth considering the specific issues associated with this mode of alcohol supply. There is a dearth of research in this area, but the limited research we have suggests online retailers are subject to less regulation than ‘bricks and mortar’ bottle shops [20]. Our recent examination of the delivery practices of the most popular online alcohol retailers in Australia found 69% advertised a willingness to leave alcohol unattended at an address without verifying the purchaser’s age [20]. In addition, only one in five retailers stated anywhere on their website a policy to refuse delivery of alcohol to intoxicated persons [20], a low proportion considering it is unlawful in all jurisdictions in Australia to sell or supply alcohol to an intoxicated person on a licensed premises [21] and most jurisdictions require mandatory signage to be displayed to that effect where liquor is being sold on premises

[22–25]. In a recent survey, one in five on-demand alcohol delivery service users reported that their motivation for using the service was because they were over the blood alcohol limit to drive, and 36% said that they would have had to stop drinking alcohol if the delivery service was not available [26]. We are concerned that as the alcohol market shifts online, alcohol will be increasingly available to intoxicated persons and minors.

Unique issues about online sales and delivery in the COVID-19 era

In the midst of the pandemic, ‘contactless delivery’ is being encouraged by alcohol retailers [27,28]. This reinforces the practice of leaving alcohol unattended without age being verified or consideration taken of whether the customer is intoxicated. Harm from alcohol use is a huge burden on the healthcare system in Australia [29], and practices like these are particularly concerning at a time when the healthcare system is already under pressure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the burden of alcohol in the community

Considering the relationship between alcohol and family violence, and the avoidable burden caused by alcohol on the healthcare system, it is surprising that governments around Australia have been so quick to relax liquor licensing restrictions during this pandemic. Within hours of the Australian Government announcing the mandatory closure of all food and drink premises except for takeaway and delivery [1], the NSW Government had announced a relaxation of liquor licensing restrictions so that any restaurant, cafe, bar, pub or club could sell alcohol for takeaway and home delivery [2]. So swift was the introduction of these measures that NSW Police were even caught off-guard, forcing a Sydney bar offering home-delivered cocktails to cease trading immediately as they were ‘trading outside of their licensing conditions’ [30]. It was reported that several other small bars and restaurants were also forced to stop selling takeaway and home-delivered alcohol due to the confusion caused by rapid change in licensing conditions [30].

The temporary alcohol policy changes Australia-wide are unprecedented and vary considerably across states and territories (Table 1). For example, while NSW relaxed liquor licensing restrictions for takeaway and home-delivery, the Northern Territory introduced

additional restrictions on the sale of takeaway alcohol at bottle shops. Bottle shop attendants in the Northern Territory are now required to refuse the sale of alcohol to a person that lives outside the region where the purchase is taking place, unless the purchaser is able to satisfy the attendant that they have a lawful place within the region to consume it [31]. The introduction of these emergency restrictions are intended to discourage groups of people gathering in public to drink [31].

Industry responses

Following reports of alcohol stockpiling among Australian consumers [11–13] and increasing alcohol sales [14], Retail Drinks Australia, the organisation representing retail liquor nationally, announced a voluntary initiative by participating liquor retail members to introduce temporary purchase limits (Table 2) [32]. However, these limits on purchasing are extremely generous, allowing each customer to purchase two cases of beer and 12 bottles of wine per transaction or the equivalent [32]. This equates to around 123 standard drinks [33] or 3 months’ supply for someone who is drinking 10 standard drinks per week, the maximum recommended in the revised *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* (currently still in draft form) [34]. Imposing these kinds of purchasing limits could be seen as a deliberate attempt by the industry to make supplies seem scarce to encourage more alcohol purchasing. Research into ‘scarcity messaging’ in advertising has indicated that scarcity of a product can create a sense of urgency among buyers that can result in purchasing greater quantities than they otherwise would [35].

There has been no shortage of advertising from the alcohol industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, with one major beer brand even taking out full-page newspaper advertisements under the guise of advocating for social distancing [36,37]. The brand name and logo dominated most of the page, with a few lines of social distancing advice—the motivation clearly to promote their products and brands and present themselves as responsible corporate citizens, rather than to actually contribute to reducing the spread of the virus [36,37]. The Western Australian Cancer Council has also reported social media advertising from alcohol retailers that promote the stockpiling of alcohol and heavy drinking while in isolation at home [37]. Other alcohol retailers have also been involved in questionable promotional activities, including one offering the ‘chance to win your bills paid for a year’ with every purchase of a case of beer [38], clearly targeting those

Table 1 Temporary alcohol policy changes in Australian states and territories in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

| Jurisdiction | Date | Policy change | Duration |
|---------------------|---------------|--|--|
| New South Wales [2] | 23 March 2020 | Licensed premises that do not have authorisation for the sale or supply of liquor for consumption away from the premises—such as restaurants, cafés and bars—can now provide take-away and home delivery services. <i>Conditions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Application process:</i> No application needed—licensing extension automatically applies to all licensed premises. • <i>Quantity limits:</i> No limit on the volume or type of alcohol that can be sold. • <i>Purchase with meal:</i> Alcohol does not need to be sold with food. | For as long as the Public Health (COVID-19 Places of Social Gathering) Order 2020 remains in force. |
| Victoria [4] | 30 March 2020 | Business with an existing liquor licence can apply for a temporary limited licence to enable them to sell alcohol for takeaway and home delivery. <i>Conditions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Application process:</i> Business must apply for a Temporary Limited Licence which will be processed within 72 h. There is no associated application fee for this licence. • <i>Quantity limits:</i> Must not exceed two 750 mL bottles of wine, or 12 × 375 mL containers of beer, cider or pre-mixed spirits (including cocktails), or one 750 mL bottle of wine and 6 × 357 mL containers. • <i>Purchase with meal:</i> For restaurant, café and BYO licence holders the supply of liquor for takeaway or by delivery must be with a meal. | The earlier of 15 September 2020 or the date on which the State of Emergency declared in Victoria over COVID-19 ceases to be in force. |
| Queensland [5] | 31 March 2020 | Temporary conditions depend on the type of licence held: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Subsidiary on-premises licence (cafés):</i> Allowed to sell takeaway alcohol, limited to a maximum of 2.25 L of liquor (total volume) of packaged beer, wine, cider and ready-to-drink beverages, such as premixed spirits. • <i>Subsidiary on-premises licence (restaurants):</i> As above but alcohol must be sold with a meal. • <i>Commercial other—bar:</i> Allowed to sell takeaway alcohol, limited to packaged beer, wine, distilled spirits, cider and ready-to-drink beverages, such as premixed spirits. A maximum of 2.25 L of liquor (total volume) per transaction, including a 750 mL limit on distilled spirits within the total volume of any transaction. • <i>Community other licence:</i> Able to sell takeaway alcohol to members, staff and reciprocal members to allow for disposal of existing stock only. Type/volume restrictions the same as for Commercial other – bar licence. | Not specified. |
| South Australia [3] | 26 March 2020 | Licencees who hold a restaurant and catering, residential, small venue, club or on-premises licence are able to apply for a short-term licence to enable them to sell alcohol for takeaway or delivery. <i>Conditions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Application process:</i> Online application for short-term licence with no fee attached. • <i>Quantity limits:</i> Up to two bottles of wine or one bottle of wine and a six pack of beer, cider or pre-mixed spirits per transaction. • <i>Purchase with meal:</i> For this short-term licence the supply of liquor for delivery or takeaway must be with a meal. | Short-term licences will be valid until the public health emergency relating to COVID-19 concludes. |
| | | | Permits issued for 6 months. |

(Continues)

Table 1. (Continued)

| Jurisdiction | Date | Policy change | Duration |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--|---|
| Australian Capital Territory [6] | 25 March 2020 | <p>Business that hold an on-premises licence (e.g. restaurants, bars and cafes) can apply for a temporary permit to enable them to sell alcohol for takeaway and delivery.</p> <p><i>Conditions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Application process:</i> Licensees must make an application for three-month commercial liquor permit, no fee attached. • <i>Quantity limits:</i> No quantity limits specified. • <i>Purchase with meal:</i> No requirement to sell alcohol with food. | Occasional licences granted for up to six-months. |
| Western Australia [7] | 27 March 2020 | <p>Business with existing liquor licences are able to apply for an occasional liquor licence to allow for the sale of packaged alcohol with a meal for takeaway or delivery.</p> <p><i>Conditions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Application process:</i> Licensees can make an application for an occasional liquor license for up to 6 months. No application fee. • <i>Quantity limits:</i> One bottle of wine and a six-pack of beer, cider or pre-mixed spirits per transaction. • <i>Purchase with meal:</i> The supply of liquor for takeaway or delivery must be with a meal. | |
| Northern Territory[31] | 30 March 2020 | <p>Prior to completing a transaction for the sale of takeaway alcohol bottle shop attendants must check an approved form of identification including details of the customer's address. If a customer presents an identification that indicates that they live outside the region of the Northern Territory where the purchase is taking place, then the attendant must refuse the sale unless the customer is able to satisfy them that they have a lawful place within the region to consume the liquor.</p> <p>No changes as of 10 April 2020.</p> | Condition remains in place while the Northern Territory Declaration of Public Health Emergency remains in effect. |
| Tasmania | | | |

Table 2 Retail drinks Australia purchasing limits per transaction

| Product category | Transaction limit |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Beer | 2 cases ^{aa} |
| Cider | 2 cases ^{aa} |
| Pre-mix spirits/ ready-to-drink | 2 cases ^{aa} |
| Wine | 12 bottles |
| Cask wine | 2 casks, not to exceed 10 L in total |
| Bottled spirits | 2 bottles, not to exceed 2 L in total |

^aCases refer to either 24/30 pack, as applicable.

suffering financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. The Western Australian Cancer Council has called on the alcohol industry 'to rein in its opportunistic marketing behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic' [37].

Watch this space

We are currently seeing an unprecedented shift towards online purchasing and delivery in the alcohol retail market. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, online alcohol sales were averaging over 14% annual growth in Australia in recent years [17]. As some governments in Australia move towards relaxing liquor licensing laws to allow pubs, bars and restaurants the ability to provide takeaway and home delivery, we must consider the risks associated with this and monitor the implications for alcohol-related harm. It will be challenging to untangle the effects of these licensing changes from the broader negative impacts of social distancing, but evidence on this will be critical to the inevitable policy arguments that will arise post-pandemic about whether home delivery of alcohol should continue be to allowed for restaurants, cafés and bars.

The harms associated with online alcohol delivery and drinking in the home are not unique to pandemic times, indeed, it has been argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in existing off-premises liquor licensing in Australia in minimising the harms associated with home drinking [39]. Licensing systems should aim to help protect the community from the health and social harms associated with home drinking, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future [39]. In line with recommendations from the World Health Organization on alcohol during COVID-19 [40], we would advocate against a relaxation of regulations that increase ease of access to

alcohol. The World Health Organization advises that restrictions on access to alcohol should be upheld during the pandemic or even reinforced [40], the opposite of what we have chosen to do in Australia. At a time when people in the community are feeling anxious, stressed and vulnerable, we need to encourage measures that limit alcohol consumption, not facilitate it.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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