



A rapid scan of the evidence

Packaged liquor availability

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Summary of findings

Background and methods

An environmental scan of recent evidence, published in the last decade, was undertaken to understand how the availability of packaged liquor influences alcohol use and related harms.

This included a brief narrative summary of key themes drawn from the literature and a table summarising findings from each reviewed study. This choice of methodology was driven by the broad research question.

Findings from six systematic reviews and 33 single studies were identified through a keyword search across three databases for publications from 2016–25. Australian evidence was prioritised for review however, international studies were included to expand the evidence base and compare to the Australian context, where appropriate.

Findings

- **Adolescent access to and use of alcohol:** Across six studies and two systematic reviews, the majority of studies report a positive association between greater off-premise alcohol availability and adolescent alcohol use, with effects strongest for earlier initiation and heavier use in mid-adolescence. For example, in Australia, adolescents living or studying within walking distance of a liquor store at age 14 had substantially higher odds of ever drinking and engaging in heavy drinking by age 17. Internationally, similar patterns have been observed following policy-driven increases in off-premise availability. In Ontario, Canada, a quasi-experimental study found that adolescents exposed to the introduction of alcohol sales in grocery stores were 1.7 times more likely to transition from abstinence to high-risk regular drinking over four years, and high-risk drinkers were more likely to sustain these behaviours compared with unexposed control groups.
- **Adult alcohol use:** Across six studies and one systematic review, the evidence indicates a generally positive association between greater off-premise alcohol availability and alcohol use in adults, though findings are more limited and context-dependent than for adolescents. The strongest Australian evidence comes from a longitudinal study of young adults aged 20 at baseline, showing a dose-response relationship whereby each additional liquor store near the home was associated with increased alcohol use two years later. In Ontario, Canada, partial deregulation of off-premise alcohol sales led to a substantial increase in licensed grocery outlets, with studies showing higher neighbourhood-level alcohol use in areas with greater off-premise availability, although effects varied considerably by city and population characteristics.
- **Violence and crime:** Across 16 studies and two systematic reviews, most studies report a positive association between greater off-premise outlet density and higher rates of assault, domestic violence, and public disorder, although the strength of association varies by outcome and setting. Australian quasi-experimental evidence found that extending takeaway trading hours in NSW was followed by a significant increase in domestic violence assaults, while restricting high-strength packaged liquor in remote WA communities was associated with substantial reductions in domestic violence-related hospitalisations. Internationally, stronger and more consistent associations with violence have been reported in urban settings. In New York City, areas with higher densities of off-premise outlets, particularly grocery and liquor stores, experienced significantly higher rates of aggravated assault and street robbery than on-premise venues.

- **Injuries, accidents and health:** Across eight studies and one systematic review, most Australian evidence reported a positive association between greater packaged liquor availability and higher rates of alcohol-related injuries and health harms. However, findings are less consistent than for violence and appear shaped by local context. For example, in Melbourne, higher off-premise outlet density – particularly around large chain outlets selling cheaper alcohol – was associated with higher rates of both intentional and unintentional traumatic injury. In Perth, however, associations between outlet density, sales volume and injury differed by distance from the CBD, suggesting different harm pathways such as preloading in suburban areas. Comparable findings have been reported internationally following policy-led increases in availability. In Ontario, Canada, deregulation of off-premise alcohol sales and extended trading hours was followed by a 17.8% increase in alcohol-attributable emergency department presentations.
- **Contextual and policy factors:** Across outcomes, the evidence suggests that the direction and magnitude of harm associated with packaged liquor availability varies by local context and policy settings. For example, in Melbourne chain outlets selling cheaper alcohol were associated with higher injury rates. Policies that increase packaged liquor availability through petrol stations in Canada were more consistently associated with increased use and harm, than expansion to grocery stores.

Conclusion

Alcohol use and related harms, particularly violence, injury and hospital presentations, are associated with off-premise outlet density, trading hours, sales volume and outlet characteristics. The strength – and in some cases the direction – of these relationships appear to vary by local context, including neighbourhood characteristics, social norms and jurisdictional policy and enforcement settings.

Declarations

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