

Summarising the impacts of the Queensland Alcohol-related violence and Night-Time Economy (QUANTEM) project

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Title: Summarising the impacts of the Queensland Alcohol-related violence and Night-Time Economy (QUANTEM) project

Running head: QUANTEM summary commentary

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Abstract

This closing commentary to the Special Section presents an overview of the QUANTEM evaluation findings in comparison to those from other jurisdictions where similar interventions have been implemented (such as Sydney and Newcastle), and especially with previous studies that have used similar evaluation methodologies such as the Dealing with Alcohol and the Night Time Economy study (DANTE). Overall, the articles documented promising reductions in alcohol-related harm, building on the existing evidence base for multi-pronged interventions in entertainment districts. Importantly, this is the first comprehensive investigation to also look at impacts on nightlife-related business and findings demonstrated, that there were improvements for many businesses. There are substantial policy implications for Queensland and other jurisdictions (nationally and globally) wanting to reduce late night alcohol-related harm in entertainment districts.

Keywords: alcohol policy, nightlife, live music, violence, ambulance

Introduction

The harm associated with consuming alcohol, particularly among young people, continues to be of concern within the Australian community [1]. The rates of physical and verbal abuse by a person affected by alcohol are more than twice the rate for other drug types [2]. This presents a major challenge to all levels of government. Developing policies that effectively influence drinking behaviour is notoriously difficult, largely because consuming alcohol, often in the context of ‘drinking to get drunk,’ is widely accepted as a significant part of Australian culture [3]. The frequent consumption of alcohol at excessive and harmful levels is associated with many forms of entertainment and participation in social events, often in nightlife entertainment precincts [1].

This special section

The articles in this Special Section provide some in-depth findings for the three-year period following the introduction of the Tackling Alcohol Fuelled Violence (TAFV) legislation in Queensland, Australia. They update a two-year report published by the Queensland government [4]. The methodology and policy context are described in the research protocol article [5] and an introductory commentary to this Special Section [6]. The findings and their discussions also highlight the complexities of enacting such laws across a large and diverse jurisdiction where different communities see very different types of problems associated with alcohol, many of which will not be addressed by reducing alcohol sale for two hours late Friday and Saturday night in Safe Night Precincts (SNP), and one hour in the rest of the state.

Summary of Findings

The key goal of the TAFV legislation was to create a safer night-time environment, particularly in designated entertainment precincts (SNPs). The findings presented in this Special Section demonstrate that there have been some significant reductions in alcohol-related harm evident three years after the original introduction of trading hours’ restrictions and two years after the introduction of ID scanners – the two main levers expected to have the greatest impact.

Overall, we suggest the data show significant reductions in ambulance attendances in some key SNPs and all 15 SNPs combined [7], and improvements in public safety in some areas, especially in relation to more severe cases such as serious assaults and hospital admissions. These significant reductions were primarily observed in the larger population areas of South

East Queensland. In all 15 SNPs combined, there was a time-specific reduction in the number of serious assaults during 3am-6am for each intervention point, but there were small increases earlier in the night during the initial stage of the intervention [8]. Across different outcomes and SNPs there was also a range of null results and, in general, the effects of the TAFV policies were less marked than seen for similar policies in other jurisdictions such as Newcastle [9-11]. Possible reasons for this are discussed later in this paper.

The most pronounced effect was seen in Fortitude Valley, which accounts for a nightlife-related large proportion of the nightlife-related population and harm state-wide. The substantial reduction in serious assaults, the most reliable measure of assault [12], suggests a positive and ongoing impact from the TAFV legislation, following initial teething problems with Extended Trading Permits and the staged introduction of ID scanners [13,14]. While ID scanners had only been in place for two years at the time of analysis (introduced in July 2017), it appears they have had a moderate impact on some harms, and that minor legislative amendments following the two-year evaluation and recommendations (such as limiting the days ID scanners were required to Thursday-Sunday; see Supporting Information) have dealt with unintended consequences on a small number of businesses.

Street intercept interviews with patrons [15] showed high levels of intoxication across the Queensland sites, congruent with other indicators of harm. As outlined in Table 1, the average breath alcohol concentration (BAC, g/dL) levels documented in this study are consistently and substantially higher than those previously reported for other cities such as Melbourne, Sydney, Geelong and Newcastle, despite using almost identical methods [16-18]. This higher level of intoxication suggests that the scope of the problem may be greater than in other jurisdictions. While there was some initial evidence of reduced levels of high intoxication in Fortitude Valley in the month following implementation [19], average BAC levels over the course of the evaluation did not show any significant change in this SNP. In Cairns, there was some evidence of reductions in BAC, particularly in female patrons.

INSERT TABLE 1

The prevalence of pre-drinking was reasonably consistent across Fortitude Valley and Cairns (78-86%). These rates were similar to figures reported in Geelong and Perth (Patron Offending and Intoxication in Night Time Entertainment Districts [POINTED] study), but

comparatively higher than prevalence reported in the DASHED study in Canberra or Hobart [21]; or the POINTED study in Sydney, Melbourne or Wollongong [17]. The median number of pre-drinks consumed by patrons in Fortitude Valley (M=6) and Cairns (M=5) was one or two standard drinks more than patrons in Melbourne and Wollongong, but similar to amounts consumed by male patrons in Sydney (n=5), Geelong (n=6) and Perth (n=6) in the 2012 POINTED study [17].

Based on the data presented by Ferris and colleagues [22] suggests that business has not been impacted by the changes, and has improved in some ways. Key variables such as the number of people entering SNPs, the number of people entering venues, and the number of venues trading throughout the night until 3am, have not been significantly reduced, and some have improved. Further, Puljević and colleagues report that the number of live music performances have increased in Fortitude Valley, while the number of live music venues in the precinct have remained constant [23].

Discussion

The findings presented in this Special Section demonstrate the value of having a wide range of data sources (38 in total) to allow a comprehensive assessment of impact via triangulation [24] and achieving a concordance of trends [25]. Importantly, it has highlighted the need to consider that different indicators can show different trends because of local characteristics and cultures. For example, in some areas venues may be more inclined to call police when there is trouble, whereas in others they will call an ambulance. The articles in this issue also highlight the need to be able to address a variety of community interests and their different agendas. This is especially relevant in the alcohol policy space where there is a range of actors looking to achieve their own goals (i.e. venue operators, councils, emergency services) which may be counter to community or government goals. Thus, governments are presented with competing narratives and disparate evidence on virtually every response, encouraging inaction and conservatism. Overall, this Special Section reports findings that demonstrate how limited but targeted changes to very-late night supply of alcohol can have promising impacts on violence and injury without affecting night-time entertainment business. However, there are a range of key issues associated with the context to consider.

The scope of alcohol-related harm in Queensland

As noted in the patron interview paper [15] and two-year report to government [4], Queensland has experienced disproportionately high levels of alcohol-related harm historically [26]. The findings in this Special Section have shown that Queensland continues to experience some of the highest levels of alcohol-related harm in the country, and that people in nightlife settings continue to be at substantial risk of such harm compared to other states.

Regional variations

Queensland is a geographically huge state that includes tourist meccas, major cities and remote communities, and the findings presented in this Special Section highlight that the impacts of the legislation appear to have varied by region. Areas such as Fortitude Valley – the state’s largest SNP – is primarily dealing with local patrons, other cities like Cairns and Surfers Paradise also have a substantial number of out-of-town visitors. Within Fortitude Valley, after 1 July 2016 policy introduction there was a significant reduction in the rate of serious assaults in the periods 8pm-midnight and 3am-6am, and for the overall high-alcohol-hours timeframe, but there were no significant changes in outcomes in many SNPs.

The findings suggest that the TAFV laws, which only addressed late weekend nights, did not have as much impact in regional centres and tourist destinations. However, some of these latter areas were also affected by the continued (late night, non-closing) trading of casinos; of the four casinos operating in Queensland, three are located in SNPs. In areas outside major cities, financial stress since the end of the mining boom in 2014/5 may have lessened the impact of the legislation by increasing violent tendencies in disaffected youth [27]. Such challenges will likely require stronger responses than the TAFV legislation (such as an alcohol floor price [28] and targeted licensing schemes [29,30]), as discussed in the recommendations of the two year report [4].

Comparisons between Queensland alcohol policies and similar interventions in other cities

Overall, the impact of the TAFV intervention was less pronounced than found in other interventions in late-night entertainment precincts in Sydney and Newcastle. There are a number of key differences between the TAFV intervention and the previous interventions on which it was based. Measures introduced in Queensland were an adaptation of the measures introduced into the King’s Cross and Sydney central business district precincts in New South Wales [31]. These were in turn based on the successful Newcastle intervention, which closed venues at 3am and saw a reduction of 37% in assaults recorded by police after 18 months

[32] and 58% after 5 years [10]. While the measures introduced are similar to those in Sydney, the Sydney intervention was only applied in two geographically small precincts within a very large city where patrons continue to have a large choice of other entertainment districts and options [33]. In contrast, patrons attending SNPs in Queensland have limited alternative entertainment precincts. Most importantly, the venues in Sydney chose to shut at 3:30am for the most part, whereas up to 60% of venues in Fortitude Valley continue to trade after alcohol service ceased. This was an active strategy by some venue operators to maintain a culture of people staying out very late at night. To the best of our knowledge, previous trials around the world have operated on closing venues within a specified time frame and patrons returning home at the end of trading hours. The current situation in Queensland means that many people remain in venues or on the streets until much later (as venues are not closed), potentially affected by fatigue, alcohol and/or drugs – all factors that contribute to aggression and poor decision-making. This may reduce the potential benefit of reduced trading hours.

Exclusion of casinos from the policy may have also contributed to continued very late-night trading. Casinos can continue to sell liquor very late in the night, potentially undermining the impact of the restrictions both practically and in the message sent to patrons. Previous interventions which have found substantial reductions in violence and other harms have not had 24-hour trading casinos within the precincts considered (e.g. Newcastle). There is also emerging evidence from Queensland [4] and Melbourne [34] that casinos are a leading contributor to police-recorded assaults [4] and alcohol-related emergency department presentations [34]. Further, the exemption of casinos from mandatory ID scanning laws allows banned individuals (from attending SNP venues) to access casinos where they can still drink (and/or gamble) 24-hours a day.

Finally, current liquor licensing laws are undermining the efforts of enforcement agencies to successfully prosecute venues for serving intoxicated patrons. Despite funding for additional licensing inspectors, their ability to enforce legislation around responsible service is undermined by the current legislation which does not stipulate how proof of intoxication should be determined [4]. This means that while venues are now restricted in their trading hours, they can serve people as much alcohol as they want while they are in the venues without fear of prosecution, undermining the aim of reducing intoxication on the street, and the potential impact of the TAFV legislation.

Conclusion

The findings in this Special Section show some promising improvements in a number of key outcomes, especially the reduction in alcohol-related harm in a range of jurisdictions following the introduction of the TAFV policy. Importantly, they also show no measurable negative impact on business. Indeed, the data presented in this Special Section regarding impact, and the conclusions reached, mirror the independent work of others [35], which have reported that: “Queensland has the third largest core NTE (night-time economy) in Australia across all key metrics and is growing at faster pace than that of VIC and NSW”. However, the findings also show how small exceptions to interventions, such as the continued trading of casinos, bars remaining open after alcohol sales have ceased, and inadequate licensing laws to regulate service to intoxicated patrons, can undermine the impact of simple, effective measures. Finally, this study has shown the importance of using a wide range of measures to document impact beyond assaults and injuries and to independently document other social and community outcomes.

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Declarations of interest

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Table 1: BAC levels across Australian cities

Study and city	Collection period	<i>n</i>	Median BAC	BAC range
QUANTEM – Fortitude Valley	06/2016-11/2018	2066	0.077	(0.000-0.300)
QUANTEM – Cairns	08/2016-08/2018	1021	0.086	(0.000-0.289)
QUANTEM – Surfers Paradise	09/2018-06/2018	260	0.086	(0.000-0.290)
QUANTEM – West End ^a	10/2018-06/2018	293	0.065	(0.000-0.279)
DASHED – Canberra	04/2015-12/2015	876	0.051	(0.000-0.254)
DASHED – Hobart	04/2015-11/2015	719	0.064	(0.000-0.299)
POINTED – Geelong	11/2011–06/2012	1235	0.067	(0.000-0.230)
POINTED – Melbourne	11/2011–06/2012	1890	0.048	(0.000-0.328)
POINTED – Perth	11/2011–06/2012	1185	0.066	(0.000-0.290)
POINTED – Sydney	11/2011–06/2012	1683	0.033	(0.000-0.350)
POINTED – Wollongong	11/2011–06/2012	699	0.066	(0.000-0.277)

Note. ^a West End is a non-Safe Night Precincts comparison site. BAC, breath alcohol concentration; DASHED, Drug and Alcohol intoxication and Subsequent Harm in night-time Entertainment Districts [20]; POINTED, Patron Offending and Intoxication in Night Time Entertainment Districts study [17].