




Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario

EXPANSION OF ALCOHOL SALES IN ONTARIO

PERSPECTIVES FROM
CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION, ONTARIO

February 1, 2019



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Perspectives from Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) network in Ontario consists of 30 branches across the province that provide community-based clinical and social services to individuals living with mental health and addictions-related issues and their families. We offer comprehensive substance use and harm reduction-related supports, including youth addictions programming, Rapid Access to Addictions Medicine (RAAM) Clinics, Managed Alcohol Programs (MAPs), withdrawal management and a broad range of outpatient substance use counselling and supports. As a mental health and addictions treatment provider, CMHA Ontario Division – in partnership with Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) and Addictions and Mental Health Ontario (AMHO) – is pleased to offer our perspective and recommendations about the province’s plan to expand the sale of alcohol.

ALCOHOL-RELATED HARMS

Alcohol is the most widely-used substance in Ontario. While many people can consume alcohol with minimal consequences, alcohol is associated with several health and social harms.

For example, alcohol is responsible for the greatest proportion of costs attributable to substance use in Ontario.¹ Research shows that alcohol-related costs in the form of health care, law enforcement, corrections, prevention and lost productivity due to disability and death amount to at least \$5.3 billion in Ontario each year.² Alcohol consumption is also linked to several health harms, including dependence, cancers, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, violence and injuries.³ This is an issue that impacts all Ontarians across the lifespan – approximately one in three people in our province have experienced harm because of someone’s alcohol consumption within the past year.⁴

Alcohol availability in Ontario has increased 22 per cent from 2007 to 2017 and will continue to increase under the government’s proposed sale expansion.⁵ Evidence shows that an increase in alcohol availability (including hours of sale, the number of retail outlets and increased marketing) can contribute to an increase in harms and health care costs.⁶ Important lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions in reducing alcohol harms. For example, Russia holds one of the highest rates of alcohol use in the world, consuming roughly 15 litres of alcohol

CMHA Ontario and our partners, AMHO and CMHO, strongly caution against further alcohol sale expansion and believe a public health approach is necessary.

per person every year.⁷ Recently, a government initiative that centred on restricting the availability of alcohol, banning the sale of unregulated alcohol and increased taxation has been effective in minimizing the harms related to alcohol and contributed to better health outcomes. Alcohol-related mortality in Russia has decreased 50 per cent since the introduction of this approach, and overall alcohol consumption has decreased approximately 30 per cent in the past five years.⁸

A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

CMHA Ontario and our local branches strongly encourage the government to follow the recommendation from the World Health Organization and consider the importance of a public health approach to the expansion of alcohol sales in the province.⁹ Furthermore, the government should consider the crucial role mental health and addictions service providers play in supporting Ontarians who will have greater access to alcohol.

Central to a public health approach is ensuring the province has comprehensive supports in place to mitigate potential harms. Supports are vital, as statistics show that approximately 15 per cent of adults in Ontario reported harmful drinking behaviours within the past year.¹⁰ And with regard to youth, one of the longest-running surveys of drug use and health among high school students suggests that 17 per cent reported binge drinking (defined as five or more drinks on one occasion) at least once during the month before the survey.¹¹

Community-based mental health and addictions services across the province have a robust understanding of the complexities and barriers that may be present for individuals engaging in problematic alcohol consumption. Unfortunately, these services have historically been underfunded. CMHA Ontario supports the Mental Health Commission of Canada's recommendation to increase spending on mental health and addictions services to a minimum nine per cent of the overall provincial health care budget.¹² An increase in funds is especially necessary to assist in meeting current gaps in resources and capacity for community-based mental health and addictions agencies like CMHA. These services offer programs that are dedicated to problematic substance use and those who may be living with mental health and/or addictions issues. A public health approach would ensure that a broad range of services, from brief interventions, longer-term programming and screening for problematic alcohol use within primary care, are available across the province.

CMHA ONTARIO'S RECOMMENDATIONS

As alcohol access increases, we may experience a rise in alcohol-related harms across the province. It is necessary to balance consumer demand for increased alcohol sales while ensuring that the health of Ontarians remains a priority.

CMHA Ontario recommends the following:

1. An incremental approach to alcohol sale expansion.

Should government move forward in expanding access to alcohol, CMHA Ontario and our local branches strongly encourage the government to take an incremental approach. In doing so, the government can better monitor and evaluate the impact of any changes or increase in harms. This may include monitoring the impact of: policy changes; alcohol-related harms such as impaired driving and hospitalizations; and, the demand placed on addictions treatment service organizations. An incremental approach to increased sales, in combination with monitoring and evaluation of impacts, will help to achieve a public health approach.

2. Provide enhanced prevention and public education on the impacts of alcohol, particularly for youth.

Prevention and education are necessary components in preventing issues related to problematic alcohol consumption. It's crucial the government identify and address factors that can contribute to problematic alcohol consumption and provide evidence-based information to the public, particularly for youth. The promotion of public health materials such as Canada's low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines can support Ontarians to make informed decisions about their alcohol consumption.¹³ In addition, a public health approach would ensure investments in resources that can effectively build resiliency in high-risk youth.

3. Ensure that a portion of additional revenue generated by an increase in alcohol availability is dedicated directly to mental health and addictions services across the province.

Alcohol is responsible for the greatest proportion of costs attributable to substance use in Ontario. Therefore, in order to safeguard public health, the government should consider dedicating a portion of revenue generated from alcohol taxation to funding mental health and addictions services. In addition, dedicated revenue from alcohol would assist in meeting current gaps in funding for direct service provision. The government may wish to mirror its current format

CMHA Ontario welcomes further consultations with government to develop and implement a comprehensive public health approach to reducing alcohol-related harms in Ontario.

with gambling revenue and allocate a fixed percentage of alcohol-related revenue toward prevention, education and mental health and addiction service provision.

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