

## Shop servers' experience of alcohol-related issues and interventions in socially contrasting neighbourhoods

### Introduction

Alcohol problems are concentrated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In recent times there has been a shift in alcohol consumer patterns across the UK away from the on-trade (pubs) towards the off-trade sector (licensed shops). Off-trade purchase is cheaper (incurring more health problems, especially amongst disadvantaged groups), and its consumption is largely unsupervised (risking more serious disorder).

This project, which built upon an AERC-funded pilot study (Forsyth et al, 2007), addressed these issues via an overlooked group of experts/stakeholders, namely off-sales servers (shopkeepers) working in local licensed stores in socially contrasting neighbourhoods (deprived and non-deprived areas). Participants in this research were those who served at the counter of community shops. That is small businesses, as opposed to the major chain stores or other supermarkets (with checkouts).

A mixed methods design was devised to assess shop servers' experience of alcohol-related problems and policy interventions in their communities. Firstly, 36 in-depth face-to-face qualitative interviews were conducted with servers in shops (24 licensed to sell alcohol), evenly divided between those working in premises located in the most and least deprived localities of the city of Glasgow, Scotland (a city known to experience elevated levels of alcohol problems). Secondly, a quantitative survey was conducted, in which every community off-sales outlet in the city received a short questionnaire (response rate n=143, 52.8%). This was supplemented by a smaller survey of similar but unlicensed shops (n=47) which acted as a control sample.

The interviews and survey both enquired about: each server's / shop's role in their community, the problems they experienced, alcoholic beverage sales, business trends, their views on current licensing laws and wider alcohol policy interventions.

### Findings

The two methods used complemented each other, although greater differences between shops serving deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods were uncovered by the in-depth interviews than the survey, in that servers working in deprived neighbourhoods reported that they had encountered more serious alcohol issues.

Local shops servers often felt embedded in their communities, with a stake in the well-being of the neighbourhood. Consequently, the more their customer base was dependent on local shoppers, the more likely it was that servers knew their clientele personally (e.g. by name or age). This had the twin benefits of reducing the problems which they experienced while on duty (e.g. verbal or physical attack) and making them better able to third-party police alcohol issues (e.g. under-age purchase).

Those working in local shops were often aware of the problems in their community and were averse to be contributing to these (e.g. by fuelling alcohol-related disorder). Those working in unlicensed shops reported that alcohol problems, both locally and nationally, were more serious than did their counterparts staffing off-sales.

The major supermarkets' practice of deep discounting was felt to be the main driver of alcohol problems.

Local shops felt under threat from these majors' business practices, particularly unlicensed shops which did not have the extra revenue from alcohol. Despite this, few of these had considered obtaining a drinks licence, with most saying they did not sell alcohol for religious reasons.

Licensed shops reported that they were dependent on drinks sales for their survival, even when alcohol products only made up a small proportion of their turnover. This was felt to be due to the 'interconnectedness' of having 'everything under the one roof', which made such local premises better able to compete with the supermarkets.

Reported differences in the frequency of experiencing (potentially alcohol-related) problems while on duty were less marked than anticipated between off-sales shop servers working in socially contrasting communities (deprived versus non-deprived areas of Glasgow). This may suggest that alcohol brings the same issues regardless of neighbourhood type. However, this relative lack of difference in the frequency of experiencing problems while at work was also the case between licensed and unlicensed shops, which were also affected by alcohol (e.g. drunk customers).

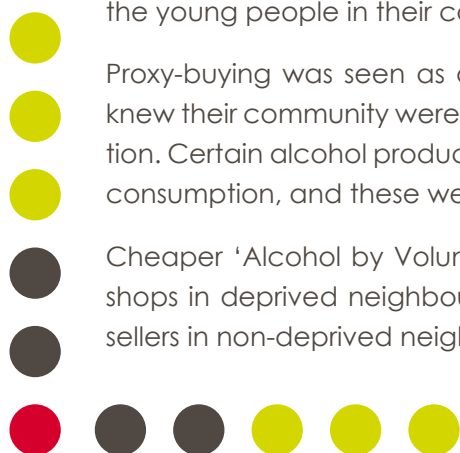
The finding that servers working across a range of local shops report similar difficulties may have been mediated by a greater tolerance of certain behaviours by shops serving deprived areas. This may be partly due to differing local behavioural norms and partly because shopkeepers in deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to know their customers personally. Similarly, off-sales servers may have a greater tolerance of alcohol-related behaviours and, especially in deprived neighbourhoods, may have been more likely to resort to a range of security measures to reduce potential problems to a comparably tolerable level, in comparison to unlicensed shops (or licensed shops in non-deprived neighbourhoods). However, this could mean that when problems were reported, they tended to be most serious in relation to off-sales serving deprived neighbourhoods.

The main problems experienced by shop servers were from drunken persons. These problematic would-be customers were not youths or addicts, but normally well-behaved regulars who might occasionally enter the shop while intoxicated. These situations became aggravated when they were surprised to be refused service by someone who they knew well and who would normally sell them alcohol.

Strict age I.D. policies, both those legally mandated and rules imposed by the shops themselves, were seen as having reduced the frequency of experiencing problems from youths. However, a recent 'Challenge 25' policy (requiring anyone who looks under-25 to provide I.D.) was seen as causing friction between the shopkeeper and customers already known to be aged between 18 and 25, especially in close-knit deprived communities. Given this perceived reduction in direct attempts by under-18s to buy alcohol, it was noteworthy that police operated test-purchases were easily spotted by shopkeepers who knew all the young people in their community.

Proxy-buying was seen as a bigger problem than direct under-age purchase. Local shopkeepers who knew their community were often aware when this was happening and were able to take appropriate action. Certain alcohol products (e.g. tonic wine) were associated with proxy-buying, and other problematic consumption, and these were 'red-flagged' with modified selling practices (e.g. one bottle per person).

Cheaper 'Alcohol by Volume' (ABV) products (e.g. white cider or super lager) were more a feature of shops in deprived neighbourhoods. In contrast, more expensive, specialist wines and spirits were better sellers in non-deprived neighbourhoods.



Participants were divided on alcohol price legislation, such as a 'two-for-one' offers ban introduced between the interview and survey phases of the research, and in particular the proposed policy of Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP). A majority (60%) of participants were in favour of MUP; in the case of off-sales servers this was because they hoped it would level the business playing field with the supermarkets, whereas unlicensed shop servers felt it might reduce alcohol consumption/problems. Those against MUP tended to report that the supermarkets would find a way round it, or that it would penalise less affluent responsible drinkers without reducing problems.

## Implications

The findings of this project can inform future alcohol harm-reduction initiatives at both local and national level. Specifically:

- It should be acknowledged that local shopkeepers know their customers and have a stake in their community. As such, and in contrast to bulk buying at supermarkets, local off-sales were able to monitor who purchases what alcohol, when and for whom, and were able to adjust their selling practices accordingly. Local off-sales should be commended for this, and encouraged towards or rewarded for participation in alcohol harm reduction initiatives. For example, the level of legal responsibilities involved with selling alcohol should be reflected in the level of legal protection afforded to servers.
- The main problem faced by off-sales servers was in refusing drunken customers (as opposed to under-agers). This highlights the need to make both the shop server and the public more aware of the legislation relating to the selling of alcohol to intoxicated persons (i.e. to be on a par with the level of understanding that people already have in the case of under-18 sales).
- This research highlighted that alcohol-related problems are experienced across all communities, regardless of levels of deprivation. However, the problems of deprived communities are likely to be more serious.
- Test-purchases appear to be counterproductive when targeting local community off-sales, especially in a 'Challenge 25' environment. As well as alienating potential allies, who might third-party-police alcohol issues, this practice seems more likely to catch the honest mistake by a novice server, than a savvy 'unscrupulous operator' who can easily circumvent the test.
- A greater onus should be placed on the responsibility of the customer, rather than the shop/server, when policing alcohol issues (e.g. proxy-buying). Although some responsibility must still lie with the seller, there may be a case for targeting 'test purchasing' at proxy-buyers instead. Again, increasing public understanding of the issue would be helpful, for example by more information being publicised by appropriate authorities or the drinks industry.
- Local shopkeepers will be supportive of policies such as MUP if this helps to level the business playing field between them and the major supermarkets. Given that it was apparent that cheaper ABV products were more a feature of deprived communities, price-led interventions would seem more likely to impact upon poor neighbourhoods (their population and shopping provision).
- Support for server training varied. Servers from shops in deprived areas felt there was too little on the problems they faced on duty, while those working in non-deprived areas felt this aspect of training was

of little relevance to them.

- Studies linking outlet density to local alcohol problems and deprivation need to take account of outlet size and customer mobility.
- Many participants saw alcohol sales as being essential to their business's survival, especially given the competition from the major supermarkets, who they felt were dominating the market place and driving alcohol issues.

## Reference

Forsyth, A. J. M., Davidson, N. and Lennox, J. L. (2007) An Investigation into the environmental impact of off-licensed premises on residential neighbourhoods. London: Alcohol Education Research Council.

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