

COVID-19 as a catalyst for alcohol policy change: A case study of the Gove Peninsula

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Abstract

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural experiment for alternate ways of living and working. Although alcohol supply was one of many aspects impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, few of those alcohol-related measures have been continued. This commentary presents a unique case study from the Gove Peninsula in northern Australia, where pandemic restrictions acted as a catalyst for a review of an established alcohol management system. A permit system was introduced on the Gove Peninsula in 2008 to control who can purchase takeaway alcohol and how much they could buy each day. Development of the system was rooted in the principles of community development and self-determination. This commentary describes how COVID-19 and associated changes in levels of alcohol harms mobilised community support for a review of the system, that had operated unchanged for the past decade. COVID-19 was adventitious in revealing compelling localised information which encouraged examination of potential improvements to the system. An updated regime is now being trialled, which sets daily limits on the alcohol purchases of everyone in the area. This experience illustrates the benefits of timely and relevant data to assist communities in formulating local solutions to local problems.

KEYWORDS

alcohol permit systems, COVID-19, supply reduction

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, jurisdictions across the globe introduced a range of measures, primarily focused on reducing person to person contact [1, 2]. Some of these measures, such as the closure of licensed premises, additional regulation of takeaway alcohol sales, curfews and operating restrictions, also affected alcohol access [1–3]. As risks associated with the pandemic diminished, restrictions eased and were generally removed altogether [2]. This paper presents a case study of an area in the north of Australia where the ‘natural experiment’ of COVID-19 restrictions [4, 5] acted as a catalyst for refining a decade-long alcohol management system.

2 | ALCOHOL PERMIT SYSTEMS IN THE NT

The Northern Territory (NT) has a long history of legislating a range of alcohol supply reduction policies, often more restrictive and more innovative than those seen in the southern states [6]. One innovation, dating back to the first iteration of the *Northern Territory Liquor Act* 1979, allowed the residents of any community to apply for a ‘General Restricted Area’ declaration. This enabled communities to request local restrictions on the availability of alcohol (including total bans). This option was predominately taken up by Aboriginal communities [6] who were involved in determining the extent and nature of

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the restrictions. This reflects a ‘ground up’ model of alcohol policy development. Meaningful community involvement in policy development, including alcohol policy development, is considered vital to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [7].

Two types of alcohol permit systems have evolved from the General Restricted Area provision; exemption schemes and permit based alcohol management systems [8]. The former allows non-local people living in a dry or heavily restricted Aboriginal community to possess and consume alcohol in their homes [9]. This paper is concerned with the latter, which regulates who may drink in the community and how much alcohol they may purchase [9]. In 2016, eight towns/communities in the NT had permit-based alcohol management systems [5], three of which are located on the Gove Peninsula.

3 | THE GOVE PENINSULA

The Gove Peninsula is part of the East Arnhem region, a large area of Aboriginal land in the north-east of the NT (Figure 1). There is a mining lease and accompanying town, Nhulunbuy, which functions as the main service

hub for the region. Latest census data estimates 3267 people live in Nhulunbuy, with the majority (70%) identifying as non-Indigenous [11]. Two major Yolŋu¹ communities are in close proximity: Yirrkala is 18 km from Nhulunbuy with a population of 657 and Gunyaŋara is 14 km from Nhulunbuy with a population of 241 [12, 13]. There are four outlets with takeaway alcohol licences on the Gove Peninsula [14]. Takeaway alcohol purchases cannot be made anywhere else in East Arnhem.

4 | INTRODUCTION OF THE GOVE PENINSULA ALCOHOL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Since the establishment of the mine in the 1960s (which occurred without the consent of the Yolŋu people), Yolŋu leaders have resisted the introduction of alcohol to the region through protests and challenges to liquor licences [16]. In 2005 formal consultation was undertaken with Yolŋu leaders, community members and organisations, as well as NT police and non-government organisations, regarding ‘options for addressing alcohol problems in the region (p. 20)’ [16]. Based on the report generated through the



FIGURE 1 Map of East Arnhem region and Gove Peninsula [10].

consultation, in 2006 East Arnhem Harmony Mäyawa Mala² made a formal application for a General Restricted Area to the NT Liquor Commission, which was followed by a series of community hearings and amendments. In 2007, the introduction of an Alcohol Management System was approved and it commenced on 1 March 2008. The system meant that only individuals with a valid permit could purchase take-away alcohol. The system is not applicable to licensed premises. Customer identification is scanned at point of sale and matched against a central server with records of all permits. There are six tiers of access, with permit holders who reside in Yirrkala and Gunyaṅara able to reach Tier 4 and permit holders who reside in Nhulunbuy able to reach Tier 6 [16]. If the customer holds a restricted permit (Tier 1–5) the bottle shop attendant is required to enter the volume of sale, which is recorded against their permit (to prevent ‘bottle shop hopping’) (Table 1) [16].

In 2011, an evaluation was conducted and found reductions in alcohol sales and several indicators of alcohol-related harm, including alcohol-related emergency department presentations and hospital separations for Aboriginal patients, injuries, disturbances and apprehensions for public drunkenness [16]. The evaluation cautioned against attributing these decreases solely to the permit system, as some trends had commenced prior to the introduction of permit and could have been influenced by other factors, such as the voluntary ban of cask wine [16]. Similar reductions in alcohol-related harms (particularly assaults and break ins) were found in nearby Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island following the introduction of a permit system in 2005 [17].

5 | COVID-19 INTERVENES

Alcohol sales were initially suspended in response to COVID-19 but a voluntary daily limit was soon negotiated to ameliorate risks associated with the sudden cessation of alcohol supply [18]. The limit included: two cartons of beer AND one bottle of spirits AND four bottles of wine AND one carton of per-mixed drinks AND one carton of cider. This might be considered a sizable daily limit and, indeed, many residents reported being unaware of the change because it had no practical impact on their purchasing patterns [18]. Licenced venues were also closed from 23 March to 15 May 2020. Once they did reopen, alcohol could only be sold with food until 5 June 2020 [2]. Biosecurity lockdown restricted movement between Yirrkala, Nhulunbuy and Gunyaṅara from 20 March to 5 June 2020 [19]. During this period, there were reductions in alcohol related harms [18]. Compared to the same period in the previous year, alcohol-related presentations to the emergency department decreased by

TABLE 1 Tiers of access for liquor permits on Gove Peninsula [15].

Tier	Daily purchase limits
6	Unrestricted
5	1 30-pack carton of 375 mL full-strength beer cans and/or 2 bottles of wine OR 1 30-pack carton of 375 mL mid-strength beer cans and/or 2 bottles of wine OR 24 cans of 375 mL premix and/or 2 bottles of wine
4	24 cans of 375 mL full-strength beer and/or 2 bottles of wine OR 24 cans of mid-strength beer and/or 2 bottles of wine OR 12 cans of 375 mL premix and/or 2 bottles of wine
3	6 cans of 375 mL full-strength beer and/or one bottle of wine OR 12 mid-strength cans and/or one bottle of wine OR 6 cans of 375 mL premix
2	6 cans of 375 mL mid-strength beer and/or one bottle of wine OR 12 cans of light beer and/or one bottle of wine
1	6 cans of 375 mL cans of light beer and/or one bottle of wine

25.8% and alcohol-related admissions decreased by 41.2%. Police-recorded offences also dropped by 40% and domestic violence incidents decreased by 55.6%. Police also reported improved detection of secondary supply³ during this period, as suspicious purchasing patterns became more obvious [18].

6 | A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

The decreases in alcohol-related harms were initially apparent to frontline staff and became a topic of conversation. These observations were confirmed when official statistics were compiled. It is important to be clear that these statistics were generated through a simple pre post observational comparison with no control group. In terms of stimulating community action, however, these observations were enough. Until COVID-19, operation of the permit system had remained virtually unchanged. In that time Permit Committee’s functionality had decreased, as had administrative support from Licensing [18]. These issues, however, were bureaucratic and invisible to most residents. In contrast, the reduced alcohol-related harms during the COVID-19 restrictions were more apparent and became a key element in rallying community interest to review the permit system (Figure 2).

COVID 19 – Surprising Positive impacts on communities

The review was particularly promoted by consequences that came from recent COVID lockdowns, along with the closure of licenced premises and restrictions placed on to takeaway alcohol. At the time there were:

- Fewer alcohol related presentations at the Gove Hospital
- Less alcohol related incident reports to Police
- Improved family relations and activities
- Reduced alcohol-related crimes and offences
- Fewer incidents of family violence

FIGURE 2 Section of the public information provided by Gove Peninsula Harmony Group.

TABLE 2 Daily limits for 2023–2024 permit trial.

Tier	Daily limit	Community
4	Permit holders may buy up to 3 of the below in any combination. Only 1 bottle of spirits or 1 carton (up to 24 units) of premix spirits can be part of this combination 1 carton or box (up to 30 units) of full-strength beer 1 carton or box (up to 30 units) of cider 6 bottles of wine 1 bottle of spirits or 1 carton (up to 24 units) of premix spirits	Nhulunbuy
3	1 carton (up to 30 units) of full-strength beer or cider; or 6 bottles of wine; or 12 units of premix spirits	Yirrkala, Gunyaṅara Birritjimi, Nhulunbuy
2	12 units of full-strength beer or cider; or 1 bottle wine; or 6 units of premix spirits	Yirrkala, Gunyaṅara Birritjimi, Nhulunbuy
1	6 units of light beer	Yirrkala, Gunyaṅara Birritjimi, Nhulunbuy

A review of the system was commissioned by the Gove Peninsula Harmony Group,⁴ involving discussion groups and interviews with more than 30 different stakeholders, and a survey completed by 339 local residents (58% male and 27% identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) [18]. The review reported that almost half of those consulted thought the permit system was not reducing alcohol related harms, attributing this largely to the

prevalence of secondary supply and a lack of Responsible Service of Alcohol in licensed premises [18].

7 | UNRESTRICTED PERMITS

Secondary supply was identified an ongoing problem by three-quarters of all survey respondents [18]. This is recognised as a challenge for other targeted supply reduction policies, like the NT's Banned Drinker Register and the national minimum age of purchase [21, 22]. There was no monitoring of purchases by permit holders at Tier 6, and it was suspected this enabled some to buy larger amounts and on-sell to non-permit holders or restricted permit holders without detection. Based on these findings, the review recommended that unrestricted permits be removed [18]. This was recognised as controversial as it would mean the majority non-Aboriginal population of Nhulunbuy would have their purchasing curtailed for the first time. On 26 September 2023, at the request of the Gove Peninsula Harmony Group, the Northern Territory Government announced a six-month trial of a four-tiered permit system which removed the unrestricted permit option (Table 2) [23]. The trial commenced 1 October 2023 and was subsequently extended from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 [24].

8 | CONCLUSION

Permit systems have been tried in a number of other countries, but it is only in remote NT Aboriginal communities and some remote Inuit communities in Nunavut, Canada that they continue to be a practiced policy option [25]. Although evidence of effectiveness is considered sparse and somewhat equivocal permits can be useful for empowering communities to take greater control over alcohol use, if the following conditions are met:

1. The administrative function is adequately resourced and supported;
2. There are effective controls to restrict secondary supply;
3. The rules and conditions of the permit system are considered legitimate by the community they are applied to [25].

The developments on the Gove Peninsula following COVID-19 illustrate why community involvement in alcohol management is to be encouraged. It was in the lived experience of frontline workers that changes were noticed, and it was through a broad-based community action group that those changes were highlighted and drew the attention of government authorities. Locals can make direct observations about alcohol-related behaviour from going about their daily lives and they have an intimate understanding of context in which to interpret the information and identify actions to take. The changes in harm indicators were compelling to the local community: they were tangible, the outcomes were positive and, critically, they were considered highly legitimate because they were derived from the community itself. This underscores one of the key features of an effective permit system: that the rules and operational framework is accepted as legitimate and appropriate by the community involved [25].

This experience on the Gove Peninsula illustrates that timely and relevant data is important for communities to identify and formulate local solutions. This practise is not new, indeed, it is a key feature of Participatory Action Research, an existing research approach, whereby relevant community members are supported to develop meaningful and practicable initiatives, which are reviewed and refined iteratively [26]. This type of approach is similar to what occurred organically on the Gove Peninsula as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. This case study serves to highlight an unintended outcome from pandemic era restrictions and as a reminder of the value of local evidence to ensure communities are meaningfully involved in decisions regarding how alcohol is managed locally.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Each author certifies that their contribution to this work meets the standards of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Aboriginal land owners of the East Arnhem region.
- ² A local community-based group comprising Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu, and government and non-government agencies.
- ³ In most Australian jurisdictions, secondary supply refers to the supply of alcohol to people aged under 18 [20]. In the NT, however, because alcohol restrictions exist based on factors other than age the supply of alcohol to restricted people is also called secondary supply [21]. For example, someone with an alcohol permit supplying alcohol to someone who does not have an alcohol permit.
- ⁴ The latest iteration of the East Arnhem Harmony Mäyawa Mala.

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