

**PROVINCIAL LIQUOR BOARDS:
MEETING THE BEST INTERESTS
OF CANADIANS**

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MADD Canada's Mission:

**To stop impaired driving and to support
victims of this violent crime.**

Provincial Liquor Boards: Meeting the Best Interests of Canadians

MADD Canada Policy Backgrounder – Revised August 2012

INTRODUCTION

MADD Canada strongly supports the provincial liquor board model which protects the public interest and meets consumer needs through safe and responsible alcohol sales.

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity and should not be sold as one. It is linked with more than 65 medical conditions and is a contributing factor in injuries, impairments and deaths caused by illness, impaired driving, homicides, suicides, falls, drowning, assaults, fires and other adverse events that threaten public safety and community well-being.

According to the National Alcohol Strategy, alcohol resulted in the deaths of an estimated 4,258 Canadians in 2002 and cost society \$14.6 billion in lost productivity and health care and law enforcements costs.¹ From 1996 to 2009, overall per capita alcohol sales have risen by 13%. This increase was greater in those provinces where the government-controlled systems have been eroded. Thirty-two per cent of Canadians experienced problems in the past year due to the drinking by others.²

It is not now, nor has it ever been, MADD Canada's goal to prohibit the legal, responsible consumption of alcohol. The fact is, however, that when alcohol is over-consumed, it imposes tremendous costs on not only the drinkers but also the people and communities around them.

We believe that replacing the provincial liquor board system with a privatized system of retail alcohol sales will increase alcohol-related problems and carry substantial human, social and economic costs.

ALCOHOL SALES IN CANADA

In Canada, policies governing alcohol availability are set and enforced by provincial liquor control or licence boards. In all jurisdictions except Alberta, these same provincial boards are responsible for the sale of alcohol through their own network of retail stores.

Canadian and international research recognizes the important role of provincial liquor boards. The World Health Organization³, Canada's National Alcohol Strategy⁴ and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health⁵ have stated that liquor control board systems provide an effective means of controlling alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in society.

Despite the overwhelming Canadian and international evidence supporting provincial liquor boards, these models have come under scrutiny in many Canadian provinces and proposals have been put forth to adopt varying degrees of privatized alcohol sales.

It is imperative that decision-makers, the general public and the media understand and consider the widespread negative impact that privatization would have on communities and society. Privatized systems typically result in increased access to alcohol (e.g. more locations, longer hours of sale, etc.) which research has shown increases alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems in our society.

The issue is not solely about addressing impaired driving or the other alcohol-related health and social harms that will increase with privatization. Nor is it solely about consumers being able to purchase wine at their local corner store or purchase their favourite product at the lowest price. Alcohol regulation must address various factors in order to safeguard public health and safety and to advance consumer interests.

Provincial liquor boards strike a fair and effective balance between consumers' access, selection and service, and the need to manage alcohol consumption and minimize alcohol-related harms and costs.

Partial Privatization Carries the Same Risks

While most of the discussion around alcohol-related sales focuses on either fully-privatized models or fully government-run models, there are hybrid models that offer governments a third option in which independent third parties control the revenues of retail alcohol sales. Governments perceive these models as a quick influx of cash, while the public perceives them to carry the same safeguards and accountability that they value in the government-controlled systems. The truth, in fact, is very different.

Government-controlled crown assets assure the public of a rigorous reporting system, transparency and, most importantly, public accountability. Crown assets balance public interest and safety. Once a crown asset has been sold or its revenues are controlled by a third party, there is a fundamental shift in its mode of operations. The balance of ensuring public interest and safety is replaced by a market-driven system of maximum return for shareholder value. Public accountability and transparency are lost in the process.

Third-party owners and managers of crown assets sign agreements with government as a way for both sides to assure the public that the Crown asset will continue to operate as it has in the past. But divesting control for alcohol sales to a third-party – in full or in part – begins the slippery slope to serious negative consequences which are outlined in this document. While it may take longer for the negative impact to be seen in hybrid models or third-party management models, the need to maximize the profitability of the asset will overtake commitments to social responsibility programming and staff training on important issues such as identifying underage drinkers. Inevitably, the number of stores will increase and the hours of operation will be extended.

History has shown that the sale of crown assets does not deliver full public accountability or economic value. Furthermore, the controls and safeguards which the public values are lost when crown assets are privatized or managed by a third party. Recent Canadian examples are the sale of Highway 407 in Ontario and the sale of New Brunswick Power to Hydro Quebec, both of which have proven unpopular with the public.

In the United States, Virginia has recently considered the sale of its state alcohol distribution programs. It has concluded that the sales would not realize significant long-term economic benefits. The state also questioned the negative impact such sales would have on public policies associated with liquor sales, and on various public health and safety programs currently funded by revenue from government-controlled alcohol sales.

The research is clear and consistent; the key to balancing alcohol retail sales and public safety is government ownership and stewardship of the crown asset. The right model for Canada is government-controlled provincial liquor boards which ensure the delicate balance of public safety and the marketing and sale of alcohol.

NEGATIVE IMPACT OF PRIVATIZATION

One need only look at the experiences in other countries to see the negative impact of increased alcohol availability.

- Finnish researchers reported that large reductions in alcohol prices in 2004 were followed by increases in alcohol-related mortality of 16% among men and 31% among women.⁶
- Studies in Western Australia and Iceland found an overall increase in alcohol-related problems such as violence⁷ and impaired driving⁸ with longer hours of sales.

- Extended hours of alcohol sale in the U.K. have caused law enforcement concerns, according to a report by the government’s Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the effects of the Licensing Act 2003, which loosened rules on bar and pub closing hours.⁹
- Allowing the sales of distilled spirits in restaurants in North Carolina (with a resulting increase in density of on-premise availability) was associated with a 16-24% increase in police-reported alcohol-related accidents and single vehicle night-time accidents involving male drivers 21 years and older.¹⁰

Many countries are examining or implementing policies to better control alcohol consumption, including minimum pricing, increased taxes, bans on volume discounts, controls on locations/hours of operation, and regulation of marketing/promotion.

A 2006 European Commission paper, *Alcohol in Europe – A Public Health Perspective*, concluded that “Governments have a responsibility to intervene in the market and benefit from doing so.”¹¹ They also concluded that jurisdictions that manage outlets through number and density, location and hours and days of sale should continue to do so while jurisdictions without such regulations or with limited regulations should consider the benefits of introducing or strengthening such controls.

International research supports the positive impact of government-controlled alcohol sales on managing alcohol consumption and related harm.

- Authors of one study examining the potential consequences from possible changes to Nordic retail alcohol monopolies as a result of joining the European Union predicted that modifying the existing government-controlled system of alcohol sales and slightly decreasing the price of alcohol would increase consumption and alcohol-related problems in Sweden, Finland and Norway. They went on to suggest that the complete elimination of government-controlled systems in these countries – coupled with the price decreases that would result from private competition – would lead to a great increase in consumption and alcohol-related problems, such as alcohol-induced assaults and alcohol-related mortality.¹²
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control’s Task Force on Community Preventive Services recommended “against the further privatization of alcohol sales in settings with current government control of retail sales, based on strong evidence that privatization results in increased per capita alcohol consumption, a well-established proxy for excessive consumption”.¹³

- An American study examined underage drinking and alcohol-impaired driving deaths in states with privatized systems versus government controlled sales of spirits or wine and spirits. The rate of drinking and binge drinking among high school students was lower in states which controlled sales of spirits/wine and spirits than in states with privatized sales. Further, those states with control over both wine and spirits had greater consumption reductions than states which controlled spirits alone. The lower consumption rates in states with control over sales of spirits/wine and spirits were associated with a 9.3% lower alcohol-impaired driving death rate under age 21.¹⁴

The fact that countries are aiming to tighten their controls through measures currently provided by our provincial liquor boards should be pause for thought for any province considering privatization.

The Canadian Experience with Privatization

Experiences from those Canadian provinces with privatized or partially-privatized systems support the link between increased availability of alcohol, increased consumption and increased alcohol-related harms in society.

- Following partial privatization of retail alcohol sales in British Columbia in 2002, the number of liquor stores in that province increased from 786 in 2002 to 1,294 in 2008. Overall alcohol consumption in the province increased by 8% during that time.¹⁵
- A 2011 British Columbia study examining the relationship between rates of alcohol-related death, density of liquor outlets and proportion of private versus government liquor stores found that those areas with more private stores than government-run stores had significantly higher rates of alcohol-related deaths involving local residents. There was a 27.5% increase in alcohol-related deaths for every extra private liquor store per 1,000 British Columbians.¹⁶
- Alcohol consumption increased in Alberta the year privatization was introduced, while rates in other parts of the country declined.¹⁷
- The number of liquor stores in Calgary increased more than tenfold from 1995 to 2003, from 23 stores to nearly 300. Police reports in Calgary document a rise in impaired driving charges and family violence cases in areas of the city with the highest density of liquor stores. The finding is consistent with peer-reviewed research linking greater volumes of alcohol consumption to higher levels of mortality for violent deaths and suicides.¹⁸
- A study of the impact of privatization of alcohol sales in Alberta found significant increases in suicide mortality rates.¹⁹

- One study indicated that a one litre increase in per capita alcohol consumption by Canadians between 1950 and 1998 resulted in an increase in accident mortality of 5.9 males and 1.9 females per 100,000.²⁰
- Ontario, which has a government-controlled model of alcohol sales, had a per capita rate of impairment-related crash deaths of 2.03 per 100,000 population in 2009; Alberta, which has a fully-privatized system of alcohol sales, had a rate that was 175% higher, at 5.70 deaths per 100,000 population²¹.

THE BENEFITS OF PROVINCIAL LIQUOR BOARDS

The provincial liquor boards regulate access to alcohol through outlet locations, limits on hours of operation, minimum pricing, and taxes. They also promote social responsibility programs to educate the public about the dangers of alcohol misuse. The result is effectively managed alcohol consumption which helps reduce alcohol-related problems in society.

A privatized system would result in more stores selling alcohol, longer hours of sale, more sales to underage and intoxicated individuals, and increased consumption.

Provincial liquor boards have intrinsic controls to protect and educate the public, such as ID'ing individuals under 25, refusing sales to intoxicated customers and alcohol abuse prevention initiatives. The current system is able to maintain rigorous enforcement levels because employees are properly and consistently trained. Implementing a system of private sales will require a significant government investment for training and monitoring of all retail locations to ensure compliance with the law.

Liquor Control Board of Ontario Challenges and Refusals²²



A privatized system puts social responsibility programs at risk. A young clerk working in a convenience store is much more vulnerable to pressure to sell alcohol to an underage peer than a trained and experienced employee of a government liquor store. Similarly, a young clerk in a corner store is less likely to refuse service to a belligerent, intoxicated customer who demands that the clerk sell him alcohol.

Further, small businesses have a strong financial incentive not to refuse sales. Refusal of sale would weigh more heavily and present more of a financial burden on a smaller retailer than it would on a province-wide network of stores. Regulations are better and more effectively enforced when the seller is not financially dependent on maximizing sales.

The provincial liquor boards have measures for accountability and transparency built into their structures. The same levels of accountability and transparency will be far more difficult to achieve within a loosely-knit, widespread network of individual and independent retailers.

For example, in 2008, the percentage of British Columbia government liquor stores requesting the mandatory two pieces of identification was 77.5% while the British Columbia private liquor stores rate of age identification was 35.9%.²³

MEETING THE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF CONSUMERS

Contrary to the alcohol industry claims about access to alcohol being too limited for consumers, Canadians do not want alcohol sold in every corner store. There is no public demand for change. Research over the past 15 years indicates the public does not want to see alcohol made more available. A Centre for Addiction and Mental Health study showed that Ontario residents are very supportive of provincially-run liquor stores and related control measures, and generally do not favour increased marketing of or greater access for alcohol products.²⁴ Among the study's findings:

- 80% of respondents believed that the number of places where they can buy alcohol in their community is “about right”. A further 9% of respondents felt there are “too many” alcohol outlets.
- 92% of respondents considered it “somewhat convenient” or “very convenient” to get to the nearest liquor or beer store.
- 73% agreed that “before making legislative or policy changes to the way alcohol is sold, governments should be required to consult with health experts.”

A 2005 MADD Canada survey reached similar conclusions. Respondents were supportive of a balanced approach in which access to alcohol is controlled by a provincial liquor board. The majority of survey respondents felt that increased availability would lead to more impaired driving and more sales to minors and intoxicated people.²⁵

Furthermore, the existing data on customer satisfaction with provincial liquor boards indicates that the current model is working and there is no basis or need for significant change.

Consumers are not losing out or lacking choice. The reality is much the opposite because consumers are likely not aware of the broader range of choice that the current system provides. Consumers in smaller communities enjoy a wider product selection through government-controlled models than they would under privatized models. The system provides consumers with other benefits, including: social responsibility programs, accountability, transparency and quality assurance.

In 2011, MADD Canada, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Ontario Public Health Association wrote to Ontario municipalities, urging them to oppose the sale of beer and wine in convenience stores. The majority of responding municipalities agreed that beer and wine should not be available in convenience stores.

In the summer of 2012, the Ontario Convenience Store Association presented a petition to the Government of Ontario in support of beer and wine sales in convenience stores. In the public and media discussions that followed, some convenience store owners themselves raised concerns selling beer and wine at their locations. They acknowledged the potential for increased profits, but also noted the risks of alcohol sales to minors, shop-lifting and robbery, and expressed fear for employee safety.²⁶ These concerns were supported by comments made by a Quebec convenience store owner who warned that selling alcohol is 'a tough business'.²⁷

Craft brewers and micro-distillery owners also expressed concerns about the impact of beer and wine sales at convenience stores, noting that deregulated systems could result in independent producers being squeezed out of business by larger companies which would dominate the market, and shelf space, even more than they do now.²⁸

Dispelling the Myths About Lower Prices

Proponents of privatization often cite the potential for lower alcohol prices. However, lower prices are not always guaranteed. According to a Consumers' Association of Canada report, the British Columbia's liquor store model has resulted in consumers paying millions more at private liquor stores. The prices of 43 major beer, wine and spirits products were consistently higher at private liquor stores than at the government liquor stores.²⁹

The higher prices are also present in Alberta. An informal comparison conducted by a news agency in 2009 found that the cost of a 12-pack of one popular standard Canadian beer was higher in Alberta than in any other province. Consumers in Alberta paid between \$23.98 to \$24.99, compared to \$20.50 in Saskatchewan and Ontario; \$18.03 in Manitoba; \$18.12 in Quebec; \$19.99 in Nova Scotia; and \$20.49 in Prince Edward Island.³⁰

A York University study showed that privatization in Alberta has resulted in higher product prices, smaller product selection, higher warehousing and distribution costs, and higher social costs.³¹

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

The argument has been made that privatizing liquor sales would increase revenues. Certainly, alcohol sales play a significant role in the Canadian economy through job generation, retail sales, export income and tax revenue. In 2004, total alcohol sales in Canada were approximately \$16 billion, with a total revenue to all governments of approximately \$7.7 billion.

However, the perception that privatized systems will generate a higher percentage of revenues than government-run systems is incorrect. In Alberta, the increase in annual revenue going to the provincial government, between the introduction of privatization in 1993 and January 2012, was 69%³². Yet, the provincially-run Ontario Liquor Control Board increased revenue for the Ontario government over the same general time period by 165%.³³

However, revenue generation cannot be viewed in isolation; it must be considered within the context of the social and financial costs of alcohol consumption. The \$7.7 billion in revenue is overshadowed by the costs of alcohol-related harms. In 2002, the cost of alcohol-related harms in Canada was estimated to be \$14.6 billion. In short, for every dollar made on alcohol, two dollars are lost on productivity or spent on health care, law enforcement and the other costs of alcohol related harm. (Figures from National Alcohol Strategy.³⁴)

Moreover, alcohol misuse carries additional costs related to lost productivity which are not always measured. In a recent survey of workplace substance abuse, the most frequently reported consequences of substance abuse issues were missed days of work, arriving late for work, slowed work pace, mistakes, and dismissal. The survey estimated that the time lost as a result of alcohol use cost \$51 million.³⁵

It should be noted that none of these costs address the human cost of alcohol-related harm, in terms of needless death and injuries, and the associated physical pain, grief or mental anguish.

Research indicates that alcohol-related harm and associated costs will increase if alcohol is made more widely accessible through privatization. For that reason, alcohol sales and revenue generation must be considered from a broad and long-term perspective.

NATIONAL ALCOHOL STRATEGY

MADD Canada is proud to endorse the National Alcohol Strategy in its work to reduce alcohol-related harm. The Strategy made recommendations in four key areas: health promotion, prevention, and education; health impacts and treatment; availability of alcohol; and safer communities.

The Strategy is based on the *National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada*, which comprised extensive, multi-sectoral, cross-Canada consultation. Building on this work, a national working group of more than 30 representatives (including provinces/territories, relevant federal departments, non-governmental organizations, researchers, addictions agencies and the alcohol beverage and hospitality industries) came together to develop the Strategy.

The Strategy made 41 recommendations³⁶, including:

- Maintain the current systems of control over alcohol sales. Under these systems, it will be important to:
 - Require liquor control boards to maintain a social-responsibility frame of reference for all matters pertaining to their operations and governance and to maintain or increase their spending and programming in this area;

- Enhance staff training at outlets and implement ongoing enforcement compliance programs to ensure that alcohol is consistently sold in a socially responsible way and in accordance with the law;
- Encourage the systematic re-examination and analysis of hours and days of alcohol sales and outlet density, recognizing that increased physical availability of alcohol can lead to increased harm.
- Discourage the introduction or expansion of U-Brew or U-Vin industries. Where these industries currently exist, make licensing contingent upon matching the socially referenced price for beverage alcohol in that jurisdiction.
- Develop and promote national alcohol/drinking guidelines to encourage a culture of moderation and aim for consistency and clarity of messages across all alcohol-related health and safety arenas.

CONCLUSION

Experience in other countries and in Canada indicates that privatizing alcohol sales will increase alcohol-related deaths, injuries and social problems through increased alcohol availability and consumption.

Provincial liquor boards provide society with a reasonable measure of control over alcohol pricing and accessibility, and thereby effectively manage alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm. At the same time, provincial liquor boards offer customers high levels of service, quality and selection, along with a strong commitment to social responsibility which benefits consumers and non-consumers alike.

Maintaining provincial liquor boards is in the best interest of all Canadians.

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