



Policy Analysis

Aboriginal alcohol policy and practice in Australia: A case study of unintended consequences

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines attempts by members of a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia, to control alcohol use, and the impact of policy decisions taken by national, territory and local governments on those attempts between 2007 and 2017. The Australian Government's main policy instrument for reducing alcohol-related harms from 2010 was the Alcohol Management Plan (AMP), officially defined as a plan, negotiated at a local community level with a high level of community input, for the effective management of alcohol use by the local community.

The paper shows that the policy as implemented had the unintended consequence of undermining rather than enhancing the capacity of the community to act collectively in managing alcohol, largely as a result of the interactions of four sets of factors: (1) the policies as formulated; (2) actions taken to implement the policies, (3) the responses of those affected by the policies, and (4) the socio-ecological context in which these events occurred. The paper seeks to identify the processes through which these consequences were generated, and the implications for future policy-making, policy implementation and community-level initiatives for managing alcohol in Aboriginal communities.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the actions taken by several groups and organisations to address a complex social issue – the management of alcohol in a remote Australian Aboriginal community – and the ways in which these actions interacted with each other to generate outcomes that did not accord with the objectives of any of the agencies involved. Nor, we argue, did they enhance wellbeing of members of the community concerned. We use a case-study method to describe the outcomes that arose from four inter-connected sets of activities: the *formulation* of policies focusing on alcohol-related harms among Indigenous Australians; the *implementation* of these policies; the *responses* of people directly and indirectly affected by the policies, and the *socio-ecological context* in which implementation and responses took place. We also consider the implications of our analysis for ongoing policy-making relating to Indigenous alcohol and other drug use in Australia.

The main policy with which the paper is concerned is the introduction from 2010 of Alcohol Management Plans as an instrument

through which remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (NT) were encouraged to control alcohol use by community members (Smith et al., 2013). Our approach is informed by a realist evaluation perspective, according to which the explanations for policy outcomes are found not in the interventions or policies themselves, but in the interplay of intervention designs, actions, and contextual factors (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Van Belle, Rifkin, & Marchal, 2017). The paper is a product of a collaborative project involving researchers from the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin and an Aboriginal community organization based in a remote Northern Territory (NT) community. The latter sought help from Menzies in developing an evaluation framework to monitor the formulation, implementation and outcomes of an Alcohol Management Plan (AMP) in the community. The authors of this paper were involved in developing the evaluation framework and the subsequent monitoring. The project was granted Ethics approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Menzies School of Health Research and the NT Department of Health.¹

The paper begins by introducing alcohol misuse among Indigenous Australians as a policy issue, then describes the setting in which the

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¹ At the request of the Corporation of the community concerned, we are concealing the identity of the community. For this reason, we are also withholding identifying details from such items as the formal Ethics approval.

events examined occurred. We then trace the history of attempts by the community and other agencies to control the use and impact of alcohol prior to the introduction of AMPs in 2010, arguing that the legacy of these attempts created a context that helped to shape the outcomes of the AMP policy itself. Finally, we assess the implications of the case study for future policy-making in regard to Indigenous alcohol problems.

Background

The adverse impact of alcohol misuse on Indigenous Australians² is well documented. Despite Indigenous Australians being, on an age-adjusted comparison, 1.6 more likely to abstain from alcohol than non-Indigenous Australians, the harm caused by alcohol misuse among the former is considerably greater. Between 2008 and 2012, Indigenous males died from alcohol-related causes at five times the rate of non-Indigenous males, Indigenous females at six times the rate for non-Indigenous females (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015).³ Between July 2011 and June 2013, Indigenous males were hospitalized for diagnoses related to alcohol use at five times the rate of non-Indigenous males, Indigenous females at four times the rate for non-Indigenous females (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015).

A number of evaluations have assessed the outcomes of specific interventions (see reviews in d'Abbs & Togni, 2000; Gray & Siggers, 2005; Gray, Siggers, Sputore, & Bourbon, 2000; Wilson, Stearne, Gray, & Siggers, 2010), although many interventions have either not been evaluated at all, or poorly evaluated (Clifford & Shakeshaft, 2017; Clifford, Pulver, Richmond, Shakeshaft, & Ivers, 2011). Several anthropologists have described the responses of Indigenous drinkers to alcohol control policies, and in doing so have tended to portray these responses as active expressions of resistance – as an 'oppositional culture' – rather than manifestations of powerlessness or addiction (Beckett, 1964; Cowlshaw, 1994; Sackett, 1988). Government policies on Aboriginal drinking have also been analysed (2004, Brady, 2000, 2007; Martin, 1998; Rowse, 1994), and in some instances heavily criticized (2008, Pearson, 2001; Phillips, 2003). In a recent study, Brady traces the evolution of one persistent policy idea: that an Aboriginal culture of moderate drinking can be nurtured by establishing Aboriginal-controlled drinking venues, either in the form of licensed clubs or community-owned hotels (Brady, 2017). Brady shows how contextual factors and the competing interests of parties involved have conspired to make the goal an elusive one. Moran (2016) provides a descriptive account of one north Queensland community's attempts to manage alcohol over a 20 year period. Throughout most of this period, alcohol could be purchased locally through a licensed canteen, run by the local council until, in 2008, the Queensland Government legislated to prohibit local authorities from holding liquor licences. Moran argues that successive state governments have invoked the rhetoric of community control while manipulating processes and groups in the community to obtain the decisions they preferred, along the way generating resentment and demoralisation, and helping to foster a trade in 'grog running' liquor purchased outside the community. Aside from these studies, the inter-connections between policy formulation, policy implementation and outcomes have rarely been examined. As a result, we know little about how, where or why particular policies generate particular outcomes.

²The terms 'Indigenous Australians' and 'Aboriginal Australians' are sometimes used interchangeably, but the former is broader in connotation than 'Aboriginal Australians' in that, as well as Aboriginal Australians, it includes Torres Strait Islanders.

³These figures are aggregated from six of the eight Australian States/Territories, namely New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

The setting

The events examined here took place in a small, Aboriginal community to which we have given the imaginary name of Galbarn, in order to respect the community's wish not to be identified. The community is located about 140 km from Darwin, capital city of the Northern Territory, a tropical and sub-tropical region that occupies 1/6th of the Australian landmass but, with an estimated resident population at 30 June 2016 of 245,740, contains just 1% of the national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a). The estimated resident population of Galbarn in 2016 was a little over 300, with a median age of 23 years (compared with a national median of 37.2 years) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b). In 2011, Galbarn was ranked amongst the most disadvantaged localities in Australia under the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Just 37 km away from Galbarn is another settlement that plays an important part in these events: a small town which we will call Jasper Creek, which has a population of similar size to Galbarn, except that in this case more than 60 percent is non-Indigenous. The town provides services to surrounding cattle stations and Aboriginal communities, hosting a health clinic, government centre, school, supermarket, police station, service station, motel, caravan park and an airstrip. Although the resident population aged 18 years and over is less than 200 persons, Jasper Creek is also home to four liquor outlets, three of which are licensed to sell liquor to the general public. In effect, it is a regional drinking and liquor supply centre. While some of the outlets' clients are passing tourists and local non-Aboriginal residents, a significant proportion of trade lies with Aboriginal communities in the region, one of which is Galbarn.

Historical context: alcohol controls in the community

Historically, four agencies have been instrumental in creating policies to control the use and impact of liquor in Galbarn. One is the community itself, initially through a local Community Council and more recently, following the absorption of community councils into higher level local government bodies in 2012, through the Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation (GCAC), a body made up of local residents acting in a voluntary capacity. A second agency is the Northern Territory Government which, like other State/Territory jurisdictions under the Australian constitution, has primary responsibility for regulating the supply and consumption of alcoholic beverages, mainly through liquor licensing laws and police powers⁴. In recent years, the Australian Government has also intervened in Aboriginal alcohol policy-making in the NT. Finally, the local Jasper Creek Council, again especially in recent years, has used its powers to control drinking by visitors from Galbarn and other communities in the region.

In 1964, a century of prohibition on possession and consumption of liquor by Aboriginal people in the NT ended (Northern Territory of Australia, 1964). Fifteen years later, communities in the NT gained a new legislative means of controlling alcohol in the form of a new *Liquor Act*, which allowed community councils to apply to the NT Liquor Commission to ban or restrict liquor within the community (Northern Territory of Australia, 1979). If the Commission was satisfied that the application had strong community support, it could declare a specified

⁴The Northern Territory has never enjoyed the sovereign status of the Australian States. For most of the period between 1825 and 1911 it was administered first by the colony of New South Wales and subsequently by South Australia. In 1911 administrative responsibility was transferred to the Commonwealth Government, which continued to exercise control until 1978, when the NT was granted limited self-government under its own fully elected Legislative Assembly (Donovan, 1984; Powell, 1996). With respect to regulating alcohol, however, the NT since 1978 has exercised similar prerogatives to other States.

area a 'Restricted Area' under the Act⁵, henceforth making it an offence to import or consume liquor, except as permitted under the declaration (d'Abbs, 1989, 1990). In the years since then, most remote communities in the NT have either banned liquor altogether or restricted its possession by means of individualized liquor permits or other mechanisms. Galbarn was one of the first to do so, becoming a Restricted Area in 1980 (Northern Territory of Australia, 1981). A sign advising residents and visitors of the ban on liquor was placed at the community boundary on the main road leading into the community.

For many years, the sign also served another purpose: that of marking a boundary, on one side of which drinking liquor was legally permitted. An area close to the sign became an unofficial drinking area. How well this arrangement worked to reconcile the needs of those who wanted somewhere safe to drink on the one hand and, on the other, those who wanted to keep grog and associated violence out of the community is difficult to say. One consequence of the remoteness and dearth of government services in communities like Galbarn is a scarcity of the kind of routinely-collected administrative data – such as police records of assaults – that are used to monitor drinking patterns and consequences in larger centres. There is no police station in Galbarn.

The Restricted Area was, however, an expression of the community's preferred strategy for managing alcohol. In August 2007, it was abruptly over-ridden by the Australian Government. In response to a report alleging rampant alcohol and other drug fueled child sexual abuse throughout Aboriginal communities in the NT (Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007), the Australian Government introduced a *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (NTNER)* – better known informally as 'the Intervention' (Australian Government, 2007). Under the NTNER, possession and consumption of alcohol was immediately banned not just in discrete Aboriginal communities, but on all land in the NT defined as Aboriginal land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* – that is, approximately 50% of NT land - unless specifically exempted. (The sequencing of this and other policy initiatives discussed below is summarized in Table 1).

The unofficial drinking area on the outskirts of the community was no longer a legal option. While liquor could still be purchased from the outlets in Jasper Creek, at least by those with access to transport into the town, here too a mix of old and new laws limited where it could legally be consumed. Ever since 1982, the consumption of liquor in a public place or on unoccupied private land without the owner's permission has been illegal anywhere in the NT within two kilometers of a licensed premise, except in places specifically exempted. In practical terms, drinking in public was already illegal within Jasper Creek when the NTNER took effect. Not satisfied with this regulation, in the same month as the NTNER was introduced, the Jasper Creek Community Government Council applied to the NT Licensing Commission (as the Liquor Commission had been renamed) to have the whole township declared a 'Public Restricted Area' – that is, an area within which public consumption of liquor is illegal. The Commission acceded to the application, which took effect in April 2008. Thus, within a few months of the Australian Government outlawing drinking in the vicinity of Galbarn community, the NT Government had moved to prohibit consumption of liquor in public spaces in and around Jasper Creek town under not one but *two* laws.

Between them, the new laws radically changed the context within which drinkers and those in the community concerned about alcohol abuse pursued their respective goals. Drinkers now had three alternatives, all of which required travelling to Jasper Creek or to outlets further afield. Firstly, they could patronize the local hotel in Jasper

Creek and pay the high on-premise prices such venues often charge. This option was viewed by Galbarn people as dangerous, since it brought them into contact with other tribal groups, with some of whom relations are traditionally tense. A second option was to buy takeaway liquor in Jasper Creek or elsewhere and drink it where they were not subject to legal prohibitions. One of the few such places accessible was on the verges that flanked major highways, since these are Crown land, and therefore not included as Aboriginal land under the NTNER. In the months following the new restrictions, drinkers selected a truck parking bay close to the highway between Jasper Creek and the community. Here, to the consternation of non-drinking members of the community, drinkers engaged in bouts of unsupervised drinking, finding their way home to the community as best they could.

It would be difficult to imagine a location less suitable for drinking liquor. There is little shade and no water nearby. Just a few meters away, vehicles including trucks regularly sped past. Today, the site is marked by a makeshift memorial erected for two young men who were killed by passing cars, the first in April 2009, the second in January 2012. They were brothers. The site was subsequently abandoned as a drinking area.

The third option was to buy takeaway liquor and drink it where it was illegal to do so, but where they could hope to hide successfully from police. This included the Galbarn community itself. According to anecdotal reports from community members, drinkers around this time became more blatant about bringing alcohol back into the community. An action that would have previously been interpreted as acting against the wishes of the community could now be justified as an act of defiance against a remote, paternalistic government. The ecological setting could also be used to advantage. The savannah bushland surrounding Galbarn is traversed by numerous vehicle tracks created for a range of purposes, such as accessing waterholes or paddocks. Throughout much of the year, a knowledgeable driver can travel between the community and Jasper Creek without using any major public roads, thereby with a good chance of evading the two officers who make up the police presence in Jasper Creek.

A new policy: alcohol management plans

In 2010, the Australian Government introduced a new policy, under which Indigenous communities were to be encouraged to formulate local AMPs. The then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) engaged a private consultant to work with four communities – including Galbarn – with a view to preparing draft AMPs for each community.⁶ These were completed in January 2011.⁷

Over the next few months, further discussions took place in Galbarn, and the draft AMP was revised to align more closely with local priorities. This process culminated on 30 April 2012 in a signing ceremony at which a letter addressed to the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs and signed by more than 100 community members was sent, together with the AMP. Central to the Plan was provision for an evaluated trial of a 'Safe Drinking Area' (SDA), at a site three km from the community. Access was to be limited to local community members only, and the area was to be visited regularly by a local Community Patrol, which would liaise with Jasper Creek Police as necessary. The AMP also included a number of other measures, including educational initiatives and lobbying for further restrictions on trading conditions at an outlet located close to Jasper Creek.

Unfortunately, while the community was finalizing its AMP, the Australian Government changed the rules under which AMPs operated.

⁵ Restricted areas were subsequently relabeled 'General restricted areas' to distinguish them from 'Public restricted areas', which evolved later as mechanisms for prohibiting public consumption of alcohol in designated urban places.

⁶ None of the authors of this paper were connected with the 'private consultant' referred to here.

⁷ In order to maintain the anonymity of the community, we are not referencing the draft AMP.

Table 1
Summary of events.

Time	Event	Responsible agency
1979	New <i>NT Liquor Act</i> introduced	NT Government
1980	Galbarn community becomes a Restricted Area under <i>NT Liquor Act</i> .	Galbarn Community & NT Liquor Commission
1982	'Two Kilometre Law' introduced, banning consumption of liquor in public place or on unoccupied private land within 2 km of a licensed premise throughout NT.	NT Government
2007	<i>NT National Emergency Response Act</i> introduced, banning alcohol on Aboriginal land throughout NT.	Australian Government
2008	Township of Jasper Creek becomes a 'Public Restricted Area' in which consumption of liquor in public places is illegal.	Jasper Creek Council & NT Government
2009 (April)	Young man from Galbarn community killed on road near an unofficial drinking site.	
2010	Private consultant engaged to prepare draft Alcohol Management Plan (AMP) for Galbarn community.	Australian Government
2011	Consultant, after consultations with community, completes draft AMP for Galbarn community.	Private consultant engaged by Australian Government
2011	<i>Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011</i> introduced, to supersede NTNER Act from July 2012.	Australian Government
2012 (January)	2nd young man from Galbarn community killed on road near unofficial drinking site; he was a brother of the first man killed.	
2012 (April)	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation submits a revised AMP to Minister for approval.	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation
2012	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation successfully applies to NT Licensing Commission to have takeaway trading hours of a liquor outlet situated close to Jasper Creek reduced.	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation & NT Licensing Commission
2012 (July)	<i>Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act</i> comes into effect.	Australian Government
2012 (August)	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation receives notification that Minister has declined to approve AMP.	Australian Government
2013 (February)	<i>Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (Alcohol Management Plans) Rule 2013</i> introduced, specifying 'minimum standards' for AMPs.	
2013	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation re-submits AMP to Minister for approval.	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation
2013 (September)	Federal election: Labor Government defeated, replaced by Liberal-National Party Coalition.	
2014 (March)	New Minister for Aboriginal Affairs visits Galbarn community, does not make any commitment regarding AMP.	Australian Government
2014 (December)	Following public meeting, Galbarn community decides to persist with seeking approval for AMP.	Galbarn Community Aboriginal Corporation
2016 (March)	Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights reports to Parliament that AMP policy not effective, notes that only one AMP has been approved by Govt.	Parliament of Australia
2016 (August)	NT Election: Country Liberal Party Government defeated by Labor; some alcohol policies suspended or changed.	NT Government
2016	Australian and NT Governments introduce new policy of funding local 'Alcohol Action Initiatives' (AAIs).	Australian and NT Governments

The *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012*, which superseded the NTNER from 1 July 2012, gave formal recognition to community-based AMPs, but added two qualifications. Firstly, under the new legislation, AMPs could not take effect without formal approval by the Minister. Secondly, approval would be granted only if the AMP complied with a new set of 'minimum standards', covering respectively consultation; management and governance; supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction; arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, and designated geographical boundaries (Australian Government, 2012, 2013). The new 'minimum standards' were not published until early in 2013 - ten months after the Galbarn community had finished revising its AMP.

Meanwhile, in August 2012, GCAC was informed by the Minister that, while she 'applauded' the leadership shown by the community, she could not permit the establishment of the proposed drinking area. She argued that it was not supported by evidence of effectiveness, that it was not clear how the community could enforce the strict operating conditions set out, and that if they did, no-one would drink there anyway (which seems like a classic 'Catch 22!').

Whatever the merits of the cases for and against the proposed drinking area may be – and a case can be made for both - the summary dismissal of the community's plan had two immediate consequences: firstly, the energy generated in the local community by the promise of regained control over managing alcohol visibly dissipated. Attendance at meetings convened to implement the AMP dwindled. Secondly, as already mentioned, drinkers became increasingly blatant about bringing liquor back into the community.

Despite these setbacks, the community did not abandon its efforts. Prior to receiving the ministerial rebuttal in August 2012, GCAC had applied to the NT Licensing Commission to have takeaway trading hours from a licensed roadhouse situated close to Jasper Creek reduced to match those in Jasper Creek itself. Following a hearing in June 2012, the Commission acceded to GCAC's application. Takeaway sales before

2 pm were banned, and on-premise sales before 2 pm were restricted to light (< = 3% alcohol) or mid-strength (< = 3.5% alcohol) beer.⁸

In 2013, GCAC resubmitted its AMP to the Minister, but before any response was received, the government fell at a national election. In March 2014, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs in the new Coalition government visited Galbarn, where the case for the drinking area and other components of the AMP were put to him. Although he did not explicitly reject the idea of the drinking area, those in attendance interpreted his remarks at the time as signifying scepticism. On 8 December 2014, a community meeting was held in Galbarn to decide whether or not the community wished to resubmit an AMP for approval. A majority of the approximately 40 residents in attendance indicated that they wished to do so. Throughout 2015 and early 2016, further meetings were held to review the existing Plan. However, before these had yielded any clear directions, the policy environment began to change yet again. The Australian and NT governments negotiated a new agreement, under which responsibility for managing alcohol policies in Indigenous communities in the NT was transferred from the Australian Government back to the NT Government. The shift was accompanied by a new policy instrument: local 'Alcohol Action Initiatives' (AAIs). Whereas AMPs were supposed to be comprehensive community plans that complied, as we have seen, with legislative prescriptions, AAIs are much more loosely defined as any initiative, implemented at a local community level, that advances the objective of reducing alcohol-related harm (Northern Territory Government, 2017, p. 77). Although no formal announcement was made, by 2017, AMPs had been quietly abandoned as a preferred policy instrument for remote Indigenous communities.

⁸ A report of the NT Licensing Commission's decision is publicly available, but details have been withheld here to maintain the community's anonymity.

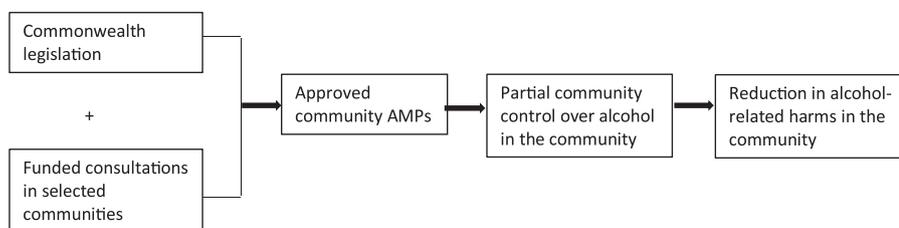


Fig. 1. Program theory underlying AMP policy.

Policy outcomes

The Australian Government's policy of fostering AMPs in Indigenous communities incorporated two assumptions. The first was that, by using its legislative powers to define the 'rules of the game', and its funding resources to link consultants with selected communities, it could generate AMPs that would give communities partial control over alcohol use by their members. We use 'partial' here in recognition of the Minister's retention of veto powers over approval of AMPs. The second assumption was that partial community control through AMPs would lead to a reduction in alcohol-related harms in the community. These two assumptions, together with the actions through which they were expected to generate the desired outcome, constitute the 'program theory' underlying the Australian Government's AMP policy (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). In the terminology of realist evaluation, the AMP policy was postulated as a 'change mechanism' – that is, a set of inter-related processes and agents that would bring about the desired outcome of reducing alcohol-related harms in communities. The program theory is represented in Fig. 1.

As we have shown, in the case of Galbarn these assumptions were not borne out. Although consultations took place and resulted in a draft AMP that in turn gained widespread community endorsement, the community did not secure approval for its AMP from the government. We cannot know to what extent an approved AMP might have reduced alcohol-related harms. What we do know is that the events outlined above had the unintended outcome of undermining rather than strengthening the capacity of community members to manage alcohol use in the community – regardless of whether they were drinkers, or other community members trying to manage the impact of drinking. These outcomes emerged, not from any single policy or intervention, but from the interplay of four sets of factors. The first comprised the policy measures themselves: the promotion of AMPs as well as preceding measures imposed through the 2007 NTNER and the initiatives of the NT Government and Jasper Creek Community Government Council aimed at stopping drinking in public places.

The second set consisted of the actions taken to implement the policy initiatives, which were experienced by the community as a sequence of three disempowering jolts. Firstly, the NTNER in 2007 effectively destroyed the community's chosen strategy for managing alcohol by banning consumption in the community, while allowing an unofficial drinking area to exist outside, but close to, the community. Secondly, the 2010 invitation to the community to take part in formulating an AMP, and the Minister's subsequent unwillingness to endorse the Plan, left the community bereft of any means of exercising care and control over its drinkers. Thirdly, the apparent increase in drinkers bringing liquor back into the community, for reasons already mentioned, further undermined the capacity of the community to maintain the 'dry' status that it had chosen by becoming a Restricted Area under the *NT Liquor Act*.

The third set of factors that contributed to the unintended outcomes were the responses of those directly affected by the policies that took effect from 2007. As we have seen, these curtailed the opportunities for drinkers to consume liquor legally and fostered a situation in which buying and drinking liquor became an act of resistance against the authorities. The fourth factor – the socio-ecological context within which these responses took place, led to drinkers adapting to the new

circumstances by seeking out clandestine, mostly illegal locations in which to engage in unsupervised drinking – the very style of drinking that most alcohol policies discourage because of its association with injury and other adverse consequences. Their opportunities for doing so were enhanced by the remoteness of the area, networks of bush tracks, and by thin policing resources: just two officers, both stationed in Jasper Creek.

While caution is required in generalizing from a single case study, there is evidence to suggest that Galbarn's experience was not exceptional. The Australian Government's Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights reported in 2016 that the AMP process was not functioning effectively (Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2016, Para 3.53). The committee noted that, as of October 2015, only one AMP had received Ministerial approval, while another seven, all approved by their communities and submitted to the Minister, had been rejected by the Minister. The committee also cited evidence that the combination of blanket bans on drinking imposed under NTNER and the protracted processes entailed in developing AMPs had led to binge drinking in unsafe areas by drinkers, and a sense of frustration and disempowerment in communities. The State of Queensland has also adopted community-based AMPs as a policy instrument for curbing high levels of binge drinking and violence in some Indigenous communities (Clough & Bird, 2015; Smith et al., 2013). Although evidence suggests that they have helped to reduce assaults and injuries (Margolis, Ypinazar, & Muller, 2008; Margolis, Ypinazar, Muller, & Clough, 2011), they remain highly contentious as a policy (Hatzakis, 2014; McKenna, 2014).

Conclusion

Community-based control of alcohol is not, in itself, an adequate means for reducing alcohol-related harms in Indigenous communities, if only because suppliers of alcohol can draw on considerable resources to overcome or subvert obstacles placed in their way by local communities, while determined drinkers can also deploy a range of strategems. In this case study, the concentration of several suppliers in Jasper Creek represents a significant economic and political factor. But collective capacity at a local level to manage alcohol represents an important dimension in the social control of alcohol use, and as a matter of principle government policies should enhance rather than undermine it. This is not easily done. Alcohol in many Indigenous communities is a deeply polarizing issue, with some people – especially but not exclusively some women – implacably opposed to any liquor in the community, others as vociferous in their demands for ready access. Consensus under these conditions is elusive and sometimes illusory. Ensuring that formal, externally imposed control measures complement and strengthen internal, informal controls, rather than undermine them, is also a challenging goal: inadequate controls open the way to market forces, both legal and illicit; excessive controls can undermine local efforts, as have seen in this case study. At the same time, as this case study also shows, communities can draw on resources, experiences and ideas of their own. The challenge for governments is to understand and build on these, rather than over-ride or ignore them. As this case study demonstrates, this requires understanding and recognition of the historical, cultural, economic and ecological contexts within which policies are introduced and implemented. To ignore these is to invite

unintended and sometimes harmful consequences.

Declarations of interest

None.

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