



## Short Report

## Do New Zealand communities have greater input to local alcohol policy? Population surveys before and after new legislation

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** New Zealand's alcohol law reforms aimed to give communities greater control over alcohol availability. We investigated whether community participation in local liquor licensing increased and why people did not participate.

**Methods:** We invited 4000 randomly selected residents to complete a questionnaire in 2014 about their views on alcohol in their community, participation in local alcohol decision-making, alcohol consumption, and experience of alcohol-related harm. In 2017, we surveyed a new sample of 4000 residents, and invited the 2014 respondents to complete a follow-up questionnaire.

**Results:** Response fractions were 44% in 2014 ( $n = 1657$ ) and 37% in 2017 ( $n = 1376$ ) for population surveys, and 61% ( $n = 887$ ) for follow-up. Cross-sectional comparisons showed no marked change in proportions reporting ever having participated in alcohol policy development (4.9% in 2014 versus 5.1% in 2017), or who objected to a licence application in the preceding year (1.0% versus 1.4%). Longitudinal comparisons also suggested little change. The most common reasons 2017 respondents gave for not participating were not knowing where to start (39%), lack of time (36%), and needing more information (32%), and this order was similar in 2014.

**Conclusion:** Public participation in local liquor licensing is low and it has not increased substantially under the new legislation.

Political theorists consider public participation in governance a hallmark of strong democracy, noting that elections alone are insufficient to reveal a polity's preferences on complex issues (e.g., Rae & Daudt, 1976). Proponents of citizen involvement argue participation is a matter of social justice; that it gives communities, particularly minority groups, the opportunity to influence decisions that affect them. Participation, they claim, builds social capital through empowerment, education concerning complex issues, and greater connectedness, all of which increase population well-being (Bishop & Davis, 2002; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Furthermore, participation helps governments define problems, canvass solutions, and legitimise policy decisions.

Amid public dismay concerning harm from alcohol, and a comprehensive statutory review recommending substantial legislative reform (Law Commission, 2010), the New Zealand government passed the Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act (SSAA) in December 2012 and implemented it over the following months (Supplementary Figure). The government claimed the reforms were needed to facilitate community input, e.g., at the Bill's final reading, an MP said “it is very important that we allow

communities to decide what is best for them, especially given the aim of increasing community input and control over licensing” (New Zealand Parliament, 2012).

In nationwide community meetings, and their consideration of around 3000 public submissions, the Law Commission found citizens frustrated by their inability to have input into decisions concerning the availability of alcohol under existing laws (Law Commission, 2010). Starting with the Law Commission's ‘root and branch’ review, and culminating in the 2012 legislation, alcohol reform was salient in public discourse.

Under the old legislation, only citizens with “a greater interest than the public in general” could oppose a licence application and, typically, by the time they became aware of a proposal, the only grounds left open to them concerned the applicant's suitability to hold a liquor licence. Accordingly, authorities rarely denied applications (Law Commission, 2010).

The new law makes reduction in “amenity and good order” grounds for objection, but still stipulates that objectors have a “greater interest

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**Table 1**  
Community participation in local alcohol decision-making processes.

Participated	Cross-sectional samples					Longitudinal sample				
	2014 (N = 1657)		2017 (N = 1376)		Change % (95%CI)	2014 (N = 887)		2017		Change % (95%CI)
	n	% <sup>a</sup>	n	% <sup>a,b</sup>		n	%	n	%	
Ever participated	97	4.9	84	5.1	0.2 (-1.6, 2.0)	58	5.1	74	6.5	1.4 (-0.6, 3.4)
Alcohol policy/bylaw										
Previous 2 years	45	2.6	23	1.2	-1.3 (-2.5, -0.2)	28	2.5	23	2.0	-0.5 (-1.8, 0.8)
2013–17 vs pre-2013	38	1.7	43	2.5	0.8 (-0.4, 2.0)	25	1.9	53	4.7	2.9 (1.1, 4.6)
Objections to licence										
Last 12 months	19	1.0	22	1.4	0.4 (-0.5, 1.3)	13	1.1	9	0.7	-0.3 (-1.2, 0.6)
Post- vs pre-June 2013	-	-	-	-	-	12	1.1	37	3.1	2.1 (0.5, 3.6)
Considered participating but then did not do so	Cross-sectional samples					Longitudinal sample				
	2014 (N = 1657)		2017 (N = 1376)		Change % (95%CI)	2014 (N = 887)		2017		Change % (95%CI)
	n	% <sup>a</sup>	n	% <sup>a,b</sup>		n	%	n	%	
Policy/bylaw	146	6.7	125	8.3	1.7 (-0.4, 3.9)	85	7.4	85	7.7	0.2 (-2.0, 2.5)
Objection to licence	184	8.4	108	6.8	-1.5 (-3.7, 0.6)	102	9.2	86	8.1	-1.1 (-3.6, 1.4)
Reasons for not participating	Cross-sectional samples					Longitudinal sample				
	2014		2017		Change % (95%CI)	2014		2017		Change % (95%CI)
	n	% <sup>a</sup>	n	% <sup>a,b</sup>		n	% <sup>a</sup>	n	% <sup>a,b</sup>	
Policy/bylaw										
Didn't know where to start	54	35.8	55	39.0	3.2 (-10.4, 16.7)	78	40.9	49	42.6	1.7 (-13.0, 16.4)
Needed more information	39	24.5	38	31.9	7.4 (-6.5, 21.3)	43	20.1	25	18.1	-2.0 (-13.8, 9.9)
Thought it would make no difference	35	21.3	24	19.1	-2.2 (-13.3, 8.9)	73	40.2	27	24.8	-15.4 (-29.1, -1.8)
Lack of time	47	35.9	38	36.4	0.5 (-14.8, 15.8)	38	26.3	20	20.5	-5.8 (-19.4, 7.7)
Believed council would do what I was happy with	19	9.7	14	8.5	-1.2 (-9.9, 7.5)	21	7.0	19	19.8	12.2 (3.2, 21.2)
Other	15	11.7	15	15.9	4.3 (-7.4, 15.9)	8	4.1	17	23.7	19.6 (7.4, 31.8)
Objection to licence										
Didn't know where to start	29	36.1	36	32.9	-3.3 (-19.3, 12.7)	44	40.9	33	39.1	-1.8 (-19.4, 15.7)
Needed more information	23	23.5	24	32.6	9.1 (-7.2, 25.4)	23	20.0	18	20.2	0.2 (-12.5, 13.0)
Thought it would make no difference	18	16.0	15	24.5	8.5 (-5.9, 22.8)	44	39.2	34	42.8	3.6 (-11.9, 19.0)
Lack of time	31	37.7	23	31.9	-5.8 (-22.1, 10.4)	29	33.2	22	33.4	0.1 (-15.0, 15.3)
Believed licence would be refused	11	11.7	18	25.4	13.7 (2.3, 25.1)	12	7.5	18	19.0	11.5 (0.6, 22.4)
Other	9	11.5	6	3.5	-8.0 (-17.9, 1.8)	4	3.9	6	6.7	2.7 (-5.5, 10.9)

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for the survey sampling design.

<sup>b</sup> Adjusted for differences in gender, age, ethnicity and deprivation of respondents between surveys.

than the public in general” (Sale & Supply of Alcohol Act, 2012). It also allows Territorial Authorities (TAs), to adopt a legally enforceable Local Alcohol Policy (LAP) specifying maximum trading hours, and the location and density of outlets (Maclellan, Kypri, Connor, Potiki, & Room, 2016). The process for developing a LAP is regulated by the Act and requires community consultation. Some TAs adopted Sale of Liquor Policies under the old legislation, but these carried no statutory weight (Law Commission, 2010).

Central government never defined “improving” or “increasing” community input. In this study, we estimated change in the proportion of citizens who participated in local alcohol decision-making after the new provisions came into effect; and investigated the characteristics and views of citizens who participated, and why others did not participate.

**Methods**

*Study design*

We conducted cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys of residents’ views regarding local alcohol availability and problems. We posted an eight-page questionnaire (Supplementary Appendix 1) asking residents about their participation in local government alcohol decision-making

processes.

*Sampling and recruitment*

We randomly selected 4000 people from the NZ electoral roll, on which 90% of eligible voters were enrolled at the time (Electoral Commission, personal communication). We drew 2000 residents each from the General and Māori rolls. The Māori roll includes citizens who identify as Māori (the indigenous people of NZ) or are of Māori descent, and choose that roll.

We posted questionnaires in September 2014, followed by reminders and a replacement questionnaire. We employed the same procedure in September 2017, drawing a fresh sample of 2000 residents from the General and Māori rolls, and inviting 2014 respondents to participate again in 2017.

*Study measures*

We asked respondents about their involvement in TA consultation on alcohol policy and/or bylaws in the previous two years, and whether they had objected to a license application in the last 12 months and/or prior to that. In 2014, objections made prior to the last 12 months referred to objections made under the process of the old legislation only,

whereas in 2017 it referred to any time up until approximately June 2016. We asked 2014 respondents about participation in policy/bylaw consultation prior to 2013 (under the old legislation) and 2017 respondents about participation in the period 2013–2015.

In both waves we asked respondents whether they had considered becoming involved in policy/bylaw consultation and/or objecting to a licence application but then did not do so, and why they opted not to become involved.

### Data analysis

Using Stata/SE 13.1 (StataCorp LP, 1985–2013), we weighted the sampling probabilities of Māori and General enrollees, and estimated changes in the proportion of respondents who had participated, and considered participating in decision-making, and reasons for not participating. We employed logistic regression with the cross-sectional samples to weight 2017 estimates for changes between survey waves in distributions of respondent gender, age, ethnicity, and area deprivation, and estimated change in the longitudinal sample using population-averaged logit models for panel data.

## Results

### Response fractions

In 2014, 1657 of 3795 eligible people returned completed questionnaires (44% overall): 1011 from the general roll (53%) and 646 from the Māori roll (34%). In 166 cases, the intended recipient was uncontactable or ineligible (living overseas), and in 39 cases someone other than the intended recipient responded.

In 2017, 1376 of 3740 eligible members of the new sample responded (37% overall): 893 from the general roll (47%) and 483 (26%) from the Māori roll. Intended recipients were uncontactable or ineligible in 214 cases, and someone else completed the questionnaire in 46 cases. Follow-up of the longitudinal sample was 61% ( $n = 887$ ) overall, with 608 (68%) general roll and 279 (51%) Māori roll respondents.

### Involvement in alcohol policy decisions

Only 5% of respondents in 2014 had taken part in local decision-making related to alcohol (Table 1), and this changed little, if at all, after the new law came into effect. Even fewer respondents had taken part in consultation on local alcohol policy and/or bylaws, or licence objections (Table 1). Changes in the proportions who had participated in alcohol policy/bylaw consultation in the previous two years, or who had objected to a licence application in the preceding 12 months, were not marked. In the longitudinal sample we found small increases in participation in policy/bylaw consultation in 2013–2017 compared with pre-2013, and licence objections after versus before June 2013.

### Sensitivity analysis

Under the extreme assumption that 50 people we excluded from the primary analysis because they did not answer the question in 2017, and two who answered “prior to the last 12 months” in both surveys, had not made an objection under the new laws, we estimated an increase in objections post-June 2013 of 1.6% (95%CI: 0.04%, 3.1%) in the longitudinal sample.

### Change in the characteristics and views of people who participated

As so few respondents had participated in decision-making, it was impossible to meaningfully characterise the groups involved, their views, or how these changed after the law change. Accordingly, we present descriptive results only in Supplementary Tables 1 and 2.

### Considered participating and reasons for not participating

Given the consistency between the cross-sectional and longitudinal pre-post comparisons, we present only the former in the text, unless they differed substantially. In 2014, 146 respondents (7% of the cross-sectional sample) said they had considered becoming involved in alcohol policy consultation but then did not. A third indicated that they did not know where to start and lacked time, a quarter needed more information, and a fifth thought their participation would not affect the outcome (Table 1). There was a slight increase in 2017 in the proportion who considered becoming involved, and little evidence of change in the reasons for ultimately not participating. In the longitudinal sample there was a small decrease in the proportion who thought their participation would make no difference and an increase in the proportion who did not participate as they believed their TA would take action they were happy with.

In 2014, 8% of respondents indicated they had considered objecting to a licence application but then did not (Table 1), and there was little evidence of change in 2017. Proportions selecting the various reasons for not participating were largely similar to those for policy/bylaw consultation. There was an increase from 12% to 25% in the proportion who did not object as they expected “the licence would be refused anyway.”

## Discussion

Overall, we found little evidence that levels of community participation changed after the new law came into effect. There were small increases in relation to local alcohol policy/bylaw consultation, and licence objections, but these were not consistent across the cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. If a true increase, it may be due to consultation on the majority of LAPs occurring after the SSAA was adopted and before LAP regulations came into effect (Jackson, 2016). Attrition resulted in the longitudinal cohort becoming older, wealthier, and more European. Given that youth, people of lower socio-economic status, and minority ethnic groups are less politically engaged (Statistics New Zealand, 2018), and the non-replication of this result in the cross-sectional comparison, the increase in participation more likely reflects attrition bias.

Our estimate of change in objections before and after June 2013 may also be inflated due to attrition bias. However, our pre-intervention measure may have been contaminated by the gradual implementation of new objection processes and criteria, which would have biased the estimate towards the null.

There was little or no change in the proportion of residents who considered participating but did not do so. Lack of time and uncertainty about how to engage continued to be the main barriers identified. However, a greater proportion of residents expressed the view that decision-makers would deliver desirable outcomes, making their involvement unnecessary.

Our response fraction was lower for the cross-sectional survey in 2017 than 2014. If the propensity to respond was associated with citizen engagement, estimates of prevalence and change may be biased. Participation in policy debate may be overestimated given respondents were older and wealthier than non-respondents across both surveys and electoral roll samples. Uncertainty about the direction of biases reflects our scant understanding of what motivates and enables people to engage in local alcohol policy development.

In research conducted in 2007, under the previous legislation, 4% of respondents reported that they had acted on a local alcohol issue, and 20% had considered acting but then did not act (Kypri & MacLennan, 2014). The question in that research was more inclusive, possibly capturing a broader range of alcohol issues and modes of participation. The research was also conducted in relatively affluent areas which may explain the higher participation. The only other comparable research outside of our own is an Australian study that

utilised similar survey methods and obtained a similar response (Baum et al., 2000), finding civic engagement varied depending on the type of participation, e.g., from 41% for signing a petition, to 4% for attending a council meeting. Collective participation ranged from 2% for being part of a local government group, to 6% for being involved in a community action group. The prevalence of more direct forms of engagement with local government in that study is similar to our findings, but it offers no insight into how participation may differ by policy domain.

While the new laws ostensibly provide citizens with greater opportunity to participate in local alcohol decision-making, meaningful engagement remains demanding in terms of time, skills, and knowledge (Kypri et al., 2019; Sale & Supply of Alcohol Act, 2012) which may account for our finding of little or no change. Lack of time and uncertainty about how to engage remain the primary barriers. By July 2016, 48 of NZ's 67 TAs, including all large metropolitan centres, had developed and called for submissions on a draft LAP (Jackson, 2016), pointing to issues of process more than lack of opportunity as an explanation of our findings. Lack of interest in alcohol issues appears an unlikely explanation given the large proportion of non-participants who identified alcohol as a problem in their communities, and who supported restrictive policies (see supplementary tables).

It is perhaps significant that many respondents who considered participating in local alcohol policy matters ultimately did not act because they believed decision-makers would deliver the reforms they desired. Alternatively, such respondents may have been content with the status quo. While input did not improve markedly in a quantitative sense, our results do not speak to the impact participants had on deliberations. In a related study, members of Māori community organisations who had made submissions on draft LAPs reported considerable frustration at the lack of reciprocity from local authorities (Kypri et al., 2019).

Our findings raise questions about how governments might more effectively engage communities, and particularly marginalised groups. If existing methods are not working, TAs should consider innovative approaches such as citizens' juries and deliberative surveys (Michels, 2011). Central government has a responsibility to support TAs, given the legislation's object of improving community input and that TAs implement liquor licensing on the government's behalf.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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#### Author contributions

All authors were involved in conceptualising and designing the study, and in obtaining funding. B.M. collected the data, conducted the statistical analyses and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to, read and approved the final version of the paper.

#### Role of funding source

The funders took no part and had no contractual rights to interfere in the design of the study, the collection and analysis of the data, nor the reporting of findings.

#### Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.09.016.

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