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Has the Licensing Act 2003 made an impact in Britain? by Helen Conibear

The most comprehensive survey to date of the effect of the Licensing Act 2003 on the economy, premises, the police, local authorities and the public in England has been commissioned by the AERC and published by Foster J et al at the School of Health and Social Sciences at Middlesex University.

Findings from this survey – in agreement with other research - have not found a consistent picture across the country regarding the effects of licensing change on alcohol-related harms; but reports indicate that, overall, there has been little change for the better or for the worse.

However, there is currently a campaign for a review of the Act; the Prime Minister has asked for a review due to mounting pressure arising from the perception of “increased underage and binge drinking” (Merrick 2007). Driven primarily by the police and the ‘health lobby’, the report cites: ‘The perception is that changes introduced by the Licensing Act will worsen the overall health burden. To date, there is no evidence that consumption has risen as a result of changes in licensing and there have been calls from the strongest public house lobby group (BPPA) for a reduction in alcohol duty because drinking in pubs had “fallen to the lowest levels since the great depression”.

The survey found that the police, not surprisingly, have been concerned with the impact of the new legislation upon drink-related crime and violence and how it stretches their resources, but concludes: ‘A survey of 30 police forces which compared the twelve month periods before and after the change, reported a 1% fall in recorded incidents involving violence, disorder and vandalism, and a fall of 5% in serious violent crimes (Babb 2007). Equally, although some A&E departments have recorded a rise in alcohol related attendances, a survey of 33 departments in England and Wales, undertaken in 2006, concluded that there was little evidence that the 2003 Act had any significant effect on violence-related injuries. (Sivarajasingam et al. 2007). The data, therefore, indicate a variable pattern with no substantial change overall.

The survey also calls for the increase in drinking at home or ‘preloading’ and the introduction of the smoking ban to be taken into account as strong influences on patterns of consumption. ‘These trends need to be considered alongside consumption in on-licensed premises when looking at health effects’.

The report concludes: ‘These developments draw attention to the continuing tension between health concerns and public health/ criminal justice concerns which have been a feature of debates on the Licensing Act from its inception. There are no easily available answers. Assessing the impact of the Licensing Act 2003 will require time. Furthermore, in the light of other interventions – such as the development of local alcohol policies and strategies and encouragement to mount partnership, multi-agency responses to prevention and harm reduction – it is unlikely that change can be attributed to any one kind of intervention.

Source: *Implementation of the Licensing Act 2003: A national survey* by John Foster, Rachel Herring, Seta Waller, Betsy Thom School of Health and Social Sciences Middlesex University

To read the full report click here: http://www.aerc.org.uk/documents/pdf/finalReports/054_LARG_Survey.pdf

Report Conclusions

- *The perception of those surveyed was that the effect of the Licensing Act 2003 had been largely neutral. There had been little change in noise levels, alcohol related violence/fights, drink driving, alcohol-related crime and under-age drinking.*
- *Very few cumulative impact /saturation areas had been created. Virtually all had been created in urban areas in response to concerns from the police around crime and disorder and binge drinking.*
- *The general perception was that police activity had increased since the introduction of the Licensing Act especially in urban and mixed areas.*
- *There was a tendency towards greater stakeholder involvement in urban areas. This reflects an impression from the data that the changes introduced under the Licensing Act 2003 are largely “urban issues.”*
- *There were more applications for extended hours than new off on-licenses; new off licenses were more common in urban areas.*
- *New applications for public houses were more common in disadvantaged areas. This suggests that in some areas the Licensing Act have been seen as an opportunity for economic growth.*
- *A “true picture” of the changes introduced may not emerge for a number of years and in terms of health consequences, many years. Since the Licensing Act is just one of a number of changes aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm and promoting “sensible drinking”, evaluation of the impact of the Licensing Act 2003, in isolation from other interventions, is likely to prove difficult.*
- *However, there is a need for continued evaluation of the impact of policies, including the Licensing Act 2003, on changes in alcohol consumption and on drinking cultures. In particular, the differential effects of alcohol policy in advantaged and disadvantaged areas and in urban centres, suburban and rural areas warrants further attention.*