Strategies to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms and Costs in Canada: A Comparison of Provincial Policies

Objectives:
To compare Canadian provinces across 10 research-based alcohol policy and program dimensions. Results are relevant to improving provincial initiatives and frameworks to reduce hazardous drinking practices and attendant harm.

Methods:
Based on established research evidence, these ten policy dimensions and attendant indicators were assessed: alcohol pricing; alcohol control system; physical availability; drinking and driving; marketing and advertising; legal drinking age; screening, brief intervention and referrals; server training, challenge and refusal programs; provincial alcohol strategy; warning labels and signs. Feedback provided by three international experts on alcohol policy was incorporated in finalizing dimensions, scoring and weighting. Provincial scores were independently determined by two team members along a 10-point scale for each dimension, and expressed as a percentage of the ideal. Dimensions were weighted in relation to scope/reach of impact and effectiveness, and that weighting factor was applied to the raw score in order to obtain a final score for each dimension. Scores were calculated for each dimension by province, and consolidated into overall averages for each province. National averages were also calculated for each policy dimension.

Results:
Overall, the consolidated national mean is 47.2% of the ideal, with Ontario scoring highest at 55.9%, and Quebec lowest at 36.2%. Across dimensions, “legal drinking age” and “challenge and refusal programs” score highest at 75% and 61%, respectively, while “warning labels and signs” score lowest at 18% of the ideal. Finally, although “pricing” is rated third highest among dimensions at 57%, it should remain a priority for improvement given it is weighted highest overall in terms of effectiveness and scope.

Conclusions & implications:
Policy dimension scores vary considerably among the provinces, indicating substantial room for improvement in all. Concerted action involving multiple stakeholders and alcohol policies is required to reduce risky drinking practices and the burden of alcohol problems across Canada.