

The background is a deep teal color with intricate, light-colored geometric patterns. These include overlapping circles, concentric lines, and a grid of small dots that forms a larger, faint circular shape. The overall effect is a complex, layered design.

Our Alcohol Culture:

The Amherst Perspective

January 2015
Municipal Alcohol Project

Municipal Alcohol Project Community Action Team

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This report can be accessed online at:

www.cha.nshealth.ca

www.addictionservices.ns.ca

Additional Resources

For more questions or to seek help:

Call 811 for local resources and services.

Problem Gambling Helpline, 24 Hours:

Toll free 1-888-347-8888

1-888-347-3311 (TTY)

Smoker's Helpline:

Toll free 1-877-513-5333

Why are municipalities talking about alcohol?

Nova Scotia

Our Provincial Alcohol Strategy: “Changing the Culture of Alcohol Use in Nova Scotia” states a clear vision for the future in Nova Scotia as it relates to alcohol:

Safe and healthy Nova Scotians supporting responsibility and risk reduction in alcohol use – a culture of moderation. Prevent and reduce alcohol-related acute and chronic health, social and economic harm and costs among individuals, families, and communities in Nova Scotia.

The recently published Alcohol Indicators Report (2011) shows alarming Nova Scotian statistics:

- Per capita consumption by Nova Scotians (+15 years) increased by 6.6% over a 20-year period (1991-2010) according to Statistics Canada.

In 2009, 17.8% of adult Nova Scotians (15+ years) exceeded the low-risk drinking guidelines (during the past seven days at the time of the survey) with young adults aged 18 to 24 years at a much higher rate (31.6%).

- Alcohol-related mortality increased by 27% between 2002 and 2008. If the current heavy drinking rates continue in Nova Scotia, it is expected that these numbers and rates will increase over time.
- Heavy-drinking rates are particularly high among young adults. In 2004, the usual consumption patterns for 51.7% of Nova Scotia university undergraduate students was five or more drinks on the days they drank, with 27.2% of all university students drinking heavily at least once a week.
- Although the economic benefits of alcohol in Nova Scotia are high, the costs are more than double that. In 2006, the fiscal revenue to the provincial government was \$224.2 million. The direct and indirect costs to Nova Scotia were more than twice as much, estimated at \$492.5 million.

According to the 2012 Nova Scotia Student Drug Use Survey Technical Report:

- The average age of first drink in Nova Scotia is 13.4 years old;
- Heavy drinking by underage female youth is now on par with underage male youth;
- Northern Nova Scotia (DHA 4, 5 and 6) has the highest rates for any alcohol use for students in grades 7, 9, 10 and 12, at 52.7%;
- Northern Nova Scotia holds the second highest rates for frequent alcohol use at 28.9%; and,
- Northern Nova Scotia holds the highest rates for binge drinking (five or more drinks in a single sitting) at 30.1%.

Existing attempts to curb or postpone youth drinking through education are not having an acceptable impact on the numbers of youth drinking, and a new approach is needed.

In 2011, the Department of Health and Wellness presented a report to the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities and asked their municipal counterparts to engage in a discussion around the culture of alcohol use and how they experience alcohol-related harms.

The importance of municipal collaboration is essential to shifting the alcohol culture from one of over-use and binging by adults and under-age youth, to one of moderation for adults and developing healthy alternatives for youth.

Municipalities have tools, such as municipal by-laws, that can directly impact the culture of alcohol. For example, municipal by-laws can dictate the density of alcohol venues in an area, and the location of these venues. Noise by-laws can impact hours of operation and reduce domestic disturbances related to alcohol (i.e. out of control parties), as have been implemented in communities following their respective Municipal Alcohol projects.

Municipalities can also create policies around industry sponsorship and advertising at sporting and cultural events. Meaningful networks and true collaborations between community members, municipal leaders, health authority staff and provincial policy makers is needed to shift the culture of alcohol use in Nova Scotia.

Over the past three years, the Municipalities of Wolfville, Bridgewater, Springhill, Antigonish, Truro, Cape Breton, Halifax, and all six municipal units in Pictou County, have investigated the culture of alcohol use in their communities. It is clear from the stories that they have compiled from men and women, young and old, that the issue in Nova Scotia “is not that we’re drinking – it’s how we’re drinking.”

The Town of Amherst

Constable Tom Wood, the crime prevention officer for the Amherst Police Department, attended the Municipal Alcohol Forum: A Time for Collaboration and Action that was held in Truro, NS in the winter of 2014. The forum was hosted by the Town of Truro’s Mayor Bill Mills, in collaboration with the Colchester East Hants Health Authority, the Cumberland Health Authority, the Pictou Health Authority, and the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness. The forum brought together community groups, organizations, health professionals and volunteers from northern Nova Scotia to begin shifting our culture of alcohol use.

As the Town of Amherst had not yet undertaken a Municipal Alcohol Project, Constable Wood took the message from that forum back to his community.

A Community Action Team developed over the course of the following six months, and included Cumberland Health Authority staff, municipal councillors, and local business people. The Team worked collaboratively with Jaime Smith (Marram Consulting) to develop four community conversations, one with youth and three with adults, and a one-day action-oriented forum.

The Community Action Team engaged its community in a conversation about its culture of alcohol. The team identified a need to shift the culture of alcohol by supporting positive initiatives already underway (ex: bar suspension program) and to gain insight into what is working well elsewhere in Nova Scotia.

During the fall of 2014, the Alcohol Strategy Regional Coordinator, Sophie Melanson and Jaime Smith (Marram Consulting) hosted the community conversations and forum.

Approximately 125 community members, including eighty youth, joined in the conversations held in Amherst. High school students, community leaders, municipal politicians, college students, police officers, volunteers, parents and many other stakeholders engaged in the conversations. This document outlines their perceptions and experiences with alcohol at home, at work and in the community.

What is the culture of alcohol use in Amherst?

Alcohol is pervasive

"Amherst is seen as a drinking town" was a comment that was heard throughout the community conversations. Alcohol is a part of daily life here, as in many towns throughout Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada.

Alcohol is normalized, "we're Maritimers, we party!" Alcohol brings people together to socialize. "If you do not drink," one participant shared, "then you often can feel excluded."

Alcohol is a part of celebration, "we drink because we had a good day, and we drink because we had a bad day." People reflected that they drink to feel part of a larger social group, and it increases their sociability.

Alcohol is visible everyday in Amherst. Participants reflected that they are concerned about both the wellbeing and outsiders' perception of local characters in the downtown area that have alcohol dependency related issues. Many people know these individuals, yet they are not always seen. They are there, and the community appears to accept that reality. One participant shared, "what does that say about our community?"

Alcohol is overly accessible. It is increasingly available in local corner stores, and liquor stores are often attached to our grocery stores. It is that much easier to pick up alcohol while out buying groceries and running errands.

Alcohol is permitted

It is a right of passage, and as such, we sometimes allow underage children to consume alcohol. Adults often reflected, "we don't know what we should do". Some parents struggle when making the decision to allow or prohibit their child (and potentially other youth) to drink in the home under the guise to "keep an eye on them". Some parents feel that underage drinking is almost inevitable and would rather try to reduce harm by providing a "safer" place to consume alcohol. Some consensus was reached. Participants shared that by enabling drinking in the home, even at times purchasing alcohol for under-age youth, we as a community normalize underage drinking.

Although youth were evidently the topic of underage drinking, the theme of enabling extended to adults in other settings such as churches, sporting venues and at most celebratory events. During the community conversations, it was mentioned that a local church now offers Friday evening socials that serve alcohol. It is not a judgment, rather a reflection of changing times.

Alcohol is promoted

Participants felt that alcohol is promoted through our 'Maritimer' image and reflected in advertisements. It was mentioned in one conversation about a new and growing clothing manufacturing company, collaborating with a local brewing company. There are many examples of shiny, flashy advertisements, geared towards women, men or youth. Examples shared included "skinny margaritas" for women, brightly coloured and sweet tasting drinks that appear tailored for younger consumers, and recent advertisements, creating an atmosphere for the 'boys' to "get away and relax".

Some participants, however, did reflect that the culture of drinking is starting to shift, that people are starting to ask questions, and that change is in the air. Other participants, however, were concerned that people are not linking the potential harms of alcohol with the act of drinking.



"... Skinny margaritas for women, brightly coloured and sweet tasting drinks that appear tailored for younger consumers ..."

What are some examples of alcohol-related harms in the community?

Overwhelmingly, participants spoke about the personal harms to the overuse of alcohol. Participants shared their stories and concerns about risky behaviors by people who over consume; this led to conversations about personal trauma, unwanted or unplanned sexual activity, loss of physical and mental wellbeing, and potential addiction. Domestic violence, neglect of children and negative impacts on family members were also discussed.

A common thread throughout the conversations about alcohol-related harms was the loss of potential for those affected. Job and family loss that can occur due to alcohol abuse were seen as leading to bouts of grief and, in some cases, depression. Alcohol was seen as a coping mechanism, sending those seeking relief further into harm's way.

Participants shared their thoughts on how although excessive alcohol consumption has personal implications, the impacts on others are far reaching, to families, children, friends, employers, schools, communities, policing, health care, and more. Overconsumption of alcohol, whether leading to dependency or not has broad reaching consequences and costs to the whole community.

Participants talked about not only the personal financial losses, and implications of loss of employment, but also the financial costs to our communities, municipalities and province.

Alcohol can lead to increased domestic violence, as mentioned above, and risky behaviors including drinking and driving, public disturbance, vandalism and violence. All of which require policing services and can potentially increase maintenance and repair costs for municipalities.

As outlined in the beginning of this document, there are direct financial costs to our health care system linked to alcohol use. This was a common theme throughout our community conversations.

How can we reduce alcohol-related harms in the community?

Each conversation concluded with time to talk about what the community can do to shift the culture of alcohol use in Amherst.

Participants talked about making "the right choice, the easy choice." That is, to provide a supportive environment in which to make healthier choices.

They felt that creating fun, affordable and accessible activities in the community would help reduce alcohol harms. Participants shared that there should be a focus on alcohol-free events and better controls when alcohol is present, especially at community events that include children and underage youth.

Participants shared that there should be more discussions with youth "where they are at." Adults had diverse and sometimes opposing views on how to broach the topic of alcohol with youth. Some adults focused their recommendations on "scaring them straight", where others spoke about opening lines of communication between adults and youth.

Engaging better with the sports community around the culture of alcohol use was also discussed. There were many conversations that focused on the need to look more strategically at big sponsorship of sporting venues, facility policies, and sports organization policies around alcohol use, marketing and its impacts.



Alcohol can lead to increased domestic violence ... and risky behaviors including drinking and driving, public disturbance, vandalism and violence.

Keeping the NSLC as a crown corporation was also discussed, and participants agreed that Nova Scotians need to keep control of alcohol sales and marketing through the current monopoly. However, better attention is required in policing around advertising, accessibility and sales if we want to effectively reduce the negative impacts of alcohol use in the province.

Participants also talked about promoting the good things that are already happening in Amherst, such as the bar suspension program, and the work happening around the Municipal Alcohol Project. Participants stated, “we have begun the conversation to shift our alcohol culture, and it is time now to move forward.”

“We are tacitly complacent by not doing anything.” Let’s get started.

What are youth saying about alcohol use?

The Committee was very pleased to engage the youth voice in the conversation about our community’s culture of alcohol use.

In many Municipal Alcohol Projects, it was noted that the youth voice was not present in discussions, although their alcohol use was a main area of concern in all communities. As a result, Pictou County did engage numerous youth throughout their community in conversations about alcohol.

The Amherst Municipal Alcohol Project learned from Pictou County’s approach, and also included a session with youth in their project.

In November, facilitators Jaime Smith and Sophie Melanson met with over eighty youth, through a local youth group, to talk about alcohol, its influences, impacts, and what youth need to shift the culture of alcohol use.

What influences youth to drink?

“What do I look like to others?”

Youth felt that peer pressure is the number one influence of why they drink. Youth shared that they want to be accepted by their peers, they want to maintain an image, and feel included in their social circle.

Advertising in social media, movies and television portray the underage drinking culture as normal, and a rite of passage for youth.

Drinking is a way for young people to come together, to party and have fun with their friends. It is a way for youth to let go of stress, build their own self-confidence, if only for a short period of time, and to be part of a group. Youth also talked about being curious about alcohol and that sometimes, “they just wanted to try it.”

Youth talked about the role of parents and older siblings, and how a home that allows alcohol can sometimes lead or encourage them to drink. Conversely, other youth talked about growing up in a home with an alcoholic parent or guardian, and how that could influence them to drink, or perhaps to stay away from alcohol altogether.



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What do youth see as the consequences of drinking?

Youth eagerly engaged in a game about alcohol harms and the consequences of drinking. When asked to write down as many consequences to drinking that they could think of in five minutes, the answers ranged from making bad decisions (such as engaging in inappropriate sexual activities) to “acting stupid”, the “dreaded hangover”, negatively impacting a reputation, and “getting caught”.

The youth were then asked to break into groups by gender and arrange a list of twenty-five alcohol “consequences” into levels of harm, from least to most harmful. There were both similarities and differences between the two groups’ responses.

For example, the girls felt that sexual assault, child porn, unplanned pregnancy, unplanned sex and brain development problems were the most harmful consequences of drinking. The boys, however, showed that the “other” or the unknown or unintended consequences were the most harmful, followed by child porn, sexual assault, unplanned pregnancy, unprotected sex and sexually transmitted infections.

Overall, youth appeared most concerned about making bad decisions while under the influence of alcohol, and the potential for weekend binge drinking to become an addiction. Excessive alcohol consumption was seen to impact decisions around sexual activity. Youth also talked about the possibility of death when mixing social activities and binge drinking, as well as issues with mental illness, and physical injury.

How can we move forward?

At a community forum held on December 9th, 2015, 28 community members came together to talk about next steps and potential actions to shift the culture of alcohol use in the Town of Amherst.

Dr. Ryan Sommers, Medical Officer of Health, for Colchester East Hants, Cumberland and Pictou County Health Authorities provided an overview of alcohol and its social, economic and health impacts. Dr. Sommers shared the evidence and statistical information that support the case against our current culture of alcohol use, namely our over consumption, and in severe cases, dependence to alcohol.

“It’s not that we drink, it’s how we drink.”

Following Dr. Sommers presentation, the outcomes of the community conversations (as presented in the middle section of this document) were shared with the group. This information helped inform the action-planning portion of the day, which was facilitated through an Open Space Technology session.

The participants identified six questions to develop areas of action. The areas of action were combined into three categories: youth and parent collaboration, policy development, and social and cultural asset mapping.

Areas of action

Youth and Parent Collaboration

1. Why do parents allow children to drink in their basements?
2. How can we start working alongside youth?

Key Insights and Next Steps

Participants felt, that as a community, Amherst needs to determine how best to engage with families, parents and youth. The municipality and health authority need to understand where families and youth are in terms of alcohol use. Participants felt that there is a strong need to ask hard questions such as, “why are youth drinking?” and “why do parents perpetuate the use of alcohol by minors?”

Participants would like to see parents and other supportive adults model positive behaviours. Looking at sports travelling teams and understanding and assessing their rules for alcohol use by parents on trips could be one area to investigate. There is a need to cultivate a culture of “confidence-cool” for adults and youth: “It’s cool not to drink”.

It was said that coach training, such as High Five Training (www.highfive.org), provides opportunities for youth to engage in sport through the support of a caring adult. This could provide some insights on how to better and more meaningfully engage with youth in the community. However, participants felt that the MAP leaders must strive to engage with marginalized youth and their parents or caregivers as well. Additionally, adults could use some “training” on how they connect with youth, and in some cases, their own children.



Policy Development

3. What policies are appropriate and at what level of government?
4. How would it be if we treated alcohol like tobacco?
5. Can we change hours of operation for bars and services?

Key Insights and Next Steps

Overwhelmingly, participants were interested in creating a stronger policy framework at all levels of government to address alcohol related harms in Amherst and Nova Scotia. Many shared that looking closer at the risks and consequences of alcohol use and abuse is necessary.

Some felt that the community should reinforce laws “on people that provide alcohol to minors”, whereas others shared that we should take a more upstream approach, by making alcohol “less sexy”. Taking a multi-faceted approach, similar to that used with tobacco, was considered a positive direction in shifting the culture of alcohol use in the community and the province.

Alcohol and its over-use are normalized in Amherst and most other communities of Nova Scotia. Creating policies and programs that influence a “new norm” for youth, where alcohol is less desirable and sober socialization is “cool” was shared as one opportunity for creating sustainable change.

Policy change must begin with collaboration between communities, levels of government, health leaders, service providers, and families. By taking a proactive approach and offering families, youth and marginalized populations new opportunities for economic, social development, and health promotion/protection could create significant positive changes for many communities.

Social and Cultural Asset Mapping

6. Can we asset map places without alcohol (activities)?

Key Insights and Next Steps

Participants felt that the Town of Amherst should take leadership on identifying and sharing alcohol-free events that are happening in the community. The Town communicates events through social media and traditional media, and should continue to do so, however, with a focus on family-friendly and alcohol-free events.

Although recreation centers located throughout the County should continue to be supported and celebrated, additional support is needed to provide a youth-specific venue/center available on a more consistent basis. Participants shared that existing and future centers should offer a balance of sports, art, music, drama, dance, and other activities.

“What is there to do and how do we share that information?”

By mapping the existing opportunities, Amherst could better identify gaps in its programming. Is the town supporting and offering activities for a wide range of people? Is the town inclusive? Are fun and engaging activities available for youth, adults, families and seniors?

Our Alcohol Culture: The Amherst Perspective

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