Author's response to reviews

Title: A review of public opinion towards alcohol controls in Australia

Authors:

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Version: 2 Date: 27 October 2010

Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Tim,

We thank you and your reviewers for their constructive feedback and comments on our manuscript. We have responded to each reviewer’s comments (see below), and where indicated, revised our manuscript accordingly. Please find attached our revised manuscript with all revisions “track changed”.

Response to reviewer comments by Wayne Hall: thank you for your thoughts and constructive feedback.

1. We agree that a systematic comparison of public opinion towards alcohol policy between Australia and other regions such as the USA and Canada would be a valuable contribution to the literature, however believe that the complexity of conducting this comparison is beyond the scope and feasibility of this study. Our investigation into the public opinion research conducted in other regions found that broad comparisons by control type (e.g. restrict physical availability, restrict economic availability, regulate promotions, education/legal penalties) only would be possible. More direct comparisons between specific controls would be impeded because policies are country/state specific, and response frames also vary considerably.

2. In the conclusion, we have expanded upon our identification of public understanding of the intent and rationale for new policy as a factor influencing higher support, by going on to suggest a role for public health advocates when knowledge and support is identified as low:

“A factor which may induce higher support is when the intent of new policies is well understood and the rationale for change is explicit to the public. Policy advocates and decision makers should utilise public opinion data as a tool to reveal gaps in public understanding of new policies and respond to identified knowledge deficits by matter of routine during the policy development process. In instances when the effectiveness of an alcohol control is well established in the research literature, but public support is low, public health advocates should explore strategies for translating research into formats and forums which are meaningful and accessible to the public.”

Response to reviewer comments by Peter Anderson: thank you for your positive feedback.

Response to reviewer comments by Norman Giesbrecht: thank you for your thoughts and constructive feedback

1. In the Methods section, under the heading ‘Data extraction’ an additional paragraph has been added to indicate the type of response scale the data was originally collected on, and describe the method for condensing these data into a binary response during data extraction:
“In the original studies level of support was recorded on a variety of response scales; six studies used a five-point Likert scale with a middle “neither” response [6, 36-40], a further nine studies used the same scale but also allowed a “don’t know”, “refused” or “other” response [41-52], one study used a four point scale [53], and one used a two-point scale but also allowed a “don’t know” or “unaware of the restriction” response [54]. The response scale of the remaining included studies was not reported. During data extraction, level of support data were condensed into a binary response of support or do not support.”

2. It is feasible to consider that poor knowledge of existing alcohol guidelines or regulations may impact on respondent answers; however knowledge of alcohol measures was not measured consistently enough among the included studies to make an accurate assertion of its influence on respondents’ opinions. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, few data collections included in this review tested knowledge prior to measuring opinion. Tangentyere Council (2003) considers the possibility that the respondent may not be aware of the policy on which their opinion is being sought, and offer an “unaware of restriction” response option. The NDSHS questionnaire includes a question asking respondents if they have heard of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines - it can be assumed that respondents indicating that they were unaware of the guidelines, would have been more likely to utilize the response “don’t know enough to say”.

3. Wilkinson et al’s (2009) analysis of the NDSHS 2004 identifies predictors of support/opposition for alcohol controls. Additional analysis of the predictors of support was not warranted in our study, considering their already valuable contribution to the research in this area. An additional sentence, describing their key findings has been added in the introduction:

“Wilkinson et al (2009), analysing trends in Australian public opinion recorded by the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) between 1993 and 2004, found that support for alcohol controls gradually declined during this time. They also concluded that female and older aged Australians are more likely to support alcohol controls, and increasing volume and frequency of alcohol drinking is a strong predictor of opposition to alcohol controls [18].”

And these findings have been pointed to again in the conclusion:

“Public opinion towards alcohol controls in Australia is varied. Governments are well supported to tighten alcohol controls targeted towards alcohol promotions, licensees or marginalised “problem” drinkers. However, controls which impact on the availability of alcohol across the population are unpopular. Given the inextricable link between availability and alcohol-related harm, unpopularity is not enough to warrant inaction in this regulatory area. Evidence suggests that those who are most likely to oppose alcohol controls are the proportion of the population who are most likely to experience alcohol-related harm due to high-risk drinking behaviours [18].”

4. We have tried to visually depict the findings pertinent to our three hypotheses, but concluded that they did not add great value to the written description. Graphing the trend
of public opinion data from the NDSHS between 1998-2007 demonstrates as the findings suggest, that opinion is relatively static throughout this period. It is too early to tell whether increases in public support between 2004 and 2007 are part of a new trend. It is too difficult to visually demonstrate the increased support for policy framed as protecting children, as the data included are not directly comparable. It is possible to graph pre- and post-implementation support for alcohol controls in Alice Springs – however this graph is very basic and we believe the data is straightforward enough to interpret directly from the table.

5. Your comment on wording of questions to measure public opinion is noted – thank you.

6. We agree that public opinion data is subject to misinterpretation by policy makers. An additional note on this point is included in the conclusion:

“A factor which may induce higher support is when the intent of new policies is well understood and the rationale for change is explicit to the public. Policy advocates and decision makers should utilise public opinion data as a tool to reveal gaps in public understanding of new policies and respond to identified knowledge deficits by matter of routine during the policy development process. In instances when the effectiveness of an alcohol control is well established in the research literature, but public support is low, public health advocates should explore strategies for translating research into formats and forums which are meaningful and accessible to the public. **It is equally important that public opinion research findings and policy implications are accurately and succinctly communicated to policy makers.**”

In addition to revisions prompted by reviewer comments, minor grammatical alterations have been made to the text and also marked using track changes. Resulting from changes to the manuscript, the endnote reference numbers in Additional file 2, Additional file 3 and Additional file 4 have also changed – revised versions of these files have also been uploaded, and changes to referencing are indicated with yellow highlighter.

We welcome your further review of our revised manuscript and will happily respond to any further queries or concerns.

Kind regards,

Claire Tobin, Rob Moodie and Charles Livingstone