

The ChronicleHerald

N.S. government falling short in addressing alcohol abuse during pandemic: expert

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May 27, 2020



A man places a couple of cases of beer into his trunk, after leaving an NSLC outlet in Dartmouth, Wednesday, May 27, 2020. - Tim Krochak

While alcohol revenues skyrocket across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nova Scotia is doing little to counter the devastating effects of alcohol abuse in the province, says an addictions expert.

"Just as our government can speedily and forcefully engage in public health efforts to protect Nova Scotians when it comes to COVID-19, the same could be done for alcohol but we lack the political will to institute those changes," said Simon Sherry, a professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

The practising psychologist is questioning why the province has permitted all NSLC outlets to remain open during the pandemic, and most recently last Thursday extending hours of operation for all but a few stores. Last month, the World Health Organization advised that alcohol should be restricted during the lockdown, saying "alcohol consumption can exacerbate health vulnerability, risk-taking behaviours, mental health issues and violence."

A Statistics Canada report released earlier this month showed that during April 5 to 10 alcohol sales spiked 46 per cent from the same period a year ago.

Sherry said the province is placing excessive importance on minimizing the threat of COVID-19; separating families and children from schools, preventing people from working and recreation, "but at the same time permitting long lineups at liquor stores to purchase a substance that has killed an estimated 14,826 Canadians in 2014."

NSLC's total revenue last year was \$628.9 million. An employee of a Halifax area NSLC outlet said that since the lockdown began in mid-March, revenues at all stores have been up roughly 40 per cent from normal sales. The employee did not want to be identified for fear of repercussions. NSLC spokeswoman Beverly Ware wouldn't say whether sales have increased during the pandemic. She said those figures would be in its year-end results that would be made public next month.

But Sherry said on average every year the province loses twice the amount it profits from alcohol to the human harms associated with its consumption, including hospitalizations, treatment costs, domestic violence and premature death.

Besides, he said, the effects of the lockdown, including social isolation and financial hardship, create ideal circumstances for alcohol abuse. The risks are even greater with addiction.

"There are ample reasons to be concerned about drinking in Nova Scotia, particularly during a pandemic we're currently amid. Conditions that are very much conducive to consuming alcohol. We have people facing financial stressors, social isolation uncertainty and anxiety and boredom.

"This is a difficult time to maintain sobriety. People that have negotiated sobriety in their lives are at risk to relapse into problem drinking under these conditions. There's a significant scrambling of daily rhythms and routines that can make sobriety harder to maintain."

He said the lockdown is making it more difficult for people to access treatment, presenting a major obstacle for those who want to change their drinking habits or to continue to maintain sobriety.

"Credit to psychologists, psychiatrists, and grassroots groups like Alcohol Anonymous for pivoting and moving online. But at the same time, there are greater barriers to treatment now and that should be recognized.

"Our province needs greater funds dedicated to treating and preventing the misuse of alcohol. The lack of those funds and the lack of those supports becomes especially prominent during a period of crisis."

He said those cracks become glaringly wide under conditions like a pandemic.

The province wouldn't say whether they've increased funding for mental health and addictions services since the lockdown began. But government spokeswoman Shannon Kerr said the province anticipated the lockdown would impact people's mental health and has several programs in place to address the increasing need for support. She said people requiring help are able to receive it.

She pointed to the provinces' two emergency mental health telephone services including the Mental Health Crisis Line. The province also offers mental health and addictions specific programs , including ICAN (Conquer Anxiety and Nervousness) and online resource Mindwell U.

Kerr also said the province took steps to limit access to NSLC outlets by initially reducing hours once the public health guidelines were introduced as well as taking measures to protect staff and customers from contracting COVID-19. Some of those measures included installing hard plastic barriers at the cash and floor markers to provide adequate distance between customers, increased cleaning protocols and allowing a maximum of five customers in a store at a time.

Kerr said NSLC extended hours in most stores on Thursday, Friday and Saturdays until 9 p.m. to reduce lineups at peak times. She said opening hours remain reduced, and outlets are still closed on Sundays.

But Sherry said the response isn't good enough, pointing to the annual costs of alcohol abuse in Canada being at roughly \$14.6 billion.

"When you face a new and largely unknown killer like COVID-19 it provokes a lot of anxiety but we have become too casual about and too familiar with the harms and the deaths associated with alcohol."

He said the province could easily reduce the collateral costs of excessive drinking by imposing higher taxes on alcohol or simply reducing the number of NSLC outlets in the province.

"If you lower the density and availability of alcohol there's a corresponding decrease in death and harms from alcohol."