



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Health & Place

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/healthplace

Short Report

Alcohol licensing data: Why is it an underused resource in public health?

David K. Humphreys^{a,*}, Dianna M. Smith^{b,1}^a Institute of Public Health, University of Cambridge, Forvie Site, Robinson Way, Cambridge CB20SR, UK^b Centre for Primary Care and Public Health, Blizard Institute, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Yvonne Carter Building, 58 Turner Street, London, E1 2AB, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2013

Received in revised form

4 June 2013

Accepted 25 July 2013

Available online 2 August 2013

Keywords:

Alcohol availability

Harm prevention

Administrative data

Licensing

Public health

ABSTRACT

Alcohol-related harm is related to alcohol availability. Due to complex regulatory and environmental factors, alcohol availability varies spatially. However, the extent of this variation is largely unknown in the UK, despite its potential influence on patterns of alcohol-related harm. We investigate why administrative data is underused in the study of alcohol-related harm in the UK. We found that local authorities routinely collect a rich supply of licensing data. However, this information is stored in databases that are sometimes difficult to access. With greater coordination between researchers and practitioners, this data can be used to fulfil its primary administrative purpose and also contribute to understanding and prevention of alcohol-related health and social problems.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Debates on how to prevent alcohol-related harm are, at present, predominantly focussed on the affordability of alcohol (McKee, 2012; Coltart and Gilmore, 2011). However, alcohol consumption is also influenced by environmental factors: the number and density of alcohol outlets, the size of those outlets, the times at which they sell alcohol, and even the final pricing of alcoholic beverages (Gruenewald, 2011; Livingston et al., 2007; Young et al., 2013). This is generally referred to as the *physical availability of alcohol* (Stockwell and Gruenewald, 2003). Health experts recommend placing limitations on the physical availability of alcohol to prevent alcohol misuse and harm (Babor et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2009; NICE, 2010). At present there is a comparative lack of UK research that investigates the relationship between alcohol availability and health and social problems (Room, 2006; Campbell et al., 2009; Bryden et al., 2012). The absence of this research has implications for the way alcohol policy is conceived, and our ability to evaluate the impact of efforts to prevent alcohol-related harm.

In this study we report the findings of an exercise in gathering administrative data on the location and characteristics of alcohol outlets in Greater London (GL). As stipulated in the Licensing Act

(2003) and the Government's recent alcohol strategy, this information should be available to the public (HMSO, 2005; HM Government, 2012). In principle there should be few barriers to acquiring and using this data for research purposes. However, the relative absence of this data in UK research signifies that this assumption may not always be true. While it is possible to gather this information directly from licensed premises, or from commercial marketing companies, primary data collection or payment to a third party can be very expensive. In this paper we investigate whether relevant information can be gathered from existing public resources, and what the obstacles to accessing and using this data may be. We conclude by discussing reasons why it is imperative to improve research in this important area of public policy, and how utilising public data can help prevent harm.

2. Study design

As part of a larger project, this study aimed to collect data to quantify the physical availability of alcohol. GL is a large metropolitan area covering 1552 km², with a diverse population of over eight million people (Office for National Statistics, 2011). GL is made up of 33 local authorities (32 borough councils, and the City of London), each varying in size (mean pop. 247,695; SD=69,492). In order to measure alcohol availability we aimed to collect data on the name and address, type (i.e. "on" or "off" premise alcohol sales), occupancy limits and the trading hours of licensed premises across each of the 33 boroughs.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1223 746880.

E-mail addresses: dkh25@medschl.cam.ac.uk (D.K. Humphreys), d.smith@qmul.ac.uk (D.M. Smith).¹ Tel.: +44 207 882 5878.

2.1. Collecting licensing data

Stipulations under Part 2 (Section 8) of the Licensing Act (2003) require licensing authorities in each local authority to keep detailed records of premises licensed to sell alcohol (HMSO, 2005). Authorities are required to keep records in a “prescribed manner” that is available for inspection (free of charge), or if required, provided to members of the public in a legible form.

First we investigated whether data was available to the public using online registers. We performed extensive searches of the online resources provided by each local authority. These searches aimed to (a) identify an online register; (b) assess whether the relevant data (name, address, postcode, licence type, and daily trading times) held in registers was accessible (i.e. could be viewed online); and (c) see whether these data could be downloaded or processed in a batch form (i.e. a data file, or copy and paste).

Basic internet searches were performed using the borough name, and the terms “licensing” and “register”. This strategy was successful in locating the websites for all 33 licensing authorities. When these terms did not return a direct link to a licensing register, additional searches were performed within the website search bar, and through manual website browsing. Initial searches identified only ten (30%) authorities with an online register. Of those, only four (12%) provided online registers that allowed access to the full licence record for each venue. For many authorities it was impossible to access details of licensed premises for the entire borough. Instead, webpages required the entry of identifiable information (i.e. application reference, licence category, application status, address, name, etc.) in order to locate records. In the case of the four authorities in which data *could* be accessed, a search of blank fields enabled the return of information on all premises. Despite gaining access to individual records, none of the four web systems allowed the information to be downloaded or copied in batch, making data collection considerably more time consuming and potentially costly.

In the second stage we contacted authorities directly via email to (a) provide a brief overview of our intended research; (b) identify the data we intended to collect (name, address, postcode of each outlet, type of licence, occupancy limits and the daily times at which they were licensed to serve alcohol); (c) request permission to collect this data; and (d) enquire whether records could be sent electronically. We used information from licensing websites (stage one) to obtain addresses of potential gatekeepers (e.g. Head of Licensing). If specific contacts were not available, the initial email was sent to a generic email address for licensing enquiries. Each email contained the same information, and was personalised to be relevant to the recipient borough. Following guidelines from the Information Commissioners Office (ICO, 2012), we provided each local authority with an example of how we would like the data formatted electronically, if possible. Initial contact was made with all licensing authorities in March 2012. After two weeks without contact reminder emails were sent. If contact had not been established after four weeks, a freedom of information (FOI) request was sent to the authority (Fig. 1).

Our initial requests to authorities were largely unsuccessful; only 8 out of 33 granted data. After 4 weeks, FOI requests were sent to the remaining authorities. These prompted greater success in collecting data over the following three months, with further 12 boroughs providing data. Seven boroughs refused to provide data under section 12 (exemption where cost of compliance exceeds appropriate limits) or section 21 (information accessible to applicant by other means), and six boroughs had not responded after four months (Fig. 2).

Almost all authorities (six out of seven) that refused did so on the grounds that information was available on their website(s). Each provided links to webpages where the relevant information

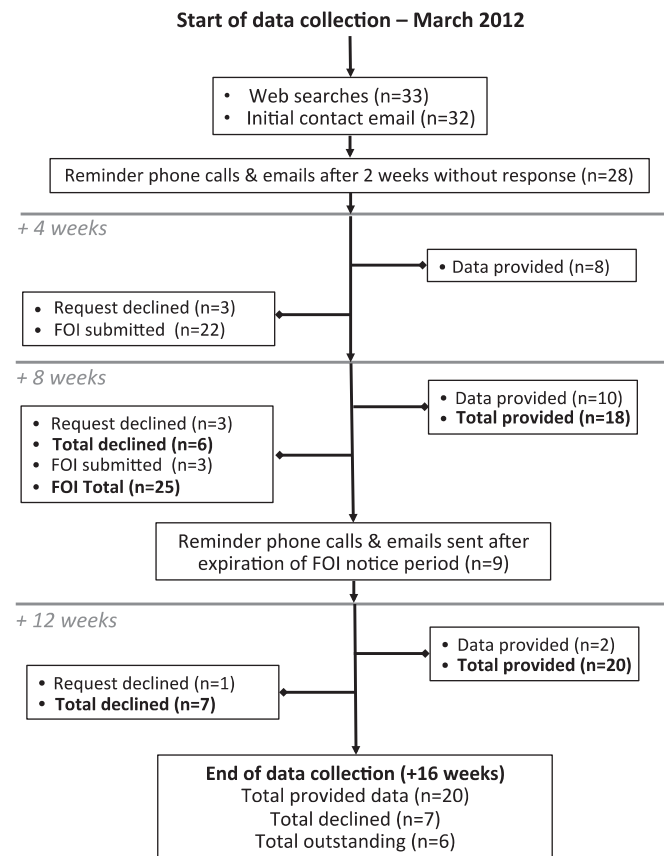


Fig. 1. Flow chart of responses to data requests. Only 8 authorities responded to initial requests without requiring an FOI; 20 authorities had provided data by the end of the data collection period; 6 authorities failed to respond to the FOI by the end of September 2012 (in all cases receipts of our requests were received).

should be accessible. However in each case it was *not* possible to access the information from the links provided. One of the links did not work; one directed us to the main licensing webpage without linking to an accessible register; and four authorities directed us to webpages where public registers were available, but where data could not be downloaded. The challenge we faced in collecting this information was alluded to by the remaining borough that refused our request, estimating that it would require over 500 h of work, chargeable at £25 an hour (£12,500) to fulfil.

2.2. Quality and format of licensing data

Of the data received, there was substantial heterogeneity in its quality and format. Nineteen of the authorities were able to provide data in spreadsheet format, and one presented the data tabulated in pdf format (see online Appendix). However there was no consistency in the data presentation between spreadsheets. In some cases the authorities sent files that appeared to be harvested from other computer packages (i.e. Access or Outlook address files). In one instance, four separate Excel files were received in which each venue occupied its own tabbed spreadsheet (approx. 300 tabs per Excel file). Though this was an extremely rich and comprehensive source of data, the data cleaning required to transform this into a useable database would be extremely costly. In another example data appeared to have been copied from a mailing list. Unfortunately this file contained only the addresses of premises, without names or any other requested information.

Most local authorities were able to provide information on the location and names of licensed premises. Although the format

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7459097>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7459097>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)