



Policy Implications of COVID-19 on Alcohol and Marijuana Use

Since the onset of COVID-19, many states and communities have loosened restrictions on alcohol and marijuana use and access, including restrictions on delivery, internet sales, takeout, and outdoor consumption. Justification for these changes includes economic relief for small businesses, COVID safety, and the accepted norm that substance use is a reasonable coping strategy. In the case of marijuana, use is also seen as medicinal for treating anxiety. But weighing the immediate, pressing needs of small business against the broader public health implications of these changes is a delicate balance.

The Implications of These Changes

The downside of these policy decisions is alarming. Over the past 10 months, alcohol sales and use have increased significantly. Drinking patterns have changed in dangerous ways, with more people drinking more frequently and alone. Unmonitored, off-premises alcohol consumption has been tied to rising domestic violence rates and child abuse and neglect. Legalized marijuana use has led to a troubling increase in underage use. We know from the research literature that “increased availability”—such as being able to pick up the phone and have a fifth of vodka delivered to your door, no questions asked, or ordering cocktails to go from your favorite restaurant, is associated, at a population level, with increased substance use.

We also know that social norms “favorable to use”—for example, the shared belief that having a drink at the end of the day is an acceptable way to deal with the stress and isolation of COVID—is associated with reduced perception of harm and that to increases in use.

The nature of alcohol and marijuana use has also changed since the start of COVID. More people are drinking in isolation and in greater quantities at a single sitting. Both these behaviors increase a person’s risk of developing a substance use disorder in the future. Our fear is that policy changes put in place during COVID, such as the push toward contact-less delivery, will become permanent. It is hard to put the genie back in the bottle once it’s out.

Nearly one in four adults surveyed reported drinking more to manage pandemic stress.
APA Survey, Feb. 2021

Steps to Monitor and Mitigate the Impact

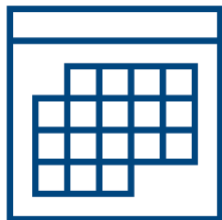
Practitioners can take several steps to monitor and mitigate the effects of these changes, beginning with getting educated.



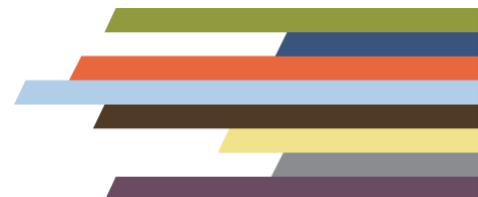
Find out what's happening in your own community. Then reach out to policymakers to raise concerns. Organizations such as the [National Alcohol Beverage Control Association](#) maintain interactive data dashboards that allow users to navigate policy changes, by state. Many industry trade organizations, such as the Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America, have also created resources for tracking state policy changes related to production, distribution, and retail sale.



Partner with other organizations to mobilize community support and leverage resources. Consider non-traditional partners such as marijuana dispensaries and alcohol distributors. They may share your concerns about the community and could become critical public health allies.



Focus on the long-term. We want to be sure the policies we have in place long after the pandemic reflect the latest prevention science, so we need to start educating our decision-makers now. We need to make explicit the links between access, norms, and perception of risk.



Great Lakes Prevention Technology Transfer Center

Resources for Tracking Change

Resource	Description
COVID-19 and Alcohol Beverage Regulation	The National Alcohol Beverage Control Association is working hard to provide its members and partners timely updates on policy changes impacting the regulation of the alcohol supply chain (producer, wholesaler, retailer) in response to COVID-19.
Digest of State Alcohol-related Laws During the COVID-19 Emergency for On-Premise and Off-Premise Establishments as of April 15, 2021	Report on selected alcohol-related policies relating to the COVID-19 pandemic across the U.S. The primary focus is the availability of beverage alcohol during the emergency. Laws were reviewed most recently as of April 15, 2021.
National Governors Association (NGA)	Tracks state action to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, including maps and charts on state disaster declarations, National Guard activation, employee travel restrictions and school closures.
National Conference of State Legislatures	Tracks pending and enacted state legislation to address COVID-19. Along with updates on state election status, NCSL is also providing daily monitoring of state fiscal and public education responses to COVID-19.
National League of Cities and Bloomberg Philanthropies	Put together a publicly available Google spreadsheet tracking city/local responses to COVID-19. This resource is updated automatically every 5 minutes
National Association of City and County Health Officials	Set up a dedicated COVID-19 Virtual Community , sharing best practices where health officials can learn from each other about ways to respond. If you are looking for those resources, contact your department's Local Health Official or Preparedness Coordinator. NACCHO has weekly NACCHO workgroups calls to facilitate real-time discussion and feedback related to the ongoing response.
National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors	Collected important COVID-19 updates and resources specific to substance use and created a dedicated webpage on its website. Provides federal guidance released from CDC, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

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