

How do Cumulative Impact Policies work? Use of institutional ethnography to assess local government alcohol policies in England

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Abstract

Background The Licensing Act (2003) gives English local authorities the power to implement Cumulative Impact Policies (CIPs), which are intended to strengthen licensing powers and limit the growth of on-premise and off-premise alcohol outlet density. Local authorities can now implement CIPs by designating boundaries within their borough as cumulative impact zones (CIZs) if adverse social effects of alcohol market saturation can be demonstrated. We are evaluating this intervention in a London borough, which as of January, 2013, had seven CIZs.

Methods The qualitative arm of our study is informed by institutional ethnography. This sociological research tradition has had limited application in public health sciences despite obvious applicability to understanding processes of multilevel institutional regulation. We conducted semi-structured individual and group interviews with stakeholders (eg, licensing officers, councillors, police, trade), documentary analysis, and ethnographic data collection. Research participants were purposively selected to include diverse stakeholders from within our case study area as well as neighbouring boroughs with CIPs. We developed a detailed map to account for the ways in which different texts (eg, laws, policies, licensing forms) coordinate sequences of action related to alcohol licensing (eg, the work of granting or rejecting a licence application).

Findings CIPs are an example of multilevel governance where national and local alcohol licensing priorities, interests, and legal powers interface. CIPs informed how some licensed premises conducted their business, including terms and conditions voluntarily adopted to minimise alcohol-related harms (eg, willingness to stop selling high-strength, inexpensive beer and cider). With newfound regulatory powers at the local level, came complex forms of work that local authorities had to negotiate, including assembling evidence and contesting licensing claims of applicants who sought to be granted new or modified licences.

Interpretation Understanding the social and public health effects of CIPs requires innovative research strategies. Institutional ethnography offers important opportunities for methodological innovation in public health science. The map we developed reveals that CIPs must be viewed in relation to other alcohol initiatives. This qualitative research also generated nuanced questions about the social and public health effects of this alcohol intervention to which our ongoing quantitative analysis will contribute.

Funding This work was supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (SPHR).

Contributors

DG conducted the primary ethnographic data collection and analysis, and led the writing of the abstract. ME, KL, and EM provided assistance with a review of background literature and gave analytical feedback throughout the process of data analysis and abstract development.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

Acknowledgments

The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the National Health Service, NIHR, or Department of Health.

Published Online
November 19, 2014
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