



MEDIA RELEASE

BIG-BOX LIQUOR BOOM

3 February 2017: There has been explosive growth in the number of 'big-box' liquor stores established in Victoria over the last 15 years.

New research reveals that the number of big-box liquor stores owned by Wesfarmers and Woolworths has increased dramatically from just three to 68 (from 2001 to 2016), after the Victorian Government lifted a regulatory cap on ownership in 2000.ⁱ

The study, commissioned by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), investigates trends in packaged liquor ownership and availability across the state over the last 15 years.

The research reveals the number of active packaged liquor licences in Victoria has increased by 49 per cent, from 1,354 in 2001 to 2,023 in 2016.

On a per-capita basis, the number of packaged liquor outlets overall has stabilised in recent years, although this has been offset by dramatic increases in big-box liquor outlets, from 0.06 per 100,000 Victorians in 2001 to 1.14 in 2016, an increase of nearly 2,000 per cent.

The sheer size of these retail giants has also seen a corresponding and dramatic increase in the total amount of retail floor space given over to the sale of alcohol in Victoria, and this together with the explosion in the number of outlets has had a significant impact on local communities.

Report author, La Trobe University's Dr Michael Livingston, of the Centre for Alcohol Policy and Research (CAPR) a joint initiative between FARE and La Trobe, says that the increase in the number of chain outlets is quite staggering.

"We've seen steep and consistent growth in the number of big-box stores in the last 15 years. Dan Murphy's has grown from three outlets to more than 60 (43 at the time of reporting), while the Wesfarmers equivalent First Choice had no stores in 2001 and now has 25 Victorian outlets," said Dr Livingston.

There is strong evidence linking increases in alcohol's availability to increases in health problems, hospital admissions, treatment episodes, ambulance attendances, as well as to family violence and child maltreatment.

Research has shown that a ten per cent increase in packaged liquor outlets is associated with a 3.3 per cent increase in family violence.ⁱⁱ

A further study found a ten per cent increase in big-box liquor chain stores such as Dan Murphy's and First Choice Liquor is associated with a 35.3 per cent increase in intentional injuries such as assaults, stabbings and shootings, and a 22 per cent increase in unintentional injuries.ⁱⁱⁱ

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn urged the Victorian Government to use the current Liquor Control Reform Act review – the first substantial review of liquor licensing legislation in almost 20 years – to reduce the widespread availability of alcohol in order to reduce harm and prevent family violence.

“The Victorian Government must follow the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Family Violence, acknowledge alcohol's significant contribution to family violence and take real action to reduce the availability and promotion of alcohol in Victoria,” Mr Thorn said.

Among FARE's recommendations are changes to the existing legislation by designating areas experiencing high levels of alcohol harm as 'alcohol harm zones' in order to freeze new licence applications and reduce the level of alcohol harm in those areas.

FARE has also called for the introduction of a risk-based licensing system that would see outlets charged annually with fees based on the risk the outlet presents, as well as changes to the Act to provide for communities to have a greater say about the introduction of new alcohol outlets in their neighbourhoods.

Mr Thorn says over the last two decades Victoria has built itself an enduring problem; a Liquor Act heavily tilted in favour of the alcohol industry.

“If we are to reduce the level of alcohol harm in Victoria and protect families and children then we must restore some balance to a system currently heavily weighted in favour of the alcohol industry. Sensible and modest changes would give the public a greater say in the decisions negatively impacting their communities, liquor licence reforms would see venues held more responsible for the harms they cause, and appropriate zoning would ensure communities already burdened by a high level of alcohol harm would be offered greater protection,” Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn says Victoria is fast finding itself the odd state out, awash with alcohol and the resulting and mounting harms, and surrounded by jurisdictions wisely prioritising community health and safety or industry interests.

“Victoria gets no bragging rights for having more licensed venues per capita than any other jurisdiction, but it does get burdened with greater alcohol harms. Victoria does not need more booze barns flogging cheap alcohol at discounted rates. It needs a complete overhaul of the existing regulatory system to stop the proliferation of new packaged liquor outlets, reform that would see immediate and substantial reductions in alcohol-related harm,” Mr Thorn said.

ENDS

Michael Thorn and Dr Michael Livingston are available for interview.

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ⁱ Livingston, M. (2016). *Packaged liquor in Victoria — 2001-2016*. Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE).

ⁱⁱ Livingston, M. (2011). A longitudinal analysis of alcohol outlet density and domestic violence. *Addiction* 106(5): 919–25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morrison, C. & Smith, K. (2015). *Disaggregating relationships between off-premise alcohol outlets and trauma*. Canberra: Monash University, Ambulance Victoria, and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE).

The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation’s greatest preventive health challenges. To find out more visit www.fare.org.au.

The **Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR)** is an innovative, world-class research facility examining alcohol-related harms and the effectiveness of alcohol-related policies. The Centre, which receives funding from the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) and La Trobe University, is led by Professor Robin Room. To find out more visit www.capr.edu.au