

Recover Alaska Local Option Law Community Outcome Evaluation

Background:

Bethel voted to prohibit alcohol sales (Local Option 1) in 1977 and then rejected changes to the ban several times before voting to in 2009 to withdraw from the local option system. With the 2009 withdrawal from local option, the Alaska Alcohol Beverage Control Board could start issuing package store, restaurant, and other liquor licenses in Bethel and Bethel residents could order unlimited amounts of alcohol from package stores elsewhere in the state and have them delivered to Bethel through the state-monitored Bush order program.

The AC Quickstop liquor store, owned by Alaska Commercial Company, opened in Bethel on May 24, 2016. It was the first liquor store to operate in Bethel since the city banned alcohol sales in 1977. The AC Quickstop continued in operation until May 22, 2018 when the Alaska Alcohol Beverage Control Board denied the store's application to renew its liquor license after hearing testimony at its meeting in Bethel.

Methods:

This evaluation consists of a secondary data analysis using previously collected safety and health service utilization records from the Bethel Police Department, Bethel Fire Department, Alaska State Troopers (Bethel, Kusilvak, and Yukon-Koyukuk census areas), Alaska Office of Children's Services (Bethel area), the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKCHS), and Bethel Search and Rescue. Visual inspection of the data and regression analysis was used to compare monthly service utilization across four time periods. Regression models accounted for seasonal increases and decreases as well as underlying trends over time.

1. January 2007 – October 2009: Bethel subject to local option laws.
2. November 2009 – April 2016: Bethel not subject to local option but the AC Quickstop liquor store had not yet opened
3. May 2016 – May 2018 - AC Quickstop liquor store open
4. June 2016 – December 2018: AC Quickstop liquor store closed, Bethel still not subject to local option

Results:

Bethel Police Department:

The monthly call volume data provided by the BPD for January 2010 through November 2018, allowed us to examine changes over time and evaluate the association between the police calls and the liquor store opening and closing. Because data were not available prior to 2010, we were not able to evaluate associations between police calls and changes in local option status. Focusing on the data from 2012 through 2018, after the new system had been in use for a couple of years, we were able to use regression analysis to evaluate associations between call volume and liquor store status, adjusting for seasonality and small but steady increases over time. We found that:

- BPD calls for intoxicated pedestrians were almost 50% higher while the liquor store was open, on top of the small but steady increase over time that was observed for the entire study period.
- Call volume for assault and for all crimes against people combined were approximately 20% higher when the liquor store was open while the call volume for property crimes was not higher.
- DUI calls were also approximately 20% higher when the liquor store was open. Hit-and-run calls were also up, but the absolute number of hit-and-run calls is low making it difficult to model.
- Monthly volume of calls for a number of other categories – including suicide, unattended death, and weapons offenses – were higher than in earlier years when the liquor store was open, but the increase started before the store opened and in some cases continued after the store closed.

Bethel Fire Department:

The Bethel Fire Department (BFD) provided monthly counts from January 2007 through December 2018 for all BFD runs as well as specific categories of runs.

- BFD saw an increase in the number of runs per month over time for the entire study period, 2007 – 2018.
- In addition, the total run volume increased by approximately 40% while the liquor store was open.
- The run volume appeared to drop when the store closed.
- Assault-related runs were also higher than expected while the store was open.

Alaska Office of Children’s Services:

The Alaska Office of Children’s Services (OCS) provided monthly counts for the Bethel region from January 2008 through December 2018 for Protective Service Reports (PSRs), Substantiated Initial Assessments (SIAs), and out of home placements.

- PSRs received, PSRs screened in, and SIAs all appeared to be higher after Bethel left local option.
- There were no additional changes related to the opening or closing of the liquor store.

Alaska State Troopers:

The Alaska State Troopers provided incident records from January 2007 through September 2017. In the Bethel census area, after adjusting for seasonality and a small decrease over time:

- Close to 10% of all incidents during this time period were identified as alcohol crimes such as possession or transport of alcohol. Alcohol crimes more than doubled when Bethel left local option, and increased again when the liquor store opened
- Approximately two-thirds of the crimes against people during this time period were assaults. In the three census areas combined, monthly assault incident counts were 50% higher after Bethel left local option and another 20% higher after the liquor store opened.
- Just over 10% of crimes against people were sexual assault. Monthly counts for sexual assault incidents were approximately 44% higher when the liquor store was open.

- Monthly counts for driving under the influence were approximately 67% higher than expected after Bethel left local option, with no significant difference associated with the liquor store opening.

YKHC:

YKHC provided monthly alcohol-related visit counts for the emergency room (ER), the sobering center, inpatient hospital admissions, and the Ayagnirvik Healing Center from 2013, when they adopted a new electronic medical record, through the end of 2018.

- Before the Sobering Center opened, approximately 20% of ER visits were alcohol-related. The Sobering Center's goal was to reduce ER utilization for alcohol-related visits to no more than 4%. The Sobering Center met this goal in mid-2015.
- As expected with an increasing number of intoxicated individuals being diverted from the ER to the Sobering Center, alcohol-related ER visits decreased over time.
- However, combined ER and Sobering Center use increased approximately 15% while the liquor store was open.
- Residential treatment admissions excluding opioid treatment were substantially elevated, approximately 90% increase, while the liquor store was open. Some of this increase may be related to an increasing trend over time.
- Alcohol-related inpatient admissions were approximately 14% lower, which might be related to the higher level of residential treatment admissions.

Bethel Search and Rescue:

We reviewed BSaR records going back to 2011. Because BSaR is a volunteer organization with a mission to conduct search and rescue operation, they have limited capacity for record keeping, and that capacity varies over time. Therefore, while the number of searches recorded during 2016 through 2018 was much higher than for previous years, we were not able to evaluate the data with regression modeling.

Conclusion:

After looking at many data points, it is clear that increased access to alcohol is associated with some increases in demand for safety and health services. This is consistent with what many Bethel residents have reported anecdotally. It also indicates that at least some residents in Bethel and surrounding communities may experience decreased quality of life when access to alcohol increases.

Source:

This study was conducted by the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies at the University of Alaska Anchorage with funding from Recover Alaska (<https://recoveralaska.org/>). The findings reported above were presented at two Community Meetings in Bethel on August 28, 2019 by Janet Johnston, PhD, MPH. The full report will be submitted to Recover Alaska later in 2019.