



In Our Words

WHAT ALCOHOL USE IN
ANTIGONISH
LOOKS LIKE



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This report can be accessed online at:
www.townofantigonish.ca

If you are seeking help for your own or someone else's alcohol or other substance use call 811 and you will be directed to your local resources.

Address all other questions and inquiries to
municipalalcoholproject@avdha.nshealth.ca.

Prologue

Snapshots Of Alcohol Harms In Antigonish



The field

Some Antigonish residents describe it as a rite of passage: the high school graduation beer bash. Come late June each year

recently-minted high school graduates drive to a designated field, unload alcohol and other beverages, hand their car keys to one of up to 30 parent chaperones, then party the night away. The chaperones – who represent all walks of life, from judges' spouses to town officials – patrol the field, putting orange vests on kids they reckon have had too much.

By the time the music starts, the party will have been in the works since September, when Grade 12 students take it upon themselves to start organizing. The nine-month planning window gives members of the Antigonish RCMP plenty of time to deliver a sober warning to both the organizers and the chaperones: *The first kid that dies? I'll tell you what. We'll be here and all of you are going to be charged with criminal negligence causing death. Trust me.*

The parents wrestle their options and many – including people who firmly oppose the party, will chaperone anyway, reasoning their kids will be safer with the supervision than without it.

Laws governing private property make it difficult for the police to completely shut down the party. Some people say they turn a blind eye. But one year three officers set up a checkpoint outside the field, confiscating the alcohol in cars that contained no passengers over 19. They stacked cases three-high along the roadside. Then the owner of the land and a group of parent chaperones confronted the officers and an argument ensued so heated that the RCMP nearly laid arrests.

The next year, the party went ahead as planned.

The flower pots

It's 6 a.m. on a weekend morning and the Mayor of Antigonish is out for his daily walk. He loops past the St. Francis Xavier University campus and through the downtown. This is what he sees: mangled flowers hanging out of flower pots along the bridge, branches snapped off the fledgling trees that line Main Street, upended garbage bins, smashed glass and beer bottles on the street. The garden that town employees scrambled to put in before the Highland Games that summer has been pulled to shreds. He sees graffiti he swears wasn't there yesterday. He thinks of the \$40,000 town beautification budget, and wonders how much is left to fix the damage. Then he approaches the library. It's a beautiful building with monuments out front, a highlight of his downtown. He's on pins and needles. *I'm hoping, God forbid, please don't spray our new library.*



The shoebox

Without them, she couldn't do her job as an Emergency Room physician. And even with those little mental compartments, some experiences will stick with her forever. It's 11:30 p.m. and a teenage boy is driving home from work. An intoxicated man crosses the centre line and his car hits the boy's head-on.

Shoebox A: She tries to resuscitate the boy but he flatlined on impact. She pronounces him dead and breaks the news to his parents. The physician knows the driver who killed the boy was impaired but can't tell his parents until an investigation is complete. She watches as they identify their son.

Shoebox B: She walks down the hall. The driver is lying in another room. He has a fractured femur. She tells him what happened to the boy he hit. He barely registers the tragedy. He wants something for the pain. *You're going to give me something to fix my leg, right? Something inside her switches off. It has to.*

The Municipal Alcohol Project

An Overview

The stories you have just read about the impact of alcohol in Antigonish were collected during the summer of 2011 as part of an innovative project designed to understand and illuminate alcohol-related harms in three Nova Scotia municipalities.

A growing body of research paints a disturbing picture of alcohol use in Nova Scotia and across much of the world.

Per capita alcohol consumption in Nova Scotia rose 6.6% over the last 20 years.¹ Nova Scotia Liquor Commission sales have grown 56% in ten years, to hit \$579.4 million in 2010, driven in part by the addition of 47 new stores in five years.² About one in five Canadians drink amounts that exceed recommended low risk drinking guidelines.³ Alcohol ranks second behind tobacco as a cause of disease, and is widely known to contribute to trauma and social problems.⁴ Between 2002-2008, alcohol-related mortality rates rose by more than 27%.⁵

So what do these numbers look like on the ground in Nova Scotia communities? That's the question at the heart of the Municipal Alcohol Project, or MAP.

MAP has its roots in a May 2010 provincial forum that offered profound insights into the complex relationship that Nova Scotians have with alcohol. Discussions inspired by the forum clearly identified the need for municipal engagement in better understanding and reducing alcohol's harmful impacts.

Three municipalities volunteered to put themselves under the microscope: the Mayors of Bridgewater, Antigonish and Wolfville agreed to work together to document alcohol-related problems and explore opportunities for municipal solutions.

The courage and cooperation of these communities puts them at the forefront of best practices in preventing alcohol harms. The crucial role municipalities can play in reducing the negative impacts of alcohol has been well documented. In painting a compelling picture of what alcohol-related harms look like in Antigonish, the Municipal Alcohol Project can encourage municipal governments and local communities to explore and implement effective policies that reduce harms and support moderate alcohol use.

The Mayor of Antigonish and two Addiction Services staff engaged 14 key informants in focused, in-depth discussions about the impact of alcohol on their lives, jobs and communities. Key informants included representatives from municipal government, St. Francis Xavier University, the justice system, Addiction Services, health care, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, the school system, and the RCMP. Our goal was to engage community members to paint an honest, unflinching picture of the alcohol-related harms in their communities. *The Municipal Alcohol Report: Antigonish* reveals our findings.



Antigonish Fast Facts

- Population: 4,236 (8,400 when St. Francis Xavier is in session)
- Size: 2 sq miles
- Home of St. Francis Xavier University
- Economy: Service-based
- Major employers: St. Martha's Regional Hospital and St. Francis Xavier University
- Median family income: \$58,066
- Known as the Highland Heart of Nova Scotia, Antigonish is the home of the oldest continuous highland games in North America

Source: Town of Antigonish website

1. Statistics Canada, CANSIM Table 183-0019
2. Nova Scotia Liquor Commission Annual Report 2010
3. Canadian Community Health Survey 2001-2010
4. Canadian Medical Association Journal. Alcohol in Canada: Reducing the toll through focused interventions and public health policies. 2011.
5. Ibid.

The Impact of Alcohol in Antigonish

Many informants told us that alcohol is a part of Nova Scotia's culture. Enjoying an occasional drink rarely poses problems for individuals or communities. But there have been growing concerns over the past decade in public health about the harms related to alcohol consumption. Those concerns are still relevant today. In 2010, for example, there were 21 alcohol-related fatalities on provincially-maintained roadways.⁶ While overall rates of motor vehicle collisions have been declining for more than ten years, fatalities and serious injuries associated with alcohol impaired driving in Nova Scotia have remained relatively consistent.

There are many reasons people drink harmfully - sometimes to cope with social and economic pressures. Alcohol affects people from all walks of life, and, as we learned, affects our entire community. The following section provides first and second-hand accounts of alcohol-related harms in Antigonish.

A. The people most affected

The Community

"The whole community is suffering."

It's a little bit like the second-hand smoke effect: you might not be the one doing the drinking, but you're impacted simply because you're there. The negative impact of alcohol on the Antigonish community as a whole was cited in every interview we conducted.

For instance, there's the family that made 36 complaints to the RCMP because of noise and rowdy behaviour coming from young people walking toward St. Francis Xavier University campus after the downtown bars closed at 2 a.m. There's the local businessman who had to replace the same broken window numerous times. There are the senior citizens who toil away in their gardens one day, only to wake up the next morning and find their hedge busted, their tree broken and an empty beer bottle in the middle of the lawn. There is graffiti and ongoing vandalism throughout the downtown core. One key informant told us that she refused to buy a house in town on account of alcohol-related noise and disruption, and chose instead to live outside town lines.

Key informants also discussed the impact of alcohol use on the reputation of the community. They told us generations of Antigonish residents have accepted harmful alcohol use as a matter of course, and described the discomfort they felt when friends or family members from out of town came to visit: *They are absolutely stunned with the amount of drinking that goes on just as the norm.*

Families

"Alcohol is destroying the family unit."

Life partners and children were cited as among those most seriously affected by alcohol in Antigonish. During his two decades as a staff lawyer for Legal Aid, one key informant said the majority of his divorce cases were alcohol-related:



6. Lapointe, B. Fatality Statistics. Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal. 2010

Most often I would see a woman. And she's sitting there with two or three kids. The husband is working but he's drinking and spending the money and beating her up when he gets drunk. And he's a great fellow when he's sober, and a terrible fellow when he's drunk. She puts up with it for a number of years. And then finally she decides to leave...but she's got two kids and has to go back because he's got the money. The problems are just enormous.

Some key informants described individuals whose drinking threatens to destroy their lives and careers. Here is an example.

I saw a 40-year-old individual and he's having problems inside the home with alcohol. He is in a position of authority in the community and people at his work do not realize what's going on, he's able to cover up through sick time. He will never be able to drink safely. But until he figures out how to live his life without alcohol, there's going to be major problems – violence inside the home. Problems with the children. You're going to see him in the courts. You're going to see him with a DWI. And if he continues the way he's going for the next three to five years, he won't have a job.

Key informants stressed that families of all socio-economic backgrounds are affected by alcohol. We heard stories of families deeply affected by harmful alcohol use by both men and women. We also heard stories about spouses who did not recognize harmful alcohol use in their partners, and were not getting the support they or their children desperately needed.

Our key informants reported cases of children who either don't go to school, or go to school hungry, because their caregivers can't get up in the morning to help them. There are families who must cope with the loss of a loved one at the hands of a drunk driver. Members of the extended families contact addictions counselors for support related to drinking problems among their nieces or nephews. Key informants also discussed the "vicarious traumas" such as violence and job loss, that family members experience as a direct result of a loved one who is intoxicated.



B. Alcohol and Crime in Antigonish

If it wasn't for booze, we'd all be laid off.

As much as 40% of crimes committed by federal and provincial inmates in Canada are attributable to alcohol use. In 2002, the percentage of alcohol-related crimes and charges in Nova Scotia attributable to alcohol was 67.6%, compared to 66.2% for the rest of Canada, *costing the province \$78.09 million for alcohol-related crimes.*⁷

Key informants from the RCMP estimate the majority of their work is related directly or indirectly to alcohol consumption. Between September and November, an estimated 70-80% of police-attended calls are alcohol-related.

Several informants referred to a disaster that could have been: an adult woman was stopped at an intersection, asleep at the wheel. She had been drinking. Other respondents mentioned numerous cases of impaired driving causing injury and death.

Common assault, followed closely by domestic assault, were widely cited by key informants as a negative consequence of alcohol use. In fact, the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women attributes more than one-third of all domestic violence cases in Nova Scotia to alcohol or other drugs.

7. Rhem J, et al. The costs of substance use in Canada 2002. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse; 2006

As one informant put it,

That's when it all comes out. They start boozing and the anger comes out. Thirty days after Christmas when the credit card statement comes in and they're drinking, we get domestics.

One key informant who works with women and sexual abuse victims estimates 65% of the sexual assault cases in her database were perpetrated on a victim who had been drinking.

It's very scary...when they present to us a lot of times there are gaps in their memory. Perhaps they were intoxicated, perhaps they had only one drink, but they still don't remember anything. The people who perpetrate know what they're doing. Either they will intentionally put something in a drink or what's most common is they will wait for someone to be incredibly intoxicated and take advantage of them.

Mischief, vandalism, noise, causing a disturbance and unruly behaviour and graffiti were also mentioned as alcohol-related crimes in Antigonish.

C. Alcohol and Work in Antigonish

"I can think of staff members whose work performances are directly affected by alcoholism in their home."

Second-hand harm to employers – including low productivity, absenteeism as well as safety violations and workplace injuries, negatively affect the community of Antigonish.

Key informants provided numerous examples they either experienced first-hand, or witnessed in co-workers. Here are some examples.

An employee shows up in a high-pressured work environment. A few hours in, he gets a call: his spouse is inebriated somewhere and can't pick up the kids. His stress levels shoot up and he can no longer focus on what it is he was supposed to be doing. The following morning he calls in sick.

After a stressful day at work, a health worker arrives home and pours herself a glass of red wine. "Why am I drinking this and not water?" she asks herself.

A teacher battles to keep her drinking problem a secret from her colleagues.

A workplace accident occurs while a staff member is drinking on the job. A second employee is injured.

D. Alcohol and Youth in Antigonish

"We have a physics department and we also have an alcohol department."

Alcohol use by underage youth in Nova Scotia has been on a downward trend since 1995. However, Nova Scotia university students engage in heavy drinking far more than their counterparts in other provinces, with 27.2% drinking heavily at least weekly, compared to 18.4% for the rest of Canada.⁸



8. Adlaf E, Demers A, Gliksman L. Canadian Campus Survey 2004. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. 2004

While key informants rarely discussed the effect of alcohol on secondary and post-secondary students as it relates to performance, some did express concerns such as underachievement, low grades and general struggling with the demands of school.

Informants also discussed youth, student and underage drinking in other contexts. For instance, one key informant reported that a great majority of infractions of St. Francis Xavier University's student code of conduct were alcohol related, including fights, sexual assault and noise. There was the sense among some informants that students see drinking and binge drinking as a rite of passage, rather than a problem. Health workers expressed concerns that young people who consumed too much alcohol and wound up in the emergency room rarely displayed regret or concern over their actions. One health worker described it this way: "If I came into emerg and I peed my pants and vomited all over everything, I would be mortified. But the mortification is not really there anymore."

Key informants also expressed concern over nonchalant attitudes among youth about the dangers of drinking:

The hard part is, you can't really scare kids. You can say 'If you drink too much, your brain will shut of, you'll stop breathing, you'll choke on your own vomit.' They'll say: 'How many times has that happened?'

Informants expressed concern over the availability of alcohol to underage youth, saying former Grade 12 students who either attend university locally or still live in town, commonly purchase alcohol for underage drinkers. One key informant expressed concern over a practice among some families of subletting apartments from university students and offering them to their children following high school graduation. Parents do this, we were told, to offer their children a taste of independent living prior to starting university or community college.

We heard accounts of high school aged students – especially girls – drinking and attending parties on the university campus, and in some instances, informants reported cases of young girls trading sex for alcohol. Indeed, concern over the blasé attitudes about sex and alcohol among youth was prevalent throughout our discussions. As one key informant described, "We drink and we hook up. That's what they say."

Many key informants expressed concerns over drinking on campus at St. Francis Xavier University, as well as the institution's perceived reputation as a party school. In some instances, this reputation is fuelled by parents of current students, said one key informant: "Parents come in and expect that their child gets the same experience they got in the 70s when it was a free for all... that's what they want their son or daughter to have." Meanwhile, some key informants told us they felt extreme drinking and behaviours were on the rise.

E. Alcohol and Health in Antigonish

"Your emergency room is the canary of your community. Everything that is not available in your community will be experienced in the ER."

Informants cited numerous negative medical and health-related consequences related to alcohol consumption. Most often, these references were related to physical harms: vomiting, black-outs, falls, self-harm and accidental death or death by suicide. Informants also discussed the strain alcohol places on the medical system.

One of the most significant traumas related to alcohol use informants referred to are so-called "sucker punches," or innocent young people who have been beaten up by a group of intoxicated youth.



One key informant described the “incredible number” of falls that happen to elderly people who have been consuming alcohol. Medical workers have cared for young people, often “naïve drinkers,” who have gone into respiratory arrest from excessive consumption. Residents, both young and old, have experienced hypothermia from falling asleep outside after drinking. Informants also referenced a number of suicides in the community over the last 18 months, and three-quarters of these were completed while the men were under the influence of alcohol and in some cases, other drugs.

Informants also described the strain of caring for patients with severe alcohol problems:

When somebody who is a very serious alcoholic goes into severe withdrawal like delerium tremens – which is the ultimate worst – it’s as labour intensive as a major trauma. These patients are incredibly sick, and it may take you 24, 48 hours to stabilize them. And then they go out and come back again the same way.

Mental health issues are placing an enormous strain on emergency room resources, informants told us, and a majority of the mental health patients seen in the Antigonish ER “use some sort of substance.” Between such cases, as well as injuries related to alcohol or treatment for patients who have consumed too much alcohol, medical workers are sometimes too busy to care for ER patients with other serious health issues, such as cardiac problems.

F. Alcohol and Individuals in Antigonish

“Alcohol is...a soother they use to numb the feelings of inadequacy, abandonment, abuse...”

Our informants described a range of serious harms Antigonish residents experience in their personal lives as a result of alcohol. Self-medication, increased impulsivity, decreased inhibition, risky sexual behaviour, STD’s and unintended pregnancy were cited. Informants described how alcohol use in the home results in inappropriate spending of household income on alcohol instead of food or bills. The effect of alcohol use on mental health was also a concern, particularly its effects on depression, anger and low or lost self-esteem.

Key informants described young people using alcohol to cope with traumas such as the divorce of their parents, stresses from school, anxiety and depression. One counselor told us, “every student has got a story around alcohol.”

We also heard concerns that alcohol contributes to a “hyper-sexualized culture”, and numerous stories of alcohol leading to unintended sex and sexual assault, many of which are never reported.



Alcohol Consumption in Antigonish

An Overview

Who drinks?

Under-age drinkers and university students were among the most discussed cohorts, and at least one key informant expressed concern over the amount of “high risk” or heavy drinking these young people engage in. Male and female adults were the next most discussed group, followed by seniors.

What?

All forms of alcohol were mentioned during our discussions. Informants provided accounts of young people mixing energy drinks with alcohol, as well as combining drugs and alcohol.

Where?

Open liquor in public places was most often discussed, followed by private house parties and campus dorm parties. Bars, school dances, festivals and events were also cited.

How?

The purchase of alcohol for youth under 19 was frequently discussed; informants related several instances of local cabdrivers delivering alcohol to underage drinkers. Our informants expressed frequent concerns over binge drinking and general over-indulging, and made only fleeting reference to moderate drinking at social events.

When?

Thursday and Friday evenings as well as weekends were cited as problematic times for drinking. The beginning of the university academic year as well as exam time were cited as challenging times for alcohol harms. Holiday and post-holiday drinking periods were also identified.

Why?

The most cited reasons for drinking included anxiety, depression and trauma relief. The availability of alcohol, including bars over-serving, multiple retail outlets and cheap drinks were cited as contributing to consumption.



Ideas on Community Action

Our key informants put forth a range of ideas on how to address harmful alcohol use in Antigonish.



Control access

Key informants recommended controlling access to alcohol by limiting store and bar hours, increasing prices, reducing the number of liquor outlets, reducing the number of drinks purchased at "last call", and increasing the drinking age. Our informants also suggested controlling alcohol advertising both in stores and at community events.



Shift the culture

Antigonish needs to examine the current social norms around alcohol, identify acceptable and unacceptable behaviours around alcohol and shift the culture accordingly. To do this, key informants said a collaborative, multi-sector and public discussion needs to take place in order to achieve community-wide buy-in to new norms. Informants also recommended setting standards of behaviour around alcohol consumption for community leaders and providing training for those leaders in order to become more effective role models.



Educate

The vast majority of our informants discussed the need for early and ongoing education on alcohol consumption and harm to individuals and society. Further, they noted the need for ongoing education on and enforcement of, alcohol-related laws. Related to education and enforcement of alcohol-related laws, informants recommended increasing police visibility and action, including ticketing, and pressuring courts to enforce – rather than reduce – fines.



Support

Informants stressed the need to provide additional support programs in the community, including discharge follow-up and evening and weekend services. Youth, in particular, require support to break out of the alcohol-related social norms that help drive risky behaviours and unwanted or unintended sex.

Conclusions

Alcohol is part of Nova Scotia's culture. Many of the key informants we interviewed told us they drink socially and enjoy a glass of fine wine or beer as much as the next person. The issue, they told us, is not that Nova Scotians drink alcohol – it's how we drink alcohol.

A growing body of research has painted an unsettling picture of increasing alcohol use, and a disturbing pattern of alcohol-related harms and injuries. To put it simply, Nova Scotia has a drinking problem and if the trends continue, it's only going to get worse.

Talking about the problem is the first step. In reaching out to key informants in Antigonish, our goal was to determine if the trends we're seeing provincially and nationally hold true in our town.

The answer? A resounding yes.

The stories we've presented in this report saddened and sometimes shocked us. There isn't a corner of our community that alcohol doesn't reach. Families and businesses struggle to cope with alcohol-fuelled noise and property damage. Parents wrestle with tough choices as they raise their kids in a culture where underage drinking is expected, and in some cases, condoned. Young children go to school without proper food because their parents spend grocery money on alcohol. We heard stories of destroyed families, domestic and sexual violence, vandalism, lost opportunities, failed careers, tragic accidents and life-changing events.

But that wasn't all we heard. Key informants expressed a sense of rage at how our culture of alcohol is harming Antigonish. And they demanded we change our ways.

In the future, we hope to gain a clearer picture of how alcohol affects other cross-sections of the community not represented in this report. Not everyone's voice was heard.

So where do we go from here?

Community problems require community, provincial, national and global solutions. Action is required on each level. Our municipal government can help play a role in addressing alcohol related harms in Antigonish. This report provides us with a useful tool to spur more conversations.

A large body of research points to the need for strong policies around alcohol pricing, access and marketing, as necessary to reduce harms overall. We see the provincial government as one of our many partners in moving ahead with these and other best practices. It is our hope that we can build community-based, collaborative strategies that will change the culture of alcohol use in Nova Scotia.

Our community depends upon it.



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The Municipal Alcohol Project was undertaken with the support of: the Town of Antigonish, the Town of Bridgewater, the Town of Wolfville, District Health Authorities 1, 3, 7, and the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness.

The MAP Team would like to acknowledge the following people for their contribution to this project:

The community participants who generously shared their time and stories.

Carolyn Davison, Director, Addiction Services, Mental Health, Children's Services and Addiction Branch

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