TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING APPROACH TO REDUCING ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM ASSOCIATED WITH LICENSED PREMISES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Andrew Hacker
BA (Psych) (Hons)

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Signed: ________________________________________  Andrew Hacker

PhD Candidate, The University of Newcastle

July 2013
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Towards the Implementation of a Problem-oriented Policing Approach to Reducing Alcohol-related Harm Associated with Licensed Premises: Challenges and Opportunities

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SYNOPSIS

Both worldwide, and within high income countries such as Australia, alcohol misuse ranks among the 10 leading risk factors for premature mortality, and among the three leading risk factors for morbidity. Estimates for middle-income and high-income countries suggest that alcohol misuse costs such countries between 1.3% and 3.3% of gross domestic product, with much of this cost being indirect, such as productivity losses.

Alcohol-related death and harm are suggested to be mediated by mechanisms of toxicity, dependency and intoxication. Intoxication in particular is associated with acute, injurious harm with substantial evidence suggesting that, for whole populations, intoxication causally contributes to such harm.

Evidence from several high-income countries suggests that licensed premises are the setting most associated with drinking to intoxication. Licensed premises are also disproportionately associated with alcohol-related injuries, and several Australian studies suggest that such injuries are particularly associated with premises licensed as hotels (bars) and night-clubs.

In light of the associations between licensed premises, intoxication, and alcohol-related injuries several harm-reduction strategies have been developed. Such strategies broadly involve restricting the availability of alcohol (e.g. reducing trading hours, reducing licensed premises density, increasing the minimum legal drinking age) and/or modifying the licensed premises environment (e.g. altering the physical environment, managing aggression, implementing responsible beverage service programs, implementing multi-component interventions). Evaluations of such strategies have highlighted enhanced policing as a key element contributing to their effectiveness.

However, while enhancing the policing of licensed premises has been suggested to be a promising harm-reduction strategy, the effectiveness of such enhancement per se is yet to
be demonstrated. Also, current routine policing of licensed premises has been suggested to be less than optimal, with evidence suggesting that such policing does not adequately focus on those supplying alcohol (relative to focusing on individual consumers) and is not conducted consistently between local jurisdictions.

In light of limitations in the current policing of licensed premises, and the suggested promise of enhancing such policing, one approach that has been suggested as a best practice approach is that of problem-oriented policing. While recognising the need for police to respond to crimes that have occurred, problem-oriented policing emphasises developing preventive interventions and stresses that such development occur in an empirical fashion. The approach is iterative, and it’s operationalization is most commonly described by the acronym SARA; *scanning* to detect recurring patterns of events, *analysing* data to determine what underlying ‘problems’ are driving such patterns and what responses might most effectively address them, *responding* based on such analysis, and *assessing* the effectiveness of responses in reducing crime.

The application of problem-oriented policing to the policing of licensed premises faces several challenges. First, changes in practice associated with its adoption have been suggested to require investment in explicit strategies to support organisational change. However, evidence regarding the effectiveness of such strategies in supporting the adoption of problem-oriented policing is limited. Second, it has been suggested that police have limited capacity to undertake in-depth analyses regarding alcohol-related harm, limiting the likelihood of successfully adopting an approach that emphasises empirical analysis. Third, while problem-oriented policing emphasises multi-strategic and proactive interventions, evidence is limited as to the range of strategies police undertake with licensed premises, with research to-date having focused solely on strategies involving formal law enforcement. Fourth, while there is growing evidence regarding the
effectiveness of problem-oriented policing in general, such evidence is limited with regard to reducing harm associated with licensed premises in particular.

In light of suggestions that adopting a problem-oriented approach to policing licensed premises may reduce alcohol-related harm, and challenges to its adoption as outlined above, the studies presented in this thesis aimed to:

1. assess current practices regarding the policing of licensed premises by those primarily responsible for such policing in New South Wales, Australia.
2. evaluate the effectiveness of an organisational change intervention in enhancing police recording of alcohol-related information.
3. determine the types of policing strategies applied to licensed premises associated with alcohol-related harms, and the relationship between levels of alcohol-related harm associated with individual premises and the application of various policing strategies.
4. assess the feasibility, acceptability and potential effectiveness of a problem-oriented policing approach to reducing alcohol-related harms associated with licensed premises.

While, overall, this thesis attempts to add to the evidence base regarding the implementation of a problem-oriented policing approach to reducing alcohol-related harm associated with licensed premises, it should be noted that chapters 2 to 5 have been written as discrete studies in the style of a journal manuscript.

Given that a preliminary step in planning how to best adopt new practices is to assess alignment between intended practice changes and existing practices, the qualitative, interview-based study described in Chapter 2 examines four aspects of current policing of licensed premises in New South Wales, Australia: consistency in the policing of licensed premises between local jurisdictions; police approaches to identifying alcohol-related harms associated with licensed premises; strategies police apply to reduce alcohol-related
harms associated with licensed premises; and factors police consider when selecting strategies to reduce alcohol-related harms associated with licensed premises.

The study found, first, that police reported limited consistency between local jurisdictions in the policing of licensed premises. However, they expressed support for improving such consistency, provided that this was not at the expense of professional discretion. Second, police reported identifying harms associated with licensed premises through using multiple information sources. This approach was, in part, due to limitations regarding alcohol-related information available from police information systems. Police also reported limited analysis of gathered information. Third, response strategies police reported using to reduce alcohol-related harm generally aligned with evidence regarding effectiveness. However, police reported a limited range of responses, and did not report use of several response strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness. Fourth, police reported that they consider several local factors when selecting responses. However, they did not report consideration of research evidence or crime prevention theory when developing responses.

The results of the study suggest several areas of alignment between current practice and problem-oriented policing: police support for greater consistency, routine detection of harm patterns, use of responses that are consistent with evidence of effectiveness, and tailoring response after considering local factors. However, the results also suggest that adopting problem-oriented policing would require enhancing the capacity of police: to undertake problem-oriented analyses, including consideration of theories of crime prevention and research evidence regarding a broader range of strategies with demonstrated effectiveness.

Chapter 3 highlights, first, that many police information systems lack capacity to record data that could describe patterns of alcohol-related harm in a way that would meaningfully support the adoption of a problem-oriented approach to the policing of
licensed premises. Second, the chapter synthesises two frameworks that have been proposed to facilitate changes in service delivery practice, diffusion of innovations theory and organisational development theory, and describes five broad strategies to increase the likelihood of successfully adopting changes in practice. Third the chapter highlights the limited available evidence regarding the effectiveness of organisational change strategies in supporting the adoption of problem-oriented policing or in enhancing information-technology systems within police services.

Using a three-stage, multiple-baseline, stepped wedge study design, the study described in Chapter 3 evaluated the use of the five broad organisational change strategies to support the implementation of enhanced alcohol-related information recording. This information essentially allows associations to be made between police-attended incidents involving intoxicated individuals and the locations where such individuals last consumed alcohol, including specific licensed premises. The study found that, for an exemplar incident category (assaults), the implementation of the five organisational change strategies was associated with enhanced police recording of alcohol-related information that was immediate, sustained (up to 45 months) and replicated on three occasions. The levels of alcohol-related information recording adopted into routine police practice were comparable to those reported in shorter-term research studies, and the results suggest that the organisational change strategies can successfully make available alcohol-related crime information that could support a problem-oriented policing approach to licensed premises and alcohol-related harm.

Chapter 4 highlights that problem-oriented policing suggests that police be multi-strategic in their responses to reduce alcohol-related harm, and describes a range of police responses on a continuum from those that attempt to achieve voluntary compliance through to formal law enforcement where such compliance has not been forthcoming. The chapter reviews evidence regarding policing strategies undertaken with licensed premises
highlighting that, despite the range of responses police might employ, such evidence has focused exclusively on formal law enforcement activities.

To address this gap in knowledge, a retrospective descriptive study examined policing practices undertaken with a sample of ‘high-risk’ licensed premises associated with alcohol-related harm. Identification of these licensed premises was based on the enhanced alcohol-related information introduced as part of the study described in Chapter 3. The study presented in Chapter 4 found that police were generally multi-strategic in responding to high-risk licensed premises, with the number and range of strategies employed increasing in association with the quantum of harm associated with licensed premises (as measured by numbers of intoxicated people involved in police-attended incidents to have last consumed alcohol at such licensed premises). However, the relative prevalence of various strategies, particularly a relatively lower use of preventive, educational strategies and relatively high use of strategies to increase perceived police presence, suggests that there is opportunity to ensure police adopt a broader range of strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness.

Chapter 5 reviews three bodies of evidence suggesting that problem-oriented policing may potentially reduce alcohol-related harm associated with licensed premises: evidence that problem-oriented policing can effectively reduce crime generally, evidence that generally enhancing the policing of licensed premises can contribute to reducing alcohol-related harm, and limited evidence directly assessing the effectiveness of adopting a problem-oriented approach to reducing alcohol-related harm associated with licensed premises.

In light of such limited direct evidence, Chapter 5 describes a pilot randomised controlled trial of the feasibility, acceptability and potential effectiveness of an intervention to facilitate adoption of a problem-oriented approach to the policing of licensed premises. The intervention employed similar organisational change strategies as employed in Chapter 3. However, consistent with the pilot nature of the study, their deployment was
limited to operating primarily through a centralised police business unit, the function of which was to provide support to local jurisdictions throughout the state in regard to addressing alcohol-related harm. The study found evidence for feasibility with regard to local police attending training and their capacity to identify: problematic licensed premises, associated underlying problems, and a range of responses. Feasibility was less evident with regard to police capacity to implement responses. Problem-oriented policing, and the training and resources provided were found to be acceptable to participating police. Relative to the control group, no significant change was observed in the number of intoxicated people associated with hotspot licensed premises in the intervention group. The chapter considers several factors that may have contributed to this lack of effect.

Chapter 6 summarises the findings of the previous chapters, considers their implications and makes suggestions for further research and policing practice in four areas: enhancing alcohol-related information systems; enhancing police analysis of underlying problems; enhancing police responding to alcohol-related harm; and the need for organisational change strategies to support implementation of a problem-oriented approach to the policing of licensed premises.

In terms of enhancing information systems, the studies presented in this thesis suggest that the deployment of organisational change strategies can enhance the availability of alcohol-related information, which can then be used to identify problematic licensed premises as a last place of alcohol-consumption for intoxicated patrons. The availability of such information provides opportunities to more efficiently conduct surveillance of harms associated with licensed premises, and deploy limited resources to reduce such harms. The chapter suggests that future research might examine similarly enhancing the availability of alcohol-related information within other services, for example hospital emergency departments, and potential opportunities for harm reduction that might arise from the sharing of such information between services that need to respond to alcohol-
related harm. Future research might also examine extending such information recording to gathering details regarding locations of alcohol consumption other than licensed premises, and locations where alcohol was purchased. Such information recording may, for example, assist to effectively target interventions toward alcohol-related harms in the domestic setting, or in relation to underage drinking.

Chapter 6 highlights that, while the availability of enhance alcohol-related information is important if a problem-oriented approach is to be adopted to the policing of licensed premises, it does not, of itself, result in the adoption of such an approach, including police adoption of problem-oriented analysis. Findings presented in this thesis suggest that there is opportunity to enhance the analytical capacity of police with regard to addressing alcohol-related harm, including increasing capacity to consider both available research evidence and theories of crime prevention. Improving such capacity has the potential to result in more effective responding, and hence greater reductions in alcohol-related harm associated with licensed premises. The chapter describes several suggestions that have been made as to how such capacity might be improved, and suggests that there may be benefit in further research examining the effectiveness of alternative organisational models for implementing such enhanced capacity.

In addition to suggesting that there is opportunity to enhance police consideration of evidence and theory when developing responses, findings in this thesis suggest there is also opportunity to enhance the consistency of police responding to licensed premises. Chapter 6 discusses suggestions that have been made as to how such consistency might be improved, and how the availability of enhanced alcohol-related information might contribute to such suggestions, including facilitating the development of key performance indicators of alcohol-related harm reduction, and being used as a tool for assessing the effectiveness of police responses.
The contrasting findings presented particularly in Chapters 3 & 5 of this thesis with regard to the observed effectiveness of organisational change interventions suggest several opportunities for further research. From the perspective of diffusion of innovations theory, the contrasting findings may suggest several opportunities to reduce perceptions that problem-oriented policing is complex, and to increase its familiarity, with a view to enhancing the likelihood of adoption. From an organisational development perspective, the contrasting findings may suggest that adequate resourcing is required to ensure that organisational change support strategies are effective.