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# Use of research in local alcohol policy-making

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *On-premise trading hours are generally decided at the local level. The purpose of this paper is to identify relevant advocacy coalitions and to assess to what extent and how these coalitions used research in the alcohol policy-making process concerning changes in on-premise trading hours in Norway.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Theory-driven content analyses were conducted, applying data from city council documents (24 Norwegian cities) and Norwegian newspaper articles and broadcast interviews (n = 138) in 2011-2012.*

**Findings** – *Two advocacy coalitions with conflicting views and values were identified. Both coalitions used research quite extensively – in the public debate and in the formal decision-making process – but in different ways. The restrictive coalition, favouring restricted trading hours and emphasising public health/safety, included the police and temperance movements and embraced research demonstrating the beneficial health/safety effects of restricting trading hours. The liberal coalition of conservative politicians and hospitality industry emphasised individual freedom and industry interests and promoted research demonstrating negative effects on hospitality industry turnover. This coalition also actively discredited the research demonstrating the beneficial health/safety effects of restricting trading hours.*

**Originality/value** – *Little is known about how local alcohol policy-making processes are informed by research-based knowledge. This study is the first to analyse how advocacy coalitions use research to influence local alcohol policy-making.*

**Keywords** *Content analysis, Advocacy coalitions, Alcohol policy-making, Local level, On-premise trading hours, Research utilization*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

Alcohol consumption is, next to tobacco use, the most important risk factor for loss of healthy life years in high-income countries (WHO, 2009) and effective alcohol policy measures can save lives and reduce alcohol-related health and social costs (Babor *et al.*, 2010). Several of the most important effective alcohol policy measures as regulations of outlet density and trading hours are often decided at the local level (Babor *et al.*, 2010). Price regulations constitute another important effective policy (Babor *et al.*, 2010) but as these are more likely to erode due to border trade, it is assumed that local-level policies will be increasingly important (Giesbrecht, 2007).

There is now substantial evidence of the effectiveness of alcohol availability regulations at the local level (Babor *et al.*, 2010; Hahn *et al.*, 2010), however, there is little knowledge about the policy-making processes at the local level (MacLennan *et al.*, 2013). While there are insights into the policy-making processes at the national and international levels regarding drug policy (Ritter, 2009) and alcohol policy (Ugland, 2003a, b; Princen, 2007), these are not necessarily transferable to alcohol policy processes at the local level.

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In studies of the effectiveness of alcohol policies it is frequently argued – or implied – that findings of such studies are important to inform the making of alcohol policy. However, studies of policy-making in various areas, including drug policy-making (Ritter, 2009) suggest that research findings and evidence of policy effectiveness are of modest importance in the policy-making process. So far, very little is known about the role of research in alcohol policy-making processes at the local level. This study aims to fill some of the knowledge gap in this respect.

### *The case of on-premise trading hours*

In the present study we address decisions on on-premise trading hours in Norwegian cities as a study case. In Norway, decisions about on-premise trading hours are made at the municipality level and they are generally made some months after a new city council is elected, which is every four years due to fixed election dates. This implies that there are regular opportunities for policy change, or in Kingdon's (1995) terminology: the policy window opens regularly and predictably (Rossow and Baklien, 2014). Moreover, changes in on-premise trading hours occur widely and frequently; during a five year period (2004-2009), 24 of the 30 largest cities in Norway had changed their policy on on-premise trading hours and five of these cities changed their policy twice (Rossow and Baklien, 2014). Local decisions on trading hours pertain to closing hours which are limited by the national maximum closing hours; until 03.00 a.m. This leaves a somewhat limited political scope of action and changes in trading hours are consequently of fairly modest magnitude, that is, generally in the range of 0.5-1.5 hours (Rossow and Baklien, 2014).

Closing hours for on-premise alcohol sales seem not only to have been subject to more changes than any other part of local alcohol policy-making in Norway over the past ten to 15 years, but also subject to more political debate, and more media attention (Rossow and Baklien, 2014). The strong debate reflects conflicting interests and values, between political parties and between other actors as for instance the hospitality industry, NGOs in the alcohol and drug field and the police (Rossow and Baklien, 2014).

Research on the effects of changes in on-premise trading hours was until a few years ago conducted in countries different from Norway and mostly outside the Nordic countries. Most studies pertained to larger policy changes than those generally seen in Norway (more than two hours changes) (Hahn *et al.*, 2010) and the relevance of these studies for Norwegian policy-making has therefore been questioned. However, in the autumn 2011 and winter 2011/2012 two studies from Norway were published on effects of changes in on-premise trading hours. One study (published on-line September 2011) demonstrated that changes in trading hours impacted significantly on violence rates at night time on weekends, a reduction in closing hours led to reduced violence rates, and vice versa (Rossow and Norström, 2012). The other showed that a reduction in closing hours led to a significant reduction in hospitality industry turnover (Melberg and Schøyen, 2012). Thus, the two studies were suitable to feed arguments in opposite directions regarding on-premise trading hours.

### *Theoretical approaches*

Several theoretical approaches were regarded as useful for guiding data collection and analyses. In particular, we have applied the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999) as a model of network in policy-making and we have applied Carol Weiss' conceptual model of how research informs policy (Baklien, 1983; Weiss, 1999). Policy-making processes normally involve a wide variety of actors, including politicians, civil servants, interest group representatives, policy experts, researchers and journalists. Alcohol policy-making processes at the local level are no different. The various types of actors involved are often portrayed in an adversarial perspective in the alcohol policy literature. Conflicts between business interests and researchers have, for instance, been subject to much attention (Babor, 2009; McCambridge *et al.*, 2013). However, instead of treating the various actors as fundamentally different, the ACF provides a fruitful and more realistic alternative (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999), interest configurations in policy areas can be understood in terms of a number of competing advocacy coalitions made up of combinations of actors that share a set of policy beliefs which they seek to translate into government

programmes. This implies that the crucial dividing lines in a given policy area are not between different types of actors but between different coalitions of actors.

The ACF explicitly identifies beliefs as the causal driver for political behaviour (Weible *et al.*, 2009) and these are organised into three tiers. The deep core of the belief system includes fundamental norms and beliefs which apply to virtually all policy domains (actors' positions on the familiar left/right scale, for instance). At the next level, the policy core beliefs represent basic policy positions and strategies for attaining core values within a specific policy domain. They include fundamental value priorities, such as the relative importance of economic development vs other priorities, basic perceptions concerning the general seriousness of a problem and its principal causes and strategies for realizing core values, such as the appropriate division of authority between governments and markets, and the basic policy instruments to be used. The specificity of policy core beliefs makes them ideal for forming coalitions (Weible *et al.*, 2009). Finally, the secondary aspects of the belief system comprise a large set of narrower beliefs and preferences. Compared to deep core and policy core beliefs, secondary beliefs are most likely to change over time (Weible *et al.*, 2009). The specific question of small changes in on-premise closing hours may be said to fall within the secondary aspects of the belief system of the advocacy coalitions regarding alcohol. However, this narrow issue is linked to more fundamental policy core beliefs concerning alcohol's role in society. More specifically, it is related to the question of whether increased availability of alcohol leads to increased alcohol-related harm in society and the relative importance of hospitality industry interests vs public health and safety priorities.

Based on this thinking, the field of alcohol can be seen as a policy sub-system dominated by two advocacy coalitions that are structured around public health and social policy objectives on the one hand, and commercial objectives on the other. Both coalitions consist of politicians, civil servants, interest group representatives, policy experts, researchers and journalists who differ in terms of deep core and policy core beliefs. For instance, different types of politicians will belong to different advocacy coalitions depending on different ideological identifications or sectorial affiliations.

A central idea in ACF is that information and research play a central role in policy-making. However, "coalition members will resist information suggesting that their deep core or policy core beliefs may be invalid and/or unattainable, and they will use formal policy analyses to buttress and elaborate those beliefs (or attack their opponents)" (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 123). Carol Weiss (1999) found that research evidence may be used in different ways and serve different purposes, for instance to legitimise political points of view or as political ammunition. In this paper, an attempt will be made to compare how and to what extent the advocacy coalitions used research evidence for instrumental problem-solving vs for political purposes. In the first case, research is directly and rationally applied to an impending decision in order to solve a policy problem. In the second case, actors have already taken stands and are generally not receptive to new research evidence. However, research can still be used to legitimise political points of view or as "ammunition for the side that finds its conclusions congenial and supportive" (Weiss, 1979, p. 429).

Against this back-drop, the purpose of the present study was to identify relevant advocacy coalitions and to assess to what extent and how these coalitions used research in the alcohol policy-making process concerning changes in on-premise closing hours in Norway.

## Methods

The two research publications on effects of changes in on-premise trading hours in Norway (Rossow and Norström, 2012; Melberg and Schøyen, 2012) were published shortly after the election of new city councils in Norway in September 2011 and therefore coincided with the early stages of the policy-making processes towards decisions on alcohol trading hours (and other local alcohol policy issues). This study covered the 24 largest cities in Norway that had changed their policy on on-premise trading hours in 2004 and/or in 2008 (Rossow and Baklien, 2014) and the policy-making processes in these cities in 2011/2012.

Rather than obtaining retrospective assessments of the policy-making processes two sources of contemporaneous data were applied. Norwegian media coverage in terms of newspaper articles

and editorials and TV and radio interviews available in text formats were used as one source of information to identify advocacy coalitions, their actors and core beliefs and arguments as portrayed in the public sphere. These data were also used to assess to what extent research on effects of changes in on-premise trading hours was mentioned and in which ways this research was used by various actors in the public debate. City council documents covering both the preparatory stages and final decision-making stage served as source of information to assess to what extent this research was used in the policy decision phase, in which ways it was used, and by whom. These data were used also to assess whether the identified advocacy coalition actors and core beliefs were consistent.

Newspaper articles and editorials and broadcast interviews in text format were obtained from electronic searches in an electronic media database (Retriever). Free text searches were conducted, using “on-premise trading hour\*” (“skjenketid\*”) and “research\*” (“forskning\*”) in the electronic archive. Publishing date was restricted to the period from 1 September 2011 through 31 December 2012. All retrieved texts were reviewed for relevance and a total of 138 newspaper articles or editorials and broadcast interviews were included for analyses. These were in part from national broadcasting or larger national newspapers presenting research on on-premise trading hours as news and in part from local newspapers mainly presenting research in relation to the local policy on sales hours for alcohol.

City council documents are by Norwegian law generally open to the public. Relevant documents related to the city councils’ decisions on on-premise trading hours included all hearing statements, committee meeting agendas and protocols in the preparatory stages; the city councillors’ proposals and the meeting agendas and protocols for the city council meetings and the adopted alcohol action plans (AAP). For 21 cities all relevant documents were accessed through their websites (which are diversely organised), for two cities the documents were retrieved after request to the city council administration and for one city both ways to access the documents were used. The policy process differed across municipalities as did the organisation and format of the documents. Thus, for some cities there were several committees and many hearings involved in the preparatory stages of the process and separate documents were produced for the various stages of the process (e.g. agendas and minutes for each meeting, hearings and consultation statements), whereas for other cities the process was more simple and relevant documentation could be found in a few documents. The documents were retrieved from a total of 50 URLs and nine additional documents were obtained per mail from three city council administrations.

Content analysis combined an inductive approach with a directed procedure (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Patterns and categories were identified through a systematic reading of the policy and media documents governed by the theoretical approaches. First, advocacy coalitions were identified; who the actors were and what their core beliefs were (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Next, the extent to which relevant research occurred in public debate and in policy documents was assessed. Finally, an analysis of how research was used by the identified coalitions was conducted, allowing new patterns to emerge from the data.

## Findings

### *The advocacy coalitions*

Two advocacy coalitions were identified. The restrictive coalition, favouring restricted trading hours, consisted mainly of politicians, local police officers as well as representatives of the temperance movement. Occasionally, health personnel made statements in line with this. Politicians from the Christian Democratic Party were consistently in the restrictive coalition. Core beliefs of the restrictive coalition included social responsibility and concerns regarding public health and safety issues:

We do not want extended on-premise trading hours. We fear that this will lead to increase in violence (Chief police officer, local newspaper).

A health and social policy oriented alcohol policy takes precedence over industry interests (Local politician, Christian Democratic Party, local newspaper).

Cutting on-premise trading hours will make our cities safer (Temperance youth organization leader, national newspaper).

In line with their statements in media, the Christian Democratic Party made proposals and voted for restricted trading hours in the preparatory stages and in the city council meetings.

The liberal advocacy coalition, favouring extended trading hours, consisted of hospitality industry actors (e.g. owners, employees and their organisations) and politicians, representing the Conservative Party and the Progress Party. Their core beliefs included liberal values such as individual freedom to choose, and the importance of lively city centres:

It should be up to the individual to decide when they would like to have a drink, and up to the pubs/bars to decide the opening hours (Local politician, Conservative Party, local newspaper).

The liberal advocacy coalition also had the economic interests of the hospitality industry at heart:

We were furious when we saw this. [...] The proposal (about restricted on-premise trading hours) will be a disaster for the bars and pubs in the city and will ruin the workplaces for many people (Leader of the local youth organization of the Conservative Party, Local newspaper).

Earlier closing hours is a shot in the dark. It will only cause problems for the many actors in the hospitality industry, because turnover will decrease (Leader of local hospitality industry organization, Local newspaper).

Correspondingly, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party proposed and voted for extended trading hours in the preparatory stages and in the city council meetings.

Politicians representing the four other major political parties in Norway (the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, the Centre Party and the Liberal Party, expressed different views on on-premise trading hours at the local level and neither of these political parties can therefore be considered as part of any of these two advocacy coalitions. Other actors in the policy-making process included the health services and while health personnel have expressed views on alcohol trading hours, these views do not constitute a coherent pattern falling into either of the two identified coalitions.

### *The advocacy coalitions' use of research in the policy debate*

The restrictive coalition referred to research – both in general and in particular to the Norwegian study – demonstrating associations between on-premise trading hours and violence rates, to support their view on restricted trading hours:

Recent research confirms this picture. Violence and on-premise trading hours are associated. Even small changes in on-premise trading hours lead to significant changes in violence rates (Local chief police officer, local newspaper).

The police and the research are clear regarding the reduction in violence rates in response to restricted trading hours. When on-premise closing hours are restricted by one hour, violence decreases by 17 percent. An association between violent crime incidents and on-premise closing hours has been demonstrated. I think we should do something about it [...] and the police says restricted trading hours is one of the most important measures to prevent violence (Local politician Christian Democratic Party, local newspaper).

Research from several European countries shows that restricted on-premise trading hours has a positive effect. It shows that if you close an hour earlier, there will be less violence (Leader of umbrella temperance organization, TV2 news).

Compared to the study on trading hours and violence (Rossow and Norström, 2012), the study demonstrating effects of restricted trading hours on hospitality industry turnover (Melberg and Schøyen, 2012) had far less media coverage. No comments on this study and the likely economic consequences for the hospitality industry were made by any actors identified in the restrictive advocacy coalition.

Actors in the liberal coalition generally disagreed with statements that on-premise trading hours influence on violence and claimed that there are statistics showing the opposite

or that there are other, or even more, important factors than restricted trading hours that may affect violence rates:

Unless you ban bars and pubs completely, there will be drunkenness and nuisance on the weekends. On-premise trading hours are not the important thing. Rather make sure there are more visible police officers on the streets at times when nuisance peaks (Bartender, Local newspaper).

Notably, the hospitality industry commissioned a report from a consulting agency to assess the publication on on-premise trading hours and violence (Rossow and Norström, 2012) and they used this assessment as basis for expressions of mistrust and disbelief in the research and the researchers:

Significant and decisive weaknesses in the research report have been detected. It simply cannot be used as basis for political decisions (Director 1 of hospitality industry organization, national newspaper).

However, statements like this were, to some extent, countered by actors in the restrictive coalition:

The hospitality industry should stop going against research that is not in their interest (Local temperance movement leader, local newspaper).

Moreover, the liberal advocacy coalition, and in particular the hospitality industry, gave numerous statements characterising the publication as commissioned work, thus implying distrust in the researchers' independence and integrity. Also politicians representing the two political parties that are generally in favour of extended trading hours, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, expressed mistrust in the research findings and argued they were unlikely:

Believing that a violent perpetrator decides not to assault because it's 2 am and not 3 am, is naive, to put it mildly (Conservative Party's youth organization leader, national radio news).

The research has been slaughtered [...] It seems that one has tried to produce a report concluding that earlier closing hours are sensible, irrespective of the costs (Local Progress Party leader, local newspaper).

While there was much less media coverage of the study demonstrating effects on hospitality industry turnover and also little debate on the topic, the study findings were retrieved and commented upon by the hospitality industry. No distrust was expressed regarding the research or the researchers, who worked at the same research institute as the mistrusted authors of the publication on violence. On the contrary, the industry argued the research findings should have political implications:

A reduction in turnover by 12 per cent is dramatic for our members. [...]. It would be most unfortunate if the government were to put restrictions on the municipalities' right to let bars and pubs trade until 3 am (Director 1, Hospitality industry organization, National newspaper).

In both coalitions, use of research was characterised by consistency in arguments between the various actors. This consistency was found also in hearing statements and proposals in the policy documents.

### *The role of research in the policy decision phase*

A review of all relevant documents from the policy processes regarding the city councils' decisions on on-premise trading hours, showed that in 12 of 24 cities, research was used for making an argument and providing a proposal (Table I). Most often – in ten of these 12 cities – recent Norwegian research showing beneficial effect of restricted trading hours on violence rates (Rossow and Norström, 2012) was used as an argument in support of restrictions or to maintain current restrictions in trading hours (Table II). In one of the ten cities, research was also used in an opposite way: the hospitality industry expressed mistrust in the Norwegian study and used this to support a proposal on extended trading hours. Notably, there was no reference to the Norwegian study on trading hours and pub/bar revenue (Melberg and Schøyen, 2012) in any of the city council documents, which may reflect the modest media coverage of this study.

In two of the ten cities where research was used to support restricted trading hours, this was reflected only in hearing statements, whereas in eight cities this research was reflected also in the city councillor's proposal and/or the adopted alcohol action plan (AAP) (Table II).

**Table I** Overview of changes in on-premise trading hours from 2004 to 2012 and use of research in policy decision phase in 2011/2012 by city

City	Change in on-premise trading hours			Research used in policy decision phase 2011-2012?
	Change in 2004	Change in 2008/2009	Change in 2011/2012	
Arendal		03:00-02:00		No
Bergen	02:00-03:00	03:00-02:30	02:30-03:00	No
Bodø	02:30-03:00			Yes <sup>a</sup>
Drammen	02:30-03:00			Yes <sup>a</sup>
Fredrikstad		02:30-01:30	01:30-02:00	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Gjøvik		02:00-01:30	01:30-02:00	Yes <sup>a</sup>
Halden		03:00-02:00		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Haugesund		01:30-01:00		No
Hamar		02:30-01:30		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Horten		03:00-02:00		May be <sup>d</sup>
Kongsberg		03:00-02:00		No
Kristiansand		03:00-02:00		No
Kristiansund N		03:00-02:00		No
Larvik		02:30-02:00		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Lillehammer	02:00-03:00			No
Molde	02:00-03:00	03:00-02:00	02:00-03:00	No
Moss		03:00-02:00		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Sandefjord		02:30-02:00		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Sandnes	01:30-03:00	03:00-01:30		Yes <sup>a</sup>
Sarpsborg		02:30-02:00/01:30		Yes <sup>b</sup>
Stavanger	01:30-03:00	03:00-01:30	01:30-03:00	No
Trondheim	02:00-03:00	03:00-02:00		Yes <sup>c</sup>
Tønsberg		03:00-02:00	02:00-03:00	No
Ålesund	01:00-03:00			No

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Research on effects of trading hours on violence/nuisance, including the Norwegian study (Rossow and Norström, 2012), interpreted as beneficial effect of restricted trading hours; <sup>b</sup>research on effects of trading hours on violence/nuisance, but only international research. The policy processes in these two cities took place prior to the publication of the Norwegian studies (Rossow and Norström, 2012; Melberg and Schøyen, 2012); <sup>c</sup>norwegian research on effects of trading hours on violence (Rossow and Norström, 2012), interpreted differently – as beneficial effect of restricted trading hours by temperance organisation, whereas the hospitality industry expressed explicit mistrust in the findings; <sup>d</sup>the proposal was to restrict closing hours on the grounds that the police and “experts” had stated this is effective in preventing violence. It is not clear whether “experts” refer to researchers and research evidence or other expertise in the field

When research on trading hours and violence was used in the city councillors' proposals to support restricted trading hours, other arguments and concerns were also forwarded. Statements from the police were included as supportive arguments for keeping restricted trading hours. Also, the hospitality industry's concerns about consequences for turnover and trade leakage to neighbouring cities were generally addressed and thus both *pro et contra* arguments were considered. These conflicting interests were generally clearly acknowledged in the city councillors' assessments in the proposals to the city councils.

In most of the ten cities where research was used as an argument to restrict or maintain restricted trading hours, existing restrictions were maintained (in seven cities) or trading hours were slightly extended but still one hour shorter than maximum limit (in one city) (Table II). In these cities various arguments and factors appeared relevant for the political decision. These include local police reports on favourable experiences of reduced violence with restricted trading hours, similar trading hours in neighbouring cities and hospitality industry not (much) affected by restricted trading hours added to the research-based argument for restricted trading hours (Table II).

In two cities (Bodø and Drammen), research-supported proposals to restrict trading hours (which were until 3 am), gained support only from a minority of city council representatives. In these cities, the political parties in power were the two political parties in the liberal coalition (plus votes



**Table II** Use of research in policy-making phase in 2012 by city

City	Research used – in which documents?	Research used – in which way?	Decision in 2011/2012	Relevant factors for the decision
Bodø	Proposal to CC	Argument to restrict TH	Kept extended TH to 3:00	Conservative Party and Progress Party in political majority. Proposal to restrict TH in conflict with their political programme
Drammen	Proposal to CC	Argument to restrict TH	Kept extended TH to 03:00	Conservative Party and Progress Party in political majority. Proposal to restrict TH in conflict with their political programme
Gjøvik	Proposal to CC	Argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00 <sup>a</sup>	An additional argument for keeping restricted TH was that the hospitality industry was not much affected by restricted TH
Halden	Proposed and adopted AAP	Argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00	CC took a pragmatic approach: no need to change trading hours because the issue was thoroughly dealt with four years earlier
Hamar	Proposal CC	Argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 01:30	Additional arguments for keeping restricted TH were: favourable experiences re reduced violence with restricted TH, similar TH in neighbouring cities, and hospitality industry not much affected by restricted TH
Larvik	Police HS	Argument to further restrict TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00	Proposal to keep TH based on balancing public health interests and hospitality industry interests
Moss	Proposal to CC	Argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00	Proposal to keep TH based on balancing public health interests and hospitality industry interests
Sandefjord	Police and temperance movement HS, proposal to CC	Argument to further restrict TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00	Proposal to further restrict TH was not adopted. Hospitality industry claimed to be affected by restricted TH and Conservative Party and Progress Party were in majority in CC
Sandnes	Proposed and adopted AAP	Argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 01:30	The police's favourable experiences with restricted TH was an additional argument to keep restricted TH. The issue was not much debated in preparatory committee meetings
Trondheim	Hospitality industry and temperance movement HS	Mistrust in research an argument to extend TH, trust in research an argument to keep restricted TH	Kept restricted TH to 02:00	The police's favourable experiences with restricted TH was an additional argument to keep restricted TH

**Notes:** CC, city council; TH, trading hours; AAP, alcohol action plan; HS, hearing statement. <sup>a</sup>Trading hours were extended by 30 minutes (from 01:30 to 02:00) but are considered restrictive compared to the proposal from the Progress Party and the Conservative Party of extending trading hours to 03:00

from representatives of the Liberal Party) and they have consistently argued in favour of extended trading hours.

Among all 24 cities included in this study, four cities extended on-premise trading hours to the maximum limit at 3 am. Research was not used for making an argument or to support a proposal in any of these four cities.

## Discussion

Our analyses of the policy processes preceding local-level decisions on one specific alcohol policy measure revealed two distinct advocacy coalitions, holding opposite and conflicting policy views and values regarding on-premise trading hours. Actors in both coalitions used recent research in support of their views and arguments and thus research findings were differently adopted, interpreted and embraced. Moreover, research was used explicitly as basis for arguments and proposals in the policy decision-making phase in some of the cities we studied.

While most previous studies on the role of research in alcohol and drug policy-making pertain to the national or the international level, focus here is on the local or sub-national level. The present study offers new insights and knowledge in several respects. First, although it has been argued

that there are several obstacles to the use of research in local policy-making due to lack of expertise and resources (Smith, 1996), this paper illustrates that research played a role in both the local debate and in the decision-making phase on alcohol availability.

Second, we illustrate that the two research publications on the effects of changes in on-premise closing hours were used the same year as they were published. This can in part be explained by the fact that alcohol in general, and on-premise trading hours in particular, is a highly politicised topic in Norway with much media attention (Rossow and Baklien, 2014), which pertained also to the research publications in question. Moreover, in this case, the research findings were fairly simple and could easily be conveyed, which facilitated their use (Stevens, 2011). Also the fact that “the policy window opened” (Kingdon, 1995) and the policy-making processes occurred about the time of the publication of the studies and media attention, adds to the facilitation of use of research. Third, this study addresses how specific research findings, rather than a broader research area – which is likely more often the case – (Ritter, 2009; Maclennan *et al.*, 2013) was used in policy-making processes.

Although there were clear differences between the two advocacy coalitions’ use of research, the research evidence was mainly used by the advocacy coalitions to legitimise points of view (Weiss, 1979), where the actors had already taken stands and were generally not receptive to new research evidence that challenged their core beliefs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). While the restrictive advocacy coalition referred to research demonstrating the beneficial health/safety effects of restricting trading hours, this coalition devoted little attention to the research that showed that a reduction in closing hours led to a reduction in hospitality turnover, which is compatible with ACF predictions (Weible *et al.*, 2009). The liberal coalition, on the other hand, promoted the results demonstrating negative effects on hospitality industry turnover. At the same time, and to a greater extent, they actively tried to discredit the research demonstrating the beneficial health/safety effects of restricting trading hours and thereby attacking opponents challenging their policy core beliefs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Also in the formal decision-making phase in the city councils, actors from both coalitions seemed to use research on trading hours and violence as “political ammunition” (Baklien, 1983; Weiss, 1979; Weiss, 1999). Research-based proposals were not adopted when they were at cross with the policy core beliefs of the political parties holding the majority (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

Whether research-based arguments to restrict/keep restricted trading hours impacted on the political decision, cannot be directly inferred from available data in this study. While research mainly strengthened existing views within the advocacy coalitions, it may possibly have made a difference in the “fuzzy periphery” of – or outside – the coalitions by influencing secondary beliefs (Weible *et al.*, 2009). Notably, representatives of political parties that have no strong views on on-premise trading hours held majority in most of the cities included in this study. Two observations indicating some impact should therefore be noted. First, when research was used to support a proposal of restricted trading hours, a decision in accordance was most often made. Exceptions to this were seen when political parties that consistently favoured extended trading hours held the majority in the city council. Second, decisions on extending trading hours to 03:00 a.m. were all made in the absence of research-based arguments in the policy decision phase.

This study’s findings mirror those of several previous studies on national drug policies. Much in line with a Belgian study (Tieberghien and Decorte, 2013), we also found that research knowledge was fairly widely used. Moreover, in a complex policy-making process characterised by competing values and interests, various elements other than research were taken into consideration. Also previous studies showed that research is used to justify existing political views or policies (Stevens, 2011; Monaghan, 2010). The ways in which the two advocacy coalitions used the two studies on effects of trading hours (Rossow and Norström, 2012; Melberg and Schøyen, 2012) resemble previous observations. Marmot (2004) noted that people’s willingness to take action influence their view of the evidence. Monaghan (2010) found that politicians were “cherry-picking evidence” (p. 1), that is, they “fish for evidence, select the beneficial bits and throw back those that are unrequired” (p. 8). Moreover, our findings were consistent with those of previous studies regarding the alcohol industry’s objections to restrictions on alcohol availability (Hilton *et al.*, 2014) and also the alcohol industry’s attempts to discredit and misrepresent research to influence alcohol policy (McCambridge *et al.*, 2013).

The fairly large number of cities that were examined provided a broad basis for assessment of whether and how research was used in the policy-making process. Our use of various data sources enhanced assessment of clear and consistent patterns regarding the views and values of the advocacy coalitions. Our use of media articles and city council documents provided concurrent statements from the policy-making process, which are likely to be more rich, nuanced and reliable than retrospective assessments. It is, however, possible that important information escaped these data sources, but could have been obtained by other methods.

The use of research in local policy debates and political decisions on on-premise trading hours in Norway, was most likely facilitated by several factors, such as timeliness of publication when the policy window was open, much media attention and simple and easily conveyable research findings. It is therefore quite possible that our findings are not valid for policy processes void of such facilitating factors. This suggests that research plays a very modest role in most alcohol policy decisions involving strong and conflicting interests, at least in the short run, and that researchers' belief in the importance of research for policy-making may be too optimistic. However, given the sparse literature on use of research in local alcohol policy-making, further studies may nuance or challenge the picture formed by the present study. Such further studies are therefore urgently needed.

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