

# Shine a Light

WHAT ALCOHOL USE IN  
**TRURO**  
LOOKS LIKE



## Message from the Mayor

I would like to thank all the individuals interviewed for the Truro Municipal Alcohol Project. Shining a light on what alcohol use looks like in Truro was something that we needed to do in order to promote serious discussion.

Mayor Robert Stead of Wolfville, Mayor Carl Chisholm of Antigonish and Mayor Carrol Publicover of Bridgewater took the lead in the 2011 Municipal Alcohol Project. When I attended the MAP session at last year's Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Conference, I was so proud to see municipalities having the wisdom to face this issue.

My mantra has been that the results of alcohol harms are increased costs in policing, health care and social services. This report illustrates these and other harms. It is my hope that the report encourages people in Truro to think more deeply about how alcohol affects our community.

Special thanks to James Shedden of Mental Health and Addictions Services at Colchester East Hants Health Authority for his valued assistance.

Sincerely,

W.R. (Bill) Mills  
Mayor of Truro

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This report can be accessed online at:  
[www.truro.ca](http://www.truro.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.

# PROLOGUE

## Snapshots Of Alcohol Harms in Truro

### THE CAMPGROUND

The campground is packed, for a weekday. The woman and her husband have the week off and they've invited their grandchildren to stay with them in their camper. There are few things the woman enjoys more than spending time with her grandkids. But her enjoyment is bittersweet, because in their faces she sees the face of her son, the one she lost a few years ago to an impaired driver. But she will not focus on that painful memory today. It's summer, the sun is out and she's having some quality time with her grandkids. She has learned to find happiness wherever she can.

The campground is noisy, though. People are partying and there's alcohol involved. *I don't care how much anyone drinks as long as they don't try to get behind the wheel*, she thinks. And then the commotion starts coming from the next camper over. A couple has been drinking all day and suddenly the man explodes in an angry outburst. He yells and swears at his girlfriend.

She worries that her grandkids will hear the words they're using – and remember them. The situation gets worse. The man pushes his girlfriend out of the camper and throws her suitcase down the stairs after her.

Later, the grandmother can see the man moving inside his trailer. It looks like he's getting ready to take off. *He can't drive*. She leaves the children with their grandfather and goes to the front gate. She warns them there has been a domestic disturbance and does her best to describe the man.

"He's angry," she says. "He's been drinking. He could be dangerous." On her way back, her mind is in overdrive – the campground is filled with children. *If he gets near his vehicle, I'll block it with my own*, she thinks.

She returns to the camper and tries to settle in with her grandkids. But she's not really there. She's thinking of the woman the man kicked out, and the people who drove her away. *Were they drinking too?* She replays the afternoon's events in her mind. And beyond them she sees something else: the image of her beloved son. The one who won't ever be coming back.



## THE SIDEWALK

You could patrol that stretch of sidewalk at 1 o'clock in the afternoon and have no problems. Thirteen hours later – it's a madhouse. There's a saying for what happens outside the cabaret bar downtown: *Nothing good happens after midnight*. And the further after midnight, the worse it gets, he figures.

He worries about his fellow officers. They're at the tail end of a grueling ten hour shift when the last bar closes at 3 a.m. Within half an hour hundreds of intoxicated people are milling the sidewalks. The police officer figures many of them started drinking at home long before hitting the bars at midnight. By the early hours of the morning, many are well beyond their limits, lining up for pizza slices and fighting over taxis. There's never enough of either. Before you know it, people are pushing and shoving. Someone trips; someone else is assaulted on the sidewalk.

It will be up to his officers to wade in and break up the trouble. Hard enough to do in daylight – but at 4 a.m., when you've put in a full shift? Even harder. And then it's back to the station for processing and paperwork. They'll be lucky if they're home by daylight. If the bars closed earlier they might have that chance. But as it is, the trouble starts way too late.

## PRE-DRINKING

It drives her crazy. It's not even a real word: pre-drinking. As a nurse who specializes in helping young people, she could come up with a pretty good definition for "pre-drinking", should the Oxford Dictionary folks ever come calling:

**Pre-drink** (verb) *To sit in one's dorm room and consume copious amounts of alcohol before finally heading out to the bar to become even more vulnerable and intoxicated. He pre-drank himself into a stupor.*

If only the students saw what she has seen, nearly every week of her 19-year career: the way alcohol changes people, diminishes their judgement, makes them vulnerable. She's seen people who have been sexually assaulted, or beaten to the point of losing consciousness, or injured and close to death. She has watched young people stumble home alone, at four in the morning. She's been a nurse for decades and the harms of alcohol are worse today than ever before. Pre-drinking. It's a new word for a new age.



# THE MUNICIPAL ALCOHOL PROJECT

## An Overview

The stories you have just read about the impact of alcohol in Truro were collected during the summer of 2012 as part of a project designed to understand and illuminate alcohol-related harms in our community.

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

Nova Scotians overall are consuming more alcohol. Per capita consumption increased 6.6% between 1991 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, this amounted to the equivalent of drinking 8.1 liters of pure alcohol, or about 470 beer a year for every Nova Scotian 15 years and older.<sup>2</sup> This should come as no surprise when sales by the Nova Scotia Liquor Commission also continue to increase. In 2011, the Corporation had a net income of \$223.2 million, a 1.7% increase over the previous year.<sup>3</sup> Between 2001 and 2010, sales grew by 56%, driven in part by the addition of 45 new agency stores in the latter five years.<sup>4</sup> Nova Scotian men and women consistently drink more heavily than Canadians in other provinces.<sup>5</sup> About one in five Canadians drink amounts that exceed recommended low risk drinking guidelines.<sup>6</sup> Alcohol ranks second behind tobacco as a cause of disease, and is widely known to contribute to trauma and social problems.<sup>7</sup>

This report is the continuation of Municipal Alcohol Projects (MAP) completed by the municipalities of Wolfville, Antigonish and Bridgewater in 2011. The Municipal Alcohol Report 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.

Anecdotal evidence collected for the communities of Bridgewater, Antigonish and Wolfville highlights that excessive alcohol consumption affects not only the individual who drinks, but also the person's family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and community members. These second-hand harms – which range from grocery and rent money being spent on alcohol, to unintended sex, sexual assaults, crime and the loss of individual potential – come at a cost to our society, a cost we are just beginning to be able to understand and quantify. Interviewees in Truro continue to describe Nova Scotia's "culture of alcohol." Documenting this culture, and understanding its effect on Truro, is at the heart of this project.

This year, community leaders in Truro embarked on a mission to collect insights from key stakeholders about how alcohol affects the community. In painting a compelling picture of what alcohol-related harms really look like in Truro, the Municipal Alcohol Project can provide municipal governments with the information they need to create effective policies around alcohol use.

The Municipal Alcohol Project Team engaged 22 key informants who live and/or work in Truro in focused, in-depth discussions about the impact of alcohol on their lives, jobs and communities. From police officers and health workers to school system representatives and youth, our goal was to engage community members to paint an honest, unflinching picture of the alcohol-related harms in Truro.

*The Municipal Alcohol Report: Truro* reveals our findings.



- Population: 16,050
- Known as the "Hub of Nova Scotia"
- Home of Nova Scotia Agricultural College
- Median Family Income: \$49,854

Source: Statistics Canada and [www.downtowntruro.ca](http://www.downtowntruro.ca)

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1. Statistics Canada, CANSIM Table 183-0019, 2011
2. Ibid
3. NSLC Annual Report 2011
4. NSLC Annual Report 2010
5. Canadian Community Health Survey 2001-2011
6. CMAJ, Alcohol in Canada: reducing the toll through focused interventions and public health policies, 2011
7. Ibid

# IN DEPTH: THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL IN TRURO

As many informants told us, alcohol is a part of Nova Scotia’s culture. Enjoying an occasional drink rarely poses problems for individuals or communities. Over the last decade the Government of Nova Scotia identified harmful alcohol use as an important public health issue. Our informants described a complex range of harms associated with alcohol use in Truro. From poor decision-making and slipping productivity levels to sexual assault, child neglect and death, our key informants described a spectrum of alcohol-related harms that affect everyone in Truro.

A range of scientific studies describe the harmful effects of alcohol on our society. The work of Municipal Alcohol Project Truro was not intended to replicate the methodology of these scientific studies, but rather, to illuminate them with the experiences and stories of community stakeholders who witness the effects of alcohol on Truro’s children, youth and adults each day.

## A. The people most affected

### 1. Children

Children were cited as among those most seriously affected by alcohol use in Truro. Informants told us they knew of children who had been physically or sexually assaulted by older family members who had been drinking. In other cases, children are neglected both emotionally and physically as their parents spend household money on alcohol, and in some cases, leave their children unattended while they consume.

One key informant told us that many children are destabilized as their parents move from one home to another because they use rent money to pay for alcohol. “They can’t pay the rent bill, so they are kicked out. And it’s hard on everybody but especially on children, who never know where they’re going to be living.”

Several informants also cited the personal challenges children, educators and other service providers face as a result of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. “It can be a real challenge to know what the issue actually is with children. Because you might suspect the child has FASD, but they have been diagnosed with ADHD. It isn’t easy to get to the root of the problem.”

One key informant described the “network” of socio-economic issues that may lie behind an individual’s harmful alcohol consumption, and its resulting impact on

*“Children have nowhere to go”*

*“Children are being left to fend for themselves. We hear how a child is left home alone and they go to the fridge and there is no food and the cupboards are empty. There are safety issues and neglect issues...it’s heartbreaking for us to see.”*



children. In public health work, this “network” is known as the social determinants of health. “There may be poverty. There may be mental health issues. There are usually so many other issues.”

One respondent described a deep cultural condition around alcohol that affects children from a young age. “They just take in so much. So if we have a festival, there’s alcohol everywhere. The children might not be drinking, their families might not be drinking, but the children are seeing this and so it’s culturally passed on to them.”

## Alcohol and Youth in Truro

Alcohol is a fact of life for Truro’s youth. Our informants described underage drinking as both a rite of passage and a source of dramatic, sometimes life-changing harm for teenagers and young people.

*“There’s been a shift in youth attitudes to alcohol. They don’t drink to be social. They drink to get drunk.”*



Today, Nova Scotia youth are drinking earlier than ever before, with the average girl having her first drink at age 13, age 12 for boys.<sup>8</sup> More than one-quarter of Nova Scotians aged 15-18 drink heavily on a monthly basis.<sup>9</sup>

The experiences of our youth informants mirrored these statistics. One young person told us alcohol is as ubiquitous as “air”, and is hard to refuse. “In Truro, the only thing for kids to do is to drink. So when they bring alcohol, it’s like: “Here, drink. No, I don’t want to drink, well drink anyways.”

Our youth informants expressed concern that young people are drinking earlier. They also told us that alcohol is widely used in schools and at school dances, and negatively harms teenagers in a range of ways, including hospitalization from over-consumption, poor grades, poor decision-making and sexual assault.

However, the experiences of the young people we interviewed didn’t match up with the perceptions of some adult informants. For instance, some stakeholders suggested that alcohol consumption is less of an issue for youth today than it was in previous decades. As one police officer put it, “In my experience, there has been a decrease in underage drinking locally.”

This informant’s sentiments were echoed by others: “Some of the younger people are much better than the boomers...like the drinking and driving piece. (Young people) are far more conscious of not driving than the boomers.”

However, these same informants expressed concern over what they perceive to be a “culture shift from alcohol to soft drugs.” Respondents expressed concerns that drugs were easier to conceal and to obtain than alcohol. “Drug use has replaced alcohol use in many cases, especially during the school day,” one informant told us.

A significant number of respondents described Truro’s youth as desensitized to alcohol consumption and its harms. Some respondents described what they regard

8. Nova Scotia Student Drug Use Survey 2007
9. Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey 2008

to be changes in social norms around drinking. “It’s OK today to publicly talk about their intoxication and inebriation and how much they consumed. It used to be something that was hidden and private but today it’s something you become boastful about.”

This desensitization to alcohol manifests in what one youth worker describes as a culture of binge drinking that leads to dangerous, and potentially fatal levels of consumption.

Unintended sex, sexual assault and teenage pregnancy were all cited as negative harms associated with youth alcohol consumption.

Informants also cited the loss of self-esteem associated with poor judgement that accompanies excessive consumption. As one young person told us, “You make a bad decision and it messes up your life. You feel guilty and you feel bad about yourself and you think, ‘I can’t believe I did that.’ You slowly degrade yourself.”

Several respondents described what they see as a disturbing trend: desensitization among parents over their children’s alcohol consumption. Our key informants told us that many parents do not draw clear lines for their kids around underage drinking, a trend that they felt contributed to alcohol harms affecting Truro’s youth.

Informants described parents buying alcohol for their children and/or hosting parties in their homes where they permit their children and their underage guests to consume alcohol.

“That just shocks me, quite frankly. Their thinking is, ‘I want them to drink responsibly and drink in my house.’ But they are not even 19 – in hosting the party you break the law, so what example is that setting for your kids?” Respondents expressed concern that in trying to reduce the harms of alcohol, parents are actually contributing to a problematic social norm.

In another case, a key informant described a situation in which an elementary school student brought a low-alcohol cooler to school. The student was disciplined, but the school administration received little support from the student’s parents.

*“It’s almost like a competition. Who can drink the most the fastest? There’s a game they play – they call it suicide. You deal out your cards and if you draw a three you can take three drinks or you can give three drinks to someone else. Adults may play that game for a round...but teens will play that all night long until the alcohol is gone. They don’t know when to stop because they’re having so much fun. They don’t know that when you get to the point where your speech is slurred, you’re passing out or you’re vomiting, you’re steps away from death’s door.”*

*“We have seen terrible binge drinking and (youth) passing out on soccer fields. And the police are involved. Kids having to spend the night in the drunk tank. I’m talking about 15 year old girls with pregnancy scares and no memory of the event – Was it rape? Was it consensual? Very scary behaviours.”*



*I often hear that parents are drinking with their kids. I think there are blurry lines about what it means to be a grown-up, to be a parent. And I think the lines are blurry as to who’s the adult in the household.*

Several informants discussed the impact of social media on alcohol-related harms among youth. Facebook and Twitter mean that word of small house parties spread like wildfire. Police have responded to house parties where hundreds of young people are present, many of whom are totally unknown to the youth hosting the party. Youth informants also described the long-lasting impact of social media in broadcasting moments of alcohol-fuelled poor judgement.

Numerous key informants described a trend among youth known as pre-drinking”, or drinking – often heavily – at home or in dorms at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College before going to bars downtown or other house parties. The result: an escalation in fighting, bar brawls and intoxication, one informant told us.

## 2. The Community

Harmful alcohol use affects the entire community, said a majority of respondents.

The harmful effects of alcohol use were described as both direct and indirect. The direct harms of alcohol use happened to the individual consuming the alcohol. For instance, one respondent referred to a young man who, after drinking heavily, punched a plate glass door and severed the ligaments and tendons in his arm - an injury that could easily have proven fatal. Other respondents described a range of major and minor physical injuries caused as a result of alcohol consumption.

*“I challenge anyone to tell me that your life has not been affected by alcohol in some way.”*

Some of the most cited effects of alcohol use were the indirect or second-hand harms associated with excessive consumption. For instance, there are the countless overtime hours worked by police officers as they spend the final hours of their shifts dealing with the late-night fallout from the after-hours bar. There are the employers who bear the cost of lost productivity as employees fail to show up for work due to intoxication, or spend weeks off the job as they seek treatment for alcohol addiction. There are property owners who must pay for repairs resulting from damage caused by alcohol-fuelled vandalism. And there are families whose breakdowns are accelerated by alcohol use.

Respondents also referred to the negative impact of alcohol consumption on the spouses of people who drink excessively. Several respondents also cited the life-altering and sometimes fatal harms visited upon individuals who fall victim to impaired drivers.

## B. Alcohol and Crime in Truro

Alcohol is a major contributor to crime in Truro and in Canada as a whole.

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 attributable to alcohol was 67.6%, compared to 66.2% for the rest of Canada, costing \$78.09 million for alcohol-related crimes.<sup>10</sup>

*“There’s not a weekend that goes by that there’s not an assault where alcohol plays a factor.”*

In Truro, a key police informant estimates that at least half of all assaults and domestic assaults committed in the town have “some overtone of alcohol.” The area immediately outside the town’s after-hours “cabaret” bar was referenced by numerous respondents as a problematic location for crime, assaults and intoxication in a public place, charges are a common occurrence in this area when the bar closes at night.

Informants described the relationship between alcohol and crime in Truro.

A key informant cited the challenge of understanding the full impact of alcohol on crime rates in Truro. The data management system does not currently allow officers to enter data related to whether alcohol played a role in a particular crime or incident. And for this reason, gauging the true connection between alcohol and crime is difficult.

*“People that are intoxicated on alcohol tend to make poor decisions. And when poor decisions are made, people come into conflict with the law. It might be the catalyst to spur a fight between a person and his spouse that might not have happened if you weren’t drunk and reached the boiling point. Maybe it gave you that extra bit of courage to break and enter into a pharmacy at night. Without the alcohol, would the person have gotten behind the wheel of the car and crashed? Probably not. But they get drinking and they feel untouchable.”*

Alcohol is a contributing factor in many sexual assault cases, we were told. One informant reported that 100% of all the sexual assaults she sees in her work as a health care practitioner are alcohol-related, “I’m seeing more men being raped. And every one of the male rape (cases) I have (seen) has been as a result of drinking. Every one of them.”

## C. Alcohol and Work in Truro

Second-hand harm to employers – including low productivity, absenteeism, lateness and employee intoxication on the job - negatively affect the community of Truro.

Key informants from one large employer told us that negative harms associated with alcohol were a more serious issue several years ago, when an average of one employee per month would be sent home early for showing up at the job site under the influence of alcohol. But while the direct effects of employee consumption have lessened in the last four years, this same employer cited a rise in the indirect harms associated with alcohol. For example, if an employee’s child or grandchild consumes alcohol in a harmful way, that employee “brings the (alcohol) issue into the workplace.”

Key informants described the stigma faced by employees who return to work after taking time off to seek counselling and support for alcohol dependence. “It’s like they now have this sticker on their forehead.” In many cases, the employer is forced to reorganize its workforce in order to find a new role for the affected employee where he or she will not face as much stigma.

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

Respondents also told us that alcohol-related harms at work (such as absenteeism), are often the proverbial tip of the iceberg, and indicate deeper issues.

*“Work is the last pillar to fall and so when we meet up with this person they’ve already got financial problems, relationship problems, family separation...they’ve been holding it together for some time. And when their job is at stake, it’s a major wake up call.”*

## E. Alcohol and Health in Truro

Drinking any amount of alcohol is associated with serious health problems, including injuries, heart disease, various types of cancer, depression and high blood pressure.<sup>11</sup>

*“We have an unsafe culture of drinking. It’s difficult to talk about...but we need to reflect on it.”*

Our informants described numerous negative medical and health-related consequences related to alcohol consumption: vomiting, black-outs, falls, assaults, or death from car accidents or over-consumption.

Informants told us that alcohol plays a factor in a range of illnesses and physical harms such as injuries and chronic diseases including cancer.

*“It just ravages a person’s body. It gets to the point where your blood doesn’t clot...you have people vomiting blood and bleeding to the point where you have to do surgical intervention to stop it. Nobody that I spoke to who was that sick from alcohol use wanted to be there. Everybody would have done things differently if they had been able to do it over again.”*

One informant also expressed concern over a lack of awareness among the general public about the negative health impacts of alcohol.

Informants also described cases in which individuals who had been drinking sustained life-altering injuries, such as paralysis, following injuries they sustained while they were drinking. These tragedies, they told us, affect not only the individuals, but their families and friends.



11. Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (2012)

# ALCOHOL STATISTICS

## The Limits

Source: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, 2012

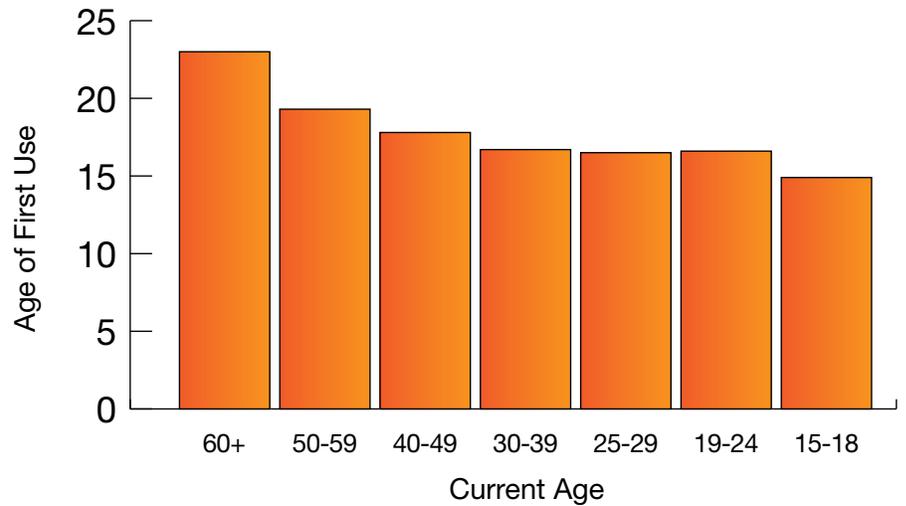
Even moderate drinking can increase your risk of chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, depression and many forms of cancer. To reduce your long-term health risks, follow these guidelines:

- Women 0-2 drinks a day, up to 10 drinks a week
- Men 0-3 drinks a day, up to 15 drinks a week

## We are starting to drink earlier

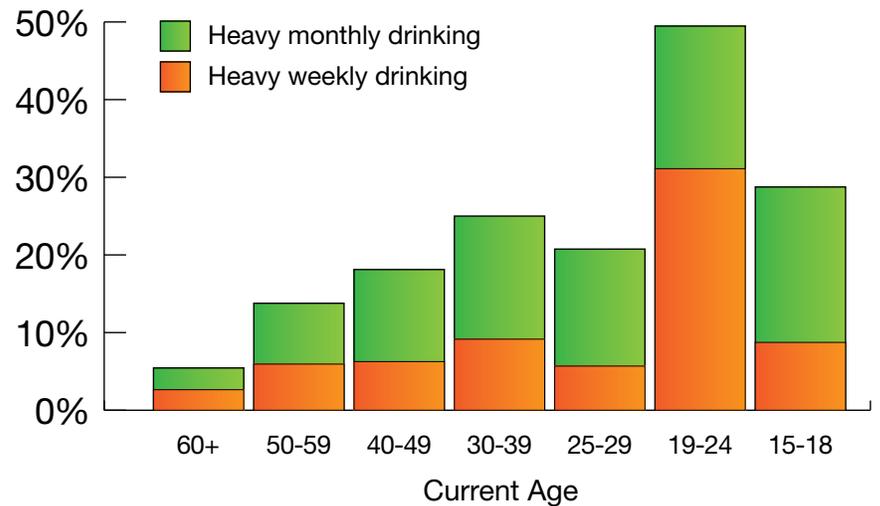
Average age of first drink by generation

Source: CAS 2007



## Heavy drinking is normal for Nova Scotia children and youth

Source: CADUMS 2008



# IDEAS ON COMMUNITY ACTION

Our key informants put forth a range of ideas on how to address harmful alcohol use in Truro. These ideas mirror evidence-based best practices in alcohol control policy.



## Reduce Advertising

Key informants recommended reducing alcohol industry advertising and sponsorship at community and sporting events. Informants told us that such reductions could help de-normalize alcohol. Informants suggested that reducing sponsorship could also help to address youth desensitization to alcohol.



## Reduce Availability

Truro needs to restrict access to alcohol, some informants tell us. The most-cited way to reduce access would be to close the town's after-hours bar earlier in the evening, to prevent excessive consumption late at night. Respondents also discussed the option of cutting NSLC store hours to reduce sales.



## Enforce and Support

Several informants told us that one way to reduce alcohol harms in Truro would be to provide bar staff with better training in order to reduce over-serving to patrons. Other ideas on community action included increasing the number of liquor inspectors working within the town, and increasing their visibility. We also heard that more community supports are needed for people struggling with harmful alcohol use.



## Communicate and Monitor

Our key informants told us that more community-wide discussions and conversations about the negative impacts of alcohol in Truro would help to shine a light on a problem that is "a little more hidden." Informants described Truro as a "quiet, self-contained" community in which residents may be hesitant to discuss or acknowledge deeper problems such as alcohol harms. Increased discussion would be a positive step, they told us. In addition, gathering better statistics around the harms of alcohol use – particularly as they impact crime, would provide a better overall picture.

# CONCLUSIONS

**Alcohol is a fact of life for Truro residents. And as our informants made clear, the problem is not *that* we drink, but *how* we drink.**

Alcohol-related harms affecting Truro's children, youth, adults and seniors are complex and far-reaching. The stories we heard during our interviews saddened and sometimes shocked us. Children in our community are exposed to alcohol on television, at community events and at neighbourhood parties. Sometimes they are neglected or assaulted because of alcohol use in the home. Alcohol causes our young people to lose focus at school, make poor decisions, live through sexual and physical assaults, get criminal records and in some cases die from over-consumption or alcohol-fuelled injuries. Parents struggle to set safe boundaries for their children in a time where social norms around alcohol use have relaxed significantly. Adults risk their relationships, careers and personal safety because of alcohol.



In many cases, the stories and experiences our stakeholders told us suggested that important discussions about the impact of alcohol on our lives and futures are not taking place. For instance, members of our youth focus group told us alcohol use was prevalent among young people, and that for some teens, one night of harmful consumption was enough to “destroy their lives.” Meanwhile some adult informants suggested alcohol wasn't as significant a problem for Truro youth today as it has been in the past.

Talking about alcohol and how it affects Truro residents of all ages is an important first step. The Truro MAP project sparked a series of such discussions over the summer of 2012, and we hope this continues as we seek to better describe and understand the true cost of our culture of alcohol. We can't solve what we don't measure. While talking about alcohol harms is important, our informants also told us we need to find ways to measure the impact of alcohol – routinely tracking the connection between alcohol and crime in police statistics would be a good first step.

Complex problems require multi-faceted solutions. Truro citizens have a history of coming together to solve problems. By volunteering their time and expertise, our key informants have taken an important step toward dealing with alcohol-related harms at the community level.

*Let's continue the journey. There is a lot of work to do.*



**Municipal Alcohol Project Truro would like to thank the following people for their contributions:**

**W.R. (Bill) Mills**

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