

Alcohol Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the world as we know it. Many policies related to alcohol availability have changed, which in turn has an impact on consumption and public health. This brief describes some of the changes in alcohol policy in Colorado, emerging indicators related to alcohol availability and related harms, and considerations on using data to study alcohol consumption changes due to COVID-19. Given the novel nature of the virus, many researchers are still in the process of understanding the impact the pandemic will have on alcohol use. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many to self-isolate and social distance. Social isolation may negatively impact those already struggling with substance use disorders. For instance, previous research on the impact of similar crises showed that

"A relaxation of alcohol measures and increasing personal distress related to the COVID-19 outbreak could lead to an increase in alcohol consumption and/or a worsening of patterns in the longer term."

-J. Rehm., C. Kilian, C. Ferreira-Borges, D. Jernigan, M. Monteiro, C. Parry, Z. Sanchez, and J. Mantney

Alcohol Use in Times of COVID-19: Implications for Monitoring and Policy

financial difficulties, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future during and after a crisis can worsen patterns of alcohol use and increase alcohol-related harms.¹ In addition, research shows that job loss is associated with increased depression, anxiety, distress, and low self-esteem, and may lead to higher rates of substance use disorder

Key Findings

- COVID-19 has had implications on alcohol policy and availability in Colorado, with some policies increasing access and others limiting access.
- Alcohol consumption and related harms can be monitored with multiple indicators including alcohol sales, tax revenue, number of drinks per day, DUI citations/crashes, alcohol related poisonings/deaths, and rates of domestic abuse.
- Interpreting data from the above indicators is challenging and may not reveal the full impact of the pandemic on alcohol use.
- It is important to support the capacity of public health professionals to monitor and study the impact of COVID-19 on alcohol consumption and related harms.

and suicide.²

This brief covers some of the implications that have been observed thus far and considerations for future research. This brief is intended to provide substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery professionals and policy makers with important information and context around alcohol use in Colorado during the pandemic.

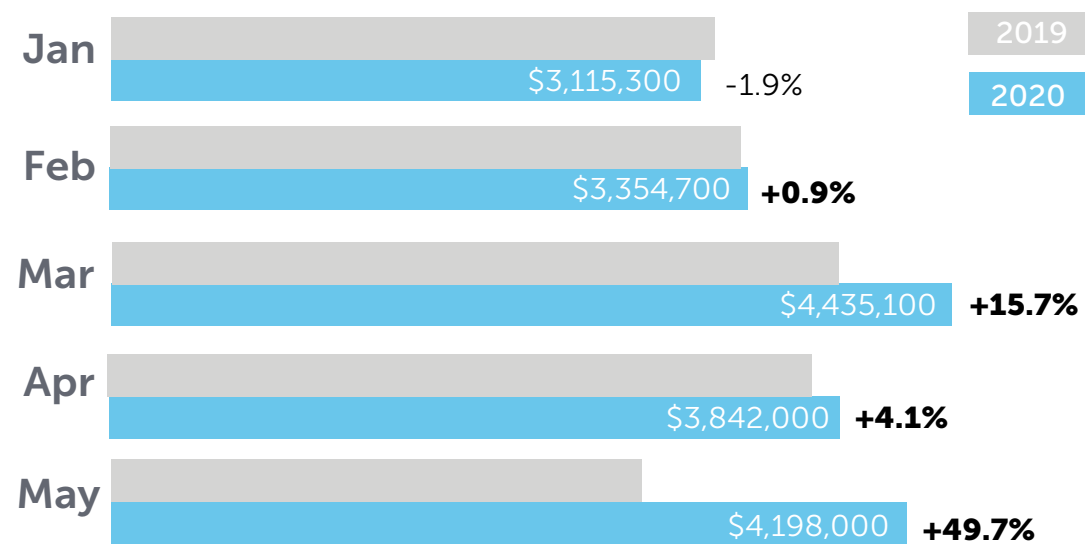
Availability of Alcohol

Recent policy decisions related to COVID-19 have not only changed daily life in Colorado but also changed the availability of various substances nationwide. On March 25, 2020, Governor Jared Polis issued Executive Order D 2020 003, which mandated Coloradans to stay at home due to an increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the state.³ A statewide shutdown of the state required many businesses to close (including bars and some restaurants) that were considered non-essential. Liquor stores in the City and County of Denver were at first ordered to close as they were categorized as non-essential, but hours later were deemed essential businesses and allowed to stay open. In addition, there are currently no limits on the amount of alcohol an individual is allowed to purchase (including beer, wine and spirits) from off-premises establishments (i.e., liquor stores). Senate Bill 20-213 now allows various on-premises establishments and sales rooms (e.g., restaurants, breweries) in Colorado to deliver alcoholic beverages to customers and provide takeout beer, wine, and mixed drinks until July 1, 2021.⁴

Conversely, Executive Order D 2020 142 requires on-premises establishments stop serving alcohol at 11:00 p.m. as a preventative measure against the spread of the virus (policy current at time of

publishing).⁵ The temporary closure of many bars and restaurants with restricted sales hours, in conjunction with the allowance of delivery and takeout of alcoholic beverages from on-premises establishments, could have impacts on public health and safety. Negative impacts may be observed due to the potential for increased availability of alcohol, including among those who are underage, through takeout and delivery from on-premises establishments. Impacts may be observed from limiting hours of alcohol sales and the temporary or permanent closure of alcohol establishments, which may reduce overall alcohol outlet density. In addition, people staying at home more may positively impact alcohol-impaired driving outcomes. The changing availability of alcohol during the pandemic makes it crucial to monitor alcohol

Figure 1. **The Colorado Department of Revenue collected increased liquor excise tax revenues** between February 2020 and May 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019.



Data source: 2019-20 Liquor Excise Tax Revenue, Colorado Department of Revenue

consumption and alcohol-related harms.

Alcohol Use Impacts

Revenue and Sales

Researchers have used diverse metrics to estimate recent changes in alcohol use and access. For example, Nielsen has monitored changes in alcohol sales data. Nationally, off-premise sales of alcoholic beverages jumped by 55% for the week of March 21, 2020 compared to the same week a year earlier.⁶ Liquor excise tax revenues are another indicator of

change in alcohol consumption patterns. These are taxes paid by manufacturers/wholesalers when they sell alcoholic beverages.

The Colorado Department of Revenue collected increased liquor excise tax revenues between February 2020 and May 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019.⁷ Across the entire month of March, revenues raised by the existing excise tax rate increased by 13.6% between 2019 and 2020. The greatest increase in revenues occurred in the month of May, which saw a nearly 50% increase from 2019 to 2020 (Figure 1).

National Changes in Alcohol Use During COVID-19

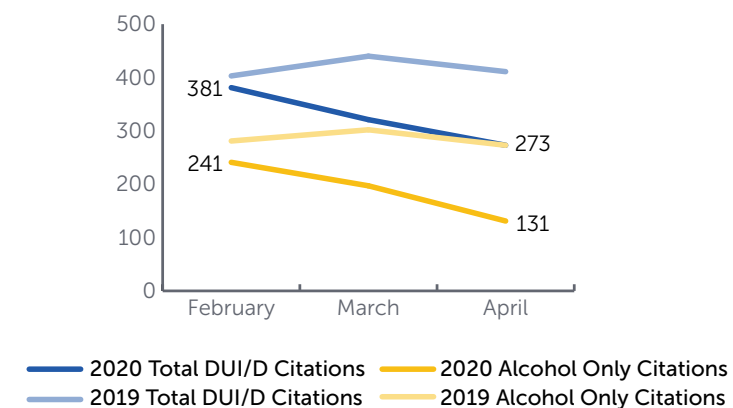
RTI International recently conducted a nationally representative survey to gauge alcohol use since the COVID-19 outbreak.⁸ Participants were asked about their patterns of alcohol consumption in February and April, mental health, employment status, and lifetime alcohol experiences. The researchers aimed to explore how overall alcohol consumption changed following policy changes related to the pandemic.

Of the 993 people surveyed, 555 (55.9%) reported drinking in the month of February. Among this sample, the average number of drinks per day increased by 27% between February and April, with males increasing drinks per day slightly more than females. The survey also found the number of people who exceeded drinking guidelines significantly increased from February to April by 21%. In addition, binge drinking increased by 26%. Another key finding is that the largest increases in all measures were observed in the Western U.S., which includes Colorado. Finally, being female, Black, or having children in the household was associated with significant increases on at least one measure of alcohol consumption.

Citations and Fatal Crashes due to DUI During COVID-19

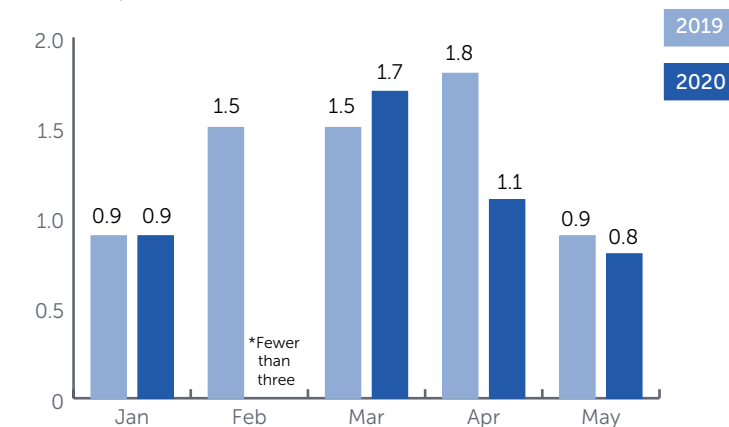
The Colorado State Patrol's Impaired Enforcement Report contains data on crashes and citations from Driving Under the Influence and Driving Under the Influence

Figure 2. **Alcohol citations and total DUI/D citations decreased** across the months of February, March, and April 2020 compared to the same months in 2019.



Data source: Feb-April 2020 Colorado State Patrol Impaired Enforcement Reports

Figure 3. There was **little variation in the age-adjusted rate of alcohol related poisonings/deaths** between January and May of 2020 compared to the same months in 2019.



Data source: Vital Statistics Program, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

of Drugs (DUI/D). The report highlights data for the months of February, March and April for 2019 and 2020 and percent changes between these years. Overall, alcohol citations and total DUI/D citations decreased across the months of February, March, and April 2020 compared to the same months in 2019 (Figure 2). Another useful metric to monitor changes in use of alcohol-related harms can be fatal crashes related to DUIs. Preliminary statistics published by the Colorado Department of Transportation show that between March 14th and May 28th of 2020, there were 38% fewer DUI-related fatal crashes compared to the same time period in 2019.⁹ The report mentions several important considerations. The preliminary DUI data for 2020 crashes is based on officer opinion, so final 2020 DUI data based on toxicology could change this result. The final 2019 DUI data is based on official toxicology reports.

Vehicle miles traveled and total number of fatal crashes during the 2020 period were lower than the same period a year earlier, which could factor into the decrease in DUI-related fatal crashes.

Alcohol Related Poisonings

Changes in alcohol use and its impact on health can also be analyzed through alcohol-related overdoses/fatalities. Preliminary data released by the Colorado Department

of Public Health and Environment Vital Statistics Program show that there was little variation in the age-adjusted rate of alcohol-related poisonings/deaths in January-May of 2020 compared to the same months in 2019. Rates are annualized and presented per 100,000 population in year and sex category. Age-adjusted rates are standardized using the 2000 US Population Standard. In March of 2019 the age-adjusted rate of alcohol related poisonings was calculated to be 1.5, compared to 1.7 for March of 2020. Conversely, April saw a decrease from 2019 to 2020. These rates not deviate largely from previous rates (Figure 3).

Domestic Violence

Due to the fact that COVID-19 has forced many people to stay at home, a major concern is an increase of child neglect/maltreatment and domestic violence. The shift from on-premises to off-premises consumption of alcohol may be associated with increased violence in the home due to increased or unsupervised drinking.¹⁰ Many police departments around the U.S. have reported an increase in domestic violence calls during the pandemic.¹¹ However, crime data from Denver Police Department Crime Reporting database shows reported domestic violence cases decreased slightly for the months of March and April in 2020 compared to the same months in 2019.¹²

Fewer opportunities to report abuse could be a reason why domestic violence crimes decreased in Denver.

Quarantine and isolation with abusers could lead to fewer opportunities to report abuse. Schools are often places where reports occur, especially for abuse of children. School closures due to COVID eliminated the opportunity for reporting.¹³ A decrease in reports does not necessarily mean a decrease in violence.

Conclusion

As the pandemic continues in the U.S. and in Colorado, researchers and public health professionals must remain informed and cognizant of how to best study the impact of the virus on substance use, including excessive alcohol consumption. The ease of access to alcohol during this time of social isolation could influence more people to use alcohol excessively as a convenient coping mechanism. The negative health impact of excessive alcohol use has been extensively studied and is known to cause harm to health and safety.¹⁴ Effective strategies to reduce the negative consequences of excessive alcohol use are available.¹⁵ It is critical to ensure public health professionals have the capacity and support to monitor changing alcohol consumption and its potential effects on the health of Coloradans. Researchers and public health officials should continue to monitor and study the impact of COVID-19 on alcohol consumption and related harms to provide important information and support to our state.

Resources for Monitoring Changes in Alcohol Use and Related Harms

- Colorado Department of Revenue [Liquor Excise Tax](#)
- Colorado Bureau of Investigation [Colorado Crime Stats DUI/Drugs](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [Alcohol-Related Disease Impact Application](#)
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment [Vital Statistics Program](#)
- [Excessive Alcohol Use Prevention & Data](#)
- Colorado Department of Human Services [Community Performance Center](#)



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