

International Center for Alcohol Policies Series on Alcohol in Society

Moonshine Markets

*Issues in Unrecorded
Alcohol Beverage
Production and Consumption*

edited by
Alan Haworth
and
Ronald Simpson



Executive Summary

What is the main purpose of this book?

It is estimated that “local alcohol” – also sometimes called moonshine, non-commercial, illicit, illegal or unrecorded alcohol – may account for as much as fifty percent of total alcohol consumption worldwide. Yet this area of alcohol studies has been largely neglected in the research community, due, in part, to the difficulty in collecting data for a product that is largely illegal.

In light of this significant gap, patterns of local alcohol consumption across a range of cultures were investigated using a common methodology. Six countries in which local alcohol is widely produced and consumed were identified for the study – Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia, Tanzania and Zambia.

Moonshine Markets, explores the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how* and *why* of local alcohol in these six countries. Each of the studies provides a rich accounting of the varied customs and rituals surrounding non-commercial alcohol, its history, cultural significance and the legal and socioeconomic framework of its production and consumption. Reports from each of the countries studied are included and discuss the implications for public health, policy and the alcohol beverage industry.

What are the main findings?

A wide range of local beverages exists, some legal, some illicit. In Zambia and Tanzania, for example, many of the locally produced drinks are legal. At times, as with tequila in Mexico and *cachaça* in Brazil, the same beverage may be both commercial and non-commercial. While some countries produce a variety of beverages, others, like Russia, have one main local drink.

One of the most interesting findings of the book is that local alcohol may not always be injurious to health. Russian *samogon*, for example, rivals commercial alcohol in quality. Thus, reports of widespread poisonings from local alcohol may relate to particular “bad batches” or unhygienic production processes, rather than to non-commercial alcohol in general.

In all the communities studied, local alcohol is generally the least expensive type of product. As a result, its consumers can be found largely among the poorest members of society. In light of these findings, the public health implications of local alcohol represent a complex interplay of culture and social and economic conditions. Further research is needed to test whether similar conclusions also apply to other countries.

Findings from the individual country studies include the following:

- Over the last two decades, frequency and volume of consumption have increased significantly in Russia. *Samogon* is the local beverage of choice, especially among the elderly. Unlike counterfeit vodka, which has been responsible for a number of alcohol poisonings, the quality of *samogon* is generally high. Problematic drinking patterns are attributed largely to state alcohol policy and an increasingly poor rural population.
- Zambia has a long tradition of homemade brew and distilled beverages. The most popular and strongest local alcohol is *kachasu*, a distilled spirit made of sorghum, maize, sour beer, sugar and yeast. Only 29% of those surveyed reported consuming illicit beverages, and were mostly older drinkers (37-60 years).
- 90% of all alcohol produced in Tanzania is non-commercial, and consists mostly of traditional opaque

beers, many of which are legal. *Gongo* is the most popular illicit distilled spirit, and is made from fermented papaw and sugar. Although the majority of Tanzanians are abstainers, in two of the participating communities, women consume more units of alcohol on average than men.

- *Cachaça*, made from sugar cane, is the most popular distilled spirit in Brazil. It has a rich history, from its early beginnings as the beverage of the poor to the key ingredient in Brazil's national drink – *caipirinha*. Both commercial and local forms of *cachaça* exist, with women as the primary consumers of the latter category.
- Four study sites in India revealed different drinking patterns among urban and rural populations, as well as different outcomes. The role played by family and peers in introducing young people to alcohol also shows an interesting relationship with both patterns and outcomes.
- Research in Mexico was carried out on two sites – rural Hidalgo and urban Mexico City. In both communities, beer was the main beverage consumed. *Pulque*, a local fermented drink made from maguey juice, was popular in the rural but not the urban areas. Drinking was not a daily activity and occurred within family and social settings. In Hidalgo, women preferentially consumed *pulque*, due partly to its association with medicinal qualities.

How did the book come to be written?

Moonshine Markets grew out of a meeting hosted in 1999 by the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP)¹, which brought together experts from developing countries to identify priority research topics. One of the areas identified was the consumption patterns of “local alcohol.” Using an common approach developed by Dr. Alan Haworth, one of the book's co-editors, studies were carried out in Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia, Tanzania and Zambia. Although not a developing country, Russia was included because of the widespread consumption in rural areas of *samogon*, a local distilled spirit.

Although the book was commissioned by ICAP, the views expressed are those of individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of ICAP, its Board of Directors, or its sponsoring companies.

For whom is the book intended?

The book should be of interest to governments, the alcohol beverage industry, the alcohol research community and anyone with an interest in alcohol issues, public health concerns and economic and social aspects of developing and transition countries.

What are the lessons for the future?

Moonshine Markets represents an impressive contribution to the study of local alcohol. However, given the quantities of local alcohol consumed around the world, more research is needed in other countries into its social, economic and health implications.

The studies show that local alcohol production and consumption have strong cultural roots. The range of drinking behaviors and outcomes described, both social and health-related, suggests that patterns, rather than choice of beverage are associated with particular consequences. Similarly, the relationship between local alcohol and poverty in the studies described points to a complex issue worth examining in greater depth.

¹ ICAP is dedicated to helping reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promoting understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community, and others interested in alcohol policy. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization supported by 10 major international beverage alcohol companies.

In addition, there is considerable overlap between local and commercial alcohol, both with respect to quality and to their economic and social roles. The research presented suggests that there may be opportunity for dialogue between producers of commercial beverages and those producing local alcohol, with regard to both policy development and prevention.

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