

NORTHERN TERRITORY ALCOHOL HARM-REDUCTION REPORT

**Assessment of preliminary
data on the Riley Review
reforms on the anniversary of
the NT Minimum Unit Price**



people's alcohol action coalition

The *People's Alcohol Action Coalition* (PAAC) is an Alice Springs-based community alcohol reform group. It was developed in response to a growing awareness of excessive alcohol use and associated harm in the Central Australian region, and provides a platform for community action to reduce alcohol-related harm. Its formation in late 1995 followed a public rally in response to alcohol problems, instigated by the late Dr Charles Perkins, Aboriginal activist and Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Central Zone Commissioner.

PAAC aims to work towards reducing the impact of alcohol-related harm through a number of strategies, including: developing constructive reforms to the sale of alcohol; advocating controls on public consumption; advocating responsible service of alcohol; and promoting healthy lifestyles.

Members include social workers, lawyers, medical practitioners, Aboriginal organisations, churches, social service organisations and individuals. Collaborating organisations include the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Central Land Council, Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance Northern Territory, Northern Territory Council of Social Services, Central Australian Youth Link Up Service, the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (Aboriginal Corporation) and the Public Health Association of Australia NT.



Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Nearly 6,000 lives are lost every year and more than 144,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation's greatest preventative health challenges.

As a leading advocate of evidence-based research, FARE contributes to policies and programs that support the public good, while holding the alcohol industry to account. FARE works with leading researchers, communities, governments, health professionals and frontline service providers to bring about change and reduce alcohol harm.

If you would like to contribute to FARE's important work, call us on (02) 6122 8600 or email info@fare.org.au.

The NT's progressive journey that's reducing alcohol harm

The Northern Territory is on a road trip of alcohol-harm reform. The one-year anniversary of the introduction of the country's first Minimum Unit Price (MUP) is an opportunity to report on key successes of the NT Government's alcohol harm minimisation plan as it has been progressively introduced in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin.



Introduction

The 12-month anniversary of the introduction of the Minimum Unit Price (MUP) in the Northern Territory (NT) is a milestone that warrants an assessment of progress in reducing alcohol harm across the Territory. The NT is the first Australian jurisdiction to put a floor price on alcohol, in a bid to curtail its worrying rate of alcohol-related harm.

The short and long-term harm associated with alcohol use has long been considered the single biggest issue facing the Territory, which for many years has had the highest rate of alcohol use and related harm in the country – with markers including alcohol-related hospitalisations, road trauma, mortality¹ and assaults.

In response to the devastating impact of alcohol on the community and guided by the recommendations of the *Review of alcohol policies and legislation* (the Riley Review) headed by former Chief Justice Trevor Riley, the NT Government introduced a program of alcohol reforms in 2018.

We are encouraged by the positive response to the review and we hope this report will mark a turning point in dealing with the significant problem confronting the people of the Northern Territory.

TREVOR RILEY QC
FORMER CHIEF JUSTICE



The NT Government recognised that despite past efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm, including criminal offending, more needed to be done. It accepted 219 of the 220 recommendations made by the Expert Panel charged with undertaking the review.

The introduction of the *Liquor Act 2019* on 1 October this year, just 20 months later, saw more than 75 per cent of the Riley Review recommendations implemented.² As well as the review of the Act, the NT Government established the NT Liquor Commission – an independent body with community representation that assesses liquor licence applications and complaints in relation to the Act; a Community Impact Assessment as part of the licence application process; a floor price on alcohol of \$1.30 per standard drink (MUP); annual licence fees for liquor licences; and a risk-based licensing framework.

The NT Government also re-introduced the Banned Drinker Register (BDR) prior to the Riley Review, as an early response to concerns about alcohol harm. Registration on the BDR prohibits those registered from purchasing, possessing or consuming alcohol. As at 31 July, 9,361 people had been registered on the BDR since its reintroduction on 1 September 2017, and nearly 4,000 people were currently on the register. Of all the people who had ever been registered on the BDR, nearly 30 per cent were women, and more than 20 per cent were non-Aboriginal. Domestic violence was involved in the initiating incident that led to one in four (26 per cent) of the current registrants being placed on the BDR.³

These reforms build on various imposed and voluntary restrictions on trading hours, pricing products and volume of sales that were already in place, especially in regional towns and areas of the NT. Evaluations of the BDR and the MUP are currently underway. A report on the MUP evaluation is scheduled for December 2019, while the BDR evaluation is being conducted over the next four years.

There are regional differences in drinking practices and in some of the measures taken to deter alcohol-related harm such as assaults, including domestic violence. The evaluations are important to properly understand the impact of these measures in each area and the factors that influence outcomes.

Recent international research sheds new light on the merit of the MUP as an effective population-based harm prevention measure. Scotland introduced a modest-level MUP in May 2018 and early results already show a reduction in the amount of alcohol purchased by households. The evaluation also found that the MUP was a targeted policy, because it predominantly reduced purchases by households that bought the most alcohol.⁴

A preliminary look at publicly available data suggests that the NT's alcohol reform measures are having the predicted positive impact of reducing alcohol-related assaults and also alcohol-related domestic violence. As well improving the safety, health and wellbeing of community members, families and children, a reduction in alcohol-fuelled incidents reduces pressure on the NT's community, health and justice systems.

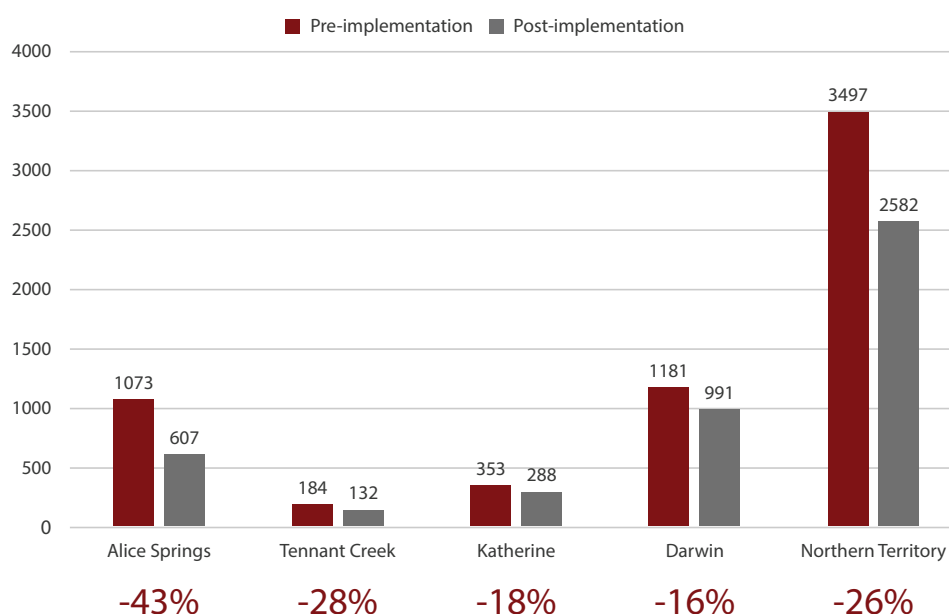
For too long alcohol-fuelled crime and violence has had a devastating impact on our communities, homes and businesses.⁵

THE HON NATASHA FYLES
MINISTER FOR HEALTH



This Report details available assaults data for major centres in the NT, and provides insights into the impact of the reform program for the period following the introduction of the MUP on 1 October 2018.

CHANGE IN TOTAL ALCOHOL-RELATED ASSAULTS IN THE NT

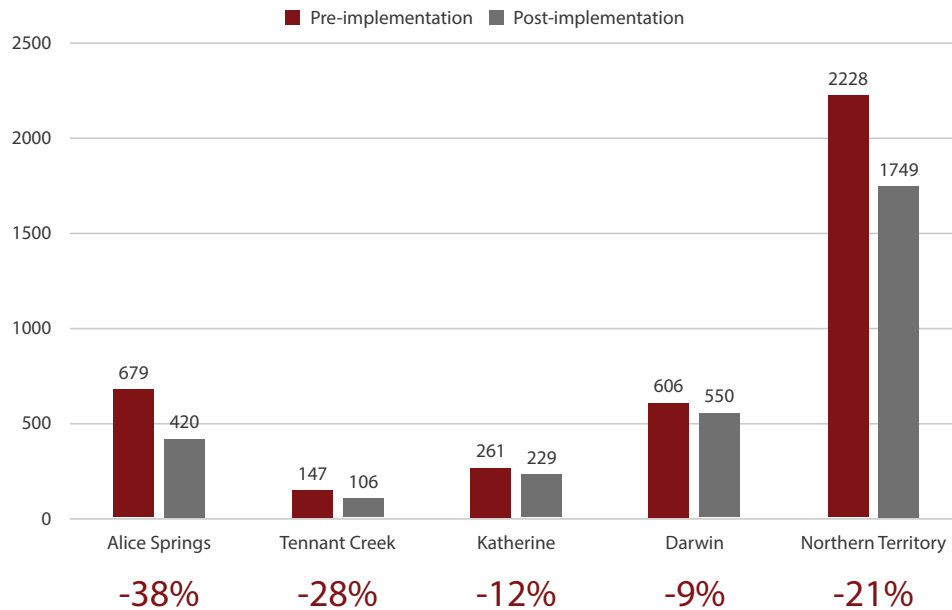


Pre-implementation = 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018, post-implementation = 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019

Notes: Date period is not 12 months due to unpublished data beyond 31 July 2019. The same 10-month period has been used pre-implementation to draw accurate comparisons. Darwin includes Palmerston.

Source: NT Police Crime Statistics: www.pfes.nt.gov.au/Police/Community-safety/Northern-Territory-crime-statistics/Statistical-publications.aspx

CHANGE IN ALCOHOL-RELATED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE NT



Pre-implementation = 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018, post-implementation = 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019

Notes: Date period is not 12 months due to unpublished data beyond 31 July 2019. The same 10-month period has been used pre-implementation to draw accurate comparisons. Darwin includes Palmerston.

Source: NT Police Crime Statistics: www.pfes.nt.gov.au/Police/Community-safety/Northern-Territory-crime-statistics/Statistical-publications.aspx



Overview of NT

NT police data shows that alcohol-related assaults in the NT are at their lowest level for more than 10 years, running at 20 per cent below the long term average.⁶ When you compare the period 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018 (prior to the implementation of the MUP) and 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019 and 2019 (following the MUP's implementation), there has been a:

- 26 per cent reduction in alcohol-related total assaults (3497 in 2017-18 : 2582 in 2018-19)
- 21 per cent reduction in alcohol-related domestic violence (2228 in 2017-18 : 1749 in 2018-19).⁷

The data shows that the biggest effect has been seen in the locations where the most measures have been in place for the longest period. Thus, they have had the strongest impact in Alice Springs, where the full suite of measures have been in place since August 2018. As you progress to centres further north, the reduction in violence has not been as extensive, which reflects in part the progressive nature of rolling out the reforms over a linear timescale. (Not all measures are being introduced in Darwin.)

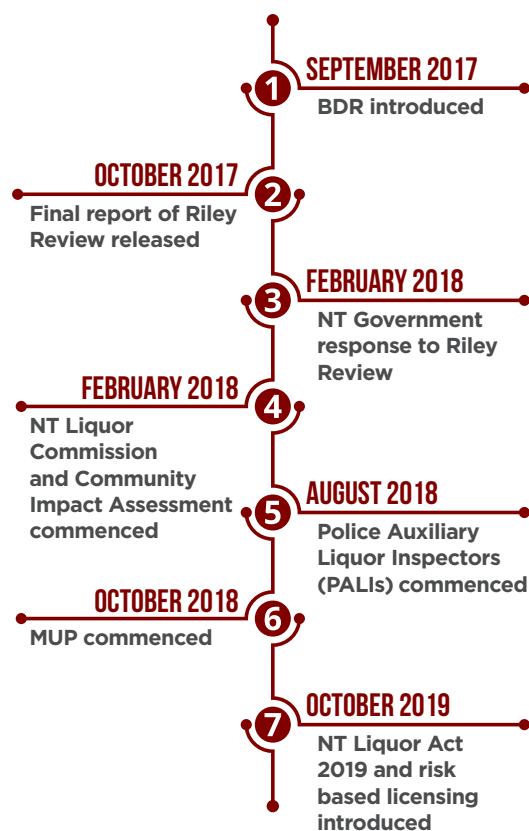
Alice Springs

Alice Springs residents have experienced very high levels of alcohol harm in their community over many decades. However, recently released data shows that the town has experienced the lowest rates of alcohol-related assaults in 10 years⁸. When you compare the period 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018 (pre-MUP implementation) and 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019 and 2019 (post-MUP implementation), there has been a:

- 43 per cent reduction in alcohol-related total assaults (1073 in 2017-18 : 607 in 2018-19)
- 38 per cent reduction in alcohol-related domestic violence (679 in 2017-18 : 420 in 2018-19).⁹

Police data also shows that protective custody episodes in Alice Springs are down 63 per cent for the year ending June 2019. The only sobering up shelter in Alice has also seen a change. Carole Taylor, Chief Executive of Drug and Alcohol Services Australia, says they have seen a sustained, significant drop in clientele over the past 12 to 15 months.¹⁰

The reduction in alcohol-related violence has also had a marked impact on the Alice Springs Hospital, reflected in the 43 per cent fall in alcohol-related emergency department presentations over the same period.¹¹



CASE STUDY: ALICE SPRINGS HOSPITAL

Emergency department presentations at Alice Springs Hospital have fallen by 43 per cent for alcohol, based on a comparison of the data over the period 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018 (pre-MUP implementation) and 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019 (post-MUP implementation). Over these two periods, the number of presentations fell from 3751 to 2134.

Recently released data shows that fewer people are being hospitalised, taken into protective custody and entering sobering up shelters.

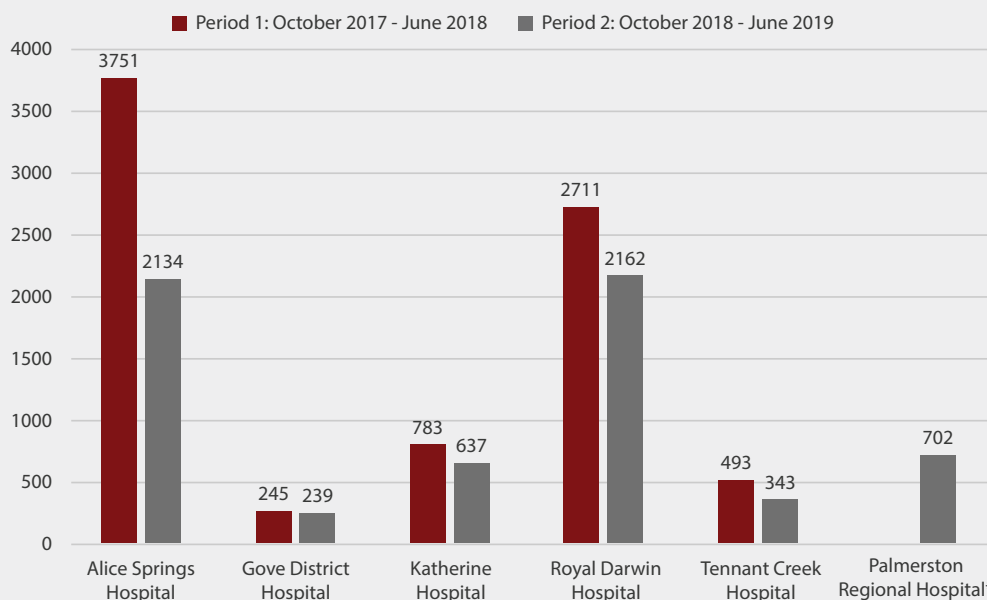
We used to see a lot of ladies with defensive fractures of the forearms just from fending off attacks. That was a common fracture – not common elsewhere but common in Alice Springs. It's very very rare now, I haven't seen one for months.

DR STEPHEN GOURLEY
DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY MEDICINE AT THE ALICE SPRINGS HOSPITAL



Dr Stephen Gourley, Director of Emergency Medicine at the Alice Springs Hospital reports that the changes have had a really positive impact on the work of frontline health professionals. He says that at the Hospital, there's been "a massive improvement – we were seeing up to 30 intoxicated people per day and now it's down to just a few. The hospital is a much more pleasant place to work....and for other patients to be.¹²"

**NUMBER OF ALCOHOL-RELATED EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT PRESENTATIONS
NORTHERN TERRITORY 2017-2019**



*No comparison possible with Period 1 as Palmerston Regional Hospital opened 27 August 2018

Source: NT Department of Health: <https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/data-and-evaluation/graph>



Tennant Creek

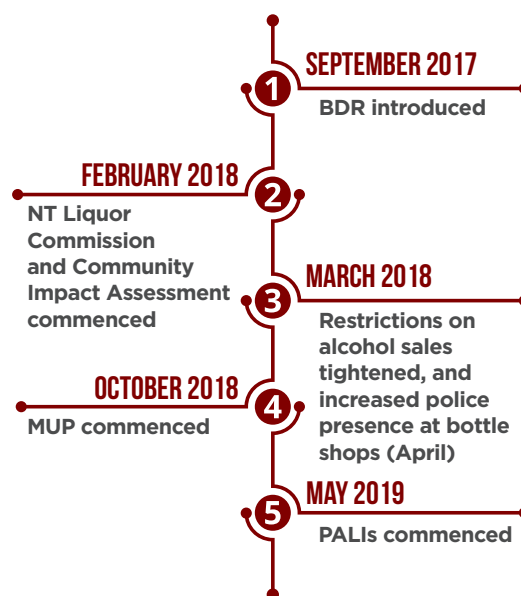
Tennant Creek has seen substantial reductions in alcohol-fuelled violence following the introduction of the alcohol reform program in 2018. These measures began with increased restrictions on trading hours and volume of sales in late February 2018, following a number of alcohol-related incidents in the town. A substantial drop in alcohol harm occurred at this time.

Further reductions in harm are also evident when you compare data from the period 1 March 2018 to 31 July 2018 (pre-MUP implementation) with data from 1 March 2019 to 31 July 2019 (post-MUP implementation):^a

- 20 per cent reduction in alcohol-related total assaults (69 in 2018 : 55 in 2019)
- 13 per cent reduction in alcohol-related domestic violence (55 in 2017-18 : 48 in 2018-19).¹³

Alcohol-related domestic violence represents approximately 80 per cent of all alcohol-related assaults in Tennant Creek, the highest rate observed in the Territory and the same level as that seen in Katherine.

The association between domestic violence and alcohol use cannot be ignored in light of the substantial drop in admissions to the Tennant Creek's women's shelter following the introduction of tighter restrictions on alcohol sales in 2018. Mary Ryan, Chief Executive Officer of the Tennant Creek Women's Shelter says that following the increased restrictions on trading hours and volume of sales, the shelter saw a significant drop in the number of women and children at the refuge. "The Easter weekend is one of the weeks that we usually have a lot of clients in. We actually had nobody there this year."



I guess it really means that they [women] can let their guard down a little bit, that they can sleep at night, that they're not so stressed, not so anxious about what's going to happen to the families. It means they're safer. And their kids are safe.¹⁴

MARY RYAN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE TENNANT CREEK WOMEN'S SHELTER



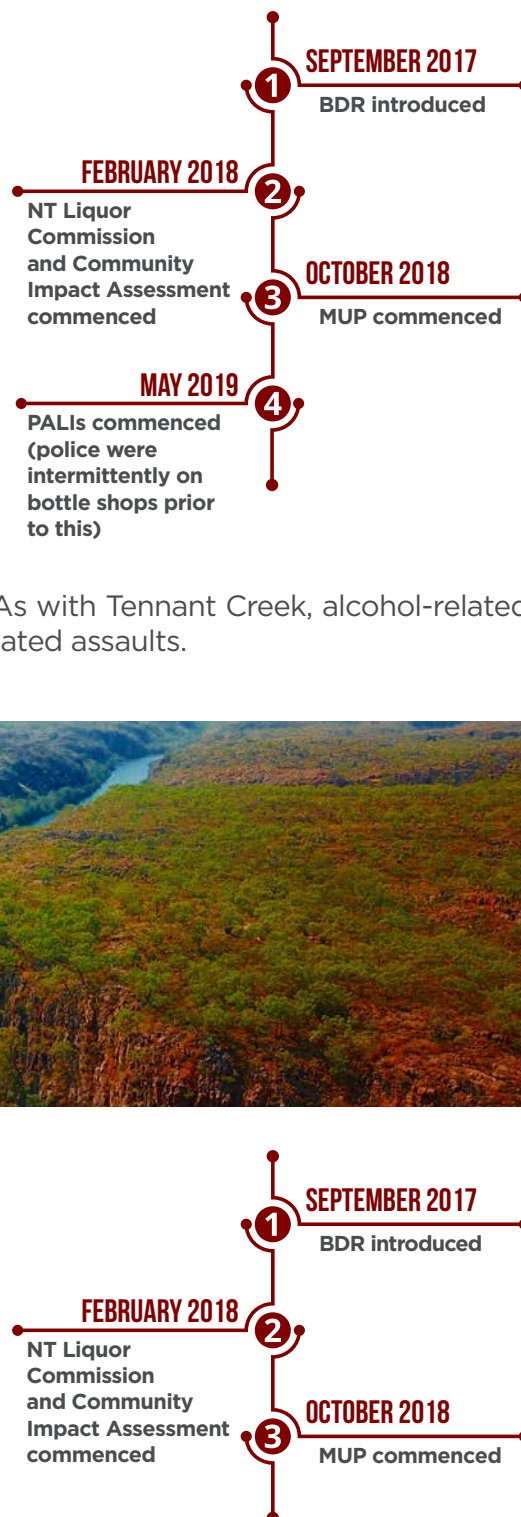
^a This time period differs to the other time periods in this report, but has been selected to ensure consistent conditions were in place in Tennant Creek throughout each time period examined, so that the impact of only one policy change (ie MUP) could be observed.

Katherine

Katherine has also seen substantial reductions in alcohol-related harm. After reaching a low in 2016, alcohol-related assaults increased sharply between 2017 and 2018, declining again in 2018. When you compare the period 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018 (pre-MUP implementation) and 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019 and 2019 (post-MUP implementation), Katherine has seen:

- an 18 per cent reduction in alcohol-related total assaults (353 in 2017-18 : 288 in 2018-19)
- a 12 per cent reduction in alcohol-related domestic violence (261 in 2017-18 : 229 in 2018-19).¹⁵

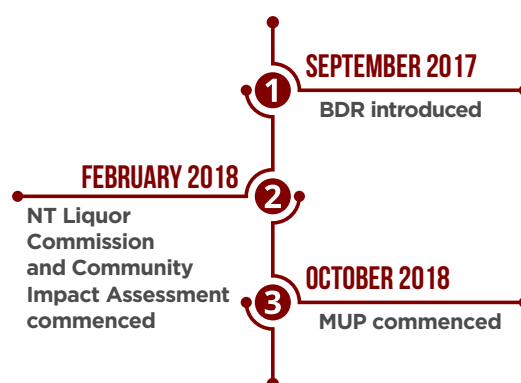
Interpersonal violence remains a key issue for Katherine. As with Tennant Creek, alcohol-related domestic violence represents 80 per cent of all alcohol-related assaults.



Darwin

The Darwin region is the broken jaw capital of the world.

DR MAHIBAN THOMAS
DIRECTOR HEAD AND NECK SERVICES
AND MAXILLOFACIAL SURGEON AT ROYAL
DARWIN HOSPITAL



In 2018, Dr Thomas was reported as saying that 92 per cent of mandible fractures were alcohol-related. He indicated that a large proportion of these occurred in the Darwin region.^{16, 17}

NT police data shows that alcohol-related assaults have trended upwards in Darwin and Palmerston over the past 10 years. They reached a peak in 2017-2018, with numbers falling in 2018-2019. A comparison of the assaults over the period 1 October 2017 to 31 July 2018 (pre-MUP implementation) and 1 October 2018 to 31 July 2019 (post-MUP implementation), shows that Darwin and Palmerston have seen a:

- 16 per cent reduction in alcohol-related total assaults (1181 in 2017-18: 991 in 2018-19)
- 9 per cent reduction in alcohol-related domestic violence (606 : 550).¹⁸

Conclusion

This Report examines data following the introduction of the NT's most comprehensive alcohol reforms, including the Riley Review recommendations. The data indicates that the measures progressively executed since the election of the Gunner Government in 2016 have had a significant effect in reducing alcohol-related violence.

Focusing on a selection of data from before and after the Territory-wide implementation of the MUP, this preliminary examination of police and hospital data has shown that total alcohol-related assaults and alcohol-related domestic violence have declined substantially in each major centre in the Territory, albeit at a higher rate in some urban centres than others.

Alcohol-related assaults are at a 10-year low. There have been 630 fewer people assaulted in the last 12 months (a 28 per cent drop) compared to the previous 12 months (August to August) and astonishing drops in public drinking offences and protective custodies at the watch house, 72% and 71% respectively. This is very good news for Alice Springs.¹⁹

BRADLEY CURRIE
POLICE COMMANDER NT SOUTHERN REGION



The current evaluations of the MUP and the BDR will enable more comprehensive analysis of a broader range of data, and provide a more detailed understanding of the full impact of these measures.

This Report provides an encouraging indication that the comprehensive program of alcohol reforms will be effective in achieving reduced levels of alcohol harm in the longer term. The extent of the impact is of course dependent on how the reforms are implemented and maintained. However, the NT Government has laid the foundations for a sustainable reduction in alcohol harm that could see the NT lose its moniker as the booze capital of the country in the years to come.



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