

A Citizens' Wānanga on alcohol policy in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction / Issues: Alcohol is a major determinant of health in New Zealand. Despite this, it is highly commercialised and current alcohol policy is failing to adequately manage alcohol-related harm. Not only is current alcohol policy ineffective, but so too are contemporary methods for policy reform. Attempts at alcohol regulation have therefore been repeatedly thwarted by economic interests.

Method / Approach: This paper first focuses on the current state of regulatory failure to clearly establish the need for reform. Following this, it proposes and analyses citizens' assemblies as a novel solution to this compromised policy process. These are novel democratic institutions designed to secure an informed and representative public voice as the central determinant of policy.

Key Findings: This paper concludes that a citizens' assembly would be appropriate for reinvigorating effective alcohol policy reform in New Zealand.

Discussions and Conclusions: A citizen's assembly recruits a representative sample of the national public and exposes these participants to a structured process of education, public consultation, and discussion. It provides a model of what the nation would desire, hypothetically, if they were exposed to the same thorough process. When appropriately designed, citizen's assemblies therefore result in policies which are more informed, evidence-based, politically legitimate, and democratically accountable than those provided by other contemporary democratic methods. Furthermore, the assembly would also be consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi principles and may assist in reducing alcohol-related inequities for Māori. Finally, in discussing such an assembly, this paper presents an internationally applicable model which could be employed for a range of other drug policy issues.

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