



RIKSREVISIONEN

Summary:

State funding in alcohol policy

RiR 2010:21

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– Is young people's alcohol consumption affected?

Summary

The government's policy on alcohol was redirected at the beginning of the 21st century. The aim was to counter the increase in alcohol consumption which followed on Sweden's entry into the EU by means of increased investment in alcohol prevention measures at the municipal level. Efforts to prevent alcohol use by young people were a priority. The Riksdag (the Swedish parliament) has passed two alcohol policy action plans (for 2001-2005 and 2006-2010 respectively).

In line with this redirection of alcohol policy, the government has given grants to municipalities and non-profit organisations whose work has included efforts to affect attitudes in order to limit the demand for alcohol. The government has also tried to limit the access to alcohol by funding municipal enforcement of alcohol service regulation under the Alcohol Act. Over the past ten years, the government has invested almost SEK 1.4 billion in local preventive efforts, of which about SEK 900 million have been aimed at children and young people.

State financing of local preventive efforts has produced some positive results. The investments of the past decade have led to a structure being created within which these efforts can be pursued at the regional and local levels. Further, children and young people have been made a priority in alcohol prevention projects, and effective alcohol enforcement methods have begun to be applied in some areas.

Little evidence that grant-giving has had an effect on drinking

Total alcohol consumption has decreased over the last few years. Binge drinking is also decreasing, and fewer young people drink now than at the beginning of the decade. The question is whether there is any causal link between these developments and the government's investment in local

preventive efforts. The Swedish National Audit Office (SNAO) has looked at whether the new thrust of alcohol policy – government funding of local preventive efforts – has been effective in the sense that children's and young people's demand for and access to alcohol has been affected.

SNAO has looked at research and evaluations in the area of alcohol prevention. It has also examined the grant-giving authorities' handling of grants, how the grants have been used by recipients, and what recipients have achieved with the help of grants. SNAO has found the following:

Research and previous evaluations offer little evidence that the projects carried out have had any effect on alcohol consumption. SNAO's audit confirms that in many cases the methods used by municipalities and non-profit organisations lack any evidence of effects. The use of evidence-based methods is complicated by the fact that it is uncertain in some cases which methods have scientifically proven effects. The standards for how effects are assessed differ between authorities. The National Council on Health Technology Assessment and the National Board of Health and Welfare use stricter criteria than other authorities to assess the scientific support for a given effect. This means that some methods considered as evidence-based by the National Institute of Public Health are not regarded by the National Board of Health and Welfare and the National Council on Health Technology Assessment as having any proven effects.

The county administrative boards that are meant to steer the projects towards effective methods are not doing so, and the National Board of Health and Welfare does not require grant recipients to present results. Those who should really have an interest in presenting effects of their grant-supported activities – the non-profit organisations and municipalities – hardly have any effects to present.

Support for local alcohol enforcement has not affected young people's access to alcohol

Medium-strength beer ("folköl" in Swedish, available in supermarkets) and alcohol purchased in bars and restaurants make up a smaller part of young people's total alcohol consumption. Alcohol purchased abroad and alcohol illicitly obtained from Systembolaget (the Swedish retailing monopoly for alcohol) make up the larger part. This fact reduces the extent to which alcohol enforcement can affect children's and young people's access to alcohol. Young people simply manage to obtain alcohol from other sources than those alcohol enforcement can affect.

Even in areas where alcohol enforcement can work there are certain shortcomings. Municipalities and the police claim that the serving of alcohol in bars and restaurants to minors is not a problem. At the same

time, four out of ten persons under the age of 18 claim that they manage to obtain alcohol in bars and restaurants even though they are underage. This indicates that alcohol enforcement is insufficient. It is the assessment of the National Institute of Public Health, furthermore, that the progress of the county administrative boards' alcohol enforcement role has been limited and that local alcohol enforcement is still lacking in terms of the sale of medium-strength beer and the alcohol enforcement of bars and restaurants.

This, in combination with the changes in the ways that young people obtain alcohol, means in SNAO's view that it seems unlikely that alcohol enforcement – as it is practised today – affects children's and young people's access to alcohol or their alcohol consumption.

Inefficient state control

County administrative boards' handling of grants is not geared towards results and effects

In their guidelines to municipalities, county administrative boards specify that applications and final reports on how grants were used must be phrased in terms of results and effects. County administrative also state that it is important for municipalities to use evidence-based methods.

The majority of county administrative boards do not include any requirements at all in their guidelines for the use of evidence-based methods. In many cases, the final reports submitted by municipalities contain considerable shortcomings. Any results presented are rarely substantiated with facts, there is hardly any reasoning in terms of the projects' effects, and information about whether the activity has been integrated with the municipalities' ordinary activities is missing from a third of all final reports. Many county administrative boards make it a condition of the final grant payment that municipalities first submit a final report. The fact that projects have received the final grant payment despite obvious shortcomings in the final reports suggests that county administrative boards in many cases don't care about how the projects' final results are presented.

Muddled grant payments

Municipalities and non-profit organisations receive grants from several sources for similar types of activities. The same temperance organisation can receive grants for alcohol prevention projects from the National Board of Health and Welfare and the National Institute of Public Health, or from the National Institute of Public Health and National Board for Youth Affairs if it is a youth organisation. Municipalities can receive

grants from both the county administrative board and the National Institute of Public Health for alcohol prevention projects.

County administrative boards handle a large number of projects involving relatively small sums of money. Over the past four years, 623 projects aimed at children and young people have received funding. Just over 70 per cent of these projects were granted funding amounting to less than SEK 300 000. The Institute of Public Health also funds many projects involving relatively small sums of money.

Grants to non-profit organisations are not focused on results and effects

The national alcohol policy action plan and the appropriation directions for the National Board of Health and Welfare specify objectives for the grants to non-profit organisations, including the objective that the national organisations' work should strengthen that of the local organisations. The state's goals are not specified in the National Board of Health and Welfare's guidelines for organisations' applications, and not in the guidelines for feedback either.

The majority of the organisations only partially carry out what their applications said they were going to carry out. Half of the organisations that have received grants from the National Board of Health and Welfare have presented results which are not fully reliable. One element of this is that claimed results are not substantiated by facts. Normally the organisations do not suffer any consequences. The National Board of Health and Welfare continues paying out grants for about the same amount to the organisations in question, year after year.

The Institute of Public Health has not used available means to strengthen alcohol enforcement

The Institute of Public Health regards it as its task to carry out alcohol enforcement on a fundamental and overall level, by means of follow-ups of county administrative boards' alcohol enforcement and of support to county administrative boards, as well as by producing general advice in the form of handbooks and guidance. The way in which the Institute of Public Health carries out alcohol enforcement implies higher demands on regional and local alcohol enforcement, which in turn brings higher demands that the Institute contribute to competence development at the regional and local levels. However, opinions differ as to how the Institute discharges its alcohol enforcement responsibilities.

County administrative boards have pointed to a lack of activity and to a perceived failure of the Institute to justify why it is important to supervise the sale of medium-strength beer. The Institute appears to assume a passive role in relation to county administrative boards on the

issue of alcohol enforcement protocols. Under the Alcohol Ordinance (1994:2046), county administrative boards shall provide the information and assistance necessary for the Institute's alcohol enforcement. The county administrative boards submit few alcohol enforcement protocols and the Institute does nothing to change the situation.

The municipalities are dissatisfied with the Institute's efforts within the area of alcohol enforcement as they consider the Institute to be absent from these efforts. Municipalities also criticise the Institute for not having updated handbooks.

The Institute has no authorisation to issue provisions on the enforcement of licences to serve alcohol and the sale of medium-strength beer. The Institute has been economical with general advice. Against this background the SNAO believes it is particularly important for the Institute to improve its efforts on general advice and to promote increased competence in the alcohol enforcement chain.

County administrative boards commit few resources in relation to needs and wishes

County administrative boards' supervision levels are currently far below the frequency levels established in the first action plan and by the National Institute of Public Health. Supervision is the county administrative boards' instrument for ensuring that municipalities live up to their alcohol enforcement obligations under the Alcohol Act. SNAO's audit shows that alcohol enforcement in most cases is not assessed on the basis of efficiency. The audited supervision plans most often lack the kind of content which would make it possible to fulfil the purpose of creating a continuous dialogue between county administrative board and municipality and thereby stimulate municipalities' alcohol enforcement activities. County management often chooses to commit few resources to the supervision responsibility that county administrative boards have under the Alcohol Act – at least in relation to the needs that exist in the municipalities.

Information transfer from the police is lacking

Until recently, the role of the police in alcohol enforcement efforts has been unclear. Training programmes have made clear the tasks of the police in local alcohol enforcement, and the police have improved their alcohol enforcement efforts. Nevertheless, it is still the case that just over 40 per cent of municipalities have not carried out joint alcohol enforcement with the police, and in half of all municipalities the police have not carried out their own alcohol enforcement. This shows that there is scope for improvement in the collaboration between municipalities and the police on the matter of alcohol enforcement. There are also problems

regarding information transfer between the police and municipalities, in that municipalities feel that they don't always receive the information that the police is obliged by law to give them.

SNAO's recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office has found little evidence that government funding of local preventive efforts has affected the alcohol consumption of children and young people. It is difficult to link preventive measures to the changes in alcohol consumption. Further, the authorities, municipalities and non-profit organisations have handled grants in such a way that effects are hard to achieve and to identify. The same is true of authorities' and municipalities' handling of alcohol enforcement. Against this background, it is questionable whether it is effective for the government to continue its funding of local preventive efforts – at least in the way that funding has hitherto been focused, controlled and followed up.

The second alcohol action plan runs until the end of 2010. In its budget bill for 2011, the government has suggested continued investment in the ANDT (alcohol, narcotics, doping and tobacco) area. A more detailed plan will be presented as part of a comprehensive ANDT strategy for the 2011-2015 period. In drawing up this plan, the government should consider the positive effects that SNAO regards as attainable through changes to the way funding is currently carried out. SNAO's recommendations assume that the respective capacities of county administrative boards, municipalities and non-profit organisations will remain unchanged.

- The government should increase the extent to which grants are directed towards measures which have a proven effect on young people's access to and demand for alcohol.
- The government should organise the grants procedure so that authorities that give grants do not overlap. A recipient should not receive grants from several different authorities for similar activities.
- County administrative boards should concentrate grants to fewer, bigger and more long-term projects.
- The National Board of Health and Welfare and county administrative boards should prioritise giving grants to projects and methods that have proven effects. Authorities should more clearly focus follow-ups on the results and effects of grants.

- The National Institute of Public Health should become clearer, more active and more concrete in its alcohol enforcement role, and should focus efforts on guidance and controlling the efficiency of alcohol enforcement.
- County administrative boards should increasingly focus their supervision on controlling efficiency and on supporting municipalities in reducing young people's access to medium-strength beer and alcohol in bars and restaurants.