

North Carolina Alcohol Social Districts

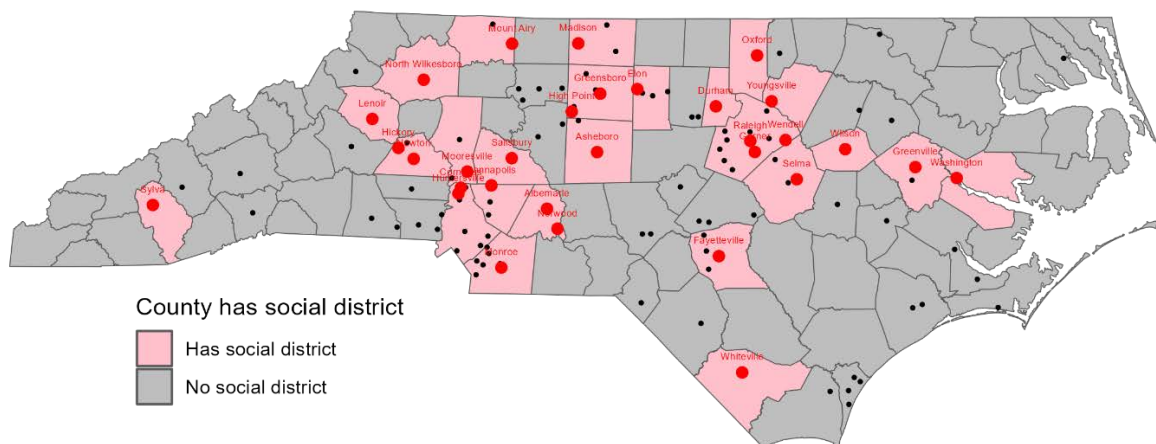
What are alcohol social districts?

In September of 2021, NC passed a law ([HB890](#)) that allowed local city and county governments to create **alcohol social districts**. Alcohol social districts loosen restrictions for pedestrians carrying open alcohol containers away from on-premises alcohol outlets (bars and restaurants) where the beverage was purchased. Alcohol social districts require signage denoting boundaries, responsible consumption messages on cups, Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) licensure, clearly defined days and hours of operation, and posted maps and signage at boundaries. While alcohol social districts must create management and maintenance plans, enforcement in practice may vary widely. They are typically a few blocks within a city but vary widely in size and structure.

Potential public health concerns include the possibility that over time these alcohol social districts could indirectly impact other alcohol environment dynamics, including increasing the number or concentration of places that sell alcohol, expanding hours of sale, more alcohol promotions, and increasing exposure of youth and adults to advertising and cultural normalization of alcohol use. However, there are not currently data available to confirm or refute these concerns.

According to our recent assessment **25% of NC counties** already have alcohol social districts in one or more of their cities (see map) as of February 2023.

Alcohol Social Districts in North Carolina



Includes n=31 social districts, representing 25 counties. Cities with social districts in red, 100 largest NC cities as black dots.

(Also see: <https://impactcarolina.org/alcohol/>)

Why should we care?

Changes to alcohol policy can have immediate and long-term measurable public health impacts. Changes like increasing hours of sale, increased street level advertising, or adding more alcohol selling businesses in an area can lead to increases in alcohol-related car crashes, chronic diseases, violent crime, and deaths. These changes enable greater access and easier excessive alcohol consumption by adults and youth. These health impacts also have high social costs. **Excessive alcohol use costs**¹ North Carolina nearly \$10 billion dollars at the last estimate in lost productivity, healthcare costs, criminal justice expenses, and motor vehicle crash costs.

¹ Gora Combs, K., Fliss, M. D., Knuth, K. B., Cox, M. E., & Trangenstein, P. J. (2022). The societal cost of excessive drinking in North Carolina, 2017. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 83(3), 214–220. <https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.83.3.214>

Although considered a motivation for alcohol social district development, increased business revenue and downtown foot traffic may not offset the enforcement and societal costs of expanding access to alcohol.²

What do we know? What don't we know?

The **Community Guide**³ summarizes the Community Preventive Services Task Force recommendations on the effects of alcohol policies on health. There is little known on the impact of alcohol social districts by name. However, by breaking alcohol social districts down into components, some of which pertain to evidence in the Community Guide, the following are some potential areas for concern:

- **Increased alcohol outlet density can negatively impact health.** Alcohol social districts may promote new alcohol-centered businesses, increasing outlet density. Regulating the number of businesses selling alcohol is an effective way to prevent excessive alcohol use.
- **Increased hours of sale** can negatively impact health. This includes independent efforts to expand happy hours, and any downstream impacts to promote alcohol sales by expanding hours in alcohol social districts.
- **If alcohol social districts encourage retailers to create promotions or offer discounts, these can negatively impact health.** Promotions such as happy hours make it easier to purchase larger quantities of alcohol at the same time. NC currently does not allow happy hours and has certain limitations regarding promotions.
- **Youth are susceptible to alcohol advertising, normalizing, and exposure.** Proximity of alcohol social districts to schools and teen social areas could increase their exposure to alcohol and normalize their views of alcohol consumption, which could be associated with increases in youth drinking.
- **Increasing excessive alcohol consumption has a high societal cost.** While proponents of alcohol social districts may state that the districts could increase local business or tax revenue, the economic cost of alcohol-related harms to local NC communities of nearly \$10 billion each year could offset the potential new revenue.
- **People in recovery** can be particularly sensitive to increased promotion and normalization of drinking. Research has found that individuals with alcohol dependence are more impacted by advertising.⁴
- **Alcohol-related harms and policies often disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.** Off-premises outlets are often denser in BIPOC communities⁵.
- **Commuting and Equity.** Those who live nearby entertainment and tourist districts may sometimes experience the health consequences of alcohol outlets more than those who travel there to spend money.

What can locals do?

- Locals can create their own **local evaluation plans** by tracking changes like outlet density, hours of sale, price and promotion changes, youth exposure to advertising, actual business revenue, practical changes in business, and alcohol-impaired driving enforcement.
- Local health departments may be able to assist in evaluation planning and execution. Local health departments may also be able to provide guidance for health promotion messaging within the district.

² Gora Combs, K., Fliss, M. D., Knuth, K. B., Cox, M. E., & Trangenstein, P. J. (2022). The societal cost of excessive drinking in North Carolina, 2017. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 83(3), 214–220. <https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.83.3.214>

³ CDC Community Guide: <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/topics/excessive-alcohol-consumption.html>

⁴ Noel, J. K., Xuan, Z., & Babor, T. F. (2019). Perceptions of Alcohol Advertising Vary Based on Psychological Characteristics. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 54(6), 986–997. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826084.2018.1555258>

⁵ Fliss, M. D., Cox, M. E., Wallace, J. W., Simon, M. C., Knuth, K. B., & Proescholdbell, S. (2021). Measuring and mapping alcohol outlet environment density, clusters, and racial and ethnic disparities in Durham, North Carolina, 2017. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd18.210127>

- Locals and organizations can **educate their city councils, county commissioners, and community members**; provide public comments; write **op-eds** to local papers; or distribute **press releases**.
- Use the **NC Public Health Alcohol Data Dashboard**⁶ to get data and talking points for your county.
- **Business owners** can track changes to revenue, share about their own experiences, and track unseen impacts like those to liability insurance and actual revenue impacts.
- Unlike some states, NC **preempts localities** from many alcohol-related policies that protect health, like increasing excise taxes or making businesses share liability for selling to minors.

What are state and academic researchers doing?

- State and academic researchers are working on an alcohol social district evaluation plan. Interested parties can request to join the NC Statewide Excessive Alcohol Advisory Committee by contacting substanceusedata@dhhs.nc.gov.
- NC DHHS continues to share well-researched, evidence-based, public health knowledge about the harms of excessive alcohol consumption. You can find more information at the state alcohol data page⁷.

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⁶ NC DHHS Alcohol & Public Health Data Dashboard: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/news/press-releases/2019/04/12/new-data-dashboard-illustrates-state-county-impacts-excessive-alcohol-use-north-carolina>

⁷ NC DHHS IVPB Alcohol Use & Related Harms: <https://injuryfreenc.dph.ncdhhs.gov/DataSurveillance/alcohol.htm>