

INUIT AND NON-INUIT ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN THE BAFFIN REGION, NWT, CANADA

Darryl S. Wood



Darryl Wood is currently an assistant professor with the Justice Center at the University of Alaska Anchorage. In 1997 he received his Ph.D. in Criminology from Simon Fraser University after completing M.A. and B.A. degree in criminal justice from New Mexico State University. His primary research interests revolve around the community and criminal justice system responses to violence in rural and indigenous communities.

Justice Center

University of Alaska Anchorage,

Anchorage, USA

ABSTRACT

Stereotypes about Inuit drinking would have us believe they are much more likely to be users of alcohol compared to other segments of the population. As with many other stereotypes, however, this belief is primarily rooted in fiction and selective observation. As revealed in a number of self-report surveys regarding alcohol use, a smaller proportion of Inuit in the Northwest Territories (NWT) have reported drinking when compared to the non-aboriginal of the territory. The data presented here serve to further confirm the notion of comparatively less prevalent alcohol use among NWT Inuit. Rather than using survey data, however, this paper looks to alcohol use indicators derived from territorial liquor commission mail order invoices to show that the volume of alcohol consumed by Baffin Region Inuit is much less than that of non-Inuit in and outside the territory. (*Int J Circumpolar Health* 1999; 58: 24-29)

As has best been the case with most groups of aboriginal peoples across North America (1, 2), self-report survey research conducted over the past 10 years has shown that the proportion of Inuit in the Northwest Territories (NWT) who are drinkers is less than that of the non-aboriginal population. According to a 1986 survey of alcohol use conducted by Health and Welfare Canada, fewer Inuit (48 %) reported drinking alcohol in the previous year compared to non-aboriginal NWT residents (86 %) (3). Results of the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey showing 63 percent of NWT Inuit to have drunk alcohol in the year prior to the survey (3) also indicated less prevalent consumption if compared to the 78 to 81 percent of Canadians who reported current alcohol consumption in a variety of surveys conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (4,5,6,7). A more recent study, the 1996 NWT Alcohol & Drug Survey, provides further support for the argument that alcohol consumption is less prevalent among the Inuit: only half (50.6 %) of the Inuit residents of Nunavut compared to more than five out of six (84.6 %) non-Inuit residents of Nunavut reported the consumption of alcohol in the year prior to the survey (8).

Taken together, the results of all three surveys show a substantial difference between the self-reported prevalence of Inuit and non-Inuit alcohol use.

Although there is a consistent difference in the self-reported prevalence of alcohol use between Inuit and non-aboriginal peoples, one might view those differences with some suspicion because no efforts have been made to validate those measures. Because it is uncommon for drinking prevalence studies to assess the accuracy of responses (9), special care should be taken when making comparisons between cultures. Variations between Inuit and non-aboriginal experiences with alcohol abuse could result in differences in the acceptability of drinking that, in turn, might lead to differential levels of underreporting of alcohol use. Validations of self-reports in surveys of other behaviors have shown that a behavior is less likely to be reported if it is socially disapproved and that such underreporting of socially disapproved behavior is more likely to occur when the behavior is common (10). Since alcohol use is a relatively common behavior that carries a comparatively higher level of disapproval among Inuit, one might expect them to be less likely than non-aboriginal peoples to report its consumption.

Based on the surveys alone, it is difficult to determine if cultural differences in self-reported alcohol use are the result of differences in behavior or a by-product of variations in the social acceptability of drinking. However, because the aforementioned surveys have long since been conducted, it is impossible to validate the individual survey responses. It is therefore desirable to look to other indicators of alcohol use to see if there are differences in Inuit and non-aboriginal drinking.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To arrive at an additional understanding of the differences between Inuit and non-Inuit drinking patterns, the two groups were compared using a proxy measure of their respective average volumes of alcohol consumption. Measures of the per capita consumption of absolute alcohol (i.e., 100 percent or 200 proof alcohol) for the Inuit and non-Inuit residents of the nine 'wet' communities of the Baffin Region, NWT were calculated using sales invoices from the regional liquor store. Given the stringent alcohol control regulations of the region, the information provided in the individual sales records, and the particular alcohol consumption practices of the Baffin Region Inuit, it was possible to construct an indicator that accounts for all of

the legally purchased alcohol that was consumed in the region.

Although alcohol possession and consumption is legal in the 'wet' Baffin Region communities, residents have a relatively difficult time obtaining their drink.¹ Under the government controlled distribution system of the NWT, there are no places for legal purchase of alcohol in the nine 'wet' Baffin Region communities that allow its importation. Residents of those communities must instead purchase their alcohol by mail order from the Territorial Liquor Store in Iqaluit.

While this system makes it difficult for drinkers to get their alcohol, the records of the system make it possible to calculate per capita alcohol consumption for the communities that allow importation. The following pieces of information were taken from each individual mail order invoice for the entire Baffin Region for 1991 to compute the volume of absolute alcohol purchased:

- the number of cases of beer or number of bottles of wine or spirits,
- the alcohol content of the beverage in percent based on brand of beer, wine or spirit (11),
- the volume of cases of beer or bottles of wine or spirits in millilitres, and
- the ethnicity (based on surname) of the buyer.²

To calculate per capita consumption, the total volume of absolute alcohol purchased was divided by the number of people in the population for which drinking occurs (age 15 and up).

A few assumptions must be made to use liquor order invoices as a measure of per capita alcohol consumption. The first of these is that purchased liquor is consumed liquor. If the respondents of field interviews can be believed, this is a very safe assumption to make about alcohol use in the Baffin region. As an Inuit woman in her early 20s put it, "when people get alcohol, they just drink until it's gone" (12). In other words, alcoholic beverages do not last very long there. A second point to bear in mind is that the liquor order invoices measure only that alcohol consumption which is legal and which is confined to beverage alcohol. There is no way to gauge the consumption of

1. The regional centre, Iqaluit, with its public drinking establishments, is an obvious exception to this rule. As such, it is excluded from the analysis. The nine 'wet' Baffin Region communities considered here are Arctic Bay / Nanisivik, Broughton Island, Cape Dorset, Clyde River, Grise Fiord, Hall Beach, Igloolik, Iqaluit, Pond Inlet, and Resolute Bay. The other three Baffin Region communities (Kimmirut, Pangnirtung, and Sanikiluaq) prohibit the importation of alcohol.

2. The buyer's surname provided an approximation of the ethnicity of the liquor purchaser. It was also a good indication of the ethnicity of the individuals that are actually consuming the alcohol because Inuit and non-Inuit generally do not socialize in non-occupational settings. In the drinking establishments in Iqaluit visited during field research it was rare to see members of the two groups drinking together.

bootlegged alcohol, homemade alcohol, or denatured alcohol based products such as after-shave or hair spray. The third caveat concerning the use of this community measure of alcohol consumption is that it only accounts for the consumption of alcohol that is shipped into, and consumed in, the community. It does not account for the alcohol that is consumed when residents are, for example, away from the community at regional meetings in Iqaluit or doing government business in Yellowknife.³ At its best, the measure of per capita absolute alcohol considered here is most reliable when comparing Inuit and non-Inuit drinking of beverage alcohol that occurs in the communities. The measure does not perform as well when attempting to make comparisons between the communities and larger levels of aggregation.

RESULTS

Two findings clearly stand out when comparing the volume of alcohol consumption of Baffin Region Inuit with that of non-Inuit and out of the region. First and foremost, there was much less alcohol consumed on average by the Baffin Region Inuit than by non-Inuit from the region or by the typical Canadian. The second striking feature of alcohol consumption in the Baffin Region is the predominance of hard liquor use instead of beer or wine.

According to aggregated sales records, the Baffin Region Inuit drink much less than non-Inuit in terms of alcohol consumed. A comparison of Inuit and non-Inuit consumption rates in Table 1 shows that the Inuit consumption rate of 1.1 litres of absolute alcohol per capita was less than a quarter of the non-Inuit consumption rate of 4.6 litres of absolute alcohol per capita. The Inuit consumption rates are also much lower than what was recorded in other surveys (13) for the NWT or for Canada as a whole. The rate of alcohol consumption among the Baffin Region Inuit was a tenth that of the territorial rate and an eighth of the national rate. Seen another way, the average Baffin Region Inuit in 1991 drank the equivalent in absolute alcohol of only 5 cases of beer⁴ compared to the roughly 42 cases per Canadian adult.

3. Even national measures of consumption have some 'slippage' because a certain amount of alcohol is consumed outside the country. For example, the national measures do not account for the alcohol consumed by Canadian 'snowbirds' in Florida and Arizona or the beers consumed by Blue Jays fans on trips to games in Seattle or Detroit.

4. In Canada, a case of beer is 12 bottles or cans containing anywhere from 341 to 355 millilitres for each can or bottle.

Table 1. Volume of Absolute Alcohol Purchased Per Capita Per Year, 'Wet' Baffin Region NWT Communities, the Entire NWT, and Canada, 1991.

Population Group	Per Capita Litres of Absolute Alcohol Purchased	Percentage Absolute Alcohol Purchased by Beverage Type		
		Spirits	Beer	Wine
Inuit Residents, 'Wet' Baffin Region Communities*	1.1	86 %	12 %	2 %
Non-Inuit Residents, 'Wet' Baffin Region Communities*	4.6	47 %	46 %	7 %
Total Residents, 'Wet' Baffin Region Communities*	1.6	71 %	25 %	4 %
Northwest Territories**	11.1	45 %	48 %	7 %
Canada**	8.7	29 %	56 %	15 %

* Compiled from NWT Liquor Commission Liquor Order Invoices.

** Source: (13).

REFERENCES

1. May PA. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism among American Indians: An overview. In: Watts TD, Wright R, eds. Alcoholism in minority populations. Springfield: Thomas 1989; 95-119.
2. May, PA. Alcohol policy considerations for Indian reservations and bordertown communities. *Indian Alsk Native Ment Health Res* 1992; 4(3): 5-59.
3. GNWT Bureau of Statistics. 1991 Aboriginal Peoples data Northwest Territories: Language, Health Status and Social Issues. Yellowknife, NWT: Author 1993.
4. Health & Welfare Canada. Health status of Canadian Indians and Inuit - 1990. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services 1991.
5. Health & Welfare Canada. Canada's health promotion survey. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services 1988.
6. Health & Welfare Canada. National alcohol and other drugs survey. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services 1990.
7. Health & Welfare Canada. Canada's health promotion survey 1990 - technical report. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services 1993.
8. GNWT Bureau of Statistics. 1996 NWT alcohol & drug survey: rates of use for alcohol, other drugs and tobacco. Yellowknife, NWT: Author 1996.
9. Midanik L. The validity of self-reported alcohol consumption and alcohol problems: a literature review. *Br J Addiction* 1982; 77: 357-382.
10. Wentland EJ, Smith KW. Survey responses: an evaluation of their validity. San Diego: Academic 1993.
11. Myers L. BCL guide: Summer '94. Vancouver: British Columbia Liquor Distribution Branch 1994.

Although the Inuit residents of the Baffin Region consume comparatively little alcohol, the alcoholic beverages they did consume generally had a high alcohol content. When the total per capita absolute alcohol consumption is broken down (see Table 1) according to the type of alcoholic beverage, most of what was consumed by the Baffin Region Inuit was nearly double that of non-Inuit in the region of the NWT and almost triple that of the nation as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above regarding the volume of alcohol consumed by the average Baffin Region Inuk correspond with those of self-report surveys. When the findings are taken together, it is safe to argue that there is actually less drinking in the Inuit population than among their non-Inuit counterparts. Not only do fewer Inuit drink, but those that do drink consume considerably less alcohol compared to non-Inuit.

Largely due to circumstances of geography and the high cost of shipping goods by airplane, the Baffin Region Inuit drink mostly spirits because that is the form of alcohol that is least expensive to obtain. This predominance of spirits consumption among the Baffin Region Inuit should be seen as troublesome for two reasons. Of immediate concern is the potential for greater impairment resulting in violent or accidental behavior when using spirits rather than beer or wine. It is easier and quicker to obtain higher blood alcohol concentration through spirits consumption (14). The long-term health consequences should also be a concern. Some studies have shown that damage such as liver cirrhosis is more likely to be associated with the use of spirits instead of beer or wine (15).

It is necessary to recognize that the results presented in this paper do not completely fill in the picture regarding Inuit drinking. The consumption measures looked at in this paper only tell us how much the typical Inuit adult drinks over the period of a year. These measures do not allow us to know if that typical consumption occurs over many or a few drinking episodes in a year. Qualitative field research conducted in the region (16,17) would have us believe that binge drinking is the norm among the Inuit. It is believed that inordinately high volumes of alcohol are consumed on relatively few drinking occasions. Future empirical research should be conducted on the prevalence and incidence of binge drinking in the Arctic in order to have an even clearer understanding of how Inuit drinking patterns differ from those of the non-Inuit.

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

The author would like to thank the Northwest Territorial Liquor Commission for providing the records on which this study was based. He would also like to thank Toni Moras for her comments on earlier drafts of this paper. This research was supported by grant #411-90-0014 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. All content remains the responsibility of the author.

12. Wood DS. Violent crime and characteristics of twelve Inuit communities in the Baffin Region, NWT [dissertation] Burnaby, B.C.: Simon Fraser University 1997.
13. Single E. Canadian profile: alcohol, tobacco & other drugs. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse 1994.
14. Smart R.G. Behavioral and social consequences related to the consumption of different beverage types. *J Stud Alcohol* 1996; 57: 77-84.
15. Gruenewald PJ, Ponicki WR: The relationship of alcohol sales to cirrhosis mortality. *J Stud Alcohol* 1995; 56: 635-641.
16. Brody H. Alcohol, change and the industrial frontier. *Inuit Stud* 1977; 1: 31-46.
17. Matthiasson JS. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours: continuities in Inuit social relationships. In: Hamer J, Steinbring J, eds. *Alcohol and native peoples of the north*. Washington: University Press of America 1980; 73-87.

Darryl S. Wood, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor, Justice Center

University of Alaska Anchorage

3211 Providence Drive

Anchorage, AK 99508, USA

Phone: (907) 786-1126

Fax: (907) 786-7777

E-Mail: afdsw@uaa.alaska.edu