

EPS Recommendation for Enhancing Liquor Store Safety



EDMONTON POLICE SERVICE

Executive Summary

DATE: May 12th, 2021
SUBJECT: Business License Bylaw #13138 (Liquor Retail Stores)

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Edmonton Police Commission (EPC) and Edmonton Police Service (EPS) work with City of Edmonton (COE) Administration to engage with citizens and businesses on amending the Business License Bylaw to enhance safety through exploring the concept of controlled entry for all Alcohol Sales [Consumption off Premises] business licenses and that the results of the engagement are returned to City Council for a decision. The engagement process would also solicit perspectives on other ideas that could achieve the same safety result.

Summary:

Since 2018, the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) has been monitoring an exponential rise in violent thefts of liquor from liquor stores within the City of Edmonton (COE). Initial observations in 2018 saw a total of 3306 liquor theft events citywide. In 2019, this number surged to 9594 averaging 25-30 liquor theft events a day in the COE alone; a 190% increase. 2020 began on track to exceed the data produced in 2019, recording 1028 events in January alone. A 95% increase from January 2019's recorded events of 527. With COVID restrictions in 2020 preventing affiliated data from surpassing 2019, the true ceiling of this issue and affiliated demand on the EPS is unknown. With this increase, the EPS has seen a rise in violence associated with these thefts (i.e., loss prevention officers have been stabbed in the face, liquor store staff have been choked unconscious and bear sprayed and weapons have been produced and or used during the commission of the offence). The frequency of violence in relation to these thefts continues to be prolific. As retail businesses opt for a 'no touch' policy (under no circumstance are employees permitted to block, impede, pursue or apprehend a suspected shoplifter) to minimize the risk to staff, offenders are now exploiting a 'help yourself' environment.

Subsequent investigations by the EPS into this trend can confirm stolen liquor is in fact being utilized as a street level currency and is being used to purchase illicit street drugs, pay outstanding drug debts, secure accommodations and sold for cash. With this demand seemingly unaffected by enforcement alone, the need to work collaboratively with external stakeholders and other police agencies is paramount. Within the province of Alberta, Edmonton has the highest liquor theft rate. Edmonton is approximately 60%-70% above its closest comparative city; Calgary.

There is a comparable series of events from the past involving 'gas and dash', with fatal consequences. The MAC'S store homicides from 2015, when despite complete compliance with the offenders demands, two employees were shot and killed, and, in 2017 the FAS GAS death in Thorsby, Alberta where an employee was killed attempting to stop an offender following a

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theft of gas. Both events, along with other “gas and dash” robberies and other violent incidents at retail fuel outlets and convenience stores resulted in customers having to prepay for fuel and stores requiring violence prevention plans across the Province to mitigate further tragedies. The notable catalyst to violence within this trend is the physical interjection of a person (staff or customer) to the offender. This is the current reality at liquor stores and it’s not a matter of if a tragic event will occur, it’s when.

The EPS proactively spoke with representatives within the liquor retail field across Canada. These included but not limited to, the Winnipeg Police Service, Ontario (Liquor Control Board of Ontario-LCBO), Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Liquor Control Board), British Columbia (BC Liquor Distribution Branch) and Prince Edward Island (PEI Liquor Control Commission). The reality is this trend is prevalent across Canada. Notable points include the LCBO losing \$77 Million in one year to theft to the Winnipeg Police Service struggling to effectively deal with 57 liquor thefts a day within their city (400+ a week). These important conversations confirmed a multitude of failed approaches to combat this trend: Public awareness, bottle locks, door ID & bag checking from staff and security, increased security officers, loss prevention officers and third-party security guards, security systems (Camera’s, alarms & front of house amendments), police officer presence (Extra Duty Detail shifts, Hot Spotting & Winnipeg off-duty officers), arrests and elevation of offender accountability, increased sentencing, dummy bottles, alarms, entry surveillance display monitors, and lockable shelf cases.

Alberta is unique in that it has the only completely privatized liquor retail industry in the country. The EPS took the time to be educated in the business of liquor retail by a major retail chain in Alberta. After identifying areas within a retail space that could be amended, a framework of collaboration was established along with a realization that a new and innovative approach was required. In September of 2019, the EPS reached out to an existing external partner who’s technology specializes in controlled entrances. The field test for this controlled entrance technology was implemented at three highly victimized businesses on January 20th, 2020. After a year of testing the data produced is nothing short of remarkable. These three locations collectively saw a 94% decrease in theft events (661 → 40) and 95% retention of otherwise stolen product (a value of \$76,072.91). There was a displacement of those violent thefts to stores without the controlled entry. This field test confirmed that without a uniform application of this technology within the City of Edmonton, other liquor stores and affiliated patrons will be at a higher risk of violence. Due to displacement we may reasonable foresee a higher concentration of violent thefts in uncontrolled stores.

When analyzing risk mitigation, a reduction in theft events is a direct reduction in the risk of harm to the public (customers) and employees. The data and documented violence associated with liquor theft validates the decrease of risk to the public and employees when this technology is in place. The second impact is reduction of financial damage to the employer who supports economic viability of the community. Although the latter impact is important, reduction to risk of harm to the public and employees transcends the financial. These violent thefts, if left unaddressed, have and will continue to put the public in danger, especially, but not limited to, patrons of those business.

EPC and EPS, in collaboration with Administration, will ensure a GBA+ lens is applied to the final report to council as it relates to ideas and solutions identified through the engagement process.

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