



Pacific Institute
FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

PIRE

Translating Science into Practice

How Alcohol Outlets Affect Neighborhood Violence

Kathryn Stewart



Prevention Research Center
PACIFIC INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

www.resources.prev.org

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation is one of the nation's preeminent independent, nonprofit organizations merging scientific knowledge and proven practice to create solutions that improve the health, safety and well-being of individuals, communities, nations, and the world.

Introduction

Neighborhoods where bars, restaurants and liquor and other stores that sell alcohol are close together suffer more frequent incidences of violence and other alcohol-related problems, according to recent research by the Prevention Research Center and others. The strong connection between alcohol and violence has been clear for a long time – but now we know that this connection also relates to the location of places that sell alcohol.

Government agencies with authority over land-use and/or liquor licenses can help fight crime and blight and improve quality of life by controlling licenses to sell alcohol and the location of licensees. Governments can make rules that set minimum distances between alcohol outlets; they can limit new licenses for areas that already have outlets too close together; they can stop issuing licenses when a particular location goes out of business; and they can permanently close outlets that repeatedly violate liquor laws.

This paper presents some of the questions and answers about alcohol sales outlets and alcohol problems – especially the relationship between outlet location and violence.

What is the relationship between outlet density and violence?

A number of studies have found that in and near neighborhoods where there is a high density of places that sell alcohol, there is a higher rate of violence. That is, when bars, liquor stores, and other businesses that sell alcohol are close together, more assaults and other violent crimes occur.

Some of the important findings about outlet density and violence are described below.

- In a study of Camden, New Jersey, neighborhoods with alcohol outlet density had more violent crime (including homicide, rape, assault, and robbery). This association was strong even when other neighborhood characteristics such as poverty and age of residents were taken into account.¹
- In a study of 74 cities in Los Angeles County, California, a higher density of alcohol outlets was associated with more violence, even when levels of unemployment, age, ethnic and racial characteristics and other community characteristics were taken into account.²
- In a six-year study of changes in numbers of alcohol outlets in 551 urban and rural zip code areas in California, an increase in the number of bars and off-premise places (e.g., liquor, convenience

and grocery stores) was related to an increase in the rate of violence. These effects were largest in poor, minority areas of the state, those areas already saturated with the greatest numbers of outlets.³

- Violence committed by youth was more common in minority neighborhoods where there are many outlets that sell alcohol for consumption off the premises (such as liquor and convenience stores).⁴ This finding makes sense because underage drinkers are more likely to purchase alcohol in a store than in a bar or restaurant.
- In neighborhoods where there are many outlets that sell high-alcohol beer and spirits, more violent assaults occur.⁵
- Large taverns and nightclubs and similar establishments that are primarily devoted to drinking have higher rates of assaults among customers.⁶

A larger number of alcohol outlets and a higher rate of violence might be expected in poorer neighborhoods or in neighborhoods with a larger population young people. But as the research described above shows, even when levels of poverty and the age and the ethnic background of residents are taken into account, a high density of outlets is strongly related to violence regardless of a neighborhood's economic, ethnic or age status.

All of the characteristics of alcohol outlet location can be important. It is easy to see that a town with many bars, restaurants, and stores that sell alcohol could be different from one that has fewer outlets. It is also easy to see that a neighborhood that has a bar on each corner and a liquor store on each block has a completely different environment than one that has few outlets or none at all. Other characteristics of the environment make a difference, too. For example, a strip of bars near a college campus presents a different environment from a similar density of bars in an upscale city center and also different from a similar density in a poor neighborhood. But in each case, some form of increased violence would be expected as compared to comparable areas with fewer alcohol outlets. A study of changes in outlet density over time as related to violence in California found that regardless of other neighborhood characteristics, an increase in outlets increased violence. In neighborhoods with a high minority population and low incomes, the effect was more than four times greater than for the statewide sample of communities.

What accounts for the relationship between outlet density and violence?

The research that has been done so far cannot pinpoint exactly why having more outlets in a small area seems to result in more violence. Various explanations have been proposed. One is that alcohol outlets can be a source of social disorder. A liquor store parking lot full of people drinking in their cars or on the curb and broken bottles littering the area outside a bar may send a message that this is a neighborhood in which normal rules about orderly behavior are not enforced. Another possible explanation is that a neighborhood with a large number of outlets acts as a magnet for people who are more inclined to be violent or more vulnerable to being assaulted. It is also possible that a high number of outlets results in a large number of people under the influence of alcohol – which makes them both more likely to be violent and less able to defend themselves.⁷ It is most probable that all of these factors come into play.

What is the relationship of outlet density to other alcohol problems?

The density of alcohol outlets has also been found to be related to other alcohol problems such as drinking and driving, higher rates of motor vehicle-related pedestrian injuries, and child abuse and neglect.⁸⁹

How do governments regulate outlet density?

States and communities can regulate the number of bars, restaurants, and stores that sell alcohol in a given area. Sometimes the number and location of alcohol outlets is not limited at all. In some jurisdictions, the number of alcohol outlets is limited based on the population of the area – only so many outlets per thousand residents, for example. In other cases, the location of outlets is regulated – for example, some states or communities set minimum distances from schools or churches. Research increasingly finds, however, that geographic density is the key aspect of outlet location – that is, the distance between outlets. Where over-concentrations of outlets occur, greater problems arise.

Governments can use their regulatory powers to reduce violence by:

- Making rules that set minimum distances between alcohol outlets;
- Limiting new licenses for areas that already have outlets too close together;
- Not issuing a new license when a particular location goes out of business;
- Permanently closing outlets that repeatedly violate liquor laws (such as by selling alcohol to minors or to intoxicated persons or allowing illicit drug sales or prostitution on the premises).

What implications do these findings have for state and local licensing policies?

The research strongly suggests that limits on outlet density may be an effective means of reducing alcohol problems, especially violence. States and communities can use controls on the number and location of alcohol outlets as a tool for reducing violence, creating a safer and healthier alcohol environment, and improving the quality of life of a community.

What other alcohol policies are important?

Alcohol is a legal and widely consumed commodity; but it is also a commodity that can create a variety of serious health and social problems. Alcohol policies are an important tool for preventing these problems. Every day, states and communities make decisions about the sale of alcohol: who can sell it, when and where it can be sold, who it can be sold to. State and local laws and policies control many aspects of the system by which alcohol is manufactured, marketed, sold, purchased, and consumed.

Regulations serve a variety of purposes, for example, they help ensure that tax revenues are collected. But the regulation of the business of selling alcohol goes beyond economic concerns. Each element of the regulatory system provides opportunities for creating a healthier social environment with respect to alcohol. For example, regulations can prevent unsafe sales practices – such as prohibiting all-you-can-drink specials that encourage intoxication. Regulations can control advertising and promotion that appeals to minors and establish the minimum age and training qualifications for people who sell and serve alcohol. Each type of regulation has the potential to ensure that alcohol is consumed in a safe and healthy manner.

What aspects of alcohol availability can be regulated?

The regulation of alcohol sales can have an impact on the availability of alcohol – that is, how easy and convenient it is to buy. Some states and communities try to make alcohol less available by selling it only in limited places – for example, state liquor stores. Other communities sell it more freely – making it available in grocery stores, convenience stores, gas stations, laundromats, drive-through windows, and so forth. States and communities can also limit the hours and days of sale, and other aspects of the conditions of sale. The regulation of availability is important because research generally shows that when alcohol is more easily available, people drink more and more alcohol problems occur.

References

- ¹ Gorman, D., Speer, P., Gruenewald, P., and Labouvie, E. (2001) *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 62: 628-636.
- ² Scribner, R. et al. (1995) The risk of assaultive violence and alcohol availability in LA County, *American Journal of Public Health*, 85:335-340.
- ³ Gruenewald, P.J. and Remer, L. Changes in outlet densities affect violence rates. In review, Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, 2004.
- ⁴ Alaniz, M., Cartmill, R., and Parker, R. (1998) Immigrants and violence, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 20, 155-174.
- ⁵ Stevenson, R., Lind., B. and Weatherburn, D. (1999). The relationship between alcohol sales and assault in New South Wales, Australia, *Addiction*, 94(3):397-410.
- ⁶ Stockwell, T. et al. (1992) Levels of drunkenness of customers leaving licensed premises in Perth, Western Australia: a comparison of high and low "risk" premises. *British Journal of Addiction*, 87: 873-881.
- ⁷ Gorman, et al. (2001).
- ⁸ Freisthler, B., Midanik, L.T. and Gruenewald, P.J. Alcohol outlets and child physical abuse and neglect: Applying routine activities theory to the study of child maltreatment. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 65, 586-592, 2004.
- ⁹ Stockwell, T. and Gruenewald, P. (2001) Controls on Physical Availability of Alcohol, in Heather, N., Peters, T., and Stockwell, T. (eds.), *International Handbook of Alcohol Dependence and Problems*. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.



Public Supports Strong Alcohol Policies

A SHORT REPORT

By Pamela S. Erickson

Volume 2/Issue 1/April 2016

There is no cry for greater convenience!

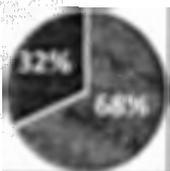
Today, local and state government officials are faced with many attempts at loosening alcohol regulation with a stated goal of creating more outlets, increasing the days and hours of sale, and increasing convenience. But, these changes are not being driven and demanded by the public. In fact, according to recent surveys, the public is very supportive of the current alcohol regulatory system; and is more likely to support stronger policies in some areas. There is simply no evidence of general dissatisfaction with alcohol regulations or shopping experiences. Many of the current legislative changes making alcohol more available are opposed by substantial majorities. This report uses recent survey data to identify public attitudes toward alcohol regulation including proposed changes.

Proposed alcohol law changes are often touted as possible ways to increase jobs and business opportunities; however, most proposals just shift jobs from one segment of the economy to another. For example, allowing a brewer to be a taproom may just take business from a bar.

More importantly, the public does not view this as a good trade-off. In a national random sample survey commissioned for the Center for Alcohol Policy (CAP), 68% of respondents said it is more important to protect society than create more jobs.

Contrary to what you might expect from political discussions, there seems to be almost no demand for additional locations to

"Is it more important to create alcohol laws that protect society against the harms of alcohol misuse and abuse or that allow more alcohol to sold and potentially create more jobs?"



- Protect Society
- Create more jobs

Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015



"In my community it is easy for adults to find a wide variety of beer, wine and liquor."

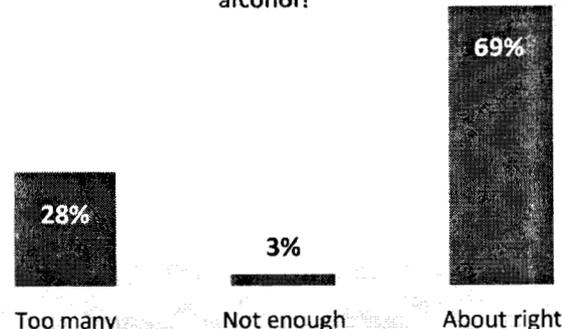
- Agree
- Disagree

Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015

sell beer, wine and liquor. In the CAP survey, a whopping 91% agreed that "In my community it is easy for adults to find a wide variety of beer, wine and liquor."

This same sentiment was echoed in a survey of Michigan voters. Respondents were asked whether they thought there were enough places to buy or drink alcohol. Notice that only 3% said there were not enough!

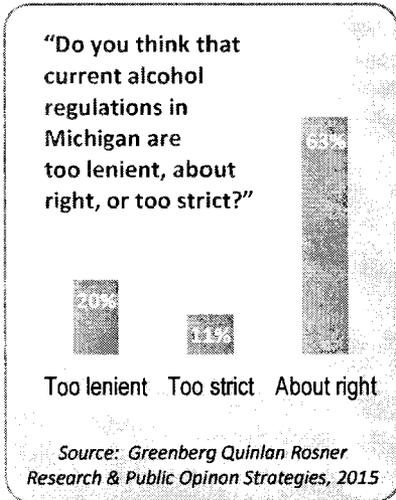
"There are too many places in Michigan to buy or drink alcohol, the number of places to buy or drink alcohol is about right, or there are not enough places in Michigan to buy or drink alcohol?"



Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies, 2015

General Attitudes about Alcohol Regulation

Surveys reveal that most members of the public understand the need for regulation of alcohol. In the CAP survey, a large majority felt it was important to keep the alcohol industry regulated and only 30% thought alcohol should be sold just like other consumer goods.



In the state of Michigan, a majority of survey participants thought alcohol regulations are about right (63%). Few suggested they are too strict (11%) and 20% said they are too lenient.

Contrary to what some people think, the public appears to support the idea that some industries and products need strong regulation.

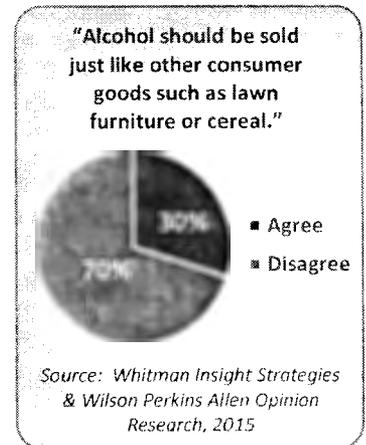
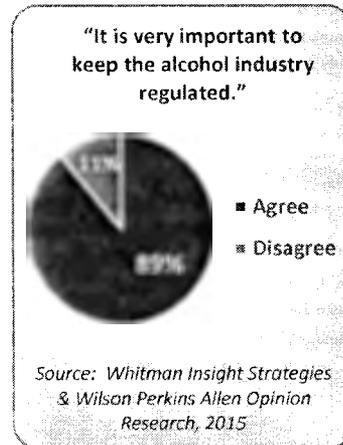
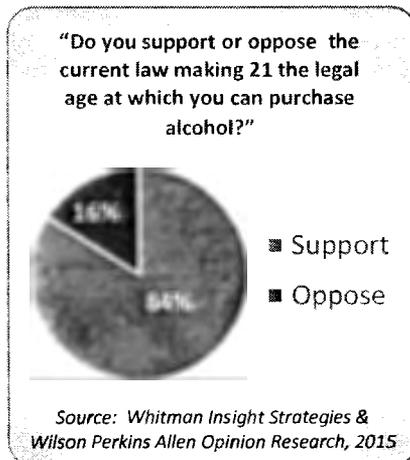
Current Regulatory Issues

In looking at specific regulatory issues, there seems to be great concern about underage drinking and drunk driving. The CAP survey showed very high support for the 21-age limit for purchase of alcohol. Eighty-four percent support this regulation.

A total of 94% said that people selling or delivering alcohol should verify age to ensure the person is 21. With regard to “getting rid of alcohol rules, regulations, and safeguards”, 82% agreed that things would get worse

because “parents, police officers and retailers already have a difficult challenge keeping alcohol out of the hands of minors.” Among Michigan voters, reducing problems such as drunk driving, underage and binge drinking were high on the list of policy concerns, more so than consumer choices or lower prices.

As the CAP survey revealed, while most felt the penalties for drunk driving should either remain the same (43%) or be more



severe (52%), there was little support for dropping the BAC limit of .08. There also wasn't a lot of support for a higher excise tax. In the CAP survey, 56% said it should stay the same, 28% wanted it lower and 15% thought it should be higher. Regarding the recent issue of powdered alcohol, a majority (55%) in the CAP survey supported a ban on the product.

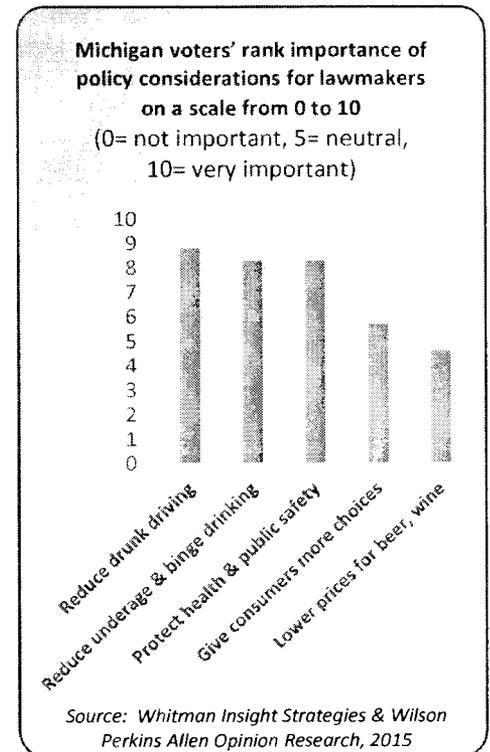
Importance of state/local control

After Prohibition, the task of regulating alcohol was given to the states. Some states also grant local government substantial power to regulate alcohol in their communities.

This appears to be quite important to the public. In the CAP survey, 81% said they support “the right of

individual states to set their own laws and regulations surrounding the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcohol.” Also, 76% said they support the 3 tier system where producers must sell products to licensed distributors who then sell to individual retailers.

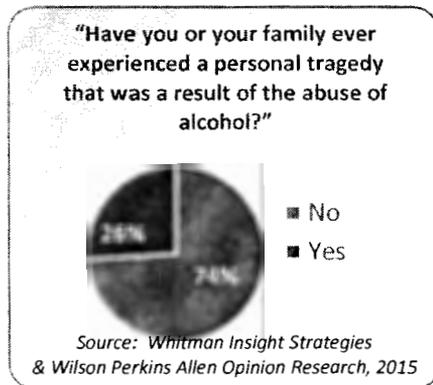
When asked about local control, 70% said that communities should be given notice if a new store that will provide alcoholic products is being considered. Many communities do have such laws.



Possible reasons for strong support for alcohol regulation

None of the surveys used for this report asked respondents why they support alcohol regulation. But, there are clues to why support is high. Here are some possibilities:

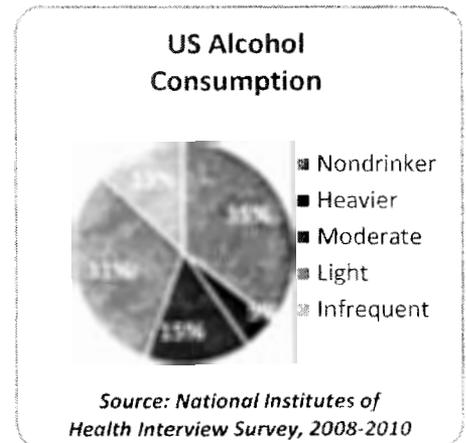
1. **Alcohol harm is very personal for a segment of the public because they have experienced its negative impact.** The Gallup organization has conducted polling on alcohol issues since the 1930's. Beginning in 1947, they asked, "Has drinking ever been a cause of trouble in your family?" In that year, 15% said "yes." In the most recent survey, it is much higher (32%). This is despite the fact that the number of people who do drink is not much higher. Something has happened to make alcohol more of a problem. In the CAP poll, a similar question was asked but one that may represent a problem of greater magnitude. That question concerned whether the respondent had experienced a



"personal tragedy" due to alcohol abuse. This may partially explain the high level of support for strong alcohol regulation.

2. **The public perceives that alcohol and drug abuse are not just personal, but community problems.** In a survey conducted in February 2016, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research participants were asked how serious of a problem were various types of substances in their community. "Other drugs" (cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.) and alcohol got the highest ratings for "extremely serious." But, when you combine the responses for extremely and moderately serious, alcohol comes out on top with 76% versus 67% for prescription pain relievers and 64% for "other drugs."
3. **A majority of the public do not benefit from additional convenience because they either do not drink at all or drink quite infrequently.** For many, alcohol is a specialty item they buy only occasionally.

The chart below portrays the responses to a question about alcohol consumption from a National Institutes of Health Interview Survey. As one can see, 35% of Americans do not drink at all, and another 13% drink infrequently meaning only a few times a year. In addition, 31% who are "light drinkers" have three drinks or fewer per week. This suggests they buy less than a six-pack of beer or one bottle of wine a week. This leaves moderate drinkers (1-2 drinks per day) and heavy drinkers (3 or more drinks per day) as regular alcohol customers.



Thus, the expanded availability of alcohol would benefit only 20% of the population at most, but any increased social and law enforcement costs would be borne by every taxpayer.

Conclusions and How to Use this Report

It is very important that elected officials, regulators and other policy makers understand public attitudes about alcohol when considering regulation changes. These officials need to know that:

1. **There is little evidence of public support for widespread deregulation of alcohol.** The public considers alcohol problems in their community to be quite serious. As a result, one should not expect the public to favor weakening current control measures even if the change would create new jobs and government revenue.
2. **There is no general evidence that the public needs or desires additional alcohol outlets.** There is considerable satisfaction with the availability of alcohol products. Given the research that increased alcohol availability is associated with increased problems, adding more outlets would increase the risk for community safety. (See <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/alcohol/outletdensity.html>.) Those pushing for more access may be looking at their financial interest, not public interest.

3. The public is especially supportive of measures that deal with underage drinking and drunk driving. Those considering such things as lowering the drinking age should know that public support for the 21 age limit is over 80%. While there was some support for stronger drunk driving measures, this didn't translate to strong support for dropping the Blood Alcohol Content level below .08.
4. There is no evidence of a public desire for a "free market" for alcohol. The public seems to have a clear understanding about the need to regulate certain products and industries due to public health and safety concerns. Claims that alcohol regulation is just a form of the "nanny state" should be countered with information about the strength of public support for current regulations.
5. The data in this report supports the important role that regulators play in fostering the public health and safety of their communities. This recognition may be useful in countering proposals to reduce enforcement or funding of regulatory efforts.

Methodology

This report summarizes information from recent survey research on alcohol issues. Only two recent surveys were located that dealt primarily with alcohol policy. The first is a random sample national survey conducted by Whitman Insight Strategies and Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research for the Center for Alcohol Policy. The survey of 1,005 people was conducted during April 27th-May 3rd, 2015. A second, state level survey, was conducted in the state of Michigan by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research of 500 likely voters during March 25-March 29, 2015. That survey was commissioned by the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association. In both surveys, two polling firms were used to ensure a bi-partisan orientation.

No recent surveys on alcohol policy from universities or non-profit research institutes were located via web searches.

A number of surveys exist that ask some questions about alcohol policy. In three cases, survey results for specific questions were used from the following organizations: Gallup.com, the National Institutes of Health, and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. More information on sources used in this report can be accessed at the websites listed below.

Notes

- 1) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/174200/reports-alcohol-related-family-trouble-remain.aspx>
- 2) <http://www.centerforalcoholpolicy.org/2015/08/18/national-survey-finds-americans-very-satisfied-with-current-alcohol-laws-and-regulations-3/>
- 3) http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_257.pdf
- 4) <http://mbwwa.org/AboutUs/OurStaff.aspx>
- 5) http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Drugs/AP-NORC%20Substance%20Use%20Report_March%202016.pdf

This is a series of short reports in a simple format. All such reports are available at www.healthyalcoholmarket.com.

Public Action Management, PO Box 4364, Scottsdale, Arizona 85261