



ISSUES IN PREVENTION

Bar Study Stories

Cheap Drinks at College Bars Can Escalate Student Drinking

by John D. Clapp

Alcohol policy advocates have long argued that the availability of cheap drinks in licensed establishments, such as bars and taverns, contributes to a host of alcohol-related problems, especially among young people. But calls for restrictions on drink specials, such as happy-hour price reductions or “two-for-the-price-of-one” promotions, as prevention measures are often met with strong resistance from bar owners, among others, who say that there is little or no research to support such measures as a way to reduce problems.

We now have evidence that cheap drinks can indeed lead to higher intoxication levels and a number of related health and safety problems. In addition, contrary to bar claims that they need to offer cheap drinks, students will purchase more expensive alcoholic drinks and, when they do, become less intoxicated than those who purchase more drinks at cheaper prices.

In 2008, Ryan J. O’Mara, of the University of Florida, and colleagues conducted a study to challenge assertions, sometimes made by the management of establishments that attract student patrons, that drink discounts are innocuous marketing practices intended only to attract customers to better bargains than those provided elsewhere ([Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research, Vol. 33, No. 11, November 2009](#)).

What made this study unique is that it was one of the first to examine this relationship at the bar-patron level using methods that carefully examined price—that is, what people actually spent—and biologically measured intoxication. Previous research on the relationship of the cost of alcohol as it relates to problems has relied on population-level data, for example, comparing alcohol taxes and alcohol sales at the state level. In contrast, this study examined price-behavior relationship at the individual, or consumer, level in a natural drinking setting.

The researchers collected data on 804 patrons (495 men, 309 women) exiting seven bars adjacent to a large university campus over four consecutive nights during April 2008. They conducted anonymous interviews and surveys, collected breath alcohol concentration readings, and calculated each patron’s expenditures per unit of alcohol consumed, based on self-reported

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information given regarding the type, size, number, and cost of consumed drinks.

The researchers found that for each \$1.40 increase in the average price paid for a standard drink, the patron was 30 percent less likely to leave the bar district with a blood alcohol concentration above 0.08. Essentially, higher alcohol prices were associated with less risk of being inebriated when walking or driving away from a bar.

It is not surprising that moderate price increases in standard drinks significantly reduce the risk of intoxication, as this relationship is well established at the population level. However, given that college students tend to have limited disposable income, determining potentially protective price points for drinks is important. Research has consistently shown the availability of alcohol, be it outlet density, price, or the physical location of alcohol distribution (e.g., temporary bars or point of purchase displays), is positively associated with heavy drinking.

But it is unlikely that these findings will lead bars and nightclubs that cater to college students to voluntarily eliminate drink discounts. Bar owners often argue that college students cannot afford to drink at “regular” prices and thus inexpensive alcohol is a business necessity. In addition, bar owners often argue that cheaper drinks do not result in drunkenness or other problems. This study suggests otherwise. Students will purchase more expensive alcoholic drinks and, when they do, become less intoxicated. It would seem from both a business and public health standpoint, inexpensive drinks are a problem.

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High Alcohol Outlet Density: A Problem for Campuses and Communities

by William DeJong

Preventing college alcohol problems requires a broad approach that targets both individual students and the campus community. A key feature of the community environment is the density of alcohol outlets—that is, the number of places where people can purchase alcohol, either per area or per population. Off-premise outlets include liquor stores and grocery and convenience stores. On-premise outlets include bars, taverns, nightclubs, and restaurants where patrons drink on the premises.

A [literature review](#) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified several studies that demonstrate a strong relationship between greater outlet density and increased consumption and related harms, including injury, crime, and interpersonal violence. Both in the United States and internationally, research has examined the impact of changes in outlet density over time, while others have assessed the effect of liberalized licensing policies that create increased numbers of outlets.

Studies are still needed to evaluate whether the deliberate control of outlet density would serve to control alcohol consumption levels and their negative consequences. Even so, based on the existing research, several health agencies have urged that communities restrict alcohol outlet density in order to reduce drinking-related problems. Of interest to campus administrators, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism’s task force on college student drinking made this recommendation in its 2002 report [A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges](#).

A recent study ([Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research, Vol. 33, No. 12, December 2009](#))

deepened our understanding of the relationship

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between the density of alcohol retail outlets and drinking-related problems among underage youth (18–20 years) and young adults (21–29 years). Paul Gruenewald and his colleagues examined hospital discharge data in California, which included residential zip codes and patient ages. For both age groups, higher density of off-premise outlets was associated with greater numbers of injuries due to assaults, accidents, and traffic crashes. The results for on-premise outlet density were more complex: for young adults only, a higher density of restaurants was associated with traffic crash injuries, whereas a higher density of bars was associated with assault-related injuries.

In another study, Richard Scribner and his colleagues examined the relationship between off-campus alcohol outlet density and drinking levels among students at 32 U.S. colleges and universities. Density was defined as the number of outlets within three miles of campus per 1,000 students enrolled. Higher on-premise outlet density was strongly related to drinking levels even after controlling statistically for individual predictors of college drinking (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity). Higher off-premise outlet density was also associated with greater drinking, but not significantly so.

In an associated study, Scribner et al. examined the relationship between alcohol outlet density and rates of rape, robbery, assault, and burglary reported by the same 32 institutions and recorded in a U.S. Department of Education database. Total violent crimes rates were strongly associated with both on-premise and off-premise outlet density. Additional analyses suggested that this relationship was mediated by student drinking level, meaning that campus communities with higher outlet density have greater alcohol consumption, which in turn explains their higher rates of criminal violence.

Looking at the crimes individually revealed interesting differences. Both on-premise and off-premise density were associated with the rape offense rate, but not with the assault or robbery rates. Subsequent analyses demonstrated that the relationship between on-premise density and the

rape offense rate was mediated by student drinking levels; the same was true for the relationship with off-premise density. Finding no relationship between outlet density and assault was unexpected, but the reported campus assault rates were surprisingly low, making it more difficult to establish an association.

More studies are needed to understand why or how alcohol outlet density drives up alcohol consumption and drinking-related problems. Greater outlet density facilitates access to alcohol by increasing its physical availability, and high numbers of outlets might also lead to price competition and longer store hours. Moreover, the presence of several alcohol outlets near campus—with neon signs, storefront advertisements, and highly visible drinking—might heighten student misperceptions of peer drinking norms, leading to greater drinking. Another possibility is what researchers call “social aggregation,” with a heavy concentration of outlets drawing in large numbers of people who drink heavily.

Both state and local policies can affect alcohol outlet density. Many states and local jurisdictions regulate density through zoning restrictions or licensing (e.g., capping the total number of licenses, increasing the cost of a license). It should be noted, however, that local control can be preempted by state laws that limit the authority of local governments to regulate the number of outlets.

Even in the best of circumstances, reducing outlet density can be a long, difficult process. For that reason, public health and safety advocates should also push for restrictions on hours of sale, bans on low-price promotions, mandatory responsible beverage service, and other measures that can mitigate the community impact caused by large numbers of retail outlets.

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Preventing Bar Violence

The book *Raising the Bar: Preventing Aggression in and Around Bars, Pubs and Clubs* (Willan Publishing, 2008) by researchers Kathryn Graham and Ross Hommel examines the complex problem of drinking and violence and evidence-based preventive strategies to reduce bar violence. According to Graham, who is a senior scientist and head of Social and Community Prevention at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, “We wanted to explore why drinking establishments are high risk for aggression and why some establishments are riskier than others, but also highlight the effectiveness of existing interventions and policies, and the importance of better regulatory models for achieving safer drinking establishments.”

Bars and nightclubs stand out as one of the most likely settings for violence, especially among young adults. According to the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#), approximately 40 percent of people experiencing violence are 18 to 30 years old. A 2002 study ([Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 17, No. 5, 2002](#)) found that 13 percent of male college students and 3 percent of female college students reported being in a physical fight in a bar in the past 12 months.

In a presentation at the Responsible Hospitality Institute’s November 2009 Networking Conference on the Nighttime Economy in Austin, Texas, Graham said, “It is no coincidence that aggressive behavior is likely to occur in drinking establishments. In fact, alcohol has been linked to crime and violence both over time and across cultures. Nevertheless, while the effects of alcohol can contribute to violence, alcohol is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause of aggressive behavior.”

According to Graham, in the alcohol-violence link, aggression occurs when there is a combination of the pharmacological effects of alcohol, a person who is willing to be aggressive when drinking, and an immediate drinking context

conducive to aggression, along with a broader culture that tolerates alcohol-related aggression.

“In addition, alcohol is particularly likely to be involved in violence that is unplanned and arises out of social interaction and conflict, as is often the case in bars, clubs, and taverns,” explained Graham. “The main issues underlying barroom aggression are macho concerns, that is, male patrons who are looking to prove or defend their manhood, sexual or romantic overtures, and a casual disregard for safety within a subculture of violence frequented by marginalized people.

“But, it is young men and a macho culture that is the largest source of conflict in many drinking contexts. At least within English-speaking countries, bar violence is often related to male patrons’ concerns about manhood, reputation, and standing up for oneself and one’s friends,” added Graham.

However, the characteristics of patrons are not solely responsible for barroom violence. Bar environments also contribute to aggressive behavior by patrons. But, the physical attributes tend to be nonsignificant when social environmental variables are included as predictors of violence.

“Not all bar patrons experience violence, and not all bars are places in which violence frequently occurs. Characteristics of the bar itself may increase the risk of violence. For example, drinking establishments where there is high tolerance for aggression and intoxication are at greatest risk of problems with violence. Crowd density increases the chances of individuals invading each other’s personal space, especially if there are design problems leading to congestion and bumping. Dancing, sexual contact, and competitive games may also increase the chance for conflict to occur in bars,” said Graham.

“But a clean well-kept bar with a helpful and friendly staff is less likely to suggest to drinkers that aggressive behavior is acceptable than is a

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dirty and poorly maintained bar with unfriendly, officious, or aggressive staff,” Graham added.

Bar staff play an important role in preventing bar violence, especially those charged with maintaining order.

“Door staff or security staff should be good communicators who are able to not only prevent problems but also stop problems without using force. They need to work as a team with other staff. In addition, they should be even tempered, well trained, have a sense of humor, and not feel the need to prove or defend their manhood. Of course, they also need to be strongly supported by management,” said Graham.

There are steps that bar owners can take to reduce the risk for violence in their establishments. For example, the Safer Bars program developed by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health aims to decrease violence by training bar staff in techniques for managing problem behavior. It focuses on intervening early, using effective tactics and body language, planning ahead and working as a team, learning how to keep from losing your temper, dealing with intoxicated patrons, and knowing legal responsibilities. An evaluation of the Safer Bars program found that such training can decrease bar violence.

Editor’s note: For more information on Raising the Bar: Preventing Aggression in and Around Bars, Pubs and Clubs, go to <http://www.willanpublishing.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781843923183>. For more information on the Safer Bars program, go to <http://www.apolnet.ca/resources/education/presentations/SaferBarsPresentation-May06.pdf> or contact Rita Thomas (Rita.Thomas@camh.net; tel.: 416-535-8501, ext. 4618) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

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Prevention Briefs

Coed Housing and Binge Drinking

Students living in coed residence halls are nearly 2.5 times more likely to binge drink on a weekly basis than their counterparts in single-sex housing, according to recent research by social scientists at Brigham Young University.

Researchers Brian J. Willoughby and Jason S. Carroll based their findings on surveys of 500 students at five American campuses, none of them in Utah (*Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2009). The key finding is that 42 percent of those in coed residences reported binge drinking on a weekly basis, compared with 18 percent of those in single-sex housing. Binge drinking is defined as consuming four or more drinks at once, or imbibing with the intent of getting drunk.

“In a time when college administrators and counselors pay a lot of attention to alcohol-related problems on their campuses, this is a call to more fully examine the influence of housing environment on student behavior,” said Carroll.

In addition, the researchers found that students in coed dorms were significantly more likely to have had multiple sexual partners in the past year. Pornography use was also higher among students in coed dorms.

Willoughby told Reuters Health that the findings should make more universities, researchers, and parents aware of the issue. According to him, 90 percent of university housing in the United States is now coed, which is part of a larger move away from the traditional notion that colleges should act as stand-ins for parents and enforce rules on students’ social behavior.

Athletes, Performance-Enhancing Drugs, and Alcohol

Athletes who use performance enhancers—ranging from steroids to stimulants to weight-loss supplements—were more likely to admit to heavy

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drinking and using drugs like marijuana and cocaine, according to a recent study by researchers from the Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University ([Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, Vol. 70, No. 3, November 2009](#)).

The researchers surveyed 234 male varsity athletes at a northeastern university to determine their use of performance-enhancing drugs and other substances. Included on the list of performance enhancers were anabolic steroids, hormone precursors (which are thought to change to active hormones in the body), analogs (chemically similar compounds), and nutritional supplements banned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The participants were also asked about alcohol and recreational drug use, and their risk-taking behaviors were noted.

Those who used performance-enhancing drugs in the last year (31 percent of the sample) were more likely to use drugs and alcohol. In that group, 70 percent said they had used marijuana, and one-third said they had used cocaine. But in the nondrug group, it was far less: 22 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Those who used performance enhancers also had higher rates of alcohol use and binge drinking, had more alcohol-related problems, smoked more cigarettes, and used more prescription drugs than the nondrug group. These students also had elevated rates of alcohol- and drug-related problems, such as missing classes, failing tests, or getting into fights.

“This really says that we have to focus on the motivations for athletes’ substance use and make them aware of the consequences that are likely to come of it,” study co-author Robert Pandina, the center’s director, said in a news release.

Myth of the Spiked Drink

Drinking alcohol puts people at high risk for all kinds of misfortunes, but exposure to date-rape drugs doesn’t seem to be one of them, according to researchers in the United Kingdom. A study of more than 200 students revealed many wrongly blamed the effects of a “bad night out” on date-rape drugs, when they had just drunk excessively ([British Journal of Criminology, Vol. 49, No. 6, 2009](#)).

More than half of the 200 university students surveyed said they knew someone whose drink had been spiked. In addition, three-quarters of students identified drink spiking as an important risk—more than alcohol or drugs.

“Young women appear to be displacing their anxieties about the consequences of consuming what is in the bottle on to rumors of what could be put there by someone else,” said Adam Burgess, one of the authors of the study, in an interview with the [Telegraph \(Jan. 20, 2010\)](#).

Nick Ross, chair of the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science, told the [Telegraph](#): “There is no evidence of widespread use of hypnotics in sexual assault, let alone Rohypnol, despite many attempts to prove the contrary.

“During thousands of blood and alcohol tests lots of judgment-impairing compounds were discovered, but they were mostly street drugs or prescription pharmaceuticals taken by the victims themselves, and above all alcohol was the common theme,” Ross explained.

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Higher Education Center Resources

Case Studies

- [Finger Lakes Community College: Campus Community Coalition](#)
- [Missouri Partners in Prevention: Missouri Partners in Prevention \(PIP\) Coalition](#)
- [University of Florida: Reducing High-Risk Drinking Among College Students](#)
- [University of Tennessee: Safety, Environment, and Education \(SEE\) Center](#)

- [University of Wyoming: Alcohol Wellness Alternatives, Research, & Education \(AWARE\)](#)

Prevention Update

- [Social Host Ordinances and Policies](#) (January 2011)

Publications

- [Last Call for High-Risk Bar Promotions That Target College Students: A Community Action Guide](#) (1997)
- [Responsible Hospitality](#) (2004)

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This Issues in Prevention was funded by the Office of Safe and Healthy Students at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-04-CO-0069/0005 with Education Development Center, Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Phyllis Scattergood. The content of this Issues in Prevention does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This Issues in Prevention also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered.