

Frequently Asked Questions about Alcohol, Neighborhood Characteristics and Intimate Partner Violence

What is intimate partner violence?

While the term *domestic violence* typically encompasses all types of family violence, including elder abuse, child physical abuse, and child psychological maltreatment, we use the term *intimate partner violence* to refer to those acts of aggression between adult married or cohabiting intimate partners.

Aggression may occur in many ways. For example, aggression can include coercive verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are not directed at the partner's body, such as slamming doors or smashing objects. Physical aggression can include sexual coercion and other coercive acts that may or may not cause physical injury.

How common is intimate partner violence?

Intimate partner violence is a significant public health problem. Estimates for any partner-to-partner violence ranged from 7.8% to 21.5% (Schafer et al., 1998). A large body of research among general population samples has shown that intimate partner violence is most common among younger couples, members of racial/ethnic minorities, and couples with lower socioeconomic status, (characterized by such things as unemployment, lower education and income levels) (Field & Caetano, 2004; Fox et al., 2002; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Sorenson et al., 1996). For example, one study found that the likelihood that intimate partner violence had occurred in the past year was approximately 30% among African Americans, 17% among Hispanics, and 11.5% among non-Hispanic white couples (Caetano, Cunradi et al. 2000).

What are the characteristics of intimate partner violence?

Data from national family violence surveys indicate that women engage in violence towards their partners as often (or more often) than men (Schafer et al., 1998; Straus, 1995; Straus et al., 1980). Women, however, are more likely than men to be injured as a result of violence (Archer, 2000; Morse, 1995; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). In addition, when women are violent towards their male partners, they are in danger of much more severe retaliation by men (Straus & Hotaling, 1980). Violence between parents, regardless of who initiates the violence, is likely to have negative consequences for children who witness it (Straus, 1999).

Two major types of intimate partner violence are “common couple violence” and “patriarchal terrorism.” The former is the type of outbursts that may occur between couples, typically in the course of conflict. Common couple usually involves ‘moderate’ acts (e.g., pushing, shoving, grabbing, slapping), although escalation to severe episodes (e.g., hitting with fist, kicking) is possible. Patriarchal or intimate terrorism is characterized by a pattern of more severe violence typically associated with terms such as

‘wife beating’ and ‘battered women.’ It involves the systematic use of violence, as well as other control tactics, such as threats, emotional abuse, isolation, and economic dependency (Johnson & Leone, 2005).

What is the relationship of alcohol use to intimate partner violence?

Heavy drinking has been linked with increased risk of intimate partner violence (see reviews in Leonard, 1993, 2001.) One study concluded that people who drink more than average are twice as likely to be involved in violence towards their partners as people who drink less than the average amount (Lipsey et al. 1997). Studies conducted among male alcoholics have shown that the occurrence of violence towards their partners was significantly reduced after the men completed treatment for alcohol dependence (O’Farrell et al., 2003; Stuart et al., 2003). Studies also indicate that intimate partner violence is more likely to occur at times when alcohol is used (Leonard & Roberts, 1998).

It is important to note that alcohol is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause of violence (Leonard, 2005). Violence can and does occur in the absence of drinking or alcohol problems and not everyone who drinks engages in violence.

What influence do the characteristics of the neighborhood have on intimate partner violence?

Most research on intimate partner violence has focused on the characteristics of the individuals involved. There is a growing body of research, however, that indicates that the type of neighborhood people live in affects various types of family problems, intimate partner violence as well as child abuse and neglect. For example, among a national sample of white, black, and Hispanic couples, Cunradi et al. (2000) found that black couples who lived in impoverished neighborhoods (where 20% or more of households were below poverty line) were three times as likely to report past-year male-to-female partner violence, and twice as likely to report female-to-male partner violence, than black couples who did not live in impoverished neighborhoods. White couples who lived in impoverished neighborhoods were nearly four times likelier to report female-to-male partner violence than white couples who did not live in impoverished neighborhoods. Other research has found that women who lived in neighborhoods characterized by high unemployment rates were at significantly more risk for violence from their male partners (O’Campo et al. 1995 and Cunradi et al. 2002a).

One reason these disadvantaged neighborhoods may have higher rates of violence is because the social ties among residents may be weak. Weak or nonexistent social ties among residents of such neighborhoods helps create an environment where residents are unlikely to intervene in problem behaviors, such as public drunkenness or family violence. Under these conditions, higher rates of problem behaviors will be found in neighborhoods that lack the structure or resources to either prevent or combat these problems.

What influence does the availability of alcohol have on intimate partner violence?

It is well known that there tend to be more places that sell alcohol closer together in impoverished and socially disorganized neighborhoods than in more stable and affluent neighborhoods (LaVeist & Wallace Jr., 2000). The easy availability of alcohol from nearby stores or bars tends to increase alcohol consumption in general and is related to a range of alcohol problems (Stockwell & Gruenewald, 2004).

Higher alcohol outlet concentrations have been found in low income minority neighborhoods (Duncan et al., 2002; Gorman & Speer, 1997; LaVeist & Wallace Jr., 2000). This concentration of outlets is associated with an increase in violent crime and other alcohol-related problems. Especially for couples in socially disorganized neighborhoods, it is quite plausible that greater alcohol availability provided by bars and off-premise packaged goods stores will result in heavier drinking on the part of one or both members of the couple, and thereafter increased the risk of violence towards their partners.

Greater alcohol outlet density, especially in disorganized neighborhoods, may contribute to increased violence towards partners in other ways – even if the members of the couple themselves are not drinking. For example, alcohol outlets, particularly off-premise packaged goods liquor stores, are often surrounded by signs of physical disorder, such as empty or broken bottles, loiterers, and publicly intoxicated patrons. Together with other disorganized neighborhood conditions, the presence of alcohol outlets may indicate that the usual social rules are not enforced (Bennett et al., 1996; Gorman et al. 2001; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Under such conditions, residents may be less likely to become involved if they witness or hear a couple involved in violent behavior, either through personal intervention or calling the police (Van Wyk et al., 2003). Lack of informal social control may also lead residents of disorganized neighborhoods to be less concerned about social consequences of engaging in violence against their partners.

Living in a disorganized neighborhood may also raise the level of stress experienced by individuals and families (for example, from crime, abandoned buildings, poverty, and unemployment). This exposure may directly or indirectly lead to heavier drinking (Hill and Angel 2005). The fact that there tend to be many liquor stores in low-income communities may exacerbate this potential by providing a ready source of alcohol that is marketed for immediate consumption in chilled, large bottles (LaVeist & Wallace Jr., 2000).

What other effects does alcohol outlet density have?

The number and location of alcohol outlets also affects drinking and driving, underage drinking, child maltreatment and neglect and other violent crime. For more information on the effects of alcohol outlet density, see

<http://resources.prev.org/documents/AlcoholViolenceGruenewald.pdf>.

What alcohol policies can reduce the risk of social problems such as intimate partner violence?

Communities can use zoning ordinances and liquor licensing rules to control the number and location of alcohol outlets and to control how alcohol is sold. Decisions about licensing and location of alcohol outlets have important ramifications on the quality of life, the relationships among neighbors, levels of crime, and safety. By reducing concentrations of alcohol outlets, particularly in high risk areas, city and county officials will likely see savings in the costs associated with various types of social, safety, and health problems related to outlet density. The location of alcohol outlets has significance that goes beyond economic concerns and convenience. These decisions should be made with full awareness of their consequences. For more information, see <http://resources.prev.org/documents/AlcoholViolenceGruenewald.pdf>