

Frequently Asked Questions about Alcohol and Child Physical Abuse and Neglect

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How big a problem is child abuse and neglect?

In 2006, over 1,400,000 children were reported to child welfare agencies as suffering from maltreatment in the U.S., about 226,000 of those occurring within California. Nationally, about 510,000 children lived in foster care. These numbers only include cases that come to the attention of authorities in the child welfare system. The actual rates of child maltreatment are likely to be much higher.

The direct and indirect costs of child maltreatment have been estimated at \$258 million each day, or \$94 billion a year. Ultimately, the most detrimental effects are to children who are at greater risk for juvenile delinquency, arrests for violent crime, and alcohol and drug abuse.

What role does alcohol play in child maltreatment?

Alcohol use by parents appears to play a key role in child maltreatment.¹ Sixty percent of young parents (aged 18-28) who reported being investigated by social services for “how they cared for their children” also reported heavy drinking in the past year, compared to only 40% of parents who said they had not been investigated by social services. Well over half of these parents who reported slapping, kicking, or hitting their child in the past year were also heavy drinkers compared to only 38% who did not report those behaviors.² One study found that parents who were identified as alcohol dependent or alcohol abusers were 4.7 times more likely to physically abuse their children and 5.3 times more likely to neglect their child than parents who were not dependent of alcohol abusers.³

Does alcohol availability in a local neighborhood affect child maltreatment?

Even when parents do not drink heavily, alcohol availability in the neighborhood may contribute to child maltreatment. Previous research has shown that families that live in neighborhoods that have many liquor stores or bars or other alcohol outlets close together (outlet density) are more likely to have problems with child abuse and neglect.⁴

How does alcohol availability in a neighborhood affect child maltreatment?

A high number of alcohol outlets in a particular area can lead to neighborhoods that are more disorganized and difficult to raise a family in. A higher density of alcohol outlets is related to more crime and more strangers coming in to a neighborhood. This may make it more difficult for families to have close relationships with neighbors and to rely on friends and neighbors for social support that can help in raising children. Social support can include emotional support (e.g., talking through problems and asking for advice),

assistance in child rearing, such as babysitting, or social companionship, such as spending time with friends and families in recreational activities.

A high number of alcohol outlets can also make it more likely that parents will drink more heavily. Drinking may impair parents' judgment – perhaps making them more aggressive or less attentive in supervising their children. Thus, children are more likely to be abused or neglected. In addition, areas with greater densities of bars have more “adult only” places for parents to socialize with other adults outside the home presenting more opportunities for parents to leave their children alone or without suitable caretakers

Does the type of alcohol outlets in a neighborhood have an effect on child maltreatment?

A high density of off-premise outlets, such as liquor stores and other stores that sell alcohol is associated with higher rates of child physical abuse. A high density of bars is associated with higher rates of child neglect.⁵

It appears that in cases of physical abuse, parents may be purchasing alcohol at off-premise outlets to be consumed at home. Drinking alcohol may cause some parents to exhibit more aggressive behaviors not normally displayed resulting in physical abuse.⁶ Here it may be the parent's drinking behavior that brings about the physical abuse.

In the case of areas with higher densities of bars, parents will have more places in the immediate area that provide entertainment and/or activities for adults and where children are not permitted. By virtue of spending time in these establishments parents will have more opportunities to leave their children home alone or with inadequate supervision, thereby committing neglect. Thus, it may not be the parent's drinking itself that leads to maltreatment but rather the opportunity to spend evenings away from home. Use of bars can also represent an economic strain on families as alcohol at this venue is more expensive than purchases made through off-premise alcohol outlets.⁷ Parents who spend significant amounts of time at bars drinking may also be spending valuable resources that may lead to physical neglect of their children's needs.

How do alcohol outlets affect poor and disorganized neighborhoods.

Neighborhood areas with high levels of social disorganization already have a number of conditions that make them vulnerable to a variety of social problems including crime and child maltreatment.⁸ With an already weakened neighborhood structure, these neighborhoods may lack the ability to deal with the negative effects related to high densities of alcohol outlets in their community.⁹ In this case, alcohol outlet densities may accelerate that risk by bringing into the neighborhood non-residents who may be inclined to commit crimes further deteriorating neighborhood conditions that support healthy family functioning.¹⁰ In addition, the presence of many alcohol outlets (particularly bars and liquor stores) may be visible signs of the social disorder in those neighborhoods. This disorder may make residents more likely to stay in their homes and not interact with neighbors who might otherwise provide social support.¹¹ On the other hand

neighborhoods that have higher densities of alcohol outlets but lower levels of social disorganization may be able to absorb the effects of outlets without risking further harm to children.

What other effects does alcohol outlet density have?

The number and location of alcohol outlets also affects drinking and driving, underage drinking, and 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 child maltreatment?

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>

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