

Drug Markets and Alcohol Outlets Predict Neighborhood Violence

Violence in American cities is a major health and safety problem. It also has a significant negative impact on the quality of life of urban dwellers. A study by the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation indicates that much of the violence we see in neighborhoods of our cities is related to illegal drug markets and commercial alcohol sales. The researchers found that neighborhoods with greater levels of drug market activity, as measured by police reports, and more alcohol outlets, especially bars, were more violent than other neighborhoods that were otherwise similar. The authors also found that violence was greater in neighborhoods in which residents had lower education, greater rates of unemployment and contained more vacant housing. Importantly, lower income areas did *not* show substantially greater levels of violence. On the contrary, areas of the city with *higher* income and more owner occupied housing were more violent.

The study used data from census tracts in Sacramento for the years 1997 to 2001. The number of assaults was based on police reports, with the exact location of the assault being recorded. Data on the demographics of neighborhoods were based on the 2000 census, including race, income, education, and employment, number of vacant homes and owner occupied homes. The number of alcohol sales licenses (both on-premise, such as bars and restaurants, and off-premise, such as liquor and grocery stores) in individual census tracts was also recorded. Police reports of drug sales and transport were collected and coded for the exact location of the incident.

It is not surprising that in neighborhoods with signs of social disorganization, such as drug sales and vacant houses, more violence occurs. The popular conception, however, that poverty itself was related to levels of violence was not supported by this study. Study co-author, Paul Gruenewald proposed that, "Previous studies have painted these relationships with too broad a brush. We looked at the characteristics of small neighborhood areas and how they changed over time." He concluded, "It is not poverty itself that creates violence. Instead, it is the effects of the other characteristics that tend to be found in poorer neighborhoods – such as a plethora of alcohol outlets and drug sales activities – that result in violence."

The study authors point out that the drug activity is measured by police reports, which may only accurately represent police activity, not the actual amount of drug activity – which often occurs underground. Better measures of how users gain access to drugs, how sellers market them and how this activity leads to violence are needed in order to design more effective drug abuse and violence prevention strategies.

The findings regarding alcohol outlets provide yet more evidence of the problems that go along with high alcohol outlet density. Bars, liquor stores and other sales outlets have been consistently shown to be related to violence and other health and social problems. Communities can exert control over the location and density of alcohol outlets in order to improve the safety of their residents

The full report can be seen in Banerjee, A. , LaScala, E., Gruenewald, P., Freisthler, B., Treno, A., and Remer, L., Social Disorganization, Alcohol and Drug Markets, and Violence, in Y. F. Thomas et al. (eds), *Geography and Drug Addiction*, Springer, 2008.