

MEDIA RELEASE FROM ADDICTION JOURNAL

Violent assaults increase around alcohol outlets

A new study by researchers in California has confirmed what many people have suspected, that the incidence of violent assaults is higher around places where alcohol is sold.

Researchers at the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation studied neighborhoods throughout California and found that the number of liquor stores and other alcohol outlets played an important role in violent crime. This link remained once other features of the localities, such as poverty, were taken into consideration.

Data on population and neighborhood characteristics were collected for all 1637 zip code areas in the state of California for the year 2000. These data included all hospital discharges that resulted from a violent assault for patients aged 15 years and older. Census data were used to determine levels of education, unemployment, poverty, racial and ethnic characteristics, transience among residents and the proportion of the population 15-29 years of age (the age group most likely to be involved in assaults).

A map of California showing rates of violence indicates that violent assaults occur most frequently in both rural and urban areas of the state. Rates of assault were greatest in a number of relatively poor rural and newly urbanized areas. In the northern part of the state, these areas were exclusively rural, poor and with large minority populations (Hispanic and American Indian). In the south these areas were predominantly rural, poor and Hispanic, consisting of collections of small towns in largely desert environments. In the central part of the state, greatest rates of assault were observed around several moderate-sized cities, such as Bakersfield. These are areas in which a mixture of rural poverty and wealth occur in close proximity. In the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles Basin, rates of assault were greatest in areas of extreme poverty, showing signs of neighborhood disorganization, and residential instability.

In all areas, places with more off-premises alcohol establishments - liquor and grocery stores and other places that sell alcohol to be consumed elsewhere - had higher rates of violence. This occurred even in areas that didn't have the other characteristics, such as poverty and disorganization, that are associated with violence. The role of bars was particularly important. Greater numbers of bars in unstable poor and rural areas were associated strongly with increases in violence rates. This led researchers to conclude that bars provide additional opportunities for violence in poor minority areas.

The head of the research team, Paul Gruenewald stated, "The regulation of the growth and spread of alcohol outlets in violence-prone areas is an important step to reducing crime." He went on to say, "In areas where bars are a particular problem, special effort should be made to reduce the potential for violence in these establishments."

In some neighborhoods, however, bars had the opposite effect. Greater numbers of bars in stable wealthy neighborhoods and immigrant Hispanic neighborhoods were related to lower rates of violence. Gruenewald speculated that, "Bars in stable wealthy neighborhoods may be patronized by drinkers less prone to violence. Bars in immigrant Hispanic neighborhoods may serve a different cultural purpose - as a gathering place where drinking patterns don't lead to violence."