

## Evaluating the Impact of Outlet Density on Crime

**W**hile much of the crime data police collect may not appear to be related to alcohol consumption, much less the density of alcohol outlets, the research tells a different story. As demonstrated in the studies below, crimes such as domestic violence, assault, burglary, grand theft and others are linked to the availability of alcohol in a community. It would therefore be a mistake to minimize the relevance of such data when making decisions about whether to permit additional alcohol outlets in a neighborhood.

### Violence and Crime

The relationship between alcohol outlet density and violent crime has been well documented. Communities with 100 or more alcohol outlets and a population of 50,000 or more can expect an annual increase of 2.5 violent crimes each year for every alcohol outlet added in the area.<sup>i</sup> Criminologists studying the distribution of violent crimes have found on-site alcohol outlets such as bars and restaurants were among the “hottest” of the “hot spots” for such incidents.<sup>ii</sup> In one large U.S. city, researchers found city blocks with bars had higher rates of assaults, robberies and rapes than other blocks, even after the analysis accounted for the effects of unemployment and poverty.<sup>iii</sup>

Researchers also found these so-called “wetter” neighborhoods have higher levels of public drunkenness and disturbing the peace violations<sup>i</sup> along with calls for police services.<sup>iv</sup> Further support for the causal relationship comes from research showing violence and other problems decrease when alcohol availability goes down.<sup>v,vi,vii,viii</sup>

Increased homicide rates also are prevalent in regions with high densities of off-site alcohol outlets such as liquor stores.<sup>vi,ix</sup> One study of urban neighborhoods in New Orleans found a 10 percent higher outlet density was associated with a 2.4 percent higher homicide rate. According to the researcher, this was true even after considering other factors such as the percentage of unemployed, black, young male residents and the number of households headed by unmarried people.<sup>ix</sup>

### Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

New findings suggest domestic violence and sexual assault in a neighborhood may rise as the number of liquor licenses in the area increases. Even after accounting for socioeconomic factors that could influence domestic violence, a study in Maryland showed that a doubling of the density of liquor stores was associated with a nine percent increase in the rate of reported domestic violence. While alcohol is certainly not the only factor in domestic violence

and sexual assault, researchers concluded that reducing the incidence of domestic violence in certain areas may be as simple as spreading out the stores that are allowed to sell alcohol.<sup>x</sup>

Several studies of college students also found a correlation between alcohol use and sexual assault. Specifically, the studies showed an increased likelihood of victimization among drinking and intoxicated women.<sup>xi</sup> In a study of 52 women bar drinkers, 85 percent of the women reported some form of nonsexual physical aggression. Thirty-three percent reported an attempted or completed rape occurred after drinking in a bar.<sup>xii</sup> The risk of nonsexual victimization was not greater for women who went to bars frequently, but the risk of sexual victimization increased.

### Alcohol-related collisions

The most frequently reported consequences of high outlet density are alcohol-related collisions. According to a study of 72 cities in California, for every one percent increase in outlet density there was a .54 percent increase in alcohol-related crashes. Thus, if a city of 50,000 had 100 alcohol outlets, the residents would experience an additional 2.7 crashes for each new bar or liquor store.<sup>i</sup> Some studies indicate the rate of crashes can be reduced by responsible beverage service training programs, but the level of risk still is high when outlet density exceeds the acceptable levels of saturation.<sup>xiii</sup>

This is of special concern in cities such as El Cajon and La Mesa, the two most populous cities in the East County region, where there is high outlet density and most of the alcohol outlets are located along major roads and highways. The presence of so many bars and restaurants, closely packed together near major intersections, tends to increase the chances of alcohol-related traffic crashes. According to data from the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) many of these incidents take place at night, as bars are closing and highways become crowded with patrons who have been drinking.<sup>xiv</sup> This is confirmed by the Place of Last Drink survey data, which indicates about half of drunken drivers in San Diego County are coming from bars and restaurants.<sup>xv</sup>

## Underage Drinking

A study of three cities in Northern California showed communities with high outlet density have significantly higher levels of underage drinking as well as gang-related behavior, drug sales and sexual promiscuity among youth. According to the authors, if alcohol outlets define the physical and social environment for youth, then they are more likely to engage in such activities.

A strong correlation was established between the age of a young person's first drink and a variety of personal and social problems. These include getting involved in fights, suffering personal injury, unprotected sexual activity and drinking problems later in life.<sup>xvi, xvii</sup> It can be especially problematic when young people grow up in an environment with alcohol advertisements on every street corner.

## Economic Decline

According to city planning departments, the most common complaints regarding alcohol outlets are related to noise, traffic or loitering. These problems may seem minor, but over time they change the character of a neighborhood. As a

result, those who regularly visit may change their routines, and even those living nearby may start to avoid the area.<sup>xviii</sup>

This phenomenon is consistent with research showing over-concentration of alcohol outlets often is part of a neighborhood's broad economic and social disintegration. *When an area becomes oversaturated with bars and liquor stores, it loses its economic base as well as its diversity and becomes less attractive to residents and potential retail customers.*<sup>xix</sup> Accordingly, a proliferation of alcohol outlets can be considered a symptom of economic decline and a factor that worsens such decline.

## Conclusion

In light of this research, appeals by community organizations and residents to limit and/or decrease the number of alcohol outlets in their neighborhoods should not be construed as anti-business. To the contrary, crime and over concentration are barriers to attracting new businesses and commercial enterprises that can promote economic revitalization and development. Any new license applications in oversaturated areas should be considered with caution.<sup>vii, xx</sup>

<sup>I</sup> Scribner, R.A., MacKinnon, D.P. & Dwyer, J.H. (1995). The risk of assaultive violence and alcohol availability in Los Angeles County. *American Journal of Public Health*, (85)3, 335-340.

<sup>II</sup> Sherman, L.W., Gartin, P.R., & Buerger, M.E. (1989). Hot spots of predatory crime: Routine activities and the criminology of place. *Criminology*, 27(1), 27-55.

<sup>III</sup> Roncek, D.W. & Maier, P.A. (1991). Bars, blocks, and crimes revisited: linking the theory of routine activities to the empiricism of "hot spots." *Criminology*, (29)4, 725-753.

<sup>IV</sup> Calhoun, S., & Coleman, V. (1989). Alcohol availability and alcohol related problems in Santa Clara County. San Jose, California: County of Santa Clara Health Department, Bureau of Alcohol Services.

<sup>V</sup> Chiu, A.Y., Perez, P.E. & Parker, R.N. (1997). Impact of banning alcohol on outpatient visits in Barrow, Alaska. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(21), 1775-1777.

<sup>VI</sup> Gorman, D.M., Labouvie, E.W., Speer, P.W., & Subaiya, A.P. (1998). Alcohol availability and domestic violence. *American Journal of Alcohol Abuse*, 24(4), 661-673.

<sup>VII</sup> Alaniz, M.L., & Parker, R.N. (1998). Alcohol outlet density and Mexican American youth violence. Berkeley CA: Prevention Research Center.

<sup>VIII</sup> Parker, R.N., & Rebhun, L.A..(1995). Alcohol and homicide: A deadly combination of two American traditions. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

<sup>IX</sup> Scribner, R.A., Cohen, D., Kaplan, S., & Allen, S.H. (1999). Alcohol availability and homicide in New Orleans: Conceptual considerations for small area analysis of the effect of alcohol outlet density. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 60, 310-316.

<sup>X</sup> Fewer liquor stores, less violence (2003). *Prevention File*, 18(1), 2.

<sup>XI</sup> Abbey, A., McAuslan, P., & Ross, L.T. (1998). Sexual assault perpetration by college men: The role of alcohol, misperception of sexual intent, and sexual beliefs and experiences. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 17(2), 167-195.

<sup>XII</sup> Parks, K., & Miller, B.A. (1997). Bar victimization of women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(4), 509-525.

<sup>XIII</sup> Holder, H.D., & Wagenaar, A.C. (1994). Mandated server training and reduced alcohol-involvement traffic crashes: A time series analysis of the Oregon experience. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, (26)1, 89-97.

<sup>XIV</sup> Data for California cities are available on the Office of Traffic Safety website: <http://www.ots.ca.gov/cgi-bin/rankings.pl>

<sup>XV</sup> Place of Last Drink data is available on the East County Community Change Project website: <http://www.publicstrategies.org/east/index.htm>

<sup>XVI</sup> Grant, B.F., and Dawson, D.A. (1997). Age of onset of alcohol use and its association with DSM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence: Results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic survey. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 9, 103-110.

<sup>XVII</sup> Hingson, R.W., Heeren, T., Winter, M.R., & Wechsler, H. (2003). Early age of first drunkenness as a factor in college students' unplanned and unprotected sex attributable to drinking. *Pediatrics*, 111(11), 34.

<sup>XVIII</sup> Roncek & Maier (1991). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Pub. No. (SMA), 99-3298.

<sup>XIX</sup> Maxwell, A. & Immergluck, D. (1997). Liquorlining: liquor store concentration and community development in lower-income Cook County (IL) neighborhoods. Chicago IL: Woodstock Institute.

<sup>XX</sup> Alaniz, M.L., Cartmill, R.S., & Parker, R.N. (1998). Immigrants and violence: The importance of neighborhood context. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 20(2), 155-174.