

Alcohol Control Policies and Violent Crime

Bruce L. Benson, David W. Rasmussen, and Paul R. Zimmerman, "The Impact of Alcohol Control Policies on the Incidence of Violent Crime," final report submitted to NIJ, grant number 99-IJ-CX-0041, available from NCJRS (NCJ 191199).

Do public policies that discourage alcohol consumption—such as excise taxes, DUI laws, and increases in the legal drinking age—reduce violence? One study was unable to find evidence to support the effectiveness of these policies as a means of crime reduction. The relationship between alcohol and crime is not one of simple cause and effect, the researchers say. Instead, other factors help link the two, and the researchers recommend that more data be collected on the effect of alcohol control measures in the fight against crime.

Reducing Consumption

The researchers first looked to see if local efforts to control access to alcohol reduce drinking. They do. For example, communities that have limited the number of bars and restaurants licensed to sell alcohol have successfully reduced the per capita (average per person) consumption of beer and wine. Higher excise taxes on distilled spirits also have lowered liquor consumption.

Linking Consumption to Crime

The next step was to see if drinking was associated with violent crime. Although this is a difficult question to answer, the researchers did find certain correlations. For example, a significant number of rape reports recorded that the assailant and/or the victim were drinking prior to the crime.

The researchers recognize the temptation to combine these two findings to support the theory that policies to reduce alcohol consumption will reduce crime rates. But the analysis conducted by the researchers led them in a different direction. They describe the apparent relationship between control-

HHS REPORT ON ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE

A subchapter of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) June 2000 report on alcohol and health summarizes research on the connection between alcohol and violence.¹ The report explains that such research is often conducted with alcohol control policies in mind:

A key variable in this research is sometimes alcohol availability rather than alcohol consumption. The expectation is that decreased availability might lead to decreased consumption, which might lead in turn to lower rates of violence. Availability is of interest because it is a potential "policy lever" that could be manipulated if a causal relationship between availability and violence rates were firmly established. (p. 54)

The research reviewed supports, in part, the idea that alcohol is not a cause of crime:

Alcohol-related violence is the result of complex interactions between individual and environmental factors that either promote or inhibit violence. (p. 54)

The report also acknowledges that in many studies in which a strong relationship between alcohol and violence appeared clear, that finding weakens with extensive analysis:

[W]hen researchers accounted for a greater number of "control variables" (such as gender, age, social class, criminal status, childhood abuse, and use of other drugs in addition to alcohol), they tended to find that these control variables weakened the strength of the original relationship between violence and alcohol consumption, in some cases to the point of no association. (p. 56)

However, the report goes on to note:

Nevertheless, experimental findings do suggest that, in laboratory settings, alcohol tends to increase aggressive responses in a way that might be interpreted as relatively strong support for a causal effect of alcohol consumption on violence. (p. 55)

Moreover, the HHS report points out that alcohol control policies can produce other positive results that do not involve acts of physical violence. For example, deaths of teens in automobile accidents decreased sharply with the institution of 21 as the legal drinking age. (p. 379)

The report cites research indicating that more study is needed:

[A]lthough research to date shows substantial evidence of an association between alcohol and violence that is consistent with a causal relationship, it will not be possible to state conclusively that alcohol causes violence until further research using a wider array of control variables is conducted. (p. 56)

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Special Report to the U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health*, June 2000.

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the apparent relationship between controlling alcohol through local policies and reducing violent crime as “spurious,” or at best questionable.

Complex Relationship

The relationship between alcohol and crime seems to be much more multidimensional. Drinking alcohol (as a single factor) does not *cause* a person to commit a crime. Additional factors—such as sleep deprivation, a history of alcoholism, psychological disorders, and physical conditions such as temporal lobe dysfunction or hypoglycemia—can play an important role. Any one of these factors in combination with alcohol can affect a person’s thinking or response to a situation or opportunity that may lead to a crime being committed. As another group of researchers put it:

[C]ausal effects come essentially in the form of an alcohol-person-situation interaction. That is, alcohol consumption increases the probability of violent behavior only for some persons in some situations.¹

It appears unlikely, then, or it is at least still unproven, that any one program aimed at limiting alcohol use can reduce crime overall. The researchers propose, however, that with better collection of data on such things as alcohol shipments and sales, specific links

between particular types of drinking and particular crimes might be demonstrated. Alcohol reduction programs could then be better targeted and might prove more effective in reducing the rates of certain crimes.

Notes

1. Lipsey, Mark W., David B. Wilson, Mark A. Cohen, and James H. Derson, “Is There a Causal Relationship Between Alcohol Use and Violence? A Synthesis of Evidence,” *Recent Developments in Alcoholism, Volume 13: Alcoholism and Violence*, ed. Marc Galanter, New York: Plenum Press, 1997: 247.

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