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Alcohol-control law may curb partner abuse

PISCATAWAY, NJ - Communities with fewer places to buy or drink alcohol also tend to have lower rates of intimate partner violence, new evidence suggests.

The research, published in the January issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, suggests that laws limiting what is called "alcohol outlet density" could offer one way to address violence within intimate relationships.

States and communities throughout the United States have enacted various laws to reduce excessive use of alcohol, including limiting outlet density, limiting hours and days of sale, and managing the pricing and taxation of alcoholic beverages. At the same time, studies have shown that alcohol is often a risk factor in incidents of partner violence. Thus, policies aimed at reducing excessive alcohol use may also have a beneficial effect on partner violence.

Because there are a number of reasons why an alcohol policy may not have the desired effect or could have unintended consequences, evaluation is necessary, according to Dennis Reidy, Ph.D., a behavioral scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

So Reidy and his CDC colleagues dug into the scientific literature to look for studies on the relationship between alcohol policies and partner violence. The 16 studies they identified looked at the effects of alcohol outlet density, hours and days of sale, and pricing/taxation of alcoholic beverages.

On reviewing these studies, the investigators found that only one of those factors was consistently linked to rates of intimate partner violence: alcohol outlet density. (This is generally calculated as the number of on-premise establishments, such as bars and restaurants, and off-premise alcohol retailers, including liquor, grocery, and convenience stores, divided by square mile or number of people living in a given area.)

In most studies, communities with a higher concentration of alcohol sellers also had increased rates of partner violence. And that link held even when researchers accounted for factors like the local poverty and unemployment rates. "The studies that we reviewed do not indicate that alcohol outlet density or the outlets themselves cause partner violence," Reidy stressed. "However, our findings suggest that local regulation of alcohol outlet density may be able to reduce rates of intimate partner violence within a community."

Many communities limit outlet density through licensing and zoning laws, although those policies are typically intended to counter problem drinking in general and not to specifically prevent violence.

The CDC team uncovered little evidence that partner violence was curbed by two other alcohol policies: increases in alcohol prices/taxation and limits on sellers' days and hours of operation. Further research is needed to understand why these policy areas may have less effect on partner violence relative to outlet density.

"This review highlights the lack of investigation into the link between alcohol policies and intimate partner violence," Reidy said. "Early collaboration between policy makers and researchers could potentially benefit both the implementation of policies and evaluation of their outcomes."

For now, Reidy suggested that people be aware of all the consequences that can come from excessive alcohol use--not only drunk driving, injuries, and long-term health effects but partner violence as well.


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Kearns, M. C., Reidy, D. E., & Valle, L. A. (January 2015). The role of alcohol policies in preventing intimate partner violence: A review of the literature. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 76(1), 21-30.

To arrange an interview with Dennis E. Reidy, Ph.D., please contact Courtney Lenard, Senior Press Officer, CDC Injury Center, at injurymedia@cdc.gov.

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