

Alcohol outlets associated with injuries among youth and young adults

A new study of places that sell alcohol – bars, restaurants liquor stores, convenience stores, etc. – shows that the type and location of these outlets appears to affect alcohol related injuries among youth and young adults. Previous alcohol research has clearly demonstrated a connection between alcohol outlets and alcohol-related problems. This recent study conducted by the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation shows how alcohol outlets in neighborhoods can affect injury accidents, traffic crashes, and assaults among underage youth and young adults. Results of this study will be published in the March 2010 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at *Early View*.

“Over the past four decades, public health researchers have come to recognize that although most drinkers safely purchase and enjoy alcohol from alcohol outlets, these places are also associated with serious alcohol-related problems among young people and adults,” said Paul J. Gruenewald, senior research scientist at the Prevention Research Center and corresponding author for the study. The relationship between outlets and alcohol problems is complex, the study indicates. Alcohol outlets are not just sources for alcohol leading to more drinking. Outlets are also important social institutions within a neighborhood that affect the character of the neighborhood.

For this study, researchers obtained non-public hospital discharge data from the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, including residential zip code and patient age for all patients discharged. Ninety-nine percent of the injury records were successfully mapped to zip codes. Population demographics, place characteristics, and data related to alcohol outlets were also collected from various sources and examined as they related to two age groups: underage youth between 18 and 20 years of age, and of-age young adults 21 to 29 years of age.

“Greater numbers of off-premise outlets such as liquor stores or grocery and convenience stores that sell alcohol were associated with greater injuries from accidents, assaults, and traffic crashes for both underage and of-age young adults,” said Gruenewald. “But only among of-age young adults were greater number of restaurants related to traffic crash injuries and greater numbers of bars related to assault injuries. These findings confirm previous research showing that people drinking at bars may be at particular risk for fights and other types of alcohol-related assaults. People drinking at restaurants may be at particular risk for drunken driving and alcohol-related traffic crashes. The findings also confirm prior studies showing that underage youth are more affected by off-premises establishments like liquor and grocery stores. Underage drinkers are less likely to frequent bars and restaurants and more likely to buy alcohol at stores.” Thus, when young adults reach the minimum legal drinking age, they begin legally drinking in bars where events such as bar fights are relatively common. Fights are even more likely when there are many bars close together.

The strong association between an increasing density of off-premise outlets such as convenience stores and liquor stores, and higher rates of all injury outcomes among both underage youth and young adults may be related to the way that being in a neighborhood with high concentrations of these types of outlets reinforces drinking, and in particular, heavy and high-risk drinking.

The key message, said Gruenewald, is that a neighborhood’s alcohol environment plays a role in regulating the risks that youth and young adults will be exposed to as they mature. “Communities should recognize that by allowing a high concentration of any kind of alcohol outlet they are creating an environment where more alcohol related injuries are likely to occur.” Gruenewald added, “This is an important message because it gives us a very powerful tool for preventing alcohol related problems through community based regulations. We can focus our effort on the community at large rather than on individual behavior.”

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Journalists: A full copy of the manuscript may be obtained by contacting Mary Newcomb with the ACER Editorial Office at mnewcomb-acer@earthlink.net.