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# **Alcohol and Violent Crime: What Is The Connection? What Can Be Done?**

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Prepared by

**The National Center for Alcohol Law Enforcement  
Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation**

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## Introduction

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Alcohol and violence are culturally and historically linked in the United States. Whether through battles fought over the taxation of alcohol, such as the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, or through the tradition of hard-drinking, bar-brawling frontiersmen of the early days of the nation's existence, alcohol and violence have been closely connected and deeply tied into American custom. This link is highly destructive, and history includes numerous campaigns aimed at addressing it. The heated rhetoric of the turn of the century included claims that Prohibition would virtually eradicate violence from society. Yet there have also been historical periods in which the link was accepted as inevitable, and efforts to address it focused primarily on individual deviance without attending to the broader social and cultural setting.<sup>1</sup>

Today there appears to be growing support for addressing the link between alcohol and violence through interventions in the various contexts in which it occurs (e.g., physical, social, etc.).<sup>2</sup> This includes interventions in the alcohol environment, focusing on how, when and where alcohol is sold and consumed. However, developing appropriate interventions requires careful attention to the complex, interactive relationship between alcohol and violence.

This paper examines this relationship. It begins with an overview of research on the topic, detailing what is known about a causal link between alcohol and violence, how alcohol use escalates and intensifies violence, the cost of alcohol-related crime, and how alcohol outlet density serves as a reliable predictor of violent crime. The paper then briefly identifies three key strategies that can be employed by law enforcement agencies in order to reduce alcohol-related violence. Case-study examples demonstrating how three enforcement-led efforts to reduce alcohol-related violent crime achieved success are then provided. The paper concludes with a summary and recommendations.

## Research on the Alcohol and Crime Connection

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Studies overwhelmingly indicate that there is a strong link between the consumption of alcohol and violent acts.

- ▶ Almost one in four victims of violent crime report that the perpetrator had been drinking prior to committing the violence.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Over one-third of victims of rapes or sexual assaults report that the offender was drinking at the time of the act.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ It is estimated that 32 to 50 percent of homicides are preceded by alcohol consumption by the perpetrator.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Between 31 percent and 36 percent of prisoners convicted of a violent crime against an intimate reported that they were drinking alcohol at the time of the offense. These figures rise to approximately 50 percent when reports from those who were consuming both alcohol and drugs at the time of the offense are considered.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Two-thirds of the victims of intimate violence reported that the offender was using alcohol at the time of the act.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ Between 27 percent and 47 percent of all homicides and acts of purposeful injury are attributable to the use of alcohol.<sup>8</sup>

Alcohol consumption is not only linked to acts of violence, but to the escalation of violence and the resulting severity of injuries. U.S. crime reports indicate that approximately six in ten incidents of alcohol-related violence resulted in injury to the victim.<sup>9</sup> One study of assault incidents compared the severity of violence present in acts by perpetrators who had been drinking and those that had not. Forty-two percent of the assault incidents escalated beyond threats to physical attacks when the assailant had not been drinking compared to 50 percent for those who had been drinking. Moreover, a higher percentage (27 percent) of assailants who had been drinking committed a physical attack resulting in injury, than did the non-drinkers (22 percent).<sup>10</sup>

The economic cost of alcohol-related crime is enormous. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism estimated the total monetary cost of alcohol-attributable consequences in 1998 as

a staggering \$185 billion. The cost of alcohol-related crime alone was estimated to be \$16.4 billion. This figure includes costs stemming from violent crime, property crime, alcohol-defined offenses (e.g., alcohol sales to minors), criminal justice costs, and lost earnings of victims and others because of the crimes committed.<sup>11</sup>

High alcohol outlet density is a reliable predictor of violent and other crimes. A study conducted in Los Angeles County, for example, found that an increase of one outlet was associated with 3.4 additional violent incidents in a year.<sup>12</sup> Adding one bar to a block in Cleveland was estimated to result in 3.38 more crimes being committed on that block in a year.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in an examination of alcohol availability and homicide in New Orleans, a 10 percent higher off-sale outlet density was predicted to result in a 2.4 percent higher homicide rate.<sup>14</sup> In Newark, New Jersey, a reduction in the density of alcohol outlets by just under one percent would likely result in a reduction in violent crime by one percent. It would take a nearly five percent increase in median household income or just over an eight percent increase in employment to achieve the same results.<sup>15</sup>

## Strategies for Preventing Alcohol-related Violence

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Just as the ready availability of alcohol in high alcohol outlet density neighborhoods is linked to violence, alcohol service and sales practices can be linked to the increased risk of violence and injury. The sale of alcohol to minors, the hours of sales, sales promotions, and serving alcohol to obviously intoxicated persons can result in risky behavior and criminal outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Policies that affect other sales practices - the "how, when, and where" alcohol is sold - can mediate the risk of violent behaviors resulting from alcohol consumption.<sup>17</sup> One study found that 79 percent of alcohol establishments will serve alcohol to patrons who appear obviously intoxicated despite laws prohibiting such sales.<sup>18</sup> The consequences of such practices are grave:

- ▶ One out of ten alcohol-involved violent incidents occurs in a bar or restaurant.<sup>19</sup>

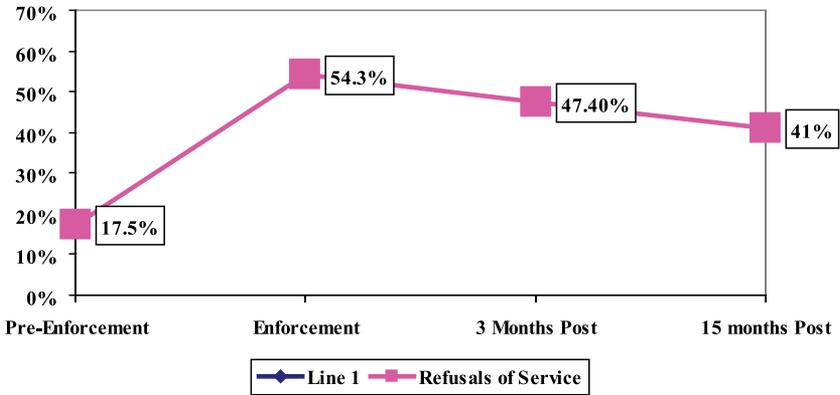
- ▶ Approximately 50 percent of drinking drivers start their intoxicated journey from licensed establishments.<sup>20</sup>

These findings suggest that the enforcement of mandated sales practices should have a positive effect on the prevention of impaired driving and other forms of alcohol-related harm. Very little research has been done, however, to test the hypothesis that consistent enforcement of the laws regulating alcohol results in reductions in crime. However, two examples follow that demonstrate that compliance with alcohol regulations does result from enforcement. In both instances, compliance was correlated with reductions in alcohol-related crime.

### ***Enforcement, Education, and Training***

A study conducted in Washtenaw County, Michigan examined compliance before and after the implementation of a campaign to enforce laws limiting sales to intoxicated persons.<sup>21</sup> Enforcement activities were conducted in conjunction with education and training of bar and restaurant staff. Compliance with the law was measured before, during and after the enforcement program by the rate at which patrons simulating intoxication were refused service. While refusals of service to pseudo-intoxicated persons declined from the initial peak of 54.3 percent to 47.4 percent after six months, and 41.0 percent after one year of the program, these later refusal rates remained significantly higher than the baseline, indicating that the intervention had an enduring effect on server compliance with sales to intoxicated laws. (See Figure 1.) It is also noteworthy that there was a statistically significant decrease in DWI arrests in Washtenaw county from the time of baseline to the time of peak enforcement (31.7 percent to 23.3 percent).<sup>22</sup>

**FIGURE 1: ENFORCEMENT EFFECTS ON SALES TO INTOXICATED PERSONS**



Further evidence of the effectiveness of enforcement efforts in reducing alcohol-related harm is provided by a study conducted in New South Wales, Australia.<sup>23</sup> Law enforcement officers identified licensed establishments that were listed as "last place of drink" by individuals apprehended for alcohol-related incidents (including drinking and driving, assault, domestic violence, and other criminal activities). A group of these establishments selected as intervention sites, and the intervention included visits by police officers conducting audits of responsible alcohol service practices, the offer of resources and assistance to the licensees for improvement in their service practices, and a follow-up workshop on responsible alcohol service. When the numbers of alcohol-related incidents were compared pre- and post-intervention, a reduction of 36 percent was observed for the intervention group while the number of alcohol-related incidents declined by 21 percent in the control group of establishments. The difference in the number of alcohol-related incidents between the two groups indicates that the enforcement and education strategies implemented in the intervention establishments resulted in a higher level of compliance with laws pertaining to responsible beverage service and a reduction in the level of alcohol-related harm.

## ***The Value of Deterrence***

The evidence above suggests that changing the environment in which alcohol is sold and consumed and reducing access to alcohol can result in a reduction of crime and violence. To achieve this, liquor laws must be enforced. Many experts also agree that the key to ensuring compliance with liquor laws is that the consequences must be perceived to be as both certain and swift, although not necessarily of great severity.<sup>24</sup> As illustrated in the Michigan study, this can be achieved by escalating the perceived certainty of detection through a campaign involving increased surveillance followed by notification of licensees of the surveillance. Increased surveillance can also be combined with streamlined administrative procedures for imposing penalties on violators. An alcohol beverage control agency can impose a fine, or suspend or revoke an operator's license in administrative proceedings that can be both swift and relatively certain, avoiding the more complex and time-consuming proceedings associated with the criminal justice system. In short, with sufficient resources and training, law enforcement agents can be effectively deployed to increase compliance with alcohol laws that can, in turn, reduce alcohol-related violence.

## **Case Study Illustrations**

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Many localities in the United States and in other countries are implementing enforcement programs to reduce alcohol-related crime. This section provides four case study examples of how increased enforcement of alcohol laws can have positive ripple effects within the community, resulting in not only the reduction of alcohol-related crimes, but also the general reduction of violent crimes. In all of these examples, the enforcement programs engaged multiple strategies, including stepped up enforcement of one or more liquor laws, education and training, and community outreach.

## **Case Study 1: Champaign, Illinois**

In 1995, the Champaign, Illinois Police Department formed the Alcohol Enforcement Unit to focus on enforcing alcohol laws to reduce alcohol-related crime. Champaign and its twin city Urbana share a large student population (nearly 40,000 students) from the University of Illinois and a community college. A major focus of the unit's work has been underage drinking, particularly by those under the age of 19. The unit does targeted enforcement in the campus districts, including bar checks, street sweeps, undercover operations in alcohol establishments, and retail compliance checks. The unit also works closely with bars to improve compliance with underage drinking laws, and develops bar employee security training programs.

Cooperative efforts with Illinois state agencies enhance the work of the Champaign Alcohol Enforcement Unit. The Illinois Liquor Control Commission regulates the licensing of retail liquor outlets and works with the Champaign unit when conducting routine inspections and investigations of licensed establishments in the area. The Commission also administers the BASSET (Beverage Alcohol Sellers and Servers Education and Training) program, which supports Champaign's efforts to reduce underage drinking and to educate liquor outlet owners and staff on state and local alcohol service laws. In addition, the Illinois State Police and the Illinois Secretary of State Police work closely with the local unit on bar and retail compliance checks.

These efforts appear to be bearing fruit: Between 1998 and 2001, the percentage of minors under the age of 19 arrested for alcohol related violations decreased from 33 percent of all liquor law violations by minors to 24 percent.<sup>25</sup> (See Table 1.)

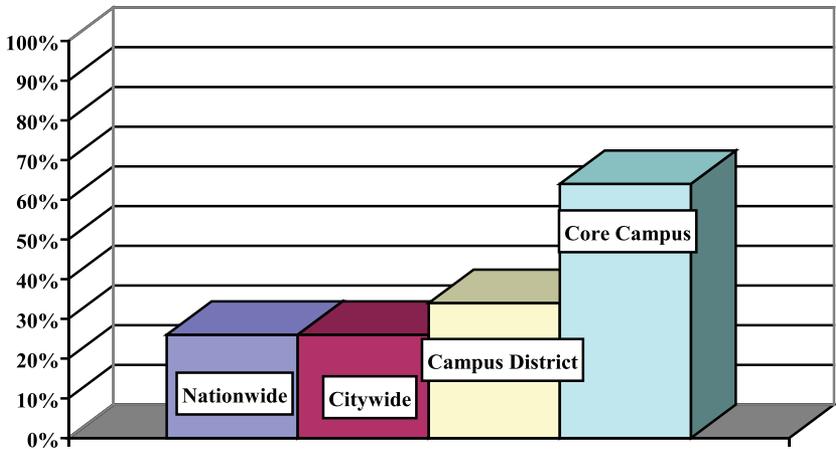
Further evidence that alcohol enforcement can have a positive effect on a community is indicated by the reduction of crime in Champaign, particularly in the campus areas targeted for alcohol enforcement. Between 1995, the year that the Alcohol Enforcement Unit was established, and 2001, violent crime dropped citywide by 26 percent (the same rate that violent crime decreased nationally), while in the campus district, it dropped by 34 percent, and, in the

**TABLE 1: ALCOHOL-RELATED ARRESTS OF MINORS**

	1998	1999	2000	2001
<b>All arrests for alcohol-related violations by minors</b>	813	971	1702	1250
<b>Arrests of minors under 19</b>	267	296	384	302
<b>Percent of Arrests: Minors under 19</b>	33%	30%	23%	24%

core campus (an area containing bar and restaurant venues that target college students), it dropped by 64 percent.<sup>26</sup> (See Figure 3.)

**FIGURE 3: DECREASES IN VIOLENT CRIME:  
CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS 1995-2001**



## **Case Study 2: Vallejo, California**

For over a decade, the Vallejo Alcohol Policy Coalition (VAPC) of Vallejo, California, a community-based organization, has collaborated closely with the Vallejo Police Department and other groups to reduce the negative effects of alcohol sales and consumption on the community. Employing a broad range of actions, from enforcing laws regulating alcohol outlets to neighborhood revitalization efforts, this collaboration has created a measurable improvement in the reduction of alcohol-related crime and the general rate of violent crime in the city.

The California Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) Department has been an active supporter of coalition projects, adding weight and authority to the enforcement of alcohol policies in this locality. VAPC worked closely with the agency's Licensee Education on Alcohol and Drugs program (LEAD) to develop a Responsible Beverage Service (RBS) curriculum for Vallejo, and the state provided VAPC with a letter of support for the curriculum to be distributed to merchants. This training began in 1995 and is required for Vallejo alcohol retail establishments to obtain a Conditional Use Permit. A 6.5 percent reduction in calls for police service occurred in the year following the introduction of RBS training. This translated into a 20 percent reduction in the number of hours of police time spent responding to calls.

The Vallejo Police Department received a grant from the state ABC Department to enforce underage drinking laws which included a responsible beverage service training component, and VAPC and LEAD co-trained local merchants. An ABC Department administrator attends VAPC meetings when new permit applicants make their business plan presentations in order to provide technical support on conditions that can be attached to a new liquor license (including RBS training for servers).

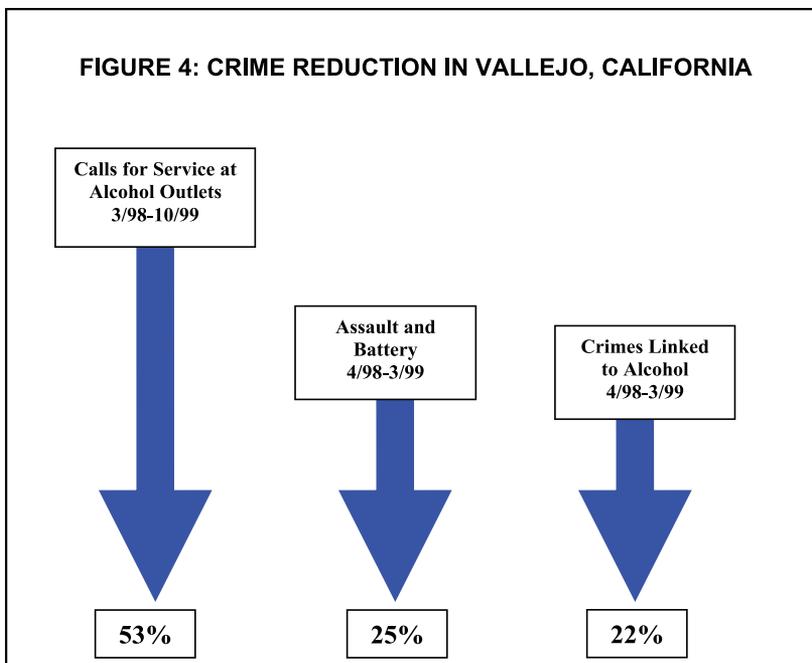
VAPC supported the passage of a "Deemed Approved" ordinance that created performance standards for alcohol outlets. The Vallejo Police Department and the community vigorously enforced the ordinance following its passage in August of 1998. Project staff compared data on police calls for service in the last 10 months of

1998 with data for the first 10 months of 1999 and found a reduction of 53 percent.<sup>27</sup>

VAPC also worked with the Vallejo Police Department to implement undercover operations testing compliance with alcohol sales to minors. In a two-year period (1997 to 1999), the compliance rate increased from 74 percent to 98 percent.<sup>28</sup>

Neighborhood revitalization was another important component of the VAPC program. Neighborhoods with multiple environmental problems were targeted for intervention by law enforcement, code and building departments, and other key city agencies and organizations beginning in 1998. The driving force was the notion that intensive revitalization in one area would result in the reduction of crime citywide, not just moving problems from one part of the city to another part. While the interventions were multi-level efforts, liquor law enforcement was an important component of the process. After these interventions began, the city of Vallejo experienced a 22 percent drop in crimes often linked to alcohol, including such violent crimes as assault and battery, which dropped by 25 percent.<sup>29</sup> (See Figure 4.)

**FIGURE 4: CRIME REDUCTION IN VALLEJO, CALIFORNIA**



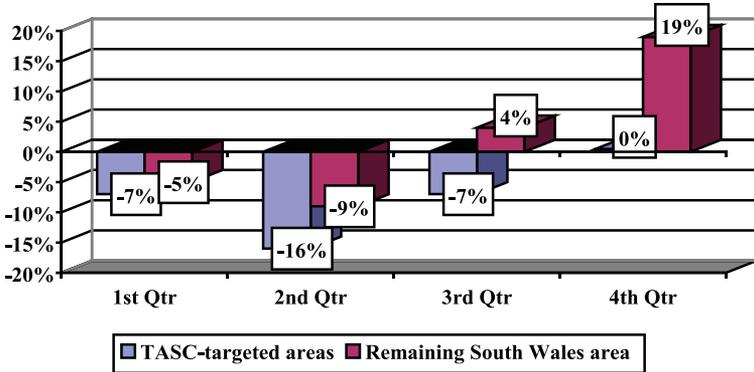
### **Case Study 3: Cardiff, Wales (United Kingdom)**

In July of 2000, the Cardiff Police Department in Wales launched a multi-agency effort called Tackling Alcohol-related Street Crime (TASC). TASC sought to reduce alcohol-related crime and disorder in central Cardiff and Cardiff Bay and was funded and supported by the United Kingdom's Home Office Crime Reduction Programme. As with the cities in the previous case studies, these efforts involved a combination of targeted policing at "hot spots," working with business owners in the targeted areas, creating training programs for bar staff, and engaging in general public education.

A comparison of police and hospital data from the first year of the TASC program with the preceding 12 months revealed an overall decrease of four percent in incidents involving alcohol-related assaults on the streets or in licensed premises. This result was achieved despite a concurrent 10 percent increase in liquor licensed premise capacity in central Cardiff. The project reduced the expected level of all violent incidents by an estimated eight percent—that is, it prevented about 100 assaults. While there was a 49 percent increase in incidents of alcohol-related non-violent disorder during this same time period, this increase slowed markedly during the evaluation period and was largely accounted for by one street with the most dense concentration of pubs and new premises.

The effectiveness of this program is further demonstrated by comparing districts targeted by TASC with the rest of the police force area. Between the year preceding implementation of the program and the first year of TASC, the TASC districts showed either a quarterly reduction or no change in police recorded incidents of "violence against the person," while the remaining South Wales area experienced either a slower rate of reduction or an *increase* by quarter in police recorded violent incidents.<sup>30</sup> (See Figure 5.) When two full years before and after implementation are compared, the TASC districts experienced an eight percent reduction in violence, while the remaining South Wales area sustained an *increase* of two percent.

**FIGURE 5: CHANGE IN ALL VIOLENT INCIDENTS RECORDED BETWEEN YEAR PRIOR TO TASC AND FIRST YEAR OF TASC**



### ***Case Study 4: Diadema, Sao Paulo (Brazil)***

Diadema is a low-income city of over 357,000 people located south of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The city had very high rates of homicides, assaults, vehicle crashes, and gang violence. Many of these incidents occurred between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

In response to these problems, the municipal government called upon military and federal police to beef up enforcement activity within the jurisdiction. They also created and deployed the Diadema municipal civil guard to assist with enforcement. These actions produced reductions in the numbers of murders and assaults against women in the first six months of the year. While city officials were pleased with these results, they believed that further reductions in violent crime rates were needed and were possible.

The mayor instructed tasked the municipal guard to develop a crime map for the city. The data showed that 60 percent of the murders occurred between 11:00 p.m. and 6 a.m., most frequently in neighborhoods with high concentrations of bars. Further investigation revealed that the majority of these crimes were not planned but were "crimes of passion" in response to unplanned confrontations. Data also revealed that 45 percent of complaints about violence against women occurred during these same hours, and these violent acts were closely connected to alcohol consumption.

Armed with this information, the city adopted a new ordinance that prohibits alcohol sales after 11:00 p.m. In the six-month period prior to its passage in July 2002, the municipal civil guard visited most alcohol retailers to discuss the proposed new law and its application to alcohol sales.

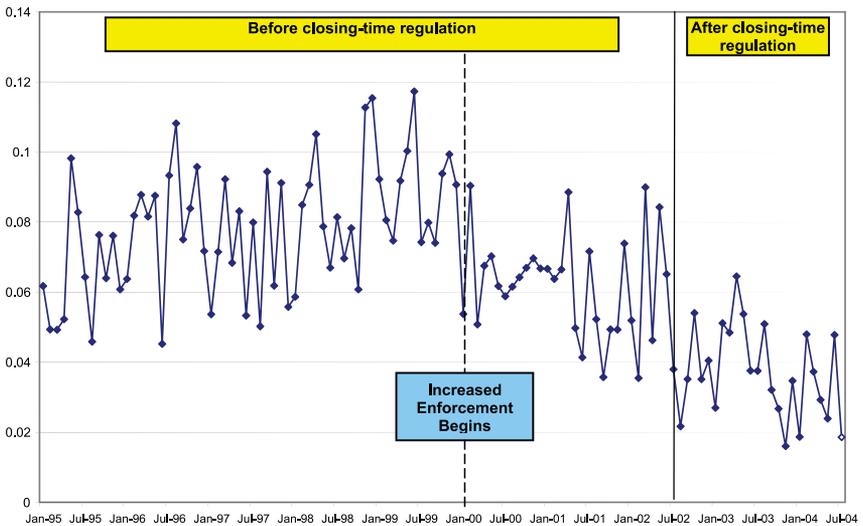
The municipal government also developed a strategy to ascertain and develop support for the new alcohol ordinance both prior to and after its adoption. After the problem analysis was completed, the mayor consulted with other political leaders on the findings and used public opinion polling to confirm community approval (83 percent) of the proposed ordinance prior to its adoption. Following adoption of the law, the city launched a public education campaign detailing the content of the new law as well as why it was needed. Surveys conducted in the summer of 2003 indicated that 98 percent of residents knew about the law and 93 percent supported it.

A dedicated enforcement unit comprised of staff of various city departments meets daily to conduct operations in a specific section of the city. The location of the enforcement activity, however, is not known until the unit is ready to be deployed for the evening's work. The City also established a telephone number which citizens could use to report violators of the ordinance. Violators are adjudicated administratively (rather than criminally) and penalties are progressive in nature. A first violation results in a warning, the second in a fine, the third in a fine and license suspension, and the fourth in license revocation. These policies, along with the knowledge that the law is equitably enforced, provide retailers with the assurance that they are not being placed at an economic disadvantage by retailers engaged in illegal behavior, and this knowledge encourages voluntary compliance with the law.

City records indicate that the adoption and enforcement of the new policy have led to further reductions in assaults against women and murders. Monthly counts for homicides averaged about 301.3 homicides per year before the implementation of the new policy to 169.6 per year afterward. Factoring in earlier enforcement efforts, it is estimated that the sales hours restrictions reduced homicides 46 percent.<sup>31</sup> (See Figure 5.) The restrictions were also associated with a 26 percent decrease in assaults on women. City records also document reductions in other acts of interpersonal violence, calls

for police service, and hospital emergency admissions. Conversely, citizen perception of personal safety and community order increased.

**FIGURE 6: DIADEMA, BRAZIL – HOMICIDES PER 1,000 RESIDENTS**



July 2004 figure represents first half of month.

## Summary and Recommendations

The link between alcohol and violence represents a serious public health and safety problem in the United States and other parts of the world. Whatever the exact cause and effect relationship, there is now consensus among researchers that alcohol contributes to acts of violence and that reducing availability and improving the environment in which alcohol is sold and consumed can result in a reduction of violent crime. The results of alcohol enforcement efforts in different localities suggest that targeted enforcement of liquor laws, combined with training alcohol outlet employees, improving outlet policies regarding alcohol service practices, increasing

community involvement, and related strategies can result in a reduction of violence. The results also suggest that cooperation among enforcement and regulatory agencies at the local, state, or national level can enhance the effectiveness of these enforcement efforts.

Yet, despite this demonstrated potential to reduce violence, alcohol law enforcement is a relatively low priority at many levels. Federal funding for alcohol law enforcement is limited. State liquor law enforcement agencies face small and shrinking budgets. Local law enforcement agencies are often given the mandate to focus on "more serious crime," apparently not fully recognizing how such crime is oftentimes linked to alcohol consumption. Or, local law enforcement agents lack the specialized training necessary for effective alcohol enforcement. This lack of adequate attention to alcohol law enforcement reduces compliance with alcohol availability policies, and thereby increases alcohol-related violence and its associated human, social, and economic costs.

The case study research reviewed here supports an alternative approach: make liquor law enforcement a priority area, increase funding for enforcement, reduce alcohol-related violence, and create enormous savings in social and economic costs. The enforcement strategies discussed in this paper also suggest that enforcement of liquor laws should have a positive impact on other forms of alcohol-related harm, such as alcohol-related traffic crashes, thus multiplying the savings to society.

There is clearly a pressing need to increase the level of resources dedicated to alcohol law enforcement. This review suggests its potential for preventing violence and highlights the need for additional research to assess enforcement's impact and optimal design. The urgency of this prevention agenda is demonstrated by the staggering human, social, and economic costs of alcohol-related harm and the need for new and innovative strategies for its prevention. Insuring adequate resources for enforcing alcohol laws needs to be given a high priority among state and federal legislators, policy makers, governmental agencies, law enforcement personnel, community activists, and researchers.

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