

KEY FINDINGS

FROM “EXPLORING ALCOHOL POLICY APPROACHES
TO PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE PERPETRATION”



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KEY FINDINGS

FROM “EXPLORING ALCOHOL POLICY APPROACHES
TO PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE PERPETRATION”
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RESEARCH TRANSLATION BY NSVRC

Sexual violence prevention strategies have historically focused on individual- and relationship- level change. While investing in prevention at these levels remains a need in the anti-sexual violence movement, there is a growing emphasis on moving to the outer layers of the social ecology to prevent sexual violence toward community- and societal-level change. As this outer layer emphasis grows, the sexual violence prevention movement will need the research and evidence to keep pace.

In their article, “Exploring alcohol policy approaches to prevent sexual violence perpetration,” Lippy and DeGue (2014) respond to this need by exploring the available research on alcohol policy as one potential community-level strategy. Consistent links between alcohol use and sexual violence perpetration in the literature point to this as a promising approach. While it is clear that alcohol does not cause sexual violence, the authors find some evidence to support policies that may help to mitigate risk factors for sexual violence perpetration. This paper helps to shed light on the great potential of policy change to prevent sexual violence at the outer layers of the social ecology.

BACKGROUND

The authors identified two ways that alcohol may interact with and magnify risks for perpetrating violence: excessive alcohol consumption and social disorganization.

- **Excessive alcohol consumption:** Many studies show a direct relationship between excessive alcohol use, such as binge drinking, and risk for committing sexual violence. The physical and psychological effects of alcohol “interact with existing individual-level risk factors for sexual aggression (e.g., general aggressiveness, belief in rape myths, hostility toward women, or exposure to violence in childhood) and

sociocultural norms about alcohol and gender in ways that can encourage or facilitate male sexual aggression” (Lippy & DeGue, 2014, p.2). However, the authors note that “alcohol use itself does not ‘cause’ or account for sexual violence, and the socio-cognitive effects of alcohol do not place all drinkers at equal risk for sexual violence perpetration” (Lippy & DeGue, 2014, p.2).

- **Social disorganization:** The authors also looked at the ways that access to alcohol within a geographic area may influence risk for sexual violence by, potentially, creating or reinforcing social disorganization in communities. Social disorganization is defined by “a decrease in social controls, collective efficacy, and resident participation in communities resulting from the disruption of informal networks and community structures like family, schools, and religious institutions” (Lippy & DeGue, 2014, p.3). For example, the authors note that areas with a higher concentration of alcohol outlets (e.g., liquor stores, bars) may attract or congregate higher-risk people in the vicinity, resulting in more violence near the outlets and a decreased sense of public order, safety, or control in the neighborhood. This can break down connections between neighbors and impact social norms for behavior, ultimately increasing the risk for all forms of violence.

POLICY ANALYSIS APPROACH

The authors reviewed existing reports and research to better understand how policies that reduce alcohol consumption or access might prevent the perpetration of sexual violence or affect related risk factors.

They looked at six specific policy areas:

- 1. Alcohol pricing:** Examples include increasing prices of alcohol through taxes and restricting drink promotions such as “happy hour” or discounted drink specials.
- 2. Alcohol sale time:** Examples include reducing people’s access to alcohol by limiting the days and/or hours during which alcohol can be sold.
- 3. Alcohol outlet density:** Examples include restricting the number of places where alcohol can be consumed or sold within a geographic area, such as through zoning, privatization of alcohol sales, and licensing.



4. Drinking environment: Examples include enforcing existing laws that prohibit owners and servers from serving (over-serving) intoxicated customers or from serving underage customers, holding owners and servers accountable for the criminal behaviors of over-served patrons, and training owners and servers to take an active role in preventing violence in the drinking environment.

5. Marketing: Examples include banning alcohol billboard ads that list the prices of alcohol. Also, a non-policy example includes examining impacts of sexist content in alcohol ads on self-reports of sexual violence.

6. College: Examples include alcohol (and other substance) bans in certain college dormitories and/or campus-wide and social norms marketing campaigns designed to accurately inform student perceptions about alcohol consumption on campus.

FINDINGS

- **Alcohol pricing:** Research shows that increasing the price of alcohol reduces consumption and may reduce rates of sexual violence perpetration.
- **Sale time:** Research shows that reducing the times when people can purchase alcohol can reduce their consumption of alcohol. This may have effects on sexual violence perpetration, but additional research is needed.
- **Alcohol outlet density:** The research shows that increasing the number of alcohol outlets (bars, beer/liquor stores) in a geographic area increases the risk of sexual violence victimization. More research is needed to

better understand the influence of outlet type (bar vs. store) on sexual violence rates.

- **Drinking environment:** There is a lack of research on the effects of policies that attempt to influence the drinking environment and prevent violence by mobilizing servers and other staff. Sexual violence-specific prevention policies and practices were not reviewed. However, there is some evidence showing that barroom management strategies can reduce physical assaults where people drink. Research is needed to examine the potential of programs that train servers to help prevent sexual violence perpetration, specifically.
- **Marketing:** More research is needed to better understand if and how restricting location and content of alcohol ads can affect alcohol consumption. Reducing sexist content in advertising, including sexually exploitive images of women or advertisements that portray alcohol use as a strategy to obtain sex, may influence sexual violence perpetration, but more research is needed.
- **College:** Research shows that alcohol and other substance use bans on campus are associated with lower self-reported rates of sexual victimization; however, this may reflect the lower risk of students who choose to attend those campuses. To date, there is no promising evidence showing that social norms campaigns are effective in preventing sexual violence. Also, research shows that the availability of alcohol in the community that surrounds the college campus can undermine the effects of alcohol control policies on campus.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

The authors identify the following research limitations:

1. Most existing research studies do not look specifically at the effects of alcohol policy on sexual violence. More research is needed on how alcohol policies—and policies in general—can prevent sexual violence perpetration.
2. Most of the existing research on alcohol and sexual violence looks at sexual violence committed by boys and men against girls and women. This overlooks the experiences of many people. More research is needed about the intersections of alcohol, sexual violence, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
3. Due to gaps in existing research, the authors were not able to identify the ways that policies affected specific forms of sexual violence (rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, etc.) or types of perpetrator (intimate partner, acquaintance, stranger). More research is needed on the effects of alcohol, specific forms of sexual violence, and relationship contexts.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION

Importance of anti-oppression and policy as a prevention approach: Social disorganization as a framework for understanding sexual violence can be problematic. The indicators often used to study social disorganization—poverty, female-headed households, race/ethnicity—can be taken out of context and misused to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. These indicators can also be misinterpreted to be the direct causes of sexual violence, resulting in a victim-blaming practice that finds fault for a complex social

POLICIES

Additional policy efforts could examine the impacts of gentrification (the arrival of residents/businesses with wealth in a traditionally lower-income community), helping to further our understanding of social cohesion/organization, alcohol, and sexual violence risk and protection. Further, it could be helpful to examine the disinvestment of economic and social assets and resources in urban centers (sometimes referred to as “white flight”) and how that connects to the increased availability of alcohol and decreased social cohesion and access to resources. Finally, another policy area could include the role of taxes and other economic policies in bolstering social cohesion in marginalized communities.

problem in the characteristics of individuals.

In their collaborations with communities, preventionists can use these findings and work to contextualize social disorganization and the ways that alcohol can contribute to the deterioration of social connections and efficacy and the potential of alcohol and other policies to address this harmful dynamic. Additionally, preventionists can use these findings to educate policy makers and others about the need for culturally-relevant prevention strategies that work to dismantle oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism while also mobilizing the resilience or strengths of communities. Within the context of social disorganization,

preventionists can work to influence other policy efforts related to issues such as gentrification, white flight, and tax and other economic policies that can bolster or drain the social cohesion of marginalized communities.

Collaborations can help address multiple risk factors for sexual violence perpetration:

The findings support the concept that sexual violence does not happen in a vacuum. Alcohol alone does not cause sexual violence, but consuming alcohol can set into play a set of risk factors that may have already been established at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. These risk factors may include beliefs about gender inequity, male entitlement to sex, tolerance of violence, and alcohol's effects on behavior. Preventionists can use these findings to help inform their partnerships with substance abuse preventionists and treatment providers, colleges/universities, liquor control boards, and other community members to help mobilize communities around responsible drinking and other sexual violence prevention strategies related to the interplay of alcohol, sex, gender, and violence.

More practitioner-researcher partnerships are needed: This research supports the need for greater collaborations among researchers and preventionists. The authors found that most existing studies did not specifically examine policy effects on sexual violence, or when they did, they were limited to heterosexual constructs. Preventionists can use the findings to build relationships with researchers at local universities, for example, and to help inform research priorities and

methods based on the needs of the field, so that findings can strengthen prevention strategies.

CONCLUSION

While the research does not provide a definitive, clear path forward, the findings can help inform sexual violence prevention strategies at the community- and societal-levels of the social ecology, mainly through policy change. Preventionists can use these findings as a spring board to learn more about existing



alcohol-related policies and regulations and to advocate for enhancement of these policies in collaboration with communities.

Public policies have the potential to shape public perceptions about sexual violence and to support effective prevention practices. By influencing public policy, preventionists can ensure that the voices of survivors and communities are heard, which can result in better systems of care as well as a stronger infrastructure for sexual violence prevention. Given that sexual violence occurs within a context of human oppression, it is important to consider policies that promote equity across gender, race, class, ability, age, and sexual orientation.

Policies are sometimes passed and then not always evaluated for their effectiveness. Preventionists can help educate policy makers about root causes of sexual violence and the need for more research and funding to support effective sexual violence prevention strategies. Preventionists can help to evaluate policies and share evaluation findings with partners, state and community leaders, and policy makers. Preventionists can also engage in strategies that enable them to tell the human stories behind policies—showing how policies can positively

impact communities and survivors. More specifically, the findings from this study can be used to enhance policies that affect alcohol price and availability, barroom management (and the evaluation of prevention strategies with servers), sexist alcohol marketing, and college/university substance bans.

We know that sexual violence is influenced by many factors at all levels of society. Lippy and DeGue (2014) found that excessive alcohol consumption and social norms around both alcohol and sexual violence help to perpetuate sexual assault. However, drinking excessively alone does not cause a person to commit sexual violence, rather alcohol interacts with larger community and societal norms that tolerate violence and aggression. Therefore, the authors clearly state that banning alcohol alone will not end sexual violence; but by reducing rates of excessive consumption at the population-level, through policy change, there is a chance that perpetration rates can decline (Lippy & DeGue, 2014, pp. 2-3). These findings provide a helpful framework for ongoing dialog and efforts in mobilizing public policy as a sexual violence prevention strategy.

REFERENCES

Lippy, C., & DeGue, S. (2014). Exploring alcohol policy approaches to prevent of sexual violence perpetration. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1524838014557291

