

Risk of hospitalization from violent assault increases when local alcohol sales rise

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The risk of being hospitalized from being violently assaulted increases when there is increased alcohol sales near the victim's residence, finds a new study in this week's *PLoS Medicine*.

Joel Ray and colleagues at the University of Toronto and the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, Canada, studied the link between alcohol sales and violent assaults in Canada's largest province, Ontario. Most alcohol in Ontario is sold in government-run liquor stores and the province is able to track these sales. In addition, Ontario keeps detailed computerized medical records of people hospitalized as a result of violent assault.

The researchers identified 3,212 people aged over 13 years who had been hospitalized over a 32-month period because of a serious assault. They compared the volume of alcohol sold at the liquor store nearest to the victim's home the day before the assault with the volume sold at the same store a week earlier (this type of study is called a "case-crossover" study).

For every extra 1,000 l of alcohol sold per store per day (a doubling of alcohol sales), the overall risk of being hospitalized for assault increased by 13%. At peak times of alcohol sales, the risk of assault was 41% higher than at times when alcohol sales were lowest.

Dr Ray and colleagues found that the risk was highest in three subgroups of people: men (18% increased risk for every 1,000 l alcohol sold daily),

youths aged 13 to 20 years (21% increased risk for every 1,000 l alcohol sold daily), and those living in urban areas (19% increased risk for every 1,000 l alcohol sold daily).

A total of 1,150 assaults (36%) involved the use of a sharp or blunt weapon, and 1,532 (48%) arose during an unarmed brawl or fight.

Because the study considers only serious assaults and alcohol sold in shops (i.e., not including alcohol sold in bars), it probably underestimates the link between alcohol and assault. It also does not indicate whether the victim or perpetrator of the assault (or both) had been drinking, and its findings may not apply to countries with different drinking habits.

In an expert commentary on this study, Russell Bennetts and Rachel Seabrook of the Institute of Alcohol Studies, London, UK, who were not involved in conducting the research, say: "This new study illustrates the role that alcohol sales from retail outlets play in affecting the risk of suffering a serious assault. The findings suggest that the relevant officials should consider restricting availability of alcohol from retail stores if they wish to reduce the likelihood of violence in their area of jurisdiction."

Source: Public Library of Science

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