

Increased risk of binge drinking and alcohol-related harm induced by higher number of alcohol outlets

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University of Otago researchers have discovered an association between the number of liquor outlets within easy walking distance of home (1km) and the level of binge drinking and alcohol related harm reported in the community. The results of the study, which is the first of its kind in New Zealand, have just been published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

The researchers found that people with more off-licences close to their home were more likely to be binge drinkers. Off-licences are places where you buy take-away alcohol, including supermarkets, liquor stores and convenience stores.

As well as this, for each type of outlet (bars/pubs, clubs, restaurants and off-licences), there was a clear association between the number of outlets and the level of harm due to drinking reported by people living within 1km. The types of harm surveyed included effects on performance at work, on relationships, on physical health and finances.

This study used a national survey to assess individual alcohol drinking patterns, and self-reported harm from alcohol. The participants' addresses were then mapped and compared with location of alcohol outlets. The researchers pinpointed the location of all pubs, bars, clubs, restaurants and off-licences in New Zealand and counted the number of each type within 1 km of each participant's home.

“With each extra off-licence alcohol outlet within 1 km, the odds of binge drinking increased by about 4%,” says study lead author, Professor Jennie Connor of the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine.

Although a 4% increase doesn’t sound like much, Professor Connor points out that compared with five off-licences in an area, having 15 means 48% more [binge drinking](#) and a 26% increase in alcohol related harm.

“This is an important finding considering that national alcohol policies are currently under review. We need to rethink the ease of obtaining liquor licenses and how many [alcohol outlets](#) are appropriate,” says Professor Connor.

Dr. Marion Poore, Medical Officer of Health in Dunedin, agrees:

“Turning around New Zealand's heavy drinking culture is a whole of community issue. Citizens should ask new Councils to act now, by developing local [alcohol](#) plans that limit the number and location of outlets. The challenge for Local Government is how to balance the overall wellbeing of the community with the perceived economic benefit from an increasing number of outlets.”

The researchers say that while this study cannot prove that increased outlet density causes these problems, it does demonstrate that the link seen in international research is also found in [New Zealand](#). Other characteristics of the people and neighbourhoods have been taken into account, making it less likely that the findings have an alternative explanation.

“It is very likely that outlet density is making a contribution to harm, and it is an area where better policy could improve health and a range of social problems,” concludes Professor Connor.

Provided by University of Otago

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