

News coverage of alcohol's harm may sway support for liquor-control laws

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Reading a newspaper article about the role alcohol played in an injury accident or violent crime makes people more supportive of enforcing alcohol laws, a new study suggests.

Researchers had participants read actual news reports, randomly selected from newspapers across the United States, about violent crimes and various accidental injuries – half of which were edited to mention the role of alcohol and half of which were edited not to make such mention.

Those who read the articles mentioning alcohol's role later showed more support for enforcing laws regarding serving intoxicated people, sales to underage youth and open containers, compared to those who had read the other articles.

The results are important because prior work from this research group has indicated that fewer than one-fourth of newspaper reports and one-tenth of TV news reports on alcohol-related crimes and non-car-related fatal injuries actually mention that alcohol was involved.

"The underreporting of alcohol's role in crime and accidents may be having a real impact on public health," said Michael Slater, co-author of the study and professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"If people were more aware of how prevalent alcohol use was in crimes and all forms of accidents, there may be more of a public demand for tougher law enforcement."

Slater conducted the study with Andrew Hayes, associate professor, and David Edwoldsen, professor, both in the School of Communication at Ohio State; and Catherine Goodall of Kent State University.

Their study appears in the March 2012 issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

The study involved a random sample of 789 adults who were recruited for the study from across the country.

Participants read online one of 60 representative articles taken from U.S. local newspapers. They were evenly split between articles about violent crimes, car crashes, and other injuries.

Half the articles mentioned that alcohol played a causative role in the crime or accident, and half did not.

Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to evaluate the news articles, such as how clear they were, and they were asked several questions about their thoughts on what they read.

They were also asked several questions asking them to indicate their level of support for current liquor laws, such as those regulating sales to underage youth, on a scale of 1 to 10. Participants were told these questions would help researchers understand their evaluation of the article.

Those who read articles mentioning alcohol use rated their support for alcohol enforcement higher than did those who read articles that had no such mention. Findings were similar whether they read articles about crimes or injuries.

Participants were also asked whether they would support new alcohol

control laws, including restricting the number of bars and liquor stores in an area, restricting advertising, and making servers legally liable if they give alcohol to intoxicated customers.

The findings showed that participants who read the stories mentioning alcohol were no more likely to support these proposed new laws than those who read the other articles.

"In retrospect, it is not too surprising that there wasn't more support for these new laws, given the current political environment against more government control over economic activities," Slater said.

But the results do show that people may support tougher enforcement of current laws – at least if the news media accurately reported the scope of the problem, he said.

Public health estimates indicate that more than 30 percent of fatalities due to violent crimes, car crashes and other accidental injuries are in part attributable to alcohol use.

But a 2006 study by Slater and his colleagues showed that the media reporting of alcohol's role in crime and accidents is much lower. Newspapers mention alcohol's role in only 7.3 percent of their articles about violent crimes and 4.8 percent of accidental injuries. Television news was even less likely to mention the role of alcohol.

Slater noted that, in this study, support for alcohol law enforcement increased after reading only one article.

"The effect of reading one article may not last long, but people will be constantly reminded if alcohol's role is mentioned regularly in accident and crime stories," he said.

"These stories are ubiquitous in local news."

Local governments have a role to play in increasing media coverage of alcohol's role in crime and accidents, he said.

"It would help if policies mandated that local law enforcement include information on alcohol use, when appropriate, in their reports on crimes and accidents," Slater said.

"If reporters see alcohol information in police reports, they will be more likely to include that information in their stories."

More information: Slater, M. D., Hayes, A. F., Goodall, C. E., & Ewoldsen, D. R. (March 2012). Increasing support for alcohol-control enforcement through news coverage of alcohol's role in injuries and crime. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 73(2), 311.

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