

After privatization, link found between new liquor establishments, violence

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Wine on shelves at a grocery store, an example of an "off-premises" liquor outlet like the ones that just got permission to sell alcohol thanks to Initiative 1183.
Credit: Drexel University

A team of researchers examining the effect alcohol availability has on violence found a significant increase in violent assaults for each

additional establishment with a liquor license added to the area.

Loni Philip Tabb, PhD, an assistant professor in Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health, led a research team that used Seattle as a case study. The city provided a unique opportunity to discover changes in trends of [violence](#) in relation to alcohol since Washington state had just approved the complete [privatization](#) of liquor licenses in 2012. As such, Tabb and her team could look at recent data dating from both before and after the privatization.

What they found was that aggravated assault increased by 8 percent in areas where licenses were granted to establishments that had previously been unable to get them, such as grocery stores. These stores were termed "off-premises" outlets in the study because consumption of the alcohol is assumed to take place away from where it was purchased.

And even for establishments that were always able to receive liquor licenses, like bars, the addition of each new "on-premises" outlet was linked to a 5 percent average increase in aggravated assaults.

"With alcohol availability increasing due to privatization, and with an already well-established relationship between alcohol and violence, it's critical to examine the impacts of these policies," Tabb said. "The increase for both aggravated and non-aggravated assault is significant and at a population level like this is a cause for concern. In urban areas, in particular, violence and alcohol already have an association, and neighborhood characteristics play a huge role in those violence rates."

Research at a Critical Time

Findings by Tabb's team were published in *Spatial and Spatio-Temporal Epidemiology* and come at a time that is especially pertinent for the issue of alcohol privatization. In states like Pennsylvania—where the sale of

wine in select grocery stores was recently approved—movements for increased privatization are gaining steam. Tabb's research is valuable because it could project violence levels that follow other states' privatization efforts.

Washington's Initiative 1183 (I-1183) was a piece of legislation that closed state liquor stores but allowed for alcohol to be sold by private establishments and companies. Although the state and local government continues to regulate the distribution and sale of alcohol, grocery stores and wholesalers (like Costco) were now clear to obtain liquor licenses.

Overall, privatization in Washington led to a boom in off-premises outlets (635), which includes [grocery stores](#) and wholesalers, selling alcohol. Privatization also gave way to an increase in on-premises outlets (1,760—in 2010 there were less than 1,600), such as taverns, bars and restaurants, between 2010 (two years before I-1183 was approved and the start of the study's data) and the end of 2013 (two years after the law's approval and the end of the study's data).

During that timeframe, non-aggravated assaults (such as minor fist-fights) jumped 74 percent, while aggravated assaults (such as attacks with weapons) increased 42 percent, citywide.

But the study conducted by Tabb looked more closely, specifically through the use of Seattle's 567 census block groups. When the researchers charted which census block groups got new liquor outlets, statistically significant increases in violence seemed to follow.

For every new off-premises outlet that sold liquor, aggravated assault increased by about 8 percent in a given block group, with non-aggravated assault increasing by 6 percent. And for every on-premises outlet in a given block group, there were increases of 5 percent for both classifications.

Getting the Full Picture of Violence

Tabb said it was important to differentiate between the two forms of violence taking place, as aggravated assaults are typically more serious felonies and could involve a deadly weapon.

"When considering violence and the availability of alcohol, it's important to ensure a complete assessment of its impact," she explained. "If one only examines overall violence, underlying trends may be masked."

In face of that, Tabb feels her findings point to some serious points that should be considered when privatization and expansion is broached.

For one, off-premises alcohol outlets tracked with higher increases in violence than on-premises outlets. That could potentially have been higher without limits built into the law.

"Washington state has very specific guidelines on the distribution of new off-premises licensing," Tabb said. "For instance, new off-premises alcohol outlet licenses are to only be distributed to retailers with at least 10,000 square feet of space. Due to this limitation, smaller alcohol outlets, especially those in smaller convenience stores, are limited in their ability to gain additional licenses."

That's important, according to Tabb, because those stores are often already associated with increased amounts of violence, especially when they're in neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty.

"Other states that are deliberating privatization should consider specific limitations in the distribution of additional alcohol outlet licenses in neighborhoods that have already been shown to have concerns," Tabb said.

Often, the arguments about liquor privatization center around economic impact and just plain convenience. But Tabb hopes that her research, and more like it, will add a new topic to the discussion: local health impact.

"Not only should these alcohol-related policies consider the financial impact of their implementation, but they should also consider the public health impact of significant changes in the [alcohol](#) availability landscape within neighborhoods," Tabb said.

More information: Loni Philip Tabb et al, The spatio-temporal relationship between alcohol outlets and violence before and after privatization: A natural experiment, Seattle, Wa 2010–2013, *Spatial and Spatio-temporal Epidemiology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.sste.2016.08.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sste.2016.08.003)

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