

Fewer liquor stores may lead to less homicide

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Reducing the number of businesses in Baltimore that sell alcohol in urban residential areas may lower the homicide rate, according to new research.

As cities contemplate new zoning regulations regarding [alcohol](#), the

implications of those policies can have life-or-death outcomes.

"There is an ongoing violence epidemic in Baltimore, with recent years breaking records for number of homicides," write the authors, led by Pamela J. Trangenstein, Ph.D., M.P.H., of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "This study suggests that there is potential to prevent [violent crimes](#) by reducing alcohol outlet density in Baltimore City."

The results are published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Baltimore is in the process of rewriting its zoning laws, and Trangenstein and colleagues patterned their research after the proposed zoning changes in that city as they relate to alcohol. Using a computer model that took into account homicide rates in Baltimore and previous research that shows 50 percent of violent crime can be attributed to access to alcohol, the researchers analyzed three main policy changes.

The first would reduce by 20 percent all outlets that sell alcohol. The second proposal would close liquor stores only in residential areas. The third would close outlets licensed as bars or taverns that were really operating as liquor stores. (In Baltimore, bars and taverns are allowed longer operating hours than liquor stores, which allows these "sham" bars and taverns to act as extended-hours outlets.)

After factoring in additional data related to [homicide](#)—such as socioeconomic status, population density, and drug arrests—the researchers' computer modeling predicted that an overall reduction of alcohol outlets by about 20 percent would cut homicides by 51 a year and save \$63.7 million. Closing liquor stores in residential areas would eliminate 22 homicides a year, saving \$27.5 million. But closing sham bars/taverns operating as liquor stores would reduce homicides by only 1

annually, saving \$1.2 million.

Although the 20 percent reduction would curtail the [homicide rate](#) the most, the authors determined that Baltimore would need to close such a large number of alcohol outlets that the policy would likely be considered "anti-business" and politically unfeasible.

Therefore, the authors concluded, the best option would be to close the 80 liquor stores found in residential zones. Because Baltimore has over 1,200 licensed alcohol outlets, this means that closing only 1 of every 15 outlets would likely save 22 lives from among the more than 300 homicides the city sees annually.

"Alcohol outlets tend to cluster in low-income and minority neighborhoods," the authors write, "and alcohol outlet density zoning would ideally aim to reduce the concentration of outlets in these neighborhoods."

The authors note three main reasons alcohol access is linked to violence. First, more outlets means people can get alcohol more easily—they simply don't have to travel far to get it.

Second, a large concentration of businesses that sell alcohol can create "an atmosphere of immoral or illegal behavior," according to the researchers, and likely will attract young men, who themselves are more prone to violence, even if they aren't drinking.

Last, a high concentration of alcohol outlets brings more high-risk drinkers together in a smaller area, "fostering opportunities for violence," the authors write.

Trangenstein and colleagues note there is a recent trend in which some states and cities have adopted increasingly relaxed policies regarding the

density of alcohol outlets. However, studies such as the current one may help policymakers make more evidence-based decisions.

More information: Pamela J. Trangenstein et al, The Violence Prevention Potential of Reducing Alcohol Outlet Access in Baltimore, Maryland, *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (2020). [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2020.81.24](https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2020.81.24)

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