

Alcohol Outlet Density and Public Health



Alcohol outlets are places where alcohol is sold, either to drink on the premises (on-sale outlets) or off the property (off-sale outlets). Alcohol outlet density indicates the number of physical locations where alcohol is sold per population or geographic area¹ such as a square mile, census tract, or city block. Alcohol outlet density is often regulated at the local level through zoning and business licensing.² State alcohol control agencies can also stipulate density levels. Numerous studies have shown that alcohol outlet density is significantly related to the level of alcohol harm that neighborhoods experience, particularly violence.

Outlet Density and Alcohol-Related Harm

- Increasing outlet density makes it easier for drinkers to obtain alcohol. High levels of outlet density also can influence how drinkers congregate, making them more aggressive or encouraging others to drink.³
- When outlet density increases, alcohol consumption increases, and vice versa. A study examining 16 years' worth of data in Canada found that reducing off-premise density was significantly associated with a decrease in alcohol consumption.⁴
- Alcohol outlet density is the single greatest predictor of violent crime in neighborhoods, greater than other social and economic factors.^{5,6} One study found that reducing violent crime by one percent could be achieved by reducing alcohol outlet density by less than one percent.⁷
- Cirrhosis deaths, suicide, and assaults all increase when alcohol outlet density increases.⁸
- A 10 percent increase in off-premise alcohol outlets per square mile has been found to account for a 5.8 percent increase in gonorrhea rates.⁹
- Suicide rates among boys between 15 and 19 years old have been shown to increase by up to 12 percent when outlet density increases.¹⁰
- Areas with more retail alcohol outlets have been found to have higher rates of child abuse. Areas with more bars have been found to have higher rates of child neglect.¹¹
- In California, eliminating one bar per zip code would lead to 290 fewer assaults per year.¹²

Outlet Density, Communities of Color, and Economic Development

- Higher alcohol outlet densities, and related higher rates of alcohol-related problems, are disproportionately concentrated in low-income racial or ethnic minority communities.¹³
- Because neighborhoods with high crime rates are unattractive to other types of businesses, a downward spiral occurs where more alcohol retailers move in and the outlet density and related problems continue to increase.¹⁴



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Outlet Density and Underage Drinking

- Adolescent binge drinking and driving after drinking have been significantly associated with the presence of alcohol retailers within half a mile of one's home.¹⁵
- Youth who live in neighborhoods with higher alcohol outlet densities have greater access to alcohol from direct purchase; underage acquaintances; "shoulder tapping" an adult stranger and asking him or her to buy alcohol on the minor's behalf; and from home and family members.¹⁶
- Alcohol retailers are more likely to sell alcohol to minors if other alcohol outlets are nearby.¹⁷
- Hispanic youth who live farther from alcohol retailers are less likely to drink. Decreasing the distance to retailers is significantly associated with an increase in alcohol consumption, even when controlling for social and environmental factors.¹⁸

Bottom Line: The following bodies have recommended alcohol outlet density control as an effective tool for minimizing alcohol-related harm: World Health Organization, European Union, United States Surgeon General's Workshop on Drunk Driving, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Task Force on Community Preventive Services.^{19, 20, 21} The scientific evidence is overwhelming: Reducing the number of alcohol outlets is an effective tool to reduce alcohol-related harm.

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