

The Ubiquitous Availability of Alcohol: Freedom Isn't Free

Nathan Sabo MS

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Abstract

Prohibition impacted the sale of alcohol in the United States. It is currently ubiquitously available and regularly offered. This poses myriad threats to society and discussions are ongoing involving limiting alcohol availability. Laws and policies in place attempt to mitigate negative consequences of alcohol consumption and their success varies. Several forms of violence are a widespread effect of alcohol availability and pose a challenge to whether alcohol regulations need tightened. Alcohol may have favorable effects, but its unfavorable effects offset them. Safety and health are of utmost concern when considering alcohol regime and are at risk under looser policy however more restrictive policy may be unagreeable and difficult to uphold.

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Introduction

Laws and policies are often put in place to protect people, property, and rights, among other factors. Public Policies written with citizen safety in mind sometimes are met with brutal backlash by opposers of the policy (Robinson, 1979). Laws and policies governing the use and consumption of consumable alcohol are well researched and have provided positive health and safety outcomes (Law & Marks, 2020). Regardless of the positive effects of legislature concerning alcohol, these new policies do not come in to play easily. Prohibition during the early 20th century America is one such example. The 18th amendment to the constitution was intended to reduce crime and corruption, however the laws were not heavily supported nor enforced by the American population which ultimately led to a repeal of the law (Asbridge & Swarna, 2009). Although the law intended to protect the citizens of the country by reducing negative alcohol consumption, it created other issues such as the onset of the Great Depression, tax losses from the sales of alcohol, and increased crime (Asbridge & Swarna, 2009). One way or another, people were obtaining alcoholic beverages, even if it meant resorting to violence and organized crime.

Having the freedom to be able to head just about anywhere to purchase alcohol seems to be an important part of American lifestyle. This freedom however does not come without its own set of consequences. Alcohol consumption can put human health at risk. The use of alcohol is the cause for the world's third largest risk factor for disease and disability (Fritz, 2011). Excessive alcohol use is responsible for approximately 95,000 deaths and 2.8 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) annually in the United States (Esser et. al., 2020). Addiction, cirrhosis of the liver, and cancer are but a few examples of the adverse health effects of alcohol abuse. Due of the

impairment in judgement resulting from alcohol consumption, HIV and other STIs can spread opportunistically (Fritz, 2011). Unprotected sex and other factors such as genetics, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age can all play a role in how alcohol affects a person.

Safety is also jeopardized with widespread alcohol usage. Ubiquitous availability of alcohol is associated with an increase in domestic violence, child abuse, and suicide (McKinney et. al., 2009). Other risks include operating heavy machinery or vehicles, handling weapons, and/or using other drugs while under the influence of alcohol. Sometimes those individuals being harmed as a result of alcohol consumption are not the parties that were engaging in the risky behavior nor consuming alcohol at the time of the incident. Perhaps there is a way to protect individuals rights to alcohol consumption while maximizing the health and safety of the population.

The current study aims to discuss the consequences of widespread alcohol usage as well as the effects alcohol policy has on the population by reviewing the available body of literature on the subject. It is hypothesized that the ubiquitous availability of alcohol results in greater adverse effects than limited availability of alcohol. First, the relationship between availability of alcohol and violent behavior will be examined. Next, relationships between alcohol availability and human health will be analyzed. Lastly, adverse and positive consequences subsequent of alcohol policy or lack thereof will be reviewed followed by a discussion of the collective findings.

Literature Review

Relationship Between Alcohol Availability and Violence

Increasing the density of locations in which alcohol can be purchased within a geographical area is one factor mentioned in the literature. Alcohol outlet density increases consumer convenience, provides social reinforcement to participate in drinking, and stimulate demand which triggers an increase in outlets per capita (Holder, 1993 & Gruenewald, 2011). Alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems change with per capita outlet density (Holder, 1993 & Reynolds et. al., 1997). Increased alcohol availability leads to an increase in its consumption (Yörük, 2013). This has the potential to augment the probability of violent events taking place. One such form of violence is domestic abuse. One study found that there is a relationship between higher counts of alcohol channels per capita and intimate partner violence (McKinney et. al., 2009). The same study found that the density of alcohol outlets has a stronger relationship with intimate partner violence among couples who report having alcohol related problems than couples who report no alcohol related problems (McKinney et. al., 2009). Additionally, for underage alcohol consumers, there is a consistent association between alcohol related problems and easily accessible alcohol in the home (Hoskin & Moody, 2020). The influence of alcohol reduces inhibitions which provides an outlet for negative behavior.

Another form of violence that the literature suggests could be related to alcohol usage is homicide. Higher alcohol availability is associated with adolescents and young adults engaging in lethal violence (Parker et. al., 2011). Higher alcohol density can provide additional channels in which youths obtain alcohol. Alcohol may also contribute to victimization in homicidal incidents. Approximately 40% of homicide victims across 17 states in the United States between 2010 and 2012 had a positive blood alcohol content, or BAC (Naimi et. al., 2016).

Several other forms of violence related to alcohol are also mentioned. Gang violence may also be linked to the ubiquity of alcohol availability. Findings suggest that there is a direct

relationship between gang-related violence and alcohol outlet density (Parker et. al., 2007). Alcohol is also frequently involved in suicides (Coleman et. al., 2021). High alcohol outlet density has also been linked to an increase in suicides as well (McKinney et. al., 2009). Binge drinking inhibits functions that protect against the impulse to commit suicide; since the effect of alcohol also exacerbates depression this has created a leading risk factor for suicide (Coleman et. al., 2021). Adolescents with easy access to alcohol may be more likely to engage in physical fights because of drinking (Hoskin & Moody, 2020). Lastly, higher availability of alcohol is also related to violent car crashes and hence traffic fatalities; a multilevel response to alcohol has the potential to reduce them (Fritz, 2011 & Rickard et. al., 2013).

Relationship between Alcohol Availability and Health

Abundant availability of alcohol may also be directly linked to preventable human health problems. For example, drinking venues are associated with the risk of contracting human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, due to enhanced opportunity to drink alcohol, meet casual sex partners, and engage in unprotected intercourse (Fritz, 2011). Alcohol abundance also contributes to other ailments such as fetal alcohol syndrome, liver disease, tuberculosis, hypertension, psychological disorders, and cancer (Fritz, 2011). Dependency on alcohol also increases with increased alcohol consumption (Caetano & Cunradi, 2002).

Alcohol availability does not only posit negative health outcomes, however. For instance, one study suggests that there is a modest protective effect of alcohol consumption on diabetes risk (He et. al., 2018). Furthermore, moderate drinking may also reduce the impact obesity has on developing diabetes (Wakabayashi, 2014). Other studies indicate that moderate consumption of alcohol has a protective effect on coronary heart disease (Brien et. al., 2011 & Rimm et. al., 1999). Additionally, there is no significant reduction in risk of health-related mortality between

low-volume alcohol consumption and lifetime abstinence or occasional drinking (Stockwell et. al., 2016).

Relationship of Alcohol Policy on Adverse and Favorable Consequences

Of alcohol policies, probably the most infamous are the prohibition laws in the United States in the early 1900s. One study found that prohibition significantly reduced mortality rates due to alcohol-related causes (Law & Marks, 2019). Additionally, the rate of alcohol-related homicides in Chicago, Illinois from 1890-1930 was unaffected by prohibition laws; an overall increase in per capita homicides in Chicago at this time was observed due to an increase in non-alcohol-related crimes (Asbridge & Swarna, 2009).

In the modern day however, policy pertaining to alcohol possession, use, and consumption is generally in place because of concern for public health. Changes in alcohol consumption have a bearing on any society and have been influenced in varying degrees with modifications to alcohol production and distribution (Robinson, 1979). Consequently, alcohol availability is considered a public health issue (Robinson, 1979). Control measures can be used to limit the consumption of alcohol thus preventing alcohol-related problems (Robinson, 1979). Another study has also found that more restrictive alcohol policy was associated with lower rates and odds of suicides (Coleman et. al., 2021). Alcohol policy is not only put in place to safeguard consumers from their own behaviors, but also aims to prevent harm to other persons that are not the drinker. These harms can include but are not limited to assault, vehicular crashes, property vandalism, family problems, or financial disturbances (Trangenstein et. al., 2020). Policies such as state monopoly control over retail or wholesale alcohol sales and higher beer tax were associated with lower odds of physical harm to others by the drinker (Trangenstein et. al., 2020). Another policy, termed Liquor-by-the-Drink (LBD), allows for the availability of on-premise

consumption. Where LBD is absent, there is an association with lower spirits consumption; where it is present, it is associated with increased spirits sales and an increase in alcohol-related vehicular accidents (Holder, 1993).

The literature mentions how many other policies affect alcohol consumerism. A policy change allowing wine availability in private licensed outlets was associated with lower prices and increases in wine sales and thus wine consumption (Holder, 1993 & Rickard et. al., 2013). Alcohol consumption also has a direct relationship with the price of and tax on alcohol (Holder, 1993 & Subbaraman et. al., 2020). The warning label policy has also been shown to reduce consumption (Holder, 1993). There is also a significant relationship between consumers seeing the warning label and reporting having decided not to drive after drinking (Greenfield et. al., 1999). The policy restricting alcohol sales on Sunday is associated with lower consumption rates (Yörük, 2013). Policies involving minimum legal drinking age have been shown to decrease car crashes as well as alcohol-related problems among youths as the minimum age increases (Wechsler & Nelson, 2010). A different study found that when a policy change lowered the minimum drinking age to 16 years, there was no consistent evidence for an increased risk of long term alcohol-related health problems in children exposed to alcohol *in utero* (Thern et. al., 2017). The same study however also suggested that the policy change posed an increased risk to children of young mothers and a reduced risk to children of older mothers (Thern et. al., 2017).

Discussion

Overall, the more ubiquitous alcohol becomes, the more it increases the density of alcohol outlets, increases consumption of alcohol, and increases alcohol-related problems.

Although there may be positive effects from alcohol consumption, the current study suggests that such positive effects are far outweighed by the adverse effects of alcohol ubiquity. This raises the question of whether a new regulatory regime is needed to address these trends. Is the freedom to have alcohol as readily available as it is in the present day sufficiently valuable?

In questioning the need for regulatory regime, it is important to keep in mind that in America, citizens may see increased governmental restrictions on alcohol as a constraint on their freedoms. As previously mentioned, the prohibition laws did not sit well with a vast population of the United States. The laws were generally poorly enforced, crime rates increased due to illegal consumption or possession, and tax revenue losses were observed (Asbridge & Swarna, 2009). Current, less restrictive policies seem to more agreeable by society and research suggests that these types of policies do indeed to some extent accomplish what they are intended to do (Coleman et. al., 2021, Holder, 1993, Robinson, 1979, Wechsler & Nelson, 2010, Yörük, 2013). In moderation, alcohol may provide individuals the positive experience that they seek, but when abused, can lead to undesirable outcomes. It could be argued that the individual is responsible for their own actions, so the alcohol is not to blame. Therefore, the person should be left to their devices, provided they are a stable individual who has no ill intentions. However, this poses the question of preventing or reducing those ill intentions.

For instance, warning labels on alcohol containers seen by drinkers have been shown to prevent them from engaging in an irresponsible manner (Greenfield et. al., 1999). Violence resulting from the ubiquity of alcohol perhaps could be reduced by enacting policy to prevent repeat offenders of domestic abuse, driving while intoxicated, and homicide. Policies such as “Party Plates” already in place are intended to prevent risky behavior. One such suggestion to prevent abuse offenders from continued abuse could be to enact a policy that issues alcohol

restricted ID cards to prevent offenders from purchasing alcohol for a given time frame or limits the amount they're allowed. Limiting the density of distilled spirits outlets per capita is another way of decreasing alcohol-related violence (Holder, 1993). This is not intended to prevent drinking altogether; it could discourage it for those individuals who are inconvenienced by the alcohol outlet thinness.

Positive effects from alcohol seem to be statistically significant but overall impractical. The positive health effects of alcohol reported may be due in part to confounding factors i.e., genetics, metabolism, smoking, body weight, diet, and timing of measurements taken (Brien et. al., 2011 & Rimm et. al., 1999). Participant recall or reporting bias may have also been a limitation to measurements of positive health effects from alcohol (He et. al., 2019). Positive effects of alcohol should not be completely dismissed; the body literature suggests a much stronger relationship between alcohol and negative health effects. Additional research is needed to better support and understand the favorable health effects of alcohol.

Limitations of the current study are restrictions to the available body of literature at the time obtainable through specific means, databases, and journals. An unbiased approach as possible was taken to ensure a valid position on how to address the ubiquitous availability of alcohol. Future studies should seek to make stronger connections between alcohol availability and negative as well as positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study discussed the consequences of widespread alcohol usage as well as the effects alcohol policy on the population by reviewing the available body of literature on the subject. Security and well-being are inclined to be threatened with increased alcohol outlet

density and alcohol consumption. Although alcohol use may pose favorable effects, extreme caution should be observed before, during, and after consumption to preserve everyone's welfare. Policies in place do the job they were intended for but are not always enforced or complied with. Therefore, it may be the individual's right to freedom to engage in the usage of alcohol however they should be aware of, prepared, and willing to accept the subsequent consequences of their actions.

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