



A L C O H O L
H E A L T H W A T C H

Fact Sheet

Alcohol Related Violence in Families and Communities

Key Points

- There is a strong link between alcohol and violent crime.
- The interaction is complex and can be causal.
- Alcohol increases the risk of a situation escalating into physical violence.
- Men appear more likely than women to engage in violent behaviour after the consumption of alcohol.
- Alcohol use can be a significant factor in family violence.
- Parental alcohol abuse can exacerbate child abuse, neglect and injury and can lead to the child developing substance abuse and violence problems.
- Effectively addressing the co-existing problems of alcohol use/abuse and violence requires an integrated, coordinated response by a range of agencies.

Introduction

Violence is a multifaceted problem with biological, psychological, social and environmental roots combining individual, relationship, social, cultural and environmental factors (World Health Organisation, 2002; Ministry of Justice, 2004).

The World Health Organisation defines violence as *“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”* (World Health Organisation, 2002).

Violence is one of many negative outcomes associated with the consumption of alcohol. The availability and abuse of alcohol are an important, modifiable factor in reducing violence in society. Laws to control the availability and consumption of liquor are some of the earliest on the statute books in New Zealand (NZ Police, 2006).

The Relationship between Alcohol and Violence

“My friend and I had a few drinks then he started getting mad at something. I don’t know what, we started fighting and he grabbed a knife and struck my hand with it” (Lash, 2004).

Although the majority of researchers state that there is a relationship between alcohol and violence, they do not agree on the reasons why alcohol is so often involved. There are several different theories that argue the relationship between alcohol and violence.

- According to “selective disinhibition theory”, alcohol’s well known negative effects on people’s perception, ability to interpret others’ actions, intentions and judgment, interact with a complex set of social and psychological circumstances to result in violence in certain situations. Alcohol tends to lower people’s inhibitions against using violence to achieve their goals (Parker & Rebhun, 1995).
- It has been suggested that the role of alcohol in violence differs with regard to factors such as who has been drinking, the drinking context, the relationship between perpetrator and victim and the situational differences make it difficult to conceive of models that satisfactorily explain the role of alcohol in a wide range of violent incidents (Martin, 1993).
- The types and density of alcohol outlets has been found to be associated with violence, particularly for youth. Certain settings define a physical and social environment in which social norms and external controls are weakened in an atmosphere that lowers the normal constraints against behaviors that have a high potential for violence and illegal or socially marginalized activities (Alaniz and Parker, 1998.)
- Linkages between alcohol abuse and crime remain uncertain as they may reflect the presence of other confounding factors associated with both risk behaviours (Fergusson and Horwood, 2000).
- Intoxicated people may be more vulnerable to violent crime than non-violent crime because they exhibit more risk-taking behaviour (McClelland and Teplin, 2001).
- Compared to the use of other psycho-active substances, alcohol has been shown to most commonly increase aggression (Pernanen et al., 2002).

New Zealand Statistics

“We get a lot of young guys that have hand injuries – punching windows, punching other people” (Middlemore Hospital Emergency Department Clinical Charge Nurse, NZ Herald 3/6/06)

- In the 2001 New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims, 30-40% of those who had experienced violence at the hands of a partner or someone

known to them, said the person was affected by alcohol or drugs (Ministry of Justice, 2003).

- Between July 2005 and March 2006, Police Alcolink data shows that 78,343 alleged offenders consumed alcohol prior to committing an offence (New Zealand Police, 2006 (a)).
- Police report that drinking on Friday and Saturday nights accounts for a significant amount of violent offending (New Zealand Police, 2006 (b)). The higher incidence of weekend offending may be related to more people socializing, binge drinking and the longer duration of drinking.
- In December 2000, a study was carried out on patients visiting the emergency department at Auckland Hospital (Humphrey, Casswell & Han, 2003). The study found that 35% of injured patients reported having consumed alcohol prior to sustaining injuries. Violence was found to be the cause of 17% of the injury cases and alcohol was reported as involved (victim and/or perpetrator) in 79% of these cases.
- New Zealand police statistics show alcohol as a factor in approximately 29% of family violence incidents attended by the police (New Zealand Police Law Enforcement System, 2002). It is unclear whether alcohol-related family violence is under-reported to the police.

Alcohol Related Violence and Young People

- The Christchurch Health and Development Study showed that young people who abuse alcohol had up to 3.2 times the odds of violent offending (Fergusson and Horwood, 2000). The researchers found that while there were common confounding factors that may contribute to both drinking and violent behaviour, after controlling for these a specific causal linkage between alcohol abuse and crimes of violence was observed.
- In a 2003 study of Otago University students aged 16 to 24 years, it was shown that 84% of those surveyed had experienced negative effects from other students' drinking (Langley et al., 2003). The study showed that 10% of the women and 20% of the men were assaulted at least once in the four weeks preceding the survey, and one fifth of the students had their property damaged.
- This is similar to findings reported in the Drinking in New Zealand Survey (Habgood et al., 2001) regarding alcohol related physical assaults. That survey also reported that 20% of women aged 14-29 years had been sexually harassed by drinkers.
- In the USA it is estimated that 40% of people experiencing violence are young people aged 18-30 but that only 50% of these crimes are reported to the police (Quigley and Leonard, 2005).

Alcohol-related family violence

- In the Drinking in New Zealand Survey, about one in five respondents felt that alcohol had a harmful effect on their home life (Habgood et al., 2001).
- Overseas studies show that alcohol is reported by the victims as a key factor in two-thirds of the violent partner abuse cases (Greenfield, 1998). The US Department of Justice Report on Alcohol and Crime found among spousal victims, 75% of incidents were reported to have involved an offender who had been drinking, compared to 31 percent for stranger victimisations (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998).
- A Canadian study of 1,946 women found that having a partner drinking at the time of the assault was a predictive risk factor for physical injuries (Thompson et al., 2001).
- Men who drink and have a predisposition for physical violence are more likely to be violent on the days they drink alcohol. A study of men attending outpatient treatment programmes for violence or alcohol, showed that the odds of male to female aggression is eight times higher on the days that drinking occurs than on the non-drinking days (Fals-Stewart, 2003). For severe physical aggression the odds were increased 11 fold. Heavy drinking also represented a highly significant risk factor for the recurrence of physical aggression.
- Even moderate intoxication in men has been linked to the development of violent incidents, particularly where situational factors aroused feelings of frustration. A study of 414 American couples suggests that heavy drinking and 'binge' drinking, particularly among male partners, may predict a variety of relationship problems, including aggression, early in a relationship (Quigley and Leonard, 2000).
- It may be that men with high levels of hostility are more likely to have patterns of risky drinking and to abuse their wives/partners if their level of marital satisfaction is low (Leonard, 1993). However, studies suggest that even among men who disapprove of violence, the percentage of men who abuse their wives increases with the frequency of drinking (Kaufman, Kantor and Straus, 1987).

Who is affected by alcohol-related family violence?

- It is generally recognised that men are more likely than women to commit assaults while under the influence of alcohol. Researchers have found that 25-50% of men who commit acts of violence also have substance abuse problems (Fazonne et al., 1997). There is little research to support the notion that women's drinking provokes assaults by their partners (Kaufman Kantor and Asdigian, 1997).
- Alcohol use in violent intimate relationships may create a risky situation for partners. According to a recent study in two major United States cities, New York and Chicago, problem drinking was associated with an 8 fold increase in partner abuse and a two fold increase in the death of the female partner (Sharps et al., 2001). Another USA study found that

women whose partners abused alcohol were 3.6 times more likely than other women to be assaulted by their partners compared to those with other factors such as drug abuse or unemployment (Kyriacou et al., 1999).

- There is an overlap between the occurrence of child abuse or neglect and alcohol. Problematic drinking can disrupt the structure, functions and relationships within a family increasing the risk of conflict, anxiety and isolation of the family (Lay and Rutherford, 2003). Disturbances in the parent-child relationship in childhood are related to patterns of alcohol abuse in adolescence and young adulthood (Engels et al., 2005).
- A UK study of fatal child abuse cases showed that 60% recorded a history of parental substance abuse and heavy drinking by parents as a contributory factor (Robinson, 2001).
- A USA report from the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) links the rise in the numbers of abuse and neglected children to substance abuse (CASA, 1999). Eight out of ten of the 900 professionals surveyed said that substance abuse causes or exacerbates at least half of all cases of child abuse and neglect. An environment of neglect through parental alcohol abuse may also contribute to the risk of unintentional injury of younger children in the home.
- Parental alcohol problems have been found to increase the risk of alcohol problems in their children (Kumpfer, 1999). Children of problem drinkers frequently witness arguments and fights and also appear to be at increased risk of a range of behavioural, emotional and learning problems that can develop into psychiatric disorder during adolescence (Lay and Rutherford, 2003). In Great Britain psychiatric disorders among 15 year olds is said to be four times higher for those young people who have parents with a drinking problem. As many as 1 in 15 children in the UK are believed to be living with parents experiencing serious drinking problems (Alcohol Concern UK, 2000).
- Children witnessing violence in the family appear to be more prone to developing cognitive and behavioural problems or become violent as an adolescent and continue the cycle of violence (Ministry of Social Development, 2002). Family conflict and violence in the home is likely to also increase the risk of alcohol and substance abuse in young people that can lead to aggression (Hill, 2002).

Reducing alcohol-related violence

“Greater priority should be given to primary prevention of violence...” “ Many different sectors and agencies should be involved in prevention activities...”
(World Health Organisation, 2002 p)-

- Restricting the availability of alcohol is an effective way to reduce alcohol-related violent crime (Babor et al, 2003). For example, by restricting alcohol sales to 11pm the city of Diadema Brazil cut their homicide rate by 47%, assaults against women by 55% and alcohol-related hospital admissions by 80% (Marin Institute, 2006).

- Some international authors suggest that treating the alcohol abuse problem of individuals alone will not lead to a reduction in partner abuse while violence has roots in poverty, inequality and a culture that tolerates male dominance and violence (Kaufman Kantor and Asdigian, 1997). However, US research shows evidence of a decrease in men's violence following alcohol treatment when it was coupled with a relationship component (Stuart et al, 2003).
- Zubretsky and Digirolamo (1996), argue that misunderstandings about the role of alcohol in domestic violence prevents alcohol treatment programmes and domestic violence programmes alike from effectively addressing the problems for offender and survivors who abuse alcohol.
- The World Health Organisation and the New Zealand government recognise that strategies that may work to prevent family violence from occurring or reoccurring need an integrated, coordinated and collaborative approach that includes providing for diverse needs and circumstances (Ministry of Social Development, 2002).

Conclusion

To effectively reduce family and community violence, strategies that are aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm need to be incorporated more comprehensively in the mix, particularly in relation to the protection of children and young people. These need to align and complement existing and developing alcohol harm prevention strategies.

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