



A rapid review of the evidence

Liquor Outlet Density

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Summary of Findings

Background

Alcohol consumption remains a major global health burden, contributing to 2.6 million deaths in 2019 and continuing to pose significant risk in Australia, where 31% of people aged 14+ drank at risky levels in 2022–2023.

Availability theory suggests that greater physical access to alcohol – shaped by outlet density, proximity, outlet type and location – reduces barriers to consumption and can increase the potential for alcohol-related harms.

In addition, social-ecological and niche theories suggest that different outlet types may influence harms through distinct mechanisms, with on-premise venues concentrating drinkers in shared social spaces and increasing opportunities for intoxication, crowding and interaction, while off-premise outlets primarily shape patterns of private consumption within homes and neighbourhoods.

To understand the relationship between outlet density and alcohol consumption and related harms over time, a rapid review was undertaken of longitudinal and natural experiment designs in Australia and comparable jurisdictions.

Methods

A systematic search was conducted across four databases – ADF Library (specialist alcohol and other drugs library), Google Scholar, PubMed Central and Google – including citation searching. This resulted in 51 included studies, including cohort/longitudinal ($n = 40$), quasi-experimental ($n = 8$) and case-control ($n = 3$) studies. Data were extracted using Covidence (web-based systematic review tool) and formal appraisal of study quality carried out using JBI quality assessment tools.

Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that greater outlet density is generally associated with higher levels of adult alcohol consumption and dependence, as well as a range of alcohol-related harms including health and medical outcomes and crime, including gender-based family violence. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the direction and strength of evidence linking alcohol outlet density with key alcohol-related outcomes, by outlet type.

Table 1: Summary of evidence on associations between on-premise outlet density and consumption and related harms

Outcome	Summary of evidence	Confidence
Adolescent alcohol consumption	Mixed	Limited
Adult alcohol consumption and dependence	Positive	Moderate
Health and medical	Mostly positive	Moderate
Violent and assaultive crime	Mostly positive	Moderate
Gender-based family violence	Mixed	Limited
Non-violent crime	Mostly null	Limited
Road safety	Mixed	Limited
Gun-related crime	Null	Very limited

Table 2: Summary of evidence of associations between off-premise outlet density and consumption and related harms

Outcome	Summary of evidence	Confidence
Adolescent alcohol consumption	Mixed	Limited
Adult alcohol consumption and dependence	Positive	Moderate
Health and medical	Mixed	Moderate
Violent and assaultive crime	Mixed	Moderate
Gender-based family violence	Mostly positive	Limited
Non-violent crime	Mostly null	Limited
Road safety	Mixed	Limited
Gun-related crime	Mixed	Very limited

Differences were observed by outlet type, suggesting distinct mechanisms through which on- and off-premise outlets influence alcohol-related harms. On-premise venues were more consistently linked to violent and assaultive crime, while off-premise outlets were more consistently linked with adolescent drinking and gender-based family violence and showed generally positive evidence for health and medical outcomes. For outcomes with mixed findings, this variability likely reflects differences in study contexts, measures of outlet density, and local environmental and socioeconomic factors.

Conclusion

This review closely examined the link between higher outlet density and alcohol-related harms and provides a valuable contribution to the evidence base. Overall, the findings suggest that policies aimed at managing alcohol outlet density may be an important lever for reducing alcohol-related harms and improving population health, with differential impacts likely to occur according to outlet type.

Key messages

- Higher alcohol outlet density is linked to increased adult alcohol consumption and dependence, and with alcohol-related harms, particularly violent crime.
- Impacts vary by outlet type, with on-premise outlets more consistently linked to violent and assaultive crime and off-premise outlets to adolescent alcohol consumption and gender-based family violence, with mixed but generally positive evidence for health outcomes.
- Evidence for road safety and some crime outcomes is mixed, reflecting opposing mechanisms and broader spatial and contextual factors rather than inconsistent effects.

Declarations

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