Preventing aggression in the licensed environment:
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Summary
This paper summarises what is known about the causes and prevention of aggression, violence and injury in and around public drinking establishments. It is based on the book Raising the Bar: Preventing Aggression in and Around Bars, Pubs and Clubs, by Kathryn Graham and Ross (Willan Publishers, UK, 2008).

A common tendency around the world is to blame victims of bar violence for their misfortune, on the assumption that if young people (in particular) choose to be in these kinds of places at risky times of the night, what can they expect? Responding to this, a common policy response is to emphasise the policing of patrons and to focus on excessive alcohol consumption by irresponsible youths as the sole risk factor. Contrasted with this punitive and individualistic perspective, the paper argues that alcohol-related violence should be seen as a manifestation of market failure, and indeed as an inevitable outcome of the deregulatory policies pursued over the past few decades.

Effective prevention programs will need to go beyond individual risk factors (although these are one aspect of the problem) to focus on the physical and social environments of drinking establishments, the way they are managed, and on strengthening and broadening regulatory systems, in partnership with patrons, the community, and the industry. This is to ensure that all the important risk factors for aggression and violence are addressed in preventive programs.

Key risk factors at the individual level do of course include alcohol, but alcohol is a problem not just because of its pharmacological effects (which include such processes as risk taking, a focus on the here and now, a concern with personal power, and a high level of myopia with respect to alcohol’s effects on oneself as opposed to other people). Alcohol increases the risks of violence when combined with attitudes that are open to the use of violence, a social setting that is permissive, and a culture that is tolerant of alcohol-related aggression.

At the level of the establishment, key risk factors include poor design that promotes crowding and friction between patrons, and unkempt or neglected premises (which can send a “signal” that since this place does not care about itself, it will not care for its patrons). Permissive environments in which rules and limits are unclear, especially around such activities as dancing and pool playing, are particularly risky. Staff risk factors include specialised and gendered staff roles (especially security staff), a lack of staff skills (e.g., in monitoring and defusing situations), and a lack of responsible serving practices.

A particular failure of public planning processes that contributes greatly to levels of violence is the deliberate concentration of a large number of licensed premises in a small area. There is now clear evidence that levels of disorder and violence in such entertainment precincts are much higher than what is contributed by individual establishments – in other words, the effects are multiplicative or non-linear because of geographical contiguity. This has clear implications for prevention.

The international evidence on the effects of preventive strategies is reviewed. It is concluded that the great majority of responses, including reactive policing, are ineffective. The most promising approach overall is based on a responsive regulation framework, incorporating local partnerships oriented to evidence, detailed data on the local ecology, industry climate and regulatory systems, Safer Bars training/risk assessments for all staff in drinking establishments (using the course developed by the Ontario Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), targeted policing based on the NSW Alcohol Linking approach, and the formation of community coalitions and action groups that can monitor and influence industry practices at the local level.

The paper concludes by outlining a planned experiment that will advance our knowledge about what works in preventing aggression in the licensed environment, based on detailed research on a number of communities in diverse locations in Australia and New Zealand, and incorporating the preventive strategies outlined above.