

Sources of Confusion in the Alcohol and Crime Debate

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The question of whether alcohol causes violent crime is easily stated but the debate about its answer is endlessly confusing. Statistics on the percentage of people who commit serious offences while under the influence of alcohol are thrown like confetti into the public arena. They are seized on by a media ever hungry for quick-fix solutions to major social problems. But the sort of methodological rigour normally considered appropriate to the investigation of epidemiological problems is very hard to find among the published research studies on alcohol and violent crime.

Further, matters do not improve when one turns to the problem of explaining the putative link between alcohol and crime. Here the debate often turns polemical, with theoretical clashes owing more to the ideological commitments of the protagonists than they do to the dull thump of genuine contradiction between rival theories. It is hard to find an area of criminology marked by such comprehensive but unenlightening debate.

This confusion surrounding the link between alcohol and crime ramifies into policy debate over what should be done to limit the growth of violent crime. Some people, believing the relationship to be mediated by personality deficiencies, see treatment as the best way to deal with the problem. Others consider that the link between the two is really just a thinly disguised attempt by men to rationalise the violence they habitually inflict on women.

Some, believing alcohol to be a disinhibitor of aggressive behaviour, argue that control of individual alcohol consumption is the key to reducing violent crime. Still others, accepting the disinhibition thesis, argue, nonetheless, that violent crime can only be reduced by tackling the political economy of alcohol sale and distribution.

Each remedy offered is predicated on some assumption about the 'real' nature of the relationship between alcohol consumption and crime or the 'fundamental variables' which underpin it.

This paper is not intended to add any new research findings to the morass of results already available. Instead it will try to clear away some of the conceptual

debris surrounding those results by discussing some common sources of confusion in the debate.

This does not mean that all previous research on the subject is conceptually flawed. Rather, the relationship between alcohol consumption and crime is so often tinged by a kind of fevered irrationality that an attempt to clarify the terms of the debate on this occasion might help as much as the presentation of new evidence.

This paper is in three parts. First, it will look at a common methodological problem in research examining the issue; second, the confusion surrounding potential explanations of the alcohol and violent crime relationship will be discussed; and finally, some problems in policy debate on the subject will be raised.

Finding the Relationship between Alcohol and Crime

What is meant when it is said that there is a relationship between alcohol consumption and violent crime? A naive starting point is to suppose it means that alcohol consumption causes violent crime.

The trouble with this perception is that (apart from the philosophical complexities appending to the notion of 'cause') many people obviously drink alcohol in copious amounts and do not become violent. This fact conflicts with the commonsense assumption that, if some state of affairs, 'A', is said to be the cause of another state of affairs, 'B', then occurrences of 'A' ought always to be followed by 'B'.

Recognising that no such relationship holds between alcohol consumption and violent crime, the usual response is to beat a hasty retreat to the hypothesis that one is an indirect cause of the other. For many people this brief flirtation with epistemology is sufficient to justify a headlong plunge into research. Unfortunately the assertion that there is an indirect relationship between alcohol consumption and crime just sacrifices implausibility for vagueness. What is meant by this indirect causal link?

It cannot simply be some sort of statistical association between the two variables. A correlation of +1.0 between per capita alcohol consumption and violent crime rates would only be a matter of passing interest if it were known that both were actually direct effects of some third variable, such as unemployment rates. A strong statistical association in these circumstances offers no basis for controlling crime by limiting alcohol consumption.

To assert that there is an indirect causal relationship is to say one or both of two things: either that alcohol consumption increases the likelihood (or risk or

probability) of a person or a certain class of people committing violent crime, or that it increases the seriousness of violent crime when it occurs.

To say that the causal relationship is indirect is not to retreat to the view that the relationship is in some sense 'only statistical'. It is to say only that the consumption of alcohol exerts its effect on the risk of violence through a number of intervening factors.

One may not be willing or able to say what these factors are or why together with alcohol consumption, they increase the risk of violence; but that does not matter. Such considerations form the basis of theories about the alleged causal relationship between alcohol consumption and crime, not about whether there is one.

If one accepts this, how should one go about the task of gathering evidence on the question? Does one examine the alcohol consumption patterns of those who commit violent crimes or the criminal activities of those who drink? The overwhelming majority of researchers have chosen the former course. After all, if alcohol consumption increases the risk of violent crime then it is reasonable to expect a high proportion of violent offenders will show evidence of drinking in the period leading up to the commission of the offence.

Of course there are the usual complications. Not all offenders are caught and those who are may be an unrepresentative sample. Most of these difficulties, though, one might suppose, only affect the ease with which the existence of any association is established, not the appropriateness of the methodology for determining whether there is one.

The list of research studies which have sought to explore the issue by studying alcohol consumption patterns among violent offenders is too long to mention. The best known of these is Wolfgang's 1958 study of 588 criminal homicides in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952. There have been many others. Nearly all of them have turned up evidence that a notable percentage of people who commit violent offences were drinking at the time of the offence. Most of them have proceeded from this evidence to the conclusion that alcohol consumption, at least in certain circumstances, increases the risk of violent crime. It is amazing how beguiling this kind of research can be.

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, for example, in its 1986 (Wallace) study on homicide offenders, found that homicides which involved a male accused and female deceased were more likely to involve drinking by the offender than those involving other gender permutations. This difference is particularly marked when the altercation involving male and female is such that the female victim strikes the first blow. The same result is not found when the male strikes the first blow.

From such observations it is tempting to conclude, firstly, that drinking makes men more likely to kill women and, secondly that alcohol exerts its effect on men through some form of disinhibition. The drunk male offender, on the basis of this argument, once struck, loses all self-control and instead of merely striking back, overreacts, killing the victim. Such arguments, unfortunately, far from being supported by the data, actually beg the central question at issue.

The fact is that if one wishes to assess the alleged increase in risk of offending wrought by alcohol consumption, it is necessary to examine patterns of violent crime among alcohol consumers, not patterns of alcohol consumption among violent offenders. Even if all violent offenders were found to be drunk at the time of offending one would still be no closer to knowing whether alcohol consumption increases the likelihood of assault.

Studies are needed which either compare violent crime rates or patterns between people who drink and people who do not, or examine the relationship among alcohol consumers between rates or patterns of alcohol consumption and rates or patterns of violent crime. This is precisely what most research in the area does not do. Research on the relationship between alcohol and crime seems to have steadfastly ignored it. Indeed much research on the relationship between the two seems more preoccupied with the problem of testing various explanations of the causal relationship than with demonstrating that one exists.

One recent example is a 1987 study by Welte and Miller, which surveyed over 10,000 inmates of American prisons on their alcohol use at the time of offending. On the basis of this survey Welte and Miller claimed to have refuted the theory that alcohol increases the risk of violent crime because it disinhibits people disposed to violence. Their refutation relied on the fact that, controlling for other factors, they were unable to find any difference between property and violent offenders in their propensity to drunkenness at the time of the offence. Both groups were drunk when they offended.

There are many explanations which might be given for such a null result. Chief among them, is the possibility that alcohol consumption does not have any effect at all on the likelihood of offending. Welte and Miller did not even pause to consider this possibility.

Explaining the Link between Alcohol Consumption and Violence

Brewarrina is a small north-western town in New South Wales characterised by a large Aboriginal population, a relatively high incidence of violent crime and a very high per capita consumption of alcohol.

Every second Thursday in Brewarrina a large number of Aborigines go to the 'payless' store and hand over their social security pension cheques to the manager

who conveniently cashes them. They then spend the proceeds on port and sherry. Until recently, as soon as they had bought this alcohol they began to drink it, on the footpaths, in the street or in the public park overlooking the Darling River and the stone fishtraps their ancestors made some 30,000 years ago.

After a time some of them become violent, drunk and abusive, mostly toward each other, but also toward the police when they arrive. Often the internecine violence is directed against Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men. Much of the violence directed toward police, of course, arises out of attempts to protect each other from arrest and detention. This pattern of events continues, abating slowly, for the next two weeks, when it begins in earnest again.

How do we explain this cycle of violence? Because episodes of acute alcohol consumption punctuate each new cycle it is natural to suppose that excessive alcohol consumption is the immediate explanation. But this does not take us very far, even if we are prepared to accept that such consumption actually increases the risk of violence and is not just an irrelevant correlate of it. Why do so many Aborigines in Brewarrina (and many other Aboriginal settlements on the fringe of towns) chronically drink large amounts of alcohol? Why does its consumption apparently increase the likelihood of violence?

It is at this point that the debate about 'fundamental' or 'underlying' causes usually begins in earnest, probably because at this point it is only a short step into the debate about policy. But why is alcohol consumption in Brewarrina so high? There are three readily identifiable classes of answer to this question.

In the first class, are answers in terms of the physical or psychological characteristics of Aborigines in towns like Brewarrina. These include medical explanations such as the genetic susceptibility of all Aborigines to dependence on foods with a high sugar content or psychological answers such as those which appeal to depression, frustration or learned helplessness as predisposing factors toward alcoholism. Proponents of this sort of theory often consider that theirs is the only truly causal explanation for excessive alcohol consumption.

In the second class, are explanations which might be called anthropological. Such explanations typically appeal to the tendency among all minority or indigenous groups whose culture, way of life or value system is destroyed, to exhibit high rates of disease and alcoholism. Proponents of anthropological theories typically criticise adherents of physical or psychological theories as naively or deliberately taking the social context in which alcohol dependence among Aborigines has developed as unproblematic.

In the third class, there are theories which seek to explain Aboriginal alcoholism by reference to the political economy of alcohol production, sale and distribution. This sort of explanation typically appeals to the political and economic importance to the ruling class of promoting alcohol consumption among

indigenous people. Adherents of this point of view often accuse those in the anthropological school of failing to comprehend the economic imperative behind the racism they spend so much time documenting.

The three classes, of explanation, while perhaps a little overdrawn here, are almost always set in opposition to each other. But the entire dispute, though carried on with great fervour by its participants, is essentially sterile. It is possible to subscribe, without inconsistency, to theories within each of the three classes, simultaneously. There is nothing wrong, for example, with supposing that Aborigines have a genetic susceptibility to dependence on alcohol which is aggravated, on the one hand, by feelings of depression and worthlessness induced by the destruction of Aboriginal culture and, on the other, by a rural bourgeoisie which cynically markets alcohol to Aborigines. Such an explanation is not being advanced here. This example simply illustrates the point that the three classes of theory are not intrinsically inconsistent.

The same sort of spurious debate is played out between people who say that alcohol consumption increases the risk of domestic violence because it disinhibits male aggression towards women and those who contend that the domestic violence is essentially a product of patriarchal social norms which legitimate male violence toward women.

There is no need to choose between the two alternatives. One could easily construct a theory in which culturally induced male attitudes towards women create a propensity toward violence which is exacerbated by the disinhibiting effects of alcohol. One might even set about testing such a theory by examining the interplay between alcohol consumption, male attitudes toward women and the likelihood of violence. The point is that much of the argument about these things is wasted because of the false theoretical dichotomies into which the debate is drawn.

All this however does not deny the possibility of genuine conflict between different theories, nor does it suggest that theoretical conflict is undesirable. A theory which assigns all causal responsibility in domestic violence to male attitudes toward women and contends that alcohol is only called upon by men as an excuse to hide this fact is, by implication, denying that alcohol consumption increases the risk of domestic violence. This is a potentially testable hypothesis because it would regard all correlations between drinking and domestic violence as artifacts of a prior correlation between male attitudes toward women and alcohol consumption.

Presumably then, men whose attitudes toward women are comparable, but whose drinking patterns are not, will show no difference in their propensity to domestic violence. Such an implication plainly contradicts that of the disinhibition hypothesis.

Theories which genuinely contradict one another in this way are much to be sought after. Genuine theoretical clashes provide the most important, if not the only, vehicle by which our understanding of the issue is enhanced. By the same token though, argument about the merits of rival theories which actually address different issues or which simply say the same thing in different terms is a waste of time.

At a theoretical level, then, more time should be spent sharpening up the points at which theories about alcohol and violent crime genuinely contradict one another and less time arguing over which perspective concerning the relationship between alcohol and crime is the most fundamental.

Using the Relationship between Alcohol and Violent Crime

Because alcohol consumption seems to be only the penultimate occurrence in a long train of events leading to violent crime, there are many who think that crime control policies based on alcohol consumption are a mistake.

There are those, for example, who see the focus on alcohol consumption among Aborigines as less important than actions which remedy their cultural and economic position in Australian society.

In the context of domestic violence it might be argued that, even if alcohol is a disinhibitor of aggression in men, the place to start in remedying the problem is with male attitudes toward women. Extending this argument, if economic pressures lie behind the rise in alcohol consumption which precipitates public violence, then the remedy lies in alleviating those economic conditions, not, for example, in making alcohol more expensive or in further restricting hotel trading hours. These types of arguments often gain support because people are naturally anxious to bring the larger picture into focus. We are all vulnerable to the reproach that our proposed solution to some social problem glosses over its origins. (The papers of the last Alcohol and Crime conference held by the Institute in 1980, contain several complaints from participants alleging this sort of thing.)

Although there is merit in bringing to light all the underlying causes of violent crime, policy intervention should not always take place on the basis of changing those underlying causes. There are two main reasons for this. The first relates to the practical difficulties involved in attempting to manipulate some of the basic factors which might affect rates of violent crime. A rise in underage drinking, for example, might have its origins in chronic youth unemployment, but if the effect of a rise in juvenile alcohol consumption is an increase in pub brawls what do we do? Just ignore the problem of underage drinking and wait for Paul Keating to make structural changes to the economy? We might be waiting for a long time.

It is important not to be blinded by our ideological predilections here. The antecedents of a social problem may disclose great injustice and it is tempting to fashion social policies which draw attention to this. The bottom line in choosing between policies, though, should be a hard headed assessment of their effectiveness, not just their newsworthiness.

If the prospects for reducing juvenile alcohol consumption are better than those for a rapid improvement in the economy, then we must seek to control processes, like alcohol consumption, which precipitate violence even if they are not its driving force. Our guiding principle should simply be: where do we get the most leverage on the problem?

A useful analogy can be drawn here with the issue of gun control. As you all know, a favourite refrain of the gun lobby in the United States is the maxim that guns don't kill people, people kill people. The maxim is much derided by criminologists, who know only too well the increased risk of homicide caused by gun ownership.

But in a sense the red-necks are right. Murders began long before guns came into existence and in the scheme of underlying causes, gun ownership must rank a poor second to such things as cultural attitudes toward family violence. The difficulty is that it is not as easy to change cultural attitudes as it is to control levels of gun ownership. Even though gun control does nothing to address the underlying causes of violence, we are justified in seizing on it as a policy option because we know it will reduce the murder rate. The same philosophy should guide us when considering policies surrounding control over less tangible causes of violence than gun ownership.

Finally, some patterns of violence, though they may have their origins in certain important social and historical conditions, now have a life of their own. Cycles of violence among some Aboriginal groups, for example, obviously have their origins in the social alienation which has accompanied the destruction of their culture.

It can be hypothesised that, the despair which maintains this cycle of violence is now fuelled in the main by alcohol consumption and its daily effects on Aboriginal life.

In the end, however, we are still waiting for hard evidence to confirm everyone's intuition that drinking does indeed increase the likelihood of violent crime.

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