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Reducing Violence in Licensed Venues: Community Safety Action Projects

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Innovation in crime prevention techniques is an increasingly important area of criminological research. Creating an awareness of the environmental and situational factors which may contribute to violence and motivating communities to become responsive to these factors can help in reducing crime. The authors of this Trends and Issues paper outline, in a very practical way, how community action can help prevent violence in and around licensed venues. The community action model for responsive regulation described here, which has been effective in certain Queensland cities, can be adapted to suit the needs of diverse communities.

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Australia appears to have had stable levels of criminal violence for most of the twentieth century (Indermaur 1996), but there are signs that this situation is changing (Homel & Mirrlees-Black 1997; NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1997). Crime victim survey data (Homel & Mirrlees-Black 1997), as well as recent data on homicide (Carcach 1997), highlight the importance of environmental or situational factors as risk factors, especially for young people. In general, those who go out for entertainment at night, particularly to hotels and clubs, have a higher than average risk of assault (Makkai 1997). The same pattern applies to teenagers: about half of male and female teenage victims are assaulted in places they go to regularly (away from a home environment) which provide leisure facilities or entertainment. Many of these places, especially for those aged 18 years or over, are licensed venues. It follows that one important strategy for reversing the trend towards higher rates of violence is to increase the safety of leisure and entertainment venues, including hotels and nightclubs, especially for young patrons.

The aims of this paper are to describe a series of "community safety action projects" in three North Queensland cities, and to report some results. These projects, which had as their major objective improvements in the safety of the environments in and around licensed venues in the central city entertainment areas, were designed explicitly as replications of the safety action intervention model developed in 1992 and 1993 in the south-east Queensland tourist resort of Surfers Paradise (Homel et al. 1997a; Homel et al. 1997b). The reasons for undertaking replications of the Surfers intervention were to determine how robust the model is when applied in diverse communities, to improve understanding of the change process, and to strengthen the scientific evidence for a causal impact of the intervention on crime and violence.

The results reported in this paper are based on police data and on unobtrusive direct observations by patron-observers of aggression, drinking, and management practices in licensed venues in the three cities in September 1994 and October 1996. The interventions took place in each city during 1995 and early 1996.

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The Safety of Licensed Venues

On the basis of existing research, including the naturalistic studies conducted by Graham et al. (1980) and Homel, Tomsen and Thommeny (1992), Graham and Homel (1997) identify a range of features of the physical and social environments of bars that may help to reduce rates of aggression, or to limit the harm caused by aggressive incidents. These features include: attractive, nicely furnished, well-maintained bars; comfortable, uncrowded surroundings that promote enjoyment and do not irritate or frustrate people; a social atmosphere with clear rules and limits; practices that discourage drinking to intoxication and foster a positive social atmosphere; and the employment of trained, peace-loving barworkers and security staff.

One of the most common ways of attempting to minimise alcohol-related harm in licensed premises is through responsible beverage service programs. However, recent research suggests that while such programs are of importance, especially if they are combined with external enforcement (Putnam, Rockett & Campbell 1993; Stockwell 1997), regulation of alcohol-related disorder and violence must utilise other strategies as well, including the introduction of procedures that empower stakeholders to resolve problems with licensed establishments (Alcohol Advisory Council of Western Australia 1989; Gilling 1993; Lakeland & Durham 1993; Parkdale Focus Community 1995). These additional strategies are of particular importance in Australia, partly because civil law suits are very seldom used against licensees, thus removing one of the major incentives for licensees to introduce server training programs, and partly because liquor licensing laws are not very effectively enforced on a routine basis (Homel & Tomsen 1991; Stockwell 1994).

Perhaps as a response to the vacuum created by an inade-

quate regime of legal regulation, community action projects targeting licensed premises have proliferated in recent years in Australia (Lander 1995; Melbourne City Council Westend Forum Project 1991; *see also* Rumbold et al. 1998).

The Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project

The Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project, the initial phase of which was implemented in 1993, was a community-based initiative designed to reduce violence in and around licensed venues in the central business district of the main tourist area on Queensland's Gold Coast (Homel et al. 1997).

Key features of the implementation included channelling funding through local government; creating a representative steering committee and community forum; forming task groups to address safety of public spaces, management of venues, and security and policing; encouraging nightclub managers to introduce a Code of Practice regulating serving and security staff, advertising, alcohol use, and entertainment; and regulating managers through "risk assessments" and through a community-based monitoring committee. More subtle but equally important aspects of the implementation included: rehabilitating the image of nightclub managers and integrating them into the local business community; using managers committed to the reform process from another city to encourage and bring pressure to bear on local licensees; employing a Project Officer who was female and who had considerable interpersonal skills; and balancing the conflicting political agendas of participating agencies.

The evaluation showed a marked initial impact of the project, with dramatic improvements in levels of violence, publicity to patrons about house policies, and associated improvements in server practices, the

physical environment (for example, clean toilets and accessible bars), and security practices (for example, ID checks at door). However, there are indications that by January 1996, two years after the project, much of the impact had "worn off", with levels of aggression and risky drinking practices being approximately at pre-project levels.

A Community Action Model for Responsive Regulation

On the basis of the Surfers project and related research, we have developed a model of the community change process that roughly parallels behaviour change techniques at the individual level.

The model is influenced by three separate streams of research: the literature on safety action projects; the theory and practice of situational crime prevention; and regulatory theory.

We assume that certain *antecedent conditions*, such as a political environment emphasising deregulation of liquor licensing, lead to *problem behaviours*, such as cut-throat competition between venues and irresponsible drinks promotions. These conditions and problems create a climate conducive to community mobilisation and to the development, in collaboration with the community, of a range of *intervention strategies* at each of the three levels of regulation. These interventions produce certain positive *outcomes*, such as reduced violence, which can be *reinforced* if key players and organisations are rewarded through career enhancement or positive publicity. The reinforcers of positive change are more likely to have a continuing effect if key reforms are institutionalised through legislation or community-based monitoring systems. We refer to this process of institutionalisation as *mechanisms to safeguard change*.

A crucial guiding philosophy was the need to be *situationally specific* in the analysis of problems and the development

of interventions, particularly at the level of venues (Clarke 1997). Alcohol serving practices are only one aspect of unsafe environments (Homel, Tomsen & Thommeny 1992); other aspects include such things as physical design (Macintyre & Homel 1997), selection and training of security staff, the “permissiveness” of the social climate in venues (Homel et al. 1997), and the hidden “deals” between managers and regulators (Homel & Tomsen 1991; Homel 1996).

A focus on venue management leads not only “inward” to specific contexts and person-to-person interaction, but “outward” to the local community and to the larger arena in which laws and regulations are created and enforced (or not). A fundamental influence on our thinking in this respect has been the work on systems of regulation by John Braithwaite and his colleagues, particularly the concept of “responsive regulation” (Ayes & Braithwaite 1992). Indeed, one fruitful way of thinking about community interventions is as part of the “praxis” of responsive regulation, with an emphasis on tripartism and enforced self-regulation.

The Replication Projects

Cairns, Townsville, and Mackay were selected for the replication project because of their willingness to provide resources to support the project. They have the additional design advantage that they are socially and economically disparate, with both similarities to and differences from Surfers Paradise, and so comprise the kind of diverse collection of communities most suitable for a replication project.

The major features of the Surfers project were used as a “template”, with slight differences being applied in each location.

Evaluation Design

Activities in all the nightclubs and hotels in the central entertainment areas of Cairns, Towns-

ville and Mackay were observed by teams of students during September 1994 (before the interventions) and October 1996 (after the interventions). All observation sessions were of about two hours duration and were unobtrusive. In 1994, 83 visits were made to 28 venues, while in 1996, 116 visits were made to 47 venues. A structured, systematic observation technique was employed, based on an observation schedule of some 20 pages consisting of hundreds of items. These items covered details of the physical and social environments, patron characteristics, barstaff and security staff, drinking patterns, serving practices and aggression and violence (see Hauritz et al. [in press]).

Police statistics have the advantage that they are more comprehensive than observations of aggression, in that they include offences like stealing or street disturbances, and they are also collected routinely on an ongoing basis, making a special data collection exercise unnecessary. However, the comprehensiveness of police statistics is also a disadvantage, since statistics for the areas surrounding licensed venues are influenced by many factors, especially police enforcement practices such as “crack downs” on certain types of public disorder. In addition, police statistics suffer from the major disadvantage that incidents occurring within venues are grossly under-reported or under-recorded (Campbell & Green 1997; Homel & Tomsen 1991).

Police in each of the three cities supplied data in electronic form for their whole city or for the specified entertainment area. The offences selected for analysis were assault, stealing, disturbance/dispute, drunkenness, and street disturbances.

We divided up the period during which each project operated into three “stages”: a *pre-project stage* that includes some of the “tooling up” period before the appointment of the project officer and allows an assessment

of pre-project trends; a *project officer stage* that covers the period of the officer’s appointment up until the implementation of the Code of Practice in venues; and a *Code of Practice stage* that includes at least some months of the operation of the Code of Practice. These three project stages can be compared with the same periods in the previous year to assess changes and to control for seasonal factors. This was the method used for the evaluation of the Surfers Paradise project (Homel et al. 1997). For technical reasons it was not possible to define a “pre-project” period for Mackay. The reader is referred to Hauritz et al. (1998) for other important features of the police data in each city.

Results

All forms of aggression and violence observed within venues declined, especially physical violence, with a decline of between 75 per cent and 81 per cent (Table 1). Trends were similar (but generally not statistically significant) in each city, with the biggest decline in physical violence in Cairns (where, paradoxically, verbal aggression appeared to decline the *least*).

The police data for Cairns and Townsville showed significant declines for most types of street offences in the periods corresponding to the appointment of the project officer and the operation of the Code of Practice, while the Mackay data did not show any declines. These results could be interpreted to mean that the Cairns and Townsville projects were more successful in reducing street offences than the Mackay project, but the low rate of reporting and recording of assaults and other offences inside and near licensed venues, together with some anomalies in the Townsville data, make it difficult to draw strong conclusions. The most that can be said is that the Cairns and Townsville data provide modest support for the hypothesis that the project had a positive impact, while the Mackay data provide

Table 1. Indicators of Aggression and Violence in Mackay, Cairns, Townsville, and Surfers Paradise, 1994 and 1996 (Observational Data)

Indicator	Rate/100 hrs 1994	Rate/100 hrs 1996	% Red'n/ Increase	p-value ¹
<i>Mackay, Cairns, and Townsville</i>				
number of visits/hours	83/164	116/230		
verbal abuse	16.5	6.5	-60.4	.034
arguments	8.5	6.1	-28.2	.440
challenges/threats	3.7	2.2	-40.5	.520
physical assaults (1) ²	4.0	0.9	-81.2	.000
physical assaults (2) ²	12.2	3.0	-75.1	.018
total verbal aggression	28.9	14.8	-48.8	.069
total aggression/violence ³	40.9	17.8	-56.5	.019
<i>Surfers Paradise</i>				
number of visits/hours	56/112	43/86		
verbal abuse	2.33	8.34	+257.9	.068
arguments	2.33	13.54	+481.1	.033
challenges/threats	0.00	9.38	--	.003
physical assaults (1) ²	4.65	8.34	+79.4	.440

¹Based on a two-sample t-test (not assuming equal variances), or a chisquare test, whichever is appropriate.

²Physical assaults (1) is an indicator based on assault incidents for which details were recorded, such as number of aggressors and victims, severity of incident, and whether staff intervened. Physical assaults (2) is a more global measure that includes all incidents that were known to occur, regardless of whether details could be recorded.

³This excludes ejections, refusals to admit people, and accidental injuries.

little evidence for any change in either direction.

The observational data can be used to describe the physical and social contexts within which aggressive behaviour declined. As would be expected, physical infrastructure (seating design, degree of renovation) did not change much, but lighting improved, as did the spacing and comfort of tables and chairs, ventilation, the cleanliness of female toilets, and the availability of taxis and public transport.

Significantly, the declines in violence coincided with increases in total patronage and in crowding (including bar crowding), with a corresponding deterioration in aspects of comfort and convenience. It seems that these changes that would normally have negative implications for safety were offset by improvements in other aspects of the environment.

A further feature of the patron population that is of great importance is that it changed relatively little in terms of social composition between 1994 and 1996. This observation is important because it relates to the issue of *displacement*: if, for example, dress standards were to improve markedly, one might argue that the reductions in aggressive behaviour reflected a basic

change in the types of patrons frequenting the observed licensed venues, with problem patrons being moved elsewhere. However, unlike Surfers Paradise (Homel et al. 1997), no such changes were observed in the present study. The most significant change was that patron groups got smaller with an increase in singles, which on its own hardly constitutes strong evidence for the displacement of aggressive patrons.

The data on staff and patrons' behaviours is consistent with the argument that the overall licensed environment improved in ways that reduced or eliminated some of the risk factors for violence. The changes included friendlier bar staff and security staff with a better focus on controlling risky features of the environment, such as movement through aisles and around bars, and drunken patrons. Neither male nor female drinking rates appeared to change, but there was less round shouting and a marked decline in the incidence of high levels of male intoxication. This suggests that staff intervened more effectively to prevent or control intoxication, an inference supported by observed improvements in publicity to patrons and in methods for handling drunk but ordering

patrons, and also by reductions in the use of gimmicks or promotions that encourage rapid consumption.

Again it is important to note the context within which these changes in serving and drinking practices occurred. The overall level of sociability, cheerfulness and friendliness was rated as much higher in 1996 than in 1994 (especially for women); decorum expectations of management increased, so that venues became much less "permissive", especially in terms of overt sexual activity (but not "chatting up", which increased); more food was available; and there was a drop in rowdiness, swearing, and "group territoriality". Moreover, venues probably did not become less profitable overall, since patronage increased but there was no change in cover charges or the cost of drinks.

However, in contrast to the northern cities, in Surfers Paradise between 1994 and 1996 many (although not all) of the measures of the social environment and host responsibility and drinking levels moved in the wrong direction, consistent with the observed increases in aggression and violence. Further analysis of these data, combined with a more comprehensive analysis of the data from the north, should help to identify factors that are critical in achieving *and* maintaining low levels of aggression and violence.

In this vein, preliminary regression analyses were conducted on the data from Cairns, Townsville and Mackay to test whether interaction effects between year and location could be detected, and whether levels of male drunkenness could account for the observed changes in aggression and violence. These analyses are not definitive, since very skewed discrete distributions pose particular problems for least squares modelling techniques, even with transformations, and also only one variable (male drunkenness) was included as a covariate. Nevertheless, the results were of interest: there was

no evidence for any interaction effect for any measure of aggression, suggesting that the declines were roughly of the same magnitude in the three cities; and male drunkenness was able to explain the declines in physical violence, but not in non-physical aggression.

This last result, which is in line with the earlier research, suggests that control of male alcohol consumption is critical to reducing violence, but that the reduction of more general forms of aggression requires the manipulation of other factors as well.

Discussion

A critical question is whether the interventions *caused* the reductions in violence, or whether they were part of a general trend unrelated to the project. The recent increase in assaults statewide, reported by Homel and Mirrlees-Black (1997) suggests that if anything we could have expected an increase in assaults in the three cities, particularly assaults involving young people. On the other hand, initiatives of the Liquor Licensing Division across the state might have been expected to have caused some decrease in problems in and around licensed venues.

Certainly no decline was observed in Surfers Paradise over the two year period, although the special status of Surfers as an area that had previously benefited from an intensive intervention is acknowledged. The internal consistency of the data (as in the case of Surfers itself), with improvements in hospitality practices correlating with a decline in male drunkenness and a decline in aggression and violence, supports the argument for a causal impact.

Assuming some net causal impact of the interventions, three key questions arise: (1) how much of the problem was displaced elsewhere? (2) why are the sizes of the effects so much greater than reported elsewhere (e.g., by Holder 1997)? and (3)

what can be learned about the ingredients that are necessary or unnecessary for a successful intervention?

One way to address the problem of displacement is through analysis of patron characteristics. If for example patrons were much more dressed up after the interventions, it could be argued that troublesome and poorly dressed patrons were replaced by a more up-market and peaceful crowd. While there was some evidence for this in the Surfers project, the observational data from the northern cities show very few changes in patron characteristics. There was a reduction in the already small proportion of under-age patrons, a trend to smaller groups, and a drift to more "smart casual" dress (as opposed to "grunge"). There is therefore no evidence for a qualitative change in the type of patron attracted by venues. Given that drinking rates also did not change, it is reasonable to conclude that there is little evidence for displacement from the observational data.

With respect to effect sizes, one important point is methodological: our observational data were collected between 7 and 14 months after the Codes of Practice were fully implemented, which is a relatively short period, although quite long enough to ensure that results did not reflect purely ephemeral changes. Moreover, as noted earlier, observational data produce a more direct and valid sample of violence within venues than do police (or hospital) data, despite some inevitable measurement errors.

We also suspect that part of the explanation for the results lies with the strong situational focus of the interventions, with the emphasis on changing management practices in order to effect changes in the total environment of venues, not just serving practices. It is clear that there were major improvements in the social climate and sociability of venues and a big reduction in overall "permissiveness," despite an increase in patron

numbers and crowding. All of these improvements could be expected to contribute to a reduction in aggression. Nevertheless, it is also clear that responsible beverage service practices were strongly implemented, resulting in a marked reduction in levels of male intoxication. This appears to have been a key factor in the reduction in physical violence.

These large management and environmental changes were certainly not the result of the allocation of massive resources. Project resources were relatively modest, the main cost being project officer salaries for less than one year (full-time equivalent). The training components and the terms of appointment of project officers were the minimum considered necessary to make the projects viable.

Nor were the changes the result in most cases of direct law enforcement using police or liquor licensing officials. Our experience is that it is essential to manipulate many levers simultaneously to bring about change in licensed venues, and that pressure from the local community is critical.

For example, some kind of mechanism seems essential for informally calling licensees to account for violations of the Code of Practice. However, the realistic threat of formal enforcement is necessary for these informal processes to work effectively. Indeed, perhaps in terms of the "punish or persuade" balance, the safety action model is if anything too reliant on the element of persuasion, and that this may be one reason why long-term effects have been difficult to achieve in some locales (Homel et al. 1997). This is related to the general problem of the weak formal regulatory structures in the liquor licensing area in Australia (Homel 1996; Stockwell 1994).

What specific ingredients are necessary or unnecessary for change? Our main conclusion is that *there are many paths to the same destination, with perhaps some*

common steps. For example, there was strong police support through community policing initiatives in Cairns and Mackay, but in Townsville police involvement was restricted to membership of the steering committee and involvement in some task groups. This suggests that heavy police involvement through community policing strategies is *not* an essential ingredient for success, at least in the short term, although other considerations might dictate utilising such methods anyway. Similarly, a strategy we considered essential in Surfers Paradise was the creation of a community monitoring committee to assist licensees to self-regulate, but in Townsville this role was initially performed by the steering committee and then it was dropped. A cautious conclusion would be that a stand-alone monitoring committee is not essential, but that some person or group needs to perform this role.

The essential ingredients must be included amongst those strategies that all projects had in common. On the basis of our present analyses, these are: the formation of a steering committee; the conduct of a community forum; the employment of a project officer; the formation of task groups (although these differed in function from city to city); the conduct of a safety audit; and the development of a Code of Practice.

On the basis of the data currently available, the safety action model is robust as a technique for reducing alcohol-related crime and violence, although not all the specific techniques used in Surfers Paradise appear to be essential. The tasks remaining include refining the model through more detailed research on the situational factors that cause violence, through a better analysis of the community processes that make for successful implementation, and, above all, through an improved understanding of what "responsive regulation" means for the retail alcohol industry.

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