Recommendations for Reducing Excessive Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol-Related Harms by Limiting Alcohol Outlet Density

The Task Force on Community Preventive Services

The serious toll that alcohol imposes on the population of the U.S. led the Task Force on Community Preventive Services (Task Force) to include the reduction of excessive alcohol consumption and related harms as a priority topic in its earliest planning sessions.[1] As the third-leading cause of preventable death in the nation,[2] excessive use of alcohol is a public health challenge that can be approached from many directions. The Task Force first studied and made recommendations on several ways to reduce alcohol-impaired driving.[3–7] It next assessed ways to reduce excessive alcohol consumption,[8] exploring the effectiveness of interventions to maintain limits on the days on which alcohol can be sold (recommended); increase taxes on alcoholic beverages (recommended); limit privatization of alcohol sales (insufficient evidence to determine effectiveness); enhance enforcement of laws prohibiting sales to minors (recommended); and regulate alcohol outlet density, reviewed in the accompanying article.[9]

Intervention Recommendation

On the basis of the reviewed evidence, the Task Force found sufficient evidence of a positive association between outlet density and excessive alcohol consumption and related harms to recommend limiting alcohol outlet density through the use of regulatory authority (e.g., licensing and zoning) as a means of reducing or controlling excessive alcohol consumption and related harms.

A diverse group of studies of the association of outlet density with alcohol consumption and related harms indicates that when the density of on- or off-premises alcohol outlets is high or increases, the level of alcohol consumption is correspondingly high or increases, and excessive consumption and its diverse related harms occur. A smaller number of studies indicates the converse association. The validity of the causal link between outlet density and excessive alcohol consumption and its related harms is further supported by evidence from evaluations of related interventions that affect outlet density (e.g., bans or privatization of alcohol sales). On the basis of this evidence, the Task Force concludes that limiting on- and off-premises alcoholic beverage outlet density—either by reducing current density levels or limiting density growth—can be an effective means of reducing the harms associated with excessive alcohol consumption. It may also provide additional benefits for quality of life by reducing community problems such as loitering, public disturbances, and vandalism.

Information from Other Advisory Groups

Healthy People 2010 goals and objectives

The intervention reviewed here may be useful in reaching objectives specified in *Healthy People 2010*,[10] the disease prevention and health promotion agenda for the U.S. The objectives most directly relevant to this review are those to reduce excessive alcohol consumption (26–11 and 26–12); reduce average annual alcohol consumption (26–12); and reduce key adverse consequences of excessive alcohol consumption (26–1, 26–2, and 26–5 through 26–8). *Healthy People 2010* also notes that excessive alcohol consumption is related to several other public health priorities, including cancer, educational achievement, injuries, risky sexual activity, and mental health.

Surgeon General's Workshop on Drunk Driving

This workshop, held in 1988, was a multi-agency effort to address the problem of drunk driving. Recommendations were made in several areas. To reduce availability of alcoholic beverages, workshop participants included a recommendation to strengthen laws concerning hours of sale, characteristics and density of outlets, and other factors relating to retail availability of alcoholic beverages.[11] The workshop also recommended future research to document the contribution of location, density, and hours of sale of alcohol outlets to alcohol-impaired driving and resulting injuries and fatalities.

Interpreting and Using the Recommendation

This recommendation can be used to support efforts by community-based and grassroots organizations to limit the density of alcohol outlets in their communities. State and local officials can use this recommendation to help enact or reform laws concerning density of outlets where alcohol is available.

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Implementers may encounter barriers, including preemption laws at higher levels of government (a state law that takes precedence over and thus allows what a local law is trying to restrict) and opposition by groups whose commercial interests may be affected.

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