

Letter to the editor
Addiction

Liquor licensing or confounding events? Further questions about the interpretations of Menéndez et al., (2015)

By

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Abstract:

A recent research report by Menéndez et al. examined the cumulative effect of a series of licensing restrictions that took place in New South Wales in 2008. The results appear extremely encouraging, estimating a 31.27% reduction in Actual Bodily Harm (ABH) and a 39.70% reduction in Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH). Their report was criticised in commentary by Shepherd and Page due to the absence of comparison condition and because of potential confounding, due to the effects of the global economic recession. Despite a spirited defence in their rejoinder, there are important unanswered questions about the validity of these findings. This letter to the editor provides a brief overview of some additional considerations. While there is an understandable desire to report optimistic findings in relation to licensing restrictions. It appears that the authors have submitted the results of these analyses without thoroughly and rigorously considering alternative explanations.

Liquor licensing or confounding events? Further questions about the interpretations of Menéndez et al. (2015)

Menéndez et al.¹ examined the cumulative effect of a series of licensing restrictions that took place in New South Wales in 2008. The results are extremely encouraging, estimating a 31.27% reduction in Actual Bodily Harm (ABH) and a 39.70% reduction in Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH). However questions remain about the extent to which these findings represent true intervention effects.

1. Outcome selection and specification

The title suggests that the authors examined the impact of licensing restrictions on ‘alcohol-related’ violence. However, the manuscript mentions only ABH and GBH. It is not clear whether these outcomes are ‘alcohol-related’ or how this is defined. Furthermore it is unclear whether these events concern nighttime assaults—as would be most appropriate—or *all* violent assault (a.m. and p.m.). If the latter, the estimated effect of licensing restrictions is a reduction of over 30% of *all* violence, which raises the unanswered question: how can changes to nighttime alcohol trading impact *all* violence to this degree?

2. Implementation

The authors discuss three interrelated licensing restrictions that are hypothesised to have impacted violence (see p.1574-1575): options to place further controls on licensed premises (e.g. lockouts or curfews); freezes on 24-hr licenses; and further conditions on 48 ‘problematic’ NSW premises. However, there is little detail on the implementation of these restrictions: e.g. how many (if any) lockouts or curfews were imposed? How did a 24-hr license freeze impact on alcohol availability? For a 30% reduction in violence, one would expect considerable changes in trading practices across NSW. But it is unclear whether or not these intermediary processes were affected,^{2,3} thus limiting the extent to which we can understand: (a) whether the restrictions occurred; and (b) how to replicate these effects elsewhere.

3. Strengthening internal validity

When challenged about the omission of comparison units,⁴ the authors defend their decision by stating that eligible controls began “targeting alcohol-related violence around the same time”.⁵ Whether or not this was appropriate, comparison areas are not the only way to improve the rigor of this study. With some understanding of the implementation, authors could have designed an evaluative study at a smaller scale, identifying areas with greater or lesser exposure, as shown in a recent Dutch study.⁶ At the least, one would like to see the

analysis repeated using *non-equivalent dependent variables*—variables susceptible to the same cyclical factors but potentially insensitive to the intervention.⁷⁻⁹ A corresponding reduction in another outcome(s) (e.g. theft) conceptually unrelated to licensed trading patterns, may indicate that other unmeasured factors (e.g. economic downturn) were at play. In sum, there are many ways to strengthen internal validity, adding a comparison area is just one.⁸

While there is an understandable desire to present results that demonstrate the effectiveness of restrictive licensing policies, we should not prioritise the message over the science. Most evaluations of licensing policies have limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results.^{2,3,10,11} This area would benefit from the development and standardised use of rigorous design features to address these limitations in order to improve future policy implementation and evaluation. Like Shepherd & Page, I would like to see more evidence that these effects can be divorced from the significant and complex economic events that occurred simultaneously. We needn't look any further than Gorman's recent editorial (published in the same issue) for a reminder of why balanced scrutiny of positive findings is essential for the advancement of addiction science.¹²

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