



Topic overview

Crime and Alcohol

Encyclopedia of Drugs, Alcohol & Addictive Behavior

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The relationship between alcohol consumption and involvement in crime is not a simple one. Drinking is a very common activity, and most drinking is not followed by criminal behavior. Understanding the

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alcohol-crime relationship requires an identification of the drinking effects and circumstances that are related to crime. Alcohol's relationship to crime also varies by the type of crime. The major crime-type distinction is between violent personal crime (such as homicide, forcible rape, and assault) and property crime (such as burglary and larceny). In addition, driving while intoxicated is a crime, and although first offenses are usually classified as misdemeanors, repeat offenders may be charged with gross misdemeanors and felonies. Certain variables also come into play in the alcohol-crime relationship. Age and gender, for example, have a bearing on whether drinking leads to criminal behavior. Young adult males are more likely than older adult males and females of all ages to engage in alcohol-related offenses. Moreover, underage drinking is a criminal offense, as is providing alcohol to minors.

According to the available evidence, drinking is more likely to be implicated in violent crime than in property crime. Moreover, violent offenses are often thought of as "expressive" or "instrumental." Expressive violent offenses are typically those resulting from interpersonal conflict that escalates from verbal abuse to physical aggression. Such violence often involves a drinking offender or drinking by both (or multiple) parties involved. Instrumental offenses have rational goals, typified by stealing to

realize the value of the stolen money or goods. Alcohol is not thought to be an important causal factor in acquisitive crimes such as theft.

Research has shown that alcohol is an important factor in the occurrence of expressive interpersonal violence, that alcohol use increases the risk of being a crime victim, that the alcohol-crime relationship is complex (involving multiple factors in addition to alcohol), and that alcohol is often blamed without justification for criminal offenses.

DRINKING AS A PRECEDENT TO CRIME

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, reviewed the role alcohol played in crime by looking at convicted offender data from 1996 (Greenfield, 1998). On an average day in 1996, an estimated 5.3 million convicted offenders were under the supervision of criminal justice authorities. Nearly 40 percent of these offenders, or about two million persons, had been using alcohol at the time of the offense for which they were convicted. Whether the offender was on probation or was incarcerated in a local jail or a state prison, all the offenders were about equally likely to have been drinking at the time of the crime. What they consumed was similar as well, with beer being the most commonly consumed alcoholic beverage—30 percent of probationers, 32 percent of jail inmates, and 23 percent of state prisoners said that they had been drinking beer either on its own or in combination with liquor prior to the commission of the current offense. Consumption of wine alone was comparatively rare among the surveyed offender populations.

Surveys of crime victims also indicate that offenders had often been drinking. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is one of two statistical series maintained by the Department of Justice to learn about the extent to which crime is occurring. The NCVS, which gathers data on criminal victimization from a national sample of household respondents, provides annual estimates of crimes experienced by the public without regard to whether a law enforcement agency was called about the crime. Initiated in 1972, the NCVS was designed to complement what is known about crimes reported to local law enforcement agencies under the FBI's annual compilation known as the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program. Estimates from the 1998 NCVS indicate that victims of about three million violent crimes each year, or about a quarter of all violent crimes, perceived the offenders to have been drinking.

Most studies of alcohol and crime focus on offenses known to the police or on offenders serving sentences for crimes that resulted in a conviction. A notable exception is a community study done in Thunder Bay, in the province of Ontario, Canada. Pernanen (1976, 1981, 1991) collected information from a representative sample of 1,100 community residents. Among those who had been victimized, the assailant had been drinking in 51 percent of the cases in which violence occurred, and 68 percent of the time the assailant was judged to have been "drunk." Pernanen notes that the findings from the Thunder Bay study are consistent with many other North American studies using police records. Generally, half of all violent offenders have been found to have been drinking at the time of their offense.

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The most common pattern found in studies of violent crimes is that 60 percent or more of the events involve drinking by the offender, by both the offender and the victim, or by the victim alone. The results of a classic 1958 study by Wolfgang indicate that the most common pattern in a survey of homicides involved the presence of alcohol for both the victim and offender.

If these findings indicated the extent to which drinking was causally implicated in violent crime, it would be remarkable. It could then be argued that alcohol accounts for a majority of violent offenses. But neither the presence of alcohol in a crime nor the intoxication of an offender is necessarily an indication that alcohol influenced the occurrence of the crime. Because drinking is such a common activity, it is

likely that alcohol is sometimes simply present but not causally relevant. Drinking is also sometimes offered by offenders as an excuse for the crime, as a way of avoiding being held accountable.

ALCOHOL USE AND CRIME VICTIMIZATION

Alcohol use raises the likelihood that the drinker will be a victim of violent crime. Substantial percentages of homicide, assault, and robbery victims were drinking just before their victimization. Medical examiners have done a significant number of homicide studies by running toxicological tests of the body fluids of homicide victims. Separate reviews by Greenberg (1981) and Murdoch, Pihl, and Ross (1990) found that the percentage of homicide victims who had been drinking ranges widely, but is usually about 50 percent. Goodman et al. (1986) tested the alcohol levels of several thousand homicide victims and found that 46 percent of the victims had consumed alcohol in the period before being killed, and that three out of ten victims had alcohol levels beyond the legal intoxication level.

Roizen (1993) examined studies of alcohol use by robbery and rape victims. The percentage who had been drinking before their victimization ranged widely—from 12 to 16 percent for robbery victims and from 6 to 36 percent for rape victims. Abbey (1991) and Muehlenhard and Linton (1987) also found in their studies of date rape that both offenders and victims had commonly been drinking. Abbey suggested that drinking by either the offender or the victim contributes to rape because of the impaired communication and misperception that results from alcohol's effects on cognitive ability (among other contributing factors). Males who have been drinking, for example, may mistakenly attribute sexual intent to women whom they date.

Alcohol may increase the risk that the drinker will be a crime victim because of effects that alcohol has on judgment and demeanor. Someone who has been drinking may take risks that might not be taken when sober, such as walking in a dangerous area of a city at night. Alcohol also causes some individuals to be loud and verbally aggressive. Such a demeanor can be offensive and might sometimes precipitate physical attack.

DRINKING AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Unfortunately, violence is common in American households, and alcohol is a contributing factor, according to research done by Kantor and Straus (1989) and Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980), among others. Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) found that alcohol appears to be most relevant to the occurrence of husband-against-wife violence. Hamilton and Collins (1981) reviewed about 25 studies that examined the role of alcohol in spouse and child abuse. They found alcohol to be most relevant to wife beating, where it was present in one-quarter to one-half of all such events. (Alcohol was present in less than one in five incidents of child abuse, however.) The most common patterns were for only the husband to be drinking or for both parties to have consumed alcohol. It was uncommon for only the wife to have been drinking. Studies also indicate that husbands or intimate partners with alcohol problems are more likely to be violent against their wives or partners.

A 1998 BJS study on the relationship between crime and alcohol found that two-thirds of victims who suffered violence by an "intimate" (a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend) reported that alcohol had been a factor. Among spouse victims, three out of four incidents were reported to have involved an offender who had been drinking. By contrast, an estimated 31 percent of stranger victimizations where the victim could determine the absence or presence of alcohol were perceived to be alcohol-related.

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Research by Jones and Schecter (1992) and Barnett and Fagan (1993) on family violence suggests that violence against women may lead to their own use of alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Both drinking and drug use may be a response to the physical and emotional pain and fear that result

from living in a violent relationship. Miller, Downs, and Testa (1993) found that women in alcohol-treatment programs had higher rates of father-to-daughter violence than did the women in a comparison group. These findings underline the importance of interpreting the meaning of alcohol's association with family violence (and other forms of violence) carefully. As previously noted, alcohol is often present but irrelevant to the occurrence of violence. Some recent literature on family violence indicates that alcohol use may sometimes be a response to violent victimization.

ALCOHOL AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO CRIME

There are a number of possible explanations offered for alcohol's role in crime:

- The need for money to support drinking may cause some individuals to commit crimes to generate cash to support their habit.
- The pharmacological effects of alcohol can compromise drinkers' cognitive ability and judgment and raise the likelihood of physical aggression.
- Expectations that alcohol makes drinkers aggressive may increase the chance of violence.
- Standards of conduct and accountability for behavior may differ for sober and drunken activities, and these differences can result in an increase in the likelihood of criminal behavior after drinking.

These possible explanations are not mutually exclusive, and they all may sometimes accurately describe how drinking causes crime. Two or more of the explanations may even apply to the same incident.

Committing "income crimes," or crimes to obtain money for drinking, is not thought to be an important explanation. Although the cost of maintaining an addiction to relatively expensive drugs (e.g., heroin and cocaine) is high, the price tag for supporting heavy drinking is usually modest. In most of the United States, for example, one can support a habit of daily heavy drinking for 10 dollars a day or less. The majority of individuals could maintain such a habit without resorting to crime, although many heavy drinkers spend more than this minimal amount on alcohol. There is virtually no information in the research literature about the likelihood or frequency of involvement in income crime to support drinking, but alcohol is not thought to be a major factor in income crimes. This does not mean it never happens, however, only that it is uncommon.

If alcohol is not an important factor in the occurrence of income-generating crime, why do so many property offenders (approximately 30 percent of inmates in 1996) report they were under the influence of alcohol at the time they committed such offenses? At least two explanations are possible for the high correlation between drinking and property crime. The first suggests that the correlation is simply coincidental, not causal. A second reason (put forward by both Collins, 1988, and Cordilia, 1985) is that a property offender who has been drinking is more likely to be caught than one who is sober. This reason makes sense, based on the known impairment effects of alcohol. A drinking offender may not be as competent or careful as a sober one, so drinking offenders may be overrepresented among offenders who are caught, and thus known to criminal-justice officials.

Alcohol impairs one's cognitive abilities, including the capacity to communicate clearly and the capacity to understand the verbal and behavioral cues of others. In addition, a person whose abilities have been impaired by alcohol is less able to make decisions and carry out appropriate and effective actions. Permanen, in his early work (1976), discussed how alcohol-impaired cognitive ability can lead to violence. When one or both parties who are interacting have been drinking, there is an increased potential for misunderstanding that can lead to conflict and that may in turn escalate to violence. One factor in such a scenario is what may be called a "reduced behavioral response repertoire." Alcohol impairs a drinker's capacity to conceive and utilize the wide range of verbal and other behavioral options that are available to sober individuals. Alcohol-induced cognitive impairment may also diminish

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the drinker's capacity to foresee the negative implications of violent actions. In summary, one way that

alcohol increases the likelihood of violence is through its negative effects on cognitive capacities, and these effects lead to an increased risk of violence.

It has been demonstrated in laboratory experiments that both actual alcohol use and the belief that alcohol has been consumed can raise levels of aggression. In laboratory experiments using competitive encounters between opponents in which the winner could apply an electrical shock to the loser, subjects who had been given alcohol behaved more aggressively. Evidence gathered by Bushman and Cooper (1990) and by Hull and Bond (1986) also indicates that subjects who have been told they have received alcohol, but who actually have been given a placebo, are more aggressive in their administration of electrical shocks. These findings suggest that beliefs about alcohol's behavioral effects can themselves affect behavior.

Expectations that alcohol use leads to aggressive behavior probably have sociocultural roots. Anthropologists such as Heath (1976a, 1976b) and MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969), for example, note that societies differ in the behavior that occurs after drinking. Some of these differences may be attributable to racial or ethnic differences in physiological reactions to alcohol, but it is also clear that there are normative variations in what behaviors are expected or acceptable after drinking. In fact, behavioral norms after drinking may vary within societies. MacAndrew and Edgerton note that during certain "time-out" periods, usual standards of behavior are suspended. For example, festivals or Mardi Gras celebrations are often characterized by high levels of drinking and behavior that is considered deviant or criminal during normal times.

Alcohol appears to be implicated in violence in another indirect way. Drinking is sometimes used as an excuse for crime or as a way to avoid accountability after the fact. McCaghy (1968) refers to this phenomenon as "deviance disavowal." The deviance disavowal potential of alcohol can account for a drinker's involvement in crime in two ways: Individuals may drink or say that they have been drinking as an advance excuse for their conduct, or drinking may be offered as an excuse after the fact.

CRIME AND ALCOHOL: SUMMARY

Drinking alcohol and involvement in criminal behavior frequently occur together. Some of the time alcohol has a causal role in crime, but often it is merely present. Drinking is most likely to be relevant causally to expressive interpersonal violence—including family violence. Drinking can increase the risk of being victimized as well. Drinking may also sometimes help account for the commission of crimes to obtain money to support the habit, but alcohol is not a major factor in the occurrence of income crime. Drinking leads to criminal behavior in a number of ways, including having an impact on cognition and the rules that govern behavior and accountability for behavior. The alcohol-crime relationship is complex. It is clear that drinking is rarely the only cause of criminal behavior, and that when it does contribute, it is usually only one of a number of relevant factors.

See also Complications: Cardiovascular System (Alcohol and Cocaine); Complications: Cognition; Crime and Drugs; Driving, Alcohol, and Drugs; Driving Under the Influence (DUI); Economic Costs of Alcohol and Drug Abuse; Expectancies; Intimate Partner Violence and Alcohol/Substance Use; Social Costs of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

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