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Violence in the night-time economy: key findings from the research

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Violent behaviour in and around pubs and clubs on weekend nights presents a significant public health, criminal justice and urban management problem. Many people are injured in such violence, a significant minority of whom are permanently disfigured. In many of these incidents, alcohol has been consumed. The key findings from published UK and international research on violence in the night-time economy and its relation to alcohol use are presented here.

Key points

- Research consistently shows the peak time for violent offending is weekend nights and the peak location is in and around pubs and clubs (Allen et al., 2003).
- Violence in the night-time economy typically involves young males who do not know each other well. Resulting injuries are often facial, some of which are 'glassings' (Allen et al., 2003; Hutchison et al., 1998).
- Most incidents involve drinking by the offender, victim or both (Murdoch et al., 1990).
- Alcohol contributes to violence in many direct and indirect ways (Graham et al., 1998).
- Factors associated with violence in high-risk pubs and clubs include inconvenient access routes, poor ventilation, overcrowding, and permissive social environments, communicated through pub/club policies and staff behaviour (Homel et al., 2001).
- Violence outside venues may be associated with large numbers of intoxicated people congregating and competing for limited food and transport facilities (Marsh and Fox-Kibby, 1992).

Concerns about violent and disorderly behaviour in town and city centres are often associated with what is known as the 'night-time economy'. This consists primarily of bars, pubs and nightclubs, and also fast-food outlets, often clustered in town-centres. This night-time economy has expanded rapidly in recent years (Tierney and Hobbs, 2003).

The 2002/03 British Crime Survey (BCS) estimated there were 2,781,000 violent incidents experienced by adults in England and Wales

(Povey and Allen, 2003). People who frequently visit pubs and bars are much more likely to fall victim to such crime than those who do not (Povey and Allen, 2003). The impact of this is that perceived and actual high rates of violence in the night-time economy may deter potential users from a wide cross-section of society.

Existing knowledge about violence in the night-time economy is summarised here. Key findings presented are:

- prevalence
- patterns, characteristics and consequences
- the relationship with alcohol
- characteristics of the immediate environment in which violence is likely to occur.

Key research gaps are also identified. The examples of research are from the UK unless indicated otherwise.

Prevalence of violence in the night-time economy

The problem of violence in the night-time economy is indicated in research on peak times and locations for violence.

The peak *time* for violent crime is night-time, coinciding with busy trading hours and closing times of licensed venues:

- The 2001/02 BCS found 44% of violent incidents occurred at the weekend (6pm Friday to 6am Monday) and 63% occurred during the evening or night (Allen et al., 2003).
- In a national Accident and Emergency department (A&E) study, the peak time for attendance of patients with assault-related facial injuries was 9pm to 3am. Peak days were Friday and Saturday (Hutchison et al., 1998).
- Police data for 'Eastville' (UK) city police division for 1996–98 indicated that 70% of city-centre violence occurred between 9pm and 3am (Lister et al., 2000).
- Police data for Newcastle-upon-Tyne showed incidents (including violence) peaked in the half-hour following normal pub closing time (11pm) and following the closing times of premises with extended licensed hours (Hope, 1986).

The most common *location* for violent offending is in or around late night entertainment districts:

- The 2001/02 BCS found that 21% of all violent incidents occurred in or around a pub or club. 38% of violence between strangers occurred in that location (Allen et al., 2003).
- Lister et al. (2000) found 29% of recorded violent incidents in 'Eastville' occurred inside licensed premises.
- A study of young males attending Cardiff A&E with assault-related injuries on weekend nights (11pm to 4am) found 15% had occurred within one pedestrianised city-centre street and 29% within night-clubs or pubs (Shepherd and Brickley, 1996).
- Hope (1986) found over one-quarter of police-attended incidents (including violence) in Newcastle-upon-Tyne city centre occurred within a 250 square metre area containing 12 pubs.

Alcohol and violence in the night-time economy

Alcohol is often associated with violence in the night-time economy. The 2001/02 BCS found that offenders were under the influence of alcohol in 47% of all violent incidents and 58% of stranger incidents (Allen et al., 2003).

UK research indicates that the proportion of violent incidents involving alcohol committed in the night-time economy is high:

- In their national A&E study, Hutchison et al. (1998) found that at least 90% of the assaults occurring in bars involved drinking by victim, offender or both in the four hours prior to the assault. Of assaults on the street, 63% involved alcohol.
- In a Home Office custody-suite study, 12 of the 20 (60%) people arrested for assault at night in the city-centre were 'intoxicated' according to the field researchers (Deehan et al., 2002).
- Arrest data for one English resort town during the tourist season showed that 78% of all assault arrestees reported drinking during the four hours prior to the offence. Between 10pm and 2am, 93% of people arrested (across all offence types, including assault) had been drinking (Jefferies and Saunders, 1983).

However, this is not to say that drinking in the night-time economy necessarily leads to violence.

Certain *patterns of drinking* behaviour increase the risk of involvement in violence in the night-time economy:

- Shepherd and colleagues (Shepherd, 1994b; Shepherd and Brickley, 1996) have consistently found that both the likelihood of involvement in assaults and the risk of injury from assault increase sharply when drinking more than 8 or 10 units of alcohol in one session.
- In a national study of 18- to 24-year-olds, Richardson and Budd (2003) found 17% of those reporting feeling very drunk at least once a month ('binge drinkers') had committed violent criminal acts, compared with only 4% of those who drank frequently but rarely felt very drunk ('regular drinkers'). 'Binge' drinkers were also five times more likely than 'regular' drinkers to have been involved in a group fight in public.

Research also indicates that victim and offender drinking are extremely likely to co-occur in cases of violence in the night-time economy, more so than in other contexts (Murdoch et al., 1990 – US; Pernanen, 1991 – Canada). These patterns may not be surprising, given that alcohol consumption is a fundamental activity for many customers of the night-time economy and often central to its commercial enterprise.

Characteristics and consequences of violence in the night-time economy

Participants

Violence in the night-time economy predominantly involves young males as both offenders and victims. In Maguire and Nettleton's (2003) Cardiff study of police and A&E data, 72% of those arrested for violence and disorder were aged under 30 and 88% were male. The proportions for victims were similar.

A national A&E study found people aged 15 to 25 were at highest risk of assault-related injuries in bars. About ten times more males than females had been assaulted in licensed premises (Hutchison et al., 1998).

Violence in the night-time economy typically involves strangers and people who do not know each other intimately. The BCS 2001/02 found that 38% of *stranger* and 22% of *acquaintance* violence occurred 'in or around a pub or club'. Only 3% of domestic violence incidents occurred there (Allen et al., 2003). 'In or around a pub or club' is the most common location for *stranger* violence and the second most common location after 'in the street' for *acquaintance* violence – Allen et al. (2003) found that 25% of both stranger and acquaintance violence occurred in the street.

Maguire and Nettleton (2003) found that over one-third of alcohol-related violent incidents involved groups of three or more people, reflecting the finding that about one-third were described as 'fights' in police or A&E case records in the study.

Injuries

Most assaults in the night-time economy involve little or no injury, and any injuries sustained are rarely life-threatening (Maguire and Nettleton, 2003).

When injuries are sustained they are predominantly facial:

- Shepherd and Brickley (1996) found that 85% of men and women who presented at A&E with assault-related injuries on a weekend night had some facial injuries.
- Hutchison et al.'s 1998 national A&E study found that alcohol was associated with more serious facial injuries, including those incurred in assaults.
- Men are more likely than women to sustain facial injuries, such as facial fractures and lacerations (Hutchison et al., 1998).

Very serious crimes, such as murder or manslaughter, inside licensed venues are rare (Brookman and Maguire, 2003). However, available data do not indicate what proportion of murders occur elsewhere in the night-time economy.

Weapons

Most assaults involve blunt instruments or parts of the body such as fists or feet (Hutchison et al., 1998). However, drinking glasses and glass bottles are used as weapons and are the most frequently used sharp weapons (Shepherd, 1994b).

Evidence of the use of glass as a weapon includes:

- The 2001/02 BCS found 9% of stranger and 7% of acquaintance violence incidents involved the use of a glass or bottle as a weapon (Allen et al., 2003).
- Similarly, the national A&E study found glasses or bottles had been used in 8% of assaults resulting in facial injuries (Hutchison et al., 1998).

These findings are likely to reflect the high proportion of violence occurring in the night-time economy. Indeed, Hutchison et al. (1998) found that 62% of assaults with a glass or bottle occurred in bars.

Whilst glass injuries are rarely fatal, many require specialist treatment (Magennis et al., 1998) and can result in long-term facial disfigurement (Shepherd, 1994a). Physical deformity often occurs along with post-traumatic stress and other psychological disorders (Magennis et al., 1998).

Under-reporting of violence in the night-time economy

Violence in the night-time economy is likely to be more common than available data indicate. Less serious incidents are unlikely to attract police attention or warrant A&E attendance, and so often go uncounted. The 'hidden' figure of violence, especially violence occurring inside pubs and clubs, is substantial (Shepherd and Brickley, 1996).

Research has looked at the extent of under-reporting and the reasons for it:

- Maguire and Nettleton (2003) found A&E data boosted the number of violent incidents identified by police data by 16%.
- It may be that venue staff are reluctant to report violence occurring on their premises for fear of inviting negative police attention and licence revocation (Lister et al., 2000).

The role of alcohol

Any behaviour committed in the context of alcohol consumption, violent or otherwise, results from interaction between factors relating to the individual, to the immediate environment and to the alcohol consumed. Research indicates that alcohol is best seen as contributing to violent behaviour, rather than causing it (McCord, 1993 – US). Further, the role of alcohol is likely to be multifaceted. Graham et al. (1998 – Canada) describes alcohol-related factors which may directly or indirectly relate to violence as falling into four groups:

- ‘cultural’ factors, relating to how alcohol and its relation to violence are understood in society
- ‘person’ factors, relating to individuals’ responses to, expectations and beliefs about alcohol
- ‘pharmacological’ factors relating to the psychopharmacological properties of alcohol
- ‘context’ factors, relating to the physical and social circumstances in which alcohol is consumed.

There are many theories which explain the relation of alcohol to violence in the night-time economy and which find support in research:

- Societal rules: some researchers suggest societal rules about the extent to which violent behaviour may be ‘excused’ if the perpetrator is intoxicated makes them more likely to offend when they have been drinking (Sumner and Parker, 1994).
- Many men expect to feel aggressive and more powerful after drinking (Abbey et al., 2001 – US) and may drink to facilitate or excuse their behaviour.
- Violent individuals may actually seek out venues that tolerate drunkenness and aggression (Raistrick et al., 1999) and the presence of similar individuals may reinforce their attitudes and behaviours.
- Many heavy drinkers expect alcohol consumption to lead to violence (Graham et al., 1998 – Canada) and may act on this belief.

Research indicates that intoxicated victims are more likely than sober victims to be the first to escalate an altercation into violence, by ‘throwing the first punch’ (Murdoch et al., 1990 – US). When both parties are drinking, the effects of alcohol (such as making a person less likely to ignore threats and prevent escalation) are likely to be magnified (Graham et al., 1998 – Canada).

The importance of environment

Briscoe and Donnelly (2001 – Australia) note that many people visit certain areas because they contain a lot of licensed premises. The popularity of pubs and clubs as leisure and social settings underlines the importance of context in alcohol consumption. Aspects of the immediate context (venues, physical and social environment) are relevant to the likelihood of violence.

High-risk venues

UK research suggests that some venues are more likely to experience violence than others. For example, more than half the violent incidents occurring in or by pubs and night clubs in Southampton city centre in 1980 were associated with just a handful of licensed venues (Ramsay, 1982). This may relate to the influence of the physical and social environments within venues.

The physical environment

Certain ‘frustrating’ or ‘irritating’ physical attributes of bar, pub and night club environments have been associated with aggression (Homel et al., 2001 – Australia). These include poor ventilation, high noise levels, smoky atmospheres, inconvenient bar access, inadequate seating and overcrowding. Environments containing these physical elements may increase arousal and anxiety and, in turn, increase the likelihood of people becoming aggressive (Raistrick et al., 1999).

Inconvenient bar access, and so-called ‘pinch points’ in which obstacles restrict movement may increase the likelihood of violence because they bring people into close contact and competition for service or access (Deehan, 1999). Ramsay (1982) notes that violence within premises often escalates from chance contacts between males in crowded circumstances.

The social environment

A common characteristic of ‘violent’ venues is that they tolerate violent behaviour and drunkenness.

The ‘permissiveness’ of a venue’s environment may be communicated to customers through physical and social elements (Homel et al., 2001 – Australia):

- well-maintained venues can signal that managers do not anticipate damage to furniture occurring as a result of violent behaviour
- continuing to serve intoxicated customers can convey permissiveness towards intoxication
- encouraging drinking to intoxication – by holding drinking games or discounting drinks – can signal that a venue is generally permissive
- making food, especially full meals, available may reduce the risk of violence in pubs and bars.

Additionally, venue security staff have a significant influence over violence occurring in and around pubs and night clubs. Whilst private security staff defuse many aggressive situations, they also sometimes escalate conflicts. Maguire and Nettleton (2003) found over one-third of violent incidents inside licensed premises involved door staff, often as alleged perpetrators. The current move

to 'professionalise' the role of security staff, both at national (Security Standard Authority, 2002) and local levels, may improve the reputation of door staff and help reduce the number of violent incidents.

For information on violence prevention in and around licensed premises, see Deehan (1999) or Brookman and Maguire (2003).

Outside venues

A significant proportion of violent incidents happening within the context of the night-time economy occur outside venues, often in well-defined areas of urban centres (e.g. Shepherd and Brickley, 1996). Pressure on resources such as space, fast-food facilities and transport often becomes acute as several venues within an area close at once, increasing the potential for conflict (Marsh and Fox-Kibby, 1992). Changes to the licensing laws (contained within the Licensing Act, 2003) are aimed at spreading the time at which customers leave venues.

Conclusions

The night-time economy is a setting in which violent crime commonly occurs. Incidents are often clustered within small, well-defined areas of late night entertainment districts and can sometimes be linked to specific premises. Peak times for violence occur as venues close. Most assaults do not result in serious injuries but some victims do receive facial injuries (sometimes sustained in 'glassing' attacks). A substantial proportion of this violence involves people who have been drinking. Certain 'heavier' patterns of drinking increase the risk of involvement in violent crime. The possible direct and indirect way alcohol is related to violence in the night-time economy are numerous. Violence within venues may relate to venue layout, policies and behaviour of staff. Violence outside venues may relate to large numbers of people leaving venues at the same time.

Research gaps and recommendations

Research is needed to clearly establish the prevalence of violence in the night-time economy. The new police Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI127) for violent crime, introduced in April 2002, provides one opportunity for such violence to be measured at the local level and aggregated

nationally. This will provide an indication of violent incidents committed under the influence of intoxicating substances, and, separately, in connection with pubs, bars and clubs. However, as data from official sources are likely to substantially underestimate violence in this context (Shepherd and Brickley, 1996), research must employ a range of data sources, such as night-time economy user surveys, observation and A&E data.

Finally, different levels of violence are likely to be experienced across commercial centres of different town and city centres. How these differences relate to local circumstances, for example, the centre's traditional and modern functions, local subcultures, and the location and spread of licensed premises and other facilities, needs to be explored. The findings could assist the development of interventions based on local needs.

Research needs to look specifically at:

- whether or not people who are violent in the night-time economy are also violent in other contexts to determine causes and inform interventions
- what the personal risk factors are for involvement in violence in the night-time economy, whether as victim or offender, to try to distinguish those at risk and identify appropriate preventative, harm-reduction and treatment interventions
- situational prevention – pubs and clubs are especially amenable to situational prevention. Further research is needed to clearly establish how violence can be reduced within pubs and clubs
- the relative extent to which alcohol-related violence committed outside the context of the night-time economy (for example, in the home) follows consumption of alcohol purchased in on-licensed and off-licensed premises.

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