Creating Safer Drinking Environments

Ross Homel
Gillian McIlwain

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Russell Carvolth


Abstract

The focus of the chapter is violence and crime in the licensed drinking environment. The central argument is that creating safer licensed environments is primarily a regulatory problem, not just an “alcohol problem”, and that formal enforcement is a necessary but not sufficient tool for creating a culture of compliance. A system of regulation that is responsive to industry conditions will rely on the interaction of formal regulation, which is the political domain; informal regulation, mobilising civil society; and self-regulation, taming the market.

To be effective, regulatory systems must reduce situationally specific risk factors in the licensed environment that are related primarily to management practices and to “hidden deals” between licensees and regulators. Effective regulation will ensure that the physical environment is attractive and sends a message to patrons about appropriate behaviour; that it does not irritate or frustrate people by being crowded, excessively noisy, hot or smoky; that provocation related to such games as pool or to dancing is minimised; and that non-salty food is freely available. The social environment will not be permissive, having clear limits concerning sexual and other behaviours; drinking to intoxication, especially by large numbers simultaneously, will be discouraged; trained, peace-loving security and bar staff will be employed; and people identified as regularly aggressive will be kept out.

There is limited evidence that formal enforcement through visible, random checks on licensees can be effective, as can undercover policing combined with warnings to managers. There is consistent evidence that mobilising local community groups and agencies through organised community action can bring about major reductions in aggression and violence in and around venues, although the effects have not been demonstrated to be permanent in any locality. Critical ingredients of community action include: strong directive leadership during the establishment period; the mobilization of community groups concerned about violence and disorder; the implementation of a multi-agency approach involving licensees, local government, police, health and other groups; the use of safety audits to engage the local community and identify risks; a focus on the way licensed venues are managed (particularly those that cater to large numbers of young people); the “re-education” of patrons concerning their role as consumers of “quality hospitality;” and attention
to situational factors, including serving practices, that promote intoxication and violent confrontations.

Approaches available to regulators include licensing provisions, policy development, cooperation with the industry to develop standards, developing formal and informal codes of practice, education, publicity and information campaigns (especially at the local level), incentives for responsible operators, and working with the community. These approaches can usefully be arranged in an enforcement pyramid, the broad base representing frequently used approaches based on suasion, cooperation, and negotiation, the sharp end representing the ultimate but infrequently used sanctions like the closure of an establishment (the business equivalent of capital punishment). However, to ensure transparency and accountable in this most difficult of regulatory arenas, a system of responsive regulation will give a central place to community empowerment and to the role of public interest groups.

Fights are known to occur in or around pubs and taverns, and sometimes people get hurt. Usually young men are involved, and usually they’re drunk – or so people assume. Fights like this are a problem, of course, especially if one’s son or daughter is involved, but unless the injuries are really serious, it seems no one worries too much – least of all the police, who dislike the messy business of trying to get statements from people who can’t stand up straight and are frequently uncooperative, incoherent or violently ill (Homel and Tomsen, 1991).

However, the enforcement problem can take on a new dimension if lots of fights and incidents of disorderly conduct occur in a local “hot spot” on a regular basis. Downtown entertainment areas in many towns and cities often take on this character, becoming notorious for law-and-order and public safety problems that make extra attention from regulatory authorities and local government politically unavoidable. But then the response is often purely political: sweeping the streets clean of the human riff-raff in a series of well publicised blitzes for public relations purposes, rather than attending to the underlying problems of how venues and the surrounding public space are managed and regulated.

Despite the often blasé attitudes of the regulators, there is an emerging awareness in the research literature that a serious public health issue is at stake (e.g., Stockwell et al., 1994). One feature of assault victimisation found in all crime victim surveys, including those analysed by Homel and Mirrlees-Black (1997) in Queensland, is the extremely high rates of victimisation of teenagers and young adults. The survey data also highlight the importance of environmental or situational factors as risk factors for young people. In general, those who go out for entertainment at night, particularly to hotels and nightclubs, have a higher than average risk of assault. 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 or entertainment. Many of these places, especially for those aged 18 years or over, are licensed venues. It follows that one important strategy for reducing violence is to increase the safety of leisure and entertainment venues, including hotels and nightclubs, especially for young patrons.