Law enforcement and public health agencies in Ventura County report that a disproportionate share of crime and violence emanate from retail alcohol outlets. The link between alcohol and violence has been clear for a long time. New research has shed light on this relationship, particularly as it relates to the location of alcohol sales. Neighborhoods where bars, restaurants, liquor and other stores that sell alcohol are close together, suffer more frequent incidences of violence and other alcohol-related problems.

These new research findings have important and exciting implications for Ventura County in its effort to reduce alcohol-related crime and violence. City Councils and the Board of Supervisors have authority to determine the location, number, and density of alcohol outlets in Ventura County communities. They can make rules that set minimum distances between alcohol outlets, limit new licenses for areas that already have outlets too close together, stop issuing licenses when a particular location goes out of business, and permanently close outlets that repeatedly violate liquor laws. Effective use of these land-use powers can reduce alcohol retail outlet density and reduce risks of harm to Ventura communities. The Ventura County Behavioral Health Alcohol & Drug Programs – Prevention Services has recently published a Model Conditional Use Permit and Deemed Approved Ordinance that can be adapted to local community conditions and used to develop these and other violence-prevention land-use provisions.

This briefing paper presents some of the questions and answers about the relationship between alcohol outlets and violence, the implications of this relationship for Ventura County, and strategies that Ventura County can use to address the problem.
What is the relationship between outlet density and violence?

Recent research studies have found that in and near neighborhoods where there is a high density of places that sell alcohol there is a higher rate of violence. That is, when bars, liquor stores, and other businesses that sell alcohol are close together, more assaults and other violent crimes occur.

Some of the important findings about outlet density and violence are described below:

- In a study of Camden, New Jersey, neighborhoods with alcohol outlet density had more violent crime (including homicide, rape, assault, and robbery). This association was strong even when other neighborhood characteristics such as poverty and age of residents were taken into account.

- In a study of 74 cities in Los Angeles County, California, a higher density of alcohol outlets was associated with more violence, even when levels of unemployment, age, ethnic and racial characteristics and other community characteristics were taken into account.

- In a six-year study of changes in numbers of alcohol outlets in 551 urban and rural zip code areas in California, an increase in the number of bars and off-premise places (e.g., liquor, convenience and grocery stores) was related to an increase in the rate of violence. These effects were largest in poor, minority areas of the state, those areas already saturated with the greatest numbers of outlets.

- Violence committed by youth was more common in minority neighborhoods where there are many outlets that sell alcohol for consumption off the premises (such as liquor and convenience stores). This finding makes sense because underage drinkers are more likely to purchase alcohol in a store than in a bar or restaurant.

- In neighborhoods where there are many outlets that sell high-alcohol beer and spirits, more violent assaults occur.

- Large nightclubs and similar establishments that are primarily devoted to drinking have higher rates of assaults among customers.

A larger number of alcohol outlets and a higher rate of violence might be expected in poorer neighborhoods or in neighborhoods with a larger population of young people. But as the research described above shows, even when levels of poverty, age and ethnic background of residents are taken into account, a high density of outlets is strongly related to violence regardless of a neighborhood’s economic, age or ethnic status.

All of the characteristics of alcohol outlet location can be important. It is easy to see that a town with many bars, restaurants, and stores that sell alcohol could be different from one that has fewer outlets. It is also easy to see that a neighborhood that has a bar on each corner and a liquor store on each block has a completely different environment than one that has few outlets or none at all. Other characteristics of the environment make a difference, too. For example, a strip of bars near a college campus presents a different environment from a similar density of bars in an upscale city center and is also different from a similar density in a poor neighborhood. But in each case, some form of increased violence would be expected as compared to similar areas with fewer alcohol outlets. A study of changes in outlet density over time as related to violence in California found that regardless of other neighborhood characteristics, an increase in outlets increased violence. In neighborhoods with a high minority population and low
Is alcohol retail outlet density a problem in Ventura County?

Too many alcohol establishments in close proximity to one another can cause increases in crime and can discourage business investment. In the City of Ventura, which has the highest outlet density in Ventura County, some areas of Downtown and the Westside have alcohol outlet densities that are many times greater than the State ABC standards allow – and local statistics confirm what national crime research suggests – these areas have higher rates of violent and property crimes.

How do state and local governments regulate outlet density?

Both the State of California and its local governments can regulate the alcohol outlet density. State law limits the number of alcohol outlets based on the population of a given region, with differing types of licenses having differing ratios, and provides additional limits in high crime areas.

However, these state restrictions are relatively lax and do not adequately address overconcentration issues. For example, all of the alcohol outlets in a given region may be clustered in a small number of neighborhoods. State law allows local governments to augment the state requirements with additional restrictions that can be tailored to particular community needs. Most critical is developing rules that

What accounts for the relationship between outlet density and violence?

The research that has been done so far cannot pinpoint exactly why having more outlets in a small area seems to result in more violence. Various explanations have been proposed. One is that alcohol outlets can be a source of social disorder.

A liquor store parking lot with people drinking in their cars and broken bottles littering the area outside a bar may send a message that this is a neighborhood in which normal rules about orderly behavior are not enforced.

Another possible explanation is that a neighborhood with a large number of outlets acts as a magnet for people who are more inclined to be violent or more vulnerable to being assaulted. It is also possible that a high number of outlets results in a large number of people under the influence of alcohol – which makes them both more likely to be violent and less able to defend themselves. It is most probable that all of these factors come into play.

Some properties along Main Street in Ventura have difficulty attracting quality businesses – even in desirable areas of town – due to outlet density. Here, a commercial property in Midtown remains vacant, situated between a liquor store and a bar. There are fourteen alcohol-selling businesses within this three-block area.

What is the relationship of outlet density to other alcohol problems?

The density of alcohol outlets has also been found to be related to other alcohol problems such as drinking and driving, higher rates of motor vehicle-related pedestrian injuries, and child abuse and neglect.

incomes, the effect was more than four times greater than for the statewide sample of communities.
address geographic density – that is, the distance between outlets. Local governments can reduce geographic density by:

- Making rules that set minimum distances between alcohol outlets
- Limiting new licenses for areas that already have outlets too close together
- Not issuing a new license when a particular location goes out of business
- Permanently closing outlets that repeatedly violate liquor laws (such as by selling alcohol to minors or to intoxicated persons or allowing illicit drug sales or prostitution on the premises)

The research strongly suggests that limits on outlet density may be an effective means of reducing alcohol problems, especially violence. States and communities can use controls on the number and location of alcohol outlets as a tool for reducing violence, creating a safer and healthier alcohol environment, and improving the quality of life of a community.

What resources are available in Ventura County to address alcohol retail outlet density?

The Ventura County Behavioral Health Alcohol & Drug Programs – Prevention Services has recently published a guide to local regulation of alcohol availability entitled *Best Practices in Municipal Regulation to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms from Licensed Alcohol Outlets*. The guide provides an overview of local powers to regulate alcohol availability, including outlet density, and detailed model provisions that can be adapted to the conditions found in particular neighborhoods and cities, together with commentaries and resource materials. It is available at [www.venturacountylimits.org](http://www.venturacountylimits.org).

References

7. Gorman et al., supra n. 1.