

# 3 Alcohol and Youthful Rites of Passage

*Robyn Lincoln and Ross Homel*

## Abstract

*This chapter reports the most recent empirical data from a series of observational studies of alcohol-related violence in nightclubs in Surfers Paradise. It does not report the totality of the findings from these studies but instead focuses on the contributions these studies can make to a National Alcohol Strategy, especially where young people and the potential for violence are concerned. It includes some policy development suggestions that arise from the data and concludes with principles that might be incorporated in such a national approach, particularly with respect to crime prevention strategies.*

## Introduction

The major objective of the series of studies was to improve the safety of the environments in and around licensed venues in central city entertainment areas. The initial location was in Surfers Paradise (Homel et al. 1997a), but safety action projects have also been conducted in Cairns, Townsville and Mackay (Fox 1996; Hauritz et al. 1998a, 1988b). Of course, perceived and actual violence problems in and around nightclubs are not restricted to Queensland locations nor to tourist destinations, and nor are the crime prevention strategies that deal with them (see Wilson 1997 on Melbourne's West End Precinct, among others).

Other community action projects, through the use of Accords, have been implemented in Victoria (Rumbold et al. 1998), South Australia (Fisher 1993) and Western Australia (see Vaughan, this volume) and of course these parallel similar United States projects (Treno & Holder 1997). The key to these community action projects is to encourage responsible server programs, to back this up where possible with external enforcement, and to empower those involved to take a problem-solving approach. The international data on alcohol, crime and victimisation (Greenfeld 1998) present a statistical snapshot suggesting that over one-third of victims report

an offender affected by alcohol; two-thirds tend to be victimised by offenders they know; the majority of alcohol-related crimes are assaults; and up to 70 per cent of such alcohol-related incidents occur in the home. So it is imperative to recognise that resolving the alcohol and violence loop by implementing situational measures in nightclubs constitutes a narrow approach to addressing the alcohol–violence problem.

Australia’s “wet” drinking culture (Homel & Clark 1994; Makkai 1997; Room 1988) is often contrasted with the “mixed” drinking culture of the United States or the “dry” drinking cultures of Scandinavian countries (Homel & Clark 1994). It implies that alcohol use is both “socially integrated” and a part of “popular culture” (Makkai 1997). For young people in particular, alcohol is seen as being integral to their maturation and recreation (see Williams, this volume). Drinking in Australia is socially structured, culturally defined, environmentally influenced, as well as being the result of individual risk factors (such as family situations, socioeconomic status, psychological state) and so on (Whelan 1999). A majority of adult Australians consume alcohol and most are “regular drinkers consuming alcohol at least once a week”, with about 26 per cent being non-drinkers, 53 per cent being moderate drinkers and the remaining 21 per cent being in the harmful, heavy or binge categories (Makkai 1998, p. 3). While alcohol use among adolescents has been reported as being in decline during the 1980s, about nine in 10 young people report having engaged in drinking and it is this “initiation into alcohol use” of adolescents that is of most concern (McAllister, Moore & Makkai 1991) when the environments of licensed nightclub venues are examined.

There is a strong but multifactorial relationship between alcohol use and violence but it is not described as “causal” (see Carcach & Conroy, this volume). There are background factors that are implicated—individual, situational and cultural. Clearly the relationship implicates the actual properties of the drugs that impair or exacerbate certain kinds of thinking and behaviour; there may be predisposing psychological factors at the individual level; there is certainly learning and modelling in what drunks can do and can get away with; and there are the contextual factors or opportunity structures for drinking (see Carcach & Conroy, this volume). Alcohol is implicated for both victims and offenders in more than half the offences, and these can take place in “high risk” environments like nightclubs and pubs (see Brinkman et al., this volume). Yet, the constant refrain is that our data collection processes are poor. Better data collection

efforts, triangulation of indicators, and the potential use of proxies within some data sets are recommended (see Brinkman et al., this volume). Under-reporting of violent incidents, either to medical or police agencies, means that observational data can be useful in helping to elucidate the relationship.

Our concern about youthful drinking is not only focused on the physiological consequences (Whelan 1999) nor on the implications for future adult drinking patterns. Our focus is on the “rites of passage” drinking behaviours that may exacerbate the propensity for committing violence or being a victim of violence (Hollin & McMurrin 1993; Stevenson 1996). The AIC reports based on the National Drug Strategy National Household Surveys on victims and offenders in alcohol-related incidents (Makkai 1997, 1998) demonstrate that there is considerable concordance between the two groups with the key overlapping factors being: male, single and young. Physical abuse (over 10%), verbal abuse (over 30%) and being placed in a position of fear (over 20%) are significant outcomes (Makkai 1997). What is of importance to the present study are the differences between type of drinking style, where it is suggested that binge drinking—of the kind often observed in nightclubs—may be more likely to be influenced by environmental factors (Makkai 1998 and this volume).

The present study therefore examines the consequences for alcohol-related incidents in licensed venues where some key environmental variables have been modified. While there are formal regulations that govern licensed premises, there are also informal standards required by the community (Homel et al. 1997b). It was these informal requirements that led to the instigation of the Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project in 1993. The project drew together criminologists, relevant local and State government agents, community representatives and local business operators to formulate an intervention strategy. One of the major thrusts of the project was to overcome the freewheeling unregulated approach to the supply of alcohol which failed to discourage drinks promotions that have been cited as major risk factors for violence (Homel et al. 1997b). The major aims of the Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project (Homel et al. 1994) were to reduce violence and public disorder, to impact on drink-driving incidents, to reduce fear of crime and to improve the image of the area, which could increase profitability and tourism trade.

## The Project

Details of the Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project have been documented elsewhere (see Hauritz et al. 1998a, 1988b; Homel et al. 1994, 1997a, 1997b) so only a brief overview is reported here. The project established a community forum from which community-based task groups were formed. Safety audits and risk assessments were conducted, from which a code of practice was developed. The process was largely informal. Changes came from voluntary and informal regulator monitoring. This strategy worked more successfully than any formal regulatory process would have. It resulted from the efforts of individuals and the training and communication initiated by the involvement of the Licensed Venues Association and the Monitoring Committee.

A key feature of the empirical elements of the project involved participant observation studies to record levels of violence in nightclubs in the Cavill Mall and Orchid Avenue areas. The patron observations were conducted in 1993, 1994, 1996 and the present paper reports findings from the 1999 data collection. The aim of the observation study was to determine whether violence and aggression in nightclubs differed from the levels previously recorded.

The 20-page observation schedule was the same as that used in earlier data collection phases. The schedule consisted of items covering the physical and social environments, patrons, bar and security staff, drinking patterns, serving practices, and aggression and violence (extracted from Hauritz et al. 1998b, p. 28). The section on conflict/violence was divided into verbal aggression, challenges/threats, friendly fights, rough ejections, accidents leading to injury and physical aggression or assaults such as bumping deliberately, grabbing, pushing, kicking and punching. Data were recorded on the people involved, the features of the incidents and any intervention strategies (extracted from Hauritz et al. 1998b, p. 28).

The observations were conducted by 20 students from a university crime prevention class between 23 February and 14 April 1999. The student-observers received formal training sessions in order to most closely replicate the earlier procedures. They worked in teams of two or more for observation sessions of two hours in duration. A total of 57 visits were made to 17 nightclubs in the Surfers Paradise area. Each club, on average, was visited three times with a range from one to six. The observation periods were divided into three phases: early (10pm to midnight) which comprised 39 per cent of visits; middle (midnight to 2am) which comprised 47 per cent

of visits; and late (2am to 4am) which comprised 14 per cent of visits. While the majority of clubs (77%) close at 5am, some clubs closed early or were not open at all for their scheduled visit. Observation sessions were distributed across the days of the week as some clubs have theme nights or staff nights for workers from entertainment venues on the quieter weeknights. However, the majority of visits (63%) were on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.

## Key Findings

Overall, the findings replicate those of the earlier studies and support the results reported in the literature; namely that major factors related to violence include:

- “drink promotions;
- groups of young males;
- crowding;
- lack of comfort;
- aggressive bar staff and security personnel; and
- inept methods for dealing with patrons” (Homel et al. 1997b, pp. 265).

It is not the use of alcohol per se, but the way it is managed, and it is not one single factor that causes violence around licensed venues, but an interaction of various factors (Homel et al. 1994). The most important data, however, relate to the observed levels of aggression compared with those reported for the previous data collection phases (see Table 1). It is clear that the trends observed in 1996 have continued in the intervening three years, where overall aggression has increased, and in some cases exceeded, the pre-intervention levels for 1993. What is significant is that physical assaults have declined.

**Table 1: Observed rates of aggression per 100 hours for 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1999**

Type of aggression	1993 (n=56)	1994 (n=43)	1996 (n=48)	1999 (n=57)
Verbal abuse	12.5	2.3	8.3	13.2
Arguments	7.2	2.3	13.5	11.4
Challenges/threats	1.8	0.0	9.4	14.0
Total non-physical	21.4	4.7	31.3	38.6
Physical assaults	9.8	4.7	8.3	6.14

$\chi^2=19.13$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p<.05$

In general, the 17 (mainly “disco”) venues observed were comfortable, attractive and clean. Crowding was not a major problem. Transport and the provision of food, however, were extremely limited. The majority of venues provided security who were generally of Anglo-Australian origin, relatively young and most often male. Bouncer interaction with patrons was characterised as reserved as they patrolled aisles and bars or checked identification at entrances. Generally, the decorum expectations placed upon patrons by management were of a moderate standard and it was observed that over half the patrons seemed to be out for a “big night”. The number of patrons ranged from less than 50 people up to 200. Most of the patrons appeared of Anglo-Australian origin with few tourists present.

Young males (in groups) constituted the majority of the patron population (51–75%). The males were tidily dressed on the whole. While they tended to stay in their own groups, males regularly made contact with potential partners, mainly in the form of “chatting up”. Overall, males were friendly and cheerful but male hostility, roughness, bumping and rowdiness were apparent at low to medium levels, with some swearing observed. Female patrons were likewise young, tended to be in groups and to remain within those groups, and were well groomed and tidily dressed. In contrast to males, female sexual activity was mainly of the non-contact variety such the “checking out” of potential partners. Overall, females were very friendly and cheerful with very low levels (usually none) of female hostility, roughness, bumping and rowdiness but with similar swearing levels.

There were 15 verbal aggression incidents observed but these were deemed not severe. The aggressors were generally male patrons, although recipients were equally of both sexes. The incidents generally occurred inside the venues with intervention by others in 60 per cent of observations. Of the 13 arguments observed, over 40 per cent were described as having a high level of severity, with more than half the participants having high levels of drunkenness. Both male and female patrons were involved with some (14%) incidents having bouncer involvement. Intervention by patrons or staff occurred in 86 per cent of these events. Observers reported 16 challenge/threat incidents although these were seen as not severe. Both perpetrators and victims tended to be male patrons with high levels of drunkenness. In one-third of these incidents there was no intervention. The seven assault incidents were of average severity and the participants were at average to high levels of drunkenness. Again, the aggressors tended to be male patrons and, similarly, about one-third of these events received no

intervention. In the cases where bouncers intervened, treatment of the situation varied with inflaming, mediating or controlling techniques being employed. Only one incident of property damage was recorded and most observers (82% of visits) reported that there were no ejections during their two-hour periods at the venues.

The majority of venues provided adequate numbers of bar staff and these were generally fairly even mixes of male and female staff. Overall, bar staff were of a young age and of Anglo-Australian origin. Most staff were friendly, were only slightly or not permissive of deviant behaviour and were good at defusing aggression. In the case of drunken patrons, staff intervened most of the time and treatment mainly involved the refusal of service or being asked to leave. In a small number of cases, management was called.

More than half of all males were observed to have a medium to high level of drunkenness, as a result of drinking three or more drinks per hour. Normal beer was the most common drink consumed, followed by mixed spirits, straight spirits and water. The majority of drinks were consumed from either bottles or middies (285ml). Only one incident of drug consumption (cocaine) was recorded for a male. Female drunkenness was slightly lower than that of males at approximately 46 per cent reporting medium to high levels of drunkenness. Mixed spirits were the most common drink consumed, followed by cocktails and normal beer, and no drug consumption was observed among females.

Drink promotions were provided by over half the venues and included "happy hour", gimmicks and various other promotions. In the qualitative component of the observation schedule, a number of observers commented on the prevalence of drink promotions (see Atkin, Hocking & Block 1986). This includes handing out "two free drinks" cards in the Cavill Mall and promotions sponsored by beverage producers. However, the majority of venues provided alcohol care signage, such as underage drinking warnings, house policy notices and drink-driving warnings. Self-testing breathalysers were available in only 23 per cent of venues.

The initial data collection periods found that physical violence decreased from 9.8 to 4.7 per 100 hours of observation and that incidents of non-physical violence declined even more (Homel et al. 1994). The hypothesised reasons for these declines were that males had reduced their levels of binge drinking; that management of clubs displayed more responsible practices; and that patrons seemed to be better dressed (Homel et al. 1994).

The parallel police figures also showed declines in assaults, some property offences and disorder offences (Homel et al. 1994). By the time of the 1996 data collection, however, there were indications that “two years after the project, much of the impact had ‘worn off’, with levels of aggression and risky drinking practices being approximately at pre-project levels” (Hauritz et al. 1998b). The project was then implemented in modified forms in North Queensland and the results showed that “all forms of aggression and violence observed within venues declined, especially physical violence” although these decreases were not statistically significant (Hauritz et al. 1998b).

The original Surfers Paradise studies, and the subsequent ones in North Queensland, aimed to observe in each venue at least three occasions to achieve one visit for the early, middle and late periods. This was the case in 1994, but only 2.5 visits on average were completed in 1996 (Hauritz et al. 1998a). In 1999 there was an average of 3.3 visits across the 17 venues, however these were not evenly dispersed. As has been pointed out in previous publications (Hauritz et al. 1998a), aggression is more likely to occur near closing times of premises, yet in 1999 only 14 per cent of visits were in the late period (compared with 20 per cent for the previous years). The same inconsistency applies with respect to the days of the week on which the observations took place, with only 63 per cent of visits in 1999 being on Thursdays to Saturdays, which were the exclusive focus of the earlier data collections.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The current study supports the general findings from previous data collection phases incorporated into the Surfers Paradise Safety Action Project. In common with other similar interventions, it is generally found that the strategies are highly effective in the short term but lack continuity of effect in the longer term (Homel et al. 1997b). Labelling such interventions as “failures”, however, is short-sighted (Felson & Clarke 1997; Gilling 1997; Sherman et al. 1998; Baum 1999). As Homel et al. (1997b, p. 281) have noted, these projects do have a significant impact on aggression levels and alcohol consumption behaviours, even if for a limited period; other more traditional approaches have clearly not found enduring success either; and such community intervention strategies “are dynamic and pass through many phases, but rarely will they leave the site unchanged”. This is the case for

Surfers Paradise, where at least the levels of physical aggression have remained below the pre-intervention level, even if the non-physical aggression measures have climbed again. When combined with more recent work on developmental crime reduction approaches, our key recommendation is that there needs to be a range of crime prevention measures implemented (Graham & Homel 1997; Sherman et al. 1998; Rosenbaum, Lurigio & Davis 1998; Wikstrom 1995).

It seems that a national alcohol strategy needs to address the three strands of crime prevention: developmental, community and situational (Tonry & Farrington 1995). Drawing on the empirical data, there are specific recommendations that can be made across the three avenues to crime prevention. While this present project takes a situational/community crime prevention focus, it also must be recognised that youthful alcohol use has an overriding "rites of passage" element. This is particularly evident in the Surfers Paradise precinct which is housed in a tourist location and which has a large number of alcohol venues that attract young people. The student observers were themselves regular club-goers and so were able to frame the research through their own participation in the "club scene". Surfers Paradise has again recently attracted large numbers of school-leavers for their graduation celebrations. The 1999 Schoolies Festival, with estimates that up to 70,000 school-leavers came to the Gold Coast, is evidence that a more holistic, entertainment-oriented and unobtrusive approach is required (Shearing & Stenning 1997). Certainly, young women see the use of alcohol as a critical rite of passage (see de Crespigny, this volume) where they drink to relieve stress and pressure, but also as a celebration.

Contrasted against the celebratory nature of alcohol use by young people are findings from some studies that suggest that a sense of hopelessness motivates a significant amount of adolescent consumption (see Taylor & Carroll, this volume). Alcohol clearly plays a large role in adolescent culture and, as others have noted, it tends to be of the binge-drinking kind. Females seem to be drinking as frequently but not yet as heavily as young males (see Taylor & Carroll, this volume). Indeed, much of their self-reported drinking is happening in their own homes, friends' places (often under adult supervision) or in public areas. This would therefore seem to call for very different crime prevention initiatives than those described for Surfers Paradise clubs.

A paradoxical message is sent to young people about alcohol as a rite of passage with little responsibility on the providers of alcohol venues to create safe environments and on the broader community with respect to alcohol

consumption attitudes. This paradox is replete within the crime prevention literature—crime prevention strategies are aimed at providing well regulated and cohesive communities, and yet it is these very communities that are unregulated and lack cohesion that have higher crime rates (Tonry & Farrington 1995; Mazerolle & Roehl 1999).

One approach at refining intervention strategies is to target different types of drinkers. Young males represent a large proportion of harmful and binge drinkers and they are also prone to other social disadvantages (high unemployment) with resultant personal consequences (suicide and other risk behaviours). Thus, it is suggested that prevention measures be activated in early childhood to equip young men with “general life skills”, which would include alcohol prevention strategies (Makkai 1998). It is further suggested that binge drinkers may be more likely to be influenced by changes to environmental factors via situational crime prevention measures; whereas harmful drinkers would benefit from specific treatment interventions (Makkai 1998). It is these binge drinkers—out for a “big night”—who appeared to predominate in our recent observational study.

Further, with respect to developmental crime prevention, key risk and protective factors inherent in criminal or drug-use behaviours have been identified (DCPC 1999). The risk factors relate to conflict and violence in the family, poor parental supervision and discrimination based on social or cultural attributes (DCPC 1999). It is also noted, however, that these risk factors, from a developmental crime prevention approach, need not be deterministic; indeed they are affected differently at different stages of the life cycle, so there are key transition periods. What concerns us here is the transition from high school to work or further studies. The relevant risk factors are community acceptability of levels of violence and harmful alcohol consumption, and it is the converse that provides strong protective factors.

With respect to community crime prevention strategies, a number of important proposals have been made. Positive reports of successful intervention approaches have emerged. Recommendations common to all strategies include:

- (i) the need to include a range of stakeholders in the changes made to the local community;
- (ii) the need for consistent licensing laws and serving practices where regulation is enforced but in a preventive rather than reactive way;

- (iii) the use of a range of strategies to ensure compliance and facilitate the extended life of interventions;
- (iv) provision of alternative venues and activities for young people;
- (v) appropriate training for security and bar staff in licensed venues; and
- (vi) education campaigns for patrons in terms of safety and reduction of fear of violence.

With respect to the more situation-based crime prevention strategies (see Clarke 1997) there emerges some key factors in permanently reducing alcohol-related violence in licensed venues (Homel et al. 1997b, pp. 78–80):

- encourage community-based action, rather than heavy policing;
- empower and motivate licensees to be primary decision-makers, thus encouraging proactive rather than reactive action;
- utilise the media in promoting responsible drinking practices, which will consequently lead to greater public support for the licensees; and
- establish a community-based committee that oversees licensees to ensure they abide by the Code of Practice.

While there is considerable overlap between the three approaches in dealing with alcohol-related disorder, each approach offers concrete strategies that target different groups or different motivating factors. We need to draw on all approaches to crime prevention:

- developmental—looking at the risk and protective factors;
- community—to build and reorient problematic communities and behaviours; and
- situational—to implement specific localised strategies to focus on specific problems and areas.

By drawing on these three approaches to crime prevention, the key principles that emerge revolve around community responsibility for alcohol consumption and its related violence.

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