

Commentaries

DOES IT MATTER WHERE THE DRINKING IS, WHEN THE OBJECT IS GETTING DRUNK?

The paper by Wells *et al.* [1] raises interesting questions about the phenomenon now called 'pre-drinking' and its implications for research and prevention. To call off-premise consumption of alcohol 'pre-drinking' is to assume that there is a main event which it precedes. Thus the term and the paper both tend to assign on-premise drinking the status of main event; but, depending on the young drinker's age and context, this may not be the case. On-premise drinking currently accounts for considerably less than half of all drinking in most societies (Britain and Ireland are still exceptions). Those under legal drinking age will do most of their drinking off-premises, so that most drinkers begin their drinking careers as off-premise drinkers. We know more of the phenomenology of on-premise than off-premise drinking because it is easier to observe and to study, but whether and when on-premises drinking is the main event for young drinkers is a matter for investigation rather than assumption.

Wells and her colleagues tend to assume that drinking will be less problematic on-premise than off-premise. There is a logic here around the formal control of the drinking environment: it is usually easier for the state to intervene in drinking occasions in public places than in private. The bartender and bouncer have responsibilities, potentially enforced by economic threats of licence suspension or removal. It is tempting to conclude from this that on-premise drinking will be more controlled than off-premise. This was also the policy assumption some years ago in Finland. However, Partanen [2] found, comparing the same individual's drinking occasions lasting 2 hours or more at home and on-premises, that Helsinki respondents drank about the same amount in the two contexts, but did it over a longer period of time at home, resulting in less intoxication. A recent British case-control study of young offenders found that the respondent having assaulted someone was associated with going out to a nightclub (not quite significant), associated negatively with going to a pub, and showed no association with other incident contexts [3]. Inspection of the data shows that, combining the results for pubs and nightclubs, there is no significant difference between on-premise and off-premise results.

These studies suggest that whether on-premise drinking is less problematic than off-premise drinking should be—again—a matter for investigation rather than assumption. Clearly, it can go both ways. Furthermore,

policies that can reduce harm from on-premise consumption apply regardless of whether pre-drinking takes place. For instance, in today's 'night-time economy', there is a high premium on assembling large drunken crowds in a small area, increasing the odds of trouble. Thus Hadfield [4] reports that British pub rentals are twice as expensive in such 'entertainment districts' as elsewhere. Allowing such clustering of outlets is against the interest of public health and order, regardless of whether patrons consume most of their alcohol in pre-drinking sessions, or within the pubs themselves.

Perhaps the most important point made by Wells *et al.* is that 'getting drunk appears to be an underlying motivation for drinking (and pre-drinking) among many young people'. This point is supported, for instance, by data from the Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey of 16–24-year-olds in 2004. To the question, 'What proportion of the times when you are drinking do you intend to get drunk?', 20% of drinkers said 'every time' or 'most times', 53% said 'some' or 'a few times' and only 27% said 'never' [5, p. 11]. Getting drunk on a young person's weekend night out in many societies is often not accidental; it is often intended.

To reduce problems from drinking, it may be more important to start from this point rather than from a concern about whether policies favour on-premise or off-premise drinking. Faced with the intention to get drunk, the main policy choices are to dissuade from or frustrate the intent, or to channel the drinking, or organize the drinking environment to reduce the harms. Such measures as high taxes, shorter opening hours (both off-sale and on-sale), banning promotions, server interventions and making low-alcohol beverages differentially available would all potentially serve as efforts to counter the intention to get drunk. Drink-driving counter-measures, provision of late-night public transportation, bans on drinking in public places and training bar staff or re-designing bars to minimize conflict are all potentially efforts to channel the drinking or organize the environment to reduce harms. The crucial issue, in evaluating the public utility of all these measures, is not whether they favour 'pre-drinking' or on-premise drinking, but what they do to the rates of harm to the drinker and to others from a night of drinking, whether the drinking occurs off-premise, on-premise, or in both contexts.

Declarations of interest

None.

Keywords Alcohol policy, intoxication, on-premise drinking, pre-drinking, young drinkers.

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WHEN THE OBJECT IS TO GET DRUNK, PRE-DRINKING MATTERS

We thank Room and Livingston [1] for their thoughtful commentary and are delighted to have the opportunity to respond. Room and Livingston's argument that we equate pre-drinking with off-premise consumption misses the point of our paper [2]. Our goal was to describe the phenomenon of pre-drinking and discuss its implications for policy in relation to licensed premises. Pre-drinking is not simply a term that we are using to refer to off-premise drinking—'pre-drinking' and other similar terms such as 'pre-gaming', 'pre-loading', 'front-loading', 'pre-bar' and 'pre-partying' are used by young drinkers in various countries and cultures to refer to a certain style of drinking—namely, the rapid consumption of a large amount of alcohol before going out to whatever happens to be the 'main event', such as a party, bar or nightclub. For example, an online dictionary of new slang words defined by young people provides a typical definition of pre-drinking: '[The] act of drinking alcohol before you go out to the club to maximize your fun at the club while spending the least amount on extremely overpriced alcoholic beverages.' (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>). Therefore, while we concur with Room and Livingston's suggestion that a substantial portion of youth drinking

takes place off-premise and may sometimes represent the 'main event' of the evening, we are concerned with the common and widespread practice of planned, fast-paced, heavy drinking before going to a bar or nightclub and the policy implications for licensed premises of this pattern of behaviour.

In assuming that the point is to compare on- and off-premise drinking, Room and Livingston cite Partanen's study [3] comparing home drinking to on-premise drinking among Helsinki respondents in the early 1970s as evidence that home drinking may be less likely to result in intoxication. However, home drinking occasions among all age drinkers in the 1970s cannot be equated with contemporary pre-drinking practices of young people. Moreover, while it is true that pre-drinking is often done at home (although it sometimes occurs in cheaper pubs before going to clubs [4]), the critical aspect of pre-drinking is that it involves the rapid consumption of alcohol done with the intention of reaching a sufficient level of intoxication to carry one through the main event of the evening with minimal further spending on alcohol. This is clearly unlike home drinking described by Partanen, where, in comparison to on-premise drinking, 'people do it in a *more leisurely manner* [italics added], which seems to lead to a lower degree of intoxication' [3, p. 16].

Similarly, the issue is not whether drinking in a bar is more risky than drinking in other contexts, but rather whether heavy drinking before arriving at the bar produces more problems than would occur without pre-drinking. Of course, we recognize that bars and bar districts are high risk locations for aggression and other alcohol-related harm. However, among young people who go to bars, pre-drinking may increase their risk of extreme intoxication and alcohol-related harms. We are not suggesting that young people should drink in bars *instead of* at home, but that, for young people who go to bars, strategies might be developed to reduce the practice of loading up on alcohol before they go. One option to consider might be to encourage young bar-goers to do their early drinking at a bar where there is less reason for, and tolerance of, rapid consumption of alcohol in a short period of time than there might be in a private setting. This alternative might make drinking in the earlier part of the evening more leisurely, by fulfilling the social functions of pre-drinking (such as group bonding) while reducing the goal of 'banking' sufficient alcohol to last the evening.

In the same vein, Room and Livingston misinterpret our paper as being concerned about whether policies favour on- or off-premise drinking when in fact our aim was to consider how current policies may have influenced the emergence of pre-drinking and suggest alternative approaches that might reduce this highly risky