Policy implications of the widespread practice of ‘pre-drinking’ or ‘pre-gaming’ before going to public drinking establishments—are current prevention strategies backfiring?

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ABSTRACT

Aim To describe the research, policy and prevention implications of pre-drinking or pre-gaming; that is, planned heavy drinking prior to going to a public drinking establishment. Methods The authors describe the phenomenon of pre-drinking, motivations for pre-drinking and its associated risks using available research literature, media and popular internet vehicles. Results Heavy drinking prior to going out has emerged as a common and celebrated practice among young adults around the world. Apparent motivations are: (i) to avoid paying for high priced drinks at commercial drinking establishments; (ii) to achieve drunkenness and enhance and extend the night out; and (iii) to socialize with friends, reduce social anxiety or enhance male group bonding before going out. Limited existing research on pre-drinking suggests that it is associated with heavy drinking and harmful consequences. We argue that policies focused upon reducing drinking in licensed premises may have the unintended consequence of displacing drinking to pre-drinking environments, possibly resulting in greater harms. Conclusions Effective policy and prevention for drinking in licensed premises requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the entire drinking occasion (not just drinking that occurs in the licensed environment), as well as the ‘determined drunkenness’ goal of some young people.

Keywords Drinking consequences, licensed premises, policy, pre-drinking, pre-gaming, prevention, young adults.

INTRODUCTION

‘Pre-drinking’ (or ‘pre-gaming’, ‘pre-loading’, ‘front-loading’) involves planned heavy drinking, usually at someone’s home, prior to going to a social event, typically a bar or nightclub. Although it sometimes occurs in preparation for events where alcohol is not available, especially by underage drinkers [1], pre-drinking has particular relevance to policies influencing licensed premises. Our present focus, therefore, is mainly on drinking before going to commercial drinking establishments, such as bars and nightclubs. In the present paper, we describe the phenomenon of pre-drinking, its associated risks and its implications for research, policy and prevention.

While drinking before going out may not be an entirely new phenomenon, it appears to have become an increasingly common, intense and ritualized activity among young adults in countries around the world [1–8]. Pre-drinking is depicted, celebrated and even glorified in numerous internet bulletins and blogs, YouTube videos and Facebook entries of young adults (see, for example, music video by Right Side of the Tree with the lyrics ‘before we hit the town, we’re slammin’ beers down, it’s time to get your head in the game, we’re ready for the party before it starts, so grab a beer it’s time to pregame’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbhEwC97Eic [accessed 24 November 2008])). Pre-drinking also appears to be integral to the college/university drinking culture. For example, a Princeton
student writes: ‘There’s nothing like taking a solid nose-dive into the sauce and then, after some sort of too-loud consensus, finding oneself rolling 20 deep, a snuffling, lowing pack, herdin’ it on over to those well-appointed abattoirs all in a row’ [9].

Despite its ubiquitous presence on the internet and its critical relevance to policy, surprisingly little research has been conducted on pre-drinking and little consideration given to its policy implications. Recent research suggests, however, that a large proportion of young adults engage in pre-drinking and that it is linked to harmful consequences. In a study of young adults in North West England [5], 55% of men and 60% of women reported pre-drinking prior to going to a pub, bar or nightclub and pre-drinkers were significantly more likely than non-pre-drinkers to report extremely high levels of consumption and to have experienced a fight at a bar or nightclub. Sixty-four per cent of students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a US college [1] engaged in pre-drinking prior to attending a party, bar or concert, with heavier drinking and more negative consequences experienced on days when pre-drinking occurred. Thirty-one per cent of students at a private liberal arts university in Northeast US who had been referred for mandatory intervention following an alcohol-related violation had been pre-drinking on the night of their violation, and pre-drinkers reported higher consumption than did non-pre-drinkers [6].

WHY DO YOUNG ADULTS PRE-DRINK?

An important motive for pre-drinking prior to going to a bar appears to be economic; that is, to avoid paying the high price of drinks [2,10,11]. For example, in a study of young bar-goers in Glasgow [2] one respondent noted ‘...if you bought something with your pals first and then drink it first ... it will save you money’ (p. 66). In exploratory focus group interviews with students at colleges and universities in Pennsylvania ([10], no page numbers in document), one participant reported that pre-drinking is ‘just getting drunk before you go somewhere else so you don’t have to purchase as much alcohol’.

Intoxication is also a primary motive for pre-drinking [1,5,10]. For example, one participant in the Pennsylvania study [10] reported: ‘No matter what the quantity, if it gets the job done, the intent is to get wasted.’ Pre-drinking may be symptomatic of a new culture of intoxication apparent in European and other countries whereby young people drink and use other drugs with the strategic and hedonistic goal of achieving drunkenness and other altered states of consciousness [12,13]. Parker & Williams [14] noted that, among young adult bar-goers in the United Kingdom, regular heavy drinking is essentially normative. It is no longer a marginal phenomenon to be found among subcultures of poor or troubled youth; rather, determined drunkenness seems to be a mainstream phenomenon, occurring in all social classes, in larger cities as well as in the countryside, among girls as well as boys’ ([15], p. 164).

Pre-drinking also offers important social functions. Young people report that pre-drinking allows them to socialize with their friends before going out, which is often not possible in contemporary large, crowded bars and clubs [2,10]. For example, one observer in a study of Toronto nightclubs described a typical nightclub setting as: ‘Very high-energy, chaotic environment—lots of bumping, yelling, hands in the air... Intense energy in bar due to crowdedness... Generally loud and extremely lively, boisterous and rowdy’ ([16], p. 148). In contrast, pre-drinking typically occurs in quieter and less crowded settings and provides an opportunity for young people to talk and socialize. An additional social function of pre-drinking among young people is to ‘ease the discomfort or awkwardness they associate with meeting new people at the intended destination’ ([1], p. 243). In the Pennsylvania study, young people reported engaging in pre-drinking to alleviate anxiety and stress associated with socializing with other people [10]. Similarly, participants in the Glasgow study described getting drunk before going to a nightclub to increase their confidence and reduce self-consciousness [2].

An extension of these social functions is that pre-drinking also may serve to enhance group bonding, especially among young males. Grazian [11] found, for example, that young heterosexual college men used pre-drinking to engage in a collective ritual of confidence building to prepare themselves for subsequent interactions with the opposite sex. Participants in this research described pre-drinking events in which they locked arms in a circle, jumped in unison and chanted: activities described by Grazian [11] as fulfilling ‘the same function as the last minute huddle (with all hands in the middle) does for an athletic team’ (p. 230).

WHY IS PRE-DRINKING PROBLEMATIC?

Pre-drinking has been found to be associated with a greater risk of negative consequences; but why is this so? Hughes et al. [5] speculated that it is the way people drink during pre-drinking events that is problematic. Because pre-drinking occurs in locations without serving restraints and other social controls, it allows for the rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol. For example, young adults in New South Wales reported drinking half a bottle of vodka, a bottle of wine or six or seven beers before going out [3]. The rapid consumption of large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time
increases the risk of blackouts, passing out, hangovers and even alcohol poisoning [1]. For example, in at least two independent investigations, young people reported drinking so much while pre-drinking they passed out or were too intoxicated to go out [10,17].

While it is possible that pre-drinking simply replaces a portion of licensed drinking (i.e. young drinkers drink the same amount with or without pre-drinking), some research suggests that pre-drinking may increase the overall level of alcohol consumption among young people. Participants in the Pennsylvania focus group study [10] indicated that pre-drinking resulted in losing track of how much alcohol had been consumed and drinking more alcohol than planned. Consistent with this, Pedersen & LaBrie [1] found that pre-drinking led to further heavy drinking. Additionally, a study in which late-night pedestrians of downtown Blacksburg, Virginia were administered breathalyzer tests, found that blood alcohol concentration levels were higher among participants who had been pre-drinking and then went to a bar compared with participants who went to a bar without pre-drinking [18]. In a recent event-level study, women were found to drink significantly more drinks and to have higher blood alcohol concentrations on pre-drinking days compared with non-pre-drinking days [19].

Another potential problem with pre-drinking is that it may facilitate use of recreational drugs (e.g. cannabis and powder cocaine). As found by Parker & Williams [14], many young adult bar-goers purposely mix substances to enhance and extend their nights out. Similarly, Brain et al. [20] found that young heavy drinkers often used both alcohol and illicit drugs as part of a ‘psychoactive “time-out”’. Because pre-drinking occurs in an unsupervised environment, it allows for the use of illicit substances that might risk detection in public settings. Although most students in the Pennsylvania study [10] did not report illicit substance use while pre-drinking, one student noted that: ‘Weed is a big factor in pre-gaming for some people.’ The combined effects of alcohol and illicit drugs could increase impairment as well as risk-taking behaviors that may, in turn, increase the likelihood of subsequent injury, violence or victimization.

An additional concern is that, if pre-drinking promotes group bonding among young males, as suggested by Grazian [11], it may make them more likely to engage in conflicts with other groups of males at public drinking establishments or perhaps even prepare them for aggressive encounters. Bar-room research has linked the presence of groups of young males with increased risk of violence [21]. As well, in an interview study on male bar-room aggression ([22], p. 551) one participant reported pre-drinking with friends as a kind of preparation before going to a bar where they planned to beat up another man with whom they had a grudge: ‘It’s got to be done. So even if it takes getting a little drunk to do it, then we’ll do it.’ Given evidence that pre-drinkers were 2.5 times more likely than non-pre-drinkers to report involvement in a fight [5], the potential link between pre-drinking and aggression requires further study.

Finally, pre-drinking means that young adults require transportation both on their way to and from licensed premises. While considerable prevention and policy planning pertains to promoting safer ways of getting young people home from licensed premises, little consideration has been given to the fact that young people are navigating public places and using various modes of transportation with impaired judgement and reduced perception of risk on their way to licensed premises. They may drink-and-drive [10] or may experience other problems, such as violence or victimization. Unlike downtown areas in which licensed premises are located, these problems may occur in out-of-the-way locations where there is little police surveillance [5]. Overall, the implications of this practice for personal and public health are substantial, considering the sheer numbers of young adults migrating to bars and ‘club lands’ on weekends to consume even more alcohol [23].

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PREVENTION: ARE CURRENT PREVENTION STRATEGIES BACKFIRING?**

Because many young people arrive at bars and nightclubs already intoxicated [24], pre-drinking has particular relevance to policy relating to licensed premises. The widespread phenomenon of pre-drinking begs the question: to what extent have current policies contributed to pre-drinking among young adults? While factors influencing pre-drinking probably vary by jurisdiction and depend on cultural drinking norms and local alcohol policy and licensing, one mainstay policy for licensed premises in many jurisdictions has been the banning of drink promotions or specials such as ‘happy hour’ pricing [25–28]. For example, in a review of licensing authority and court responses to applications for license extensions in London, England, most included the requirement that discount drinks not be permitted [29]. The banning of drink promotions is based on evidence that they contribute to high levels of intoxication and problem behavior (e.g. troubles associated with 11-cent drinks at a Sydney hotel, Australia, Box 2.5 [30]). However, in some jurisdictions, this policy may be having the unintended consequence of encouraging young people to drink cheaper alcohol in private settings before going out, especially when heavily discounted prices are offered at off-premise alcohol outlets [5]. Consistent with this argument, one nightclub patron interviewed as part of a newspaper article on a proposed ban on drink specials following a
bar-related brawl in Halifax, Canada [31] noted: ‘Even if they blame it on dollar drinks, kids are just going to spend more at the liquor store before they go to the bar and get more hammered that way.’ Similarly, when asked about how pre-drinking might be prevented, one focus group participant in the Pennsylvania [10] study replied: ‘There used to be specials at the bars, and now there are not, so more people pre-game.’

Similarly, later closing times have been justified in some jurisdictions [e.g. [32]] as a way of reducing problems associated with large numbers of young people being on the streets after drinking establishments close. However, while early closing times may result in drinking events occurring in private settings after bars close (i.e. ‘after-parties’ or ‘chill-out’ parties), late closing times may encourage private drinking to precede rather than to follow public drinking, producing different social dynamics (i.e. ‘getting in the party mood’ rather than ‘keeping the party going’; see [2]) and possibly increasing the potential for violence and other alcohol-related problems.

A number of studies have shown that longer opening hours may increase alcohol-related crime and disorder [33–35], although not all studies have found this effect [36].

One approach to discourage pre-drinking would be for licensed premises to enforce refusal of entry for intoxicated people consistently, as required by law in many jurisdictions. While most staff training has focused upon preventing service to intoxicated people [37–41], training door staff how to recognize the signs of intoxication and refuse entry is also important. A potential problem with this approach, however, is that evidence of intoxication may not be fully apparent when people first arrive, particularly when they drink rapidly just before going out. Although breathalyzer-testing could be implemented at the door, this has a number of logistical problems. To be effective, breathalyzer-testing would need to be implemented community-wide so that pre-drinking patrons do not simply choose venues without breathalyzers. Additionally, as argued by Hughes et al. [5], systematically refusing entry to intoxicated people could result in greater numbers of drunken people in the streets and other public places. Hobbs et al. ([42], p. 104) noted that much of the current nightlife, at least in the United Kingdom, is not controlled by police but by a ‘private army’ of security staff overseeing problems within licensed premises. Thus, moving the problems onto the street could have serious immediate consequences in terms of violence and disorder that would require additional public resources.

An alternative approach to reduce pre-drinking might be to attract young people of legal drinking age back to the bar for early drinking. Although the supervisory role of staff sometimes falls short of what it should be [43] and staff have been shown to be less than perfect in implementing responsible beverage service [37–41,44,45], alcohol consumption in the bar-room setting is monitored by serving staff, at least to some extent, and drinks are served in standard sizes. While bars and clubs are locations for many alcohol-related problems such as aggression, prevention strategies exist and have shown some success in making bars safer places (e.g. Canada’s Safer Bars Program [46], Responsible Beverage Service Programs [37–40]). In contrast, when drinking at home, young people can and do drink large amounts in a short period of time, especially when pre-drinking, putting themselves at risk of alcohol-related harms such as black-outs, alcohol poisoning and injury. Moreover, there are few options available to prevent harm when people are drinking in unsupervised locations.

To reduce pre-drinking, approaches might be developed that address young people’s motivations for pre-drinking, including being able to socialize with friends and saving money. For example, drinking establishments might expand their social function and create an attractive atmosphere for more intimate socializing and not just be ‘high-energy, chaotic environments’ that elicit rowdy behavior. They might also set more affordable prices for early evening drinking, although drink promotions that clearly encourage intoxication should be prohibited [47].

In addition, as suggested by Hughes et al. [5], on- and off-premise pricing of alcoholic beverages needs to be balanced in favor of reducing overall consumption in both private and public settings. A shift to earlier closing times may also reduce pre-drinking. However, given the goal among many young people to enhance and extend their nights out [12], this licensing change may result in increased post-drinking (i.e. drinking after the bars close). Overall, a careful analysis of pricing (both on and off-premises) and closing times is required to attain the right balance in terms of achieving the ultimate goal of reducing alcohol-related harms among young people.

Perhaps the most important lesson for policy and prevention planning is the recognition that getting drunk appears to be an underlying motivation for drinking (and pre-drinking) among many young people, highlighting the need for effective strategies to reduce planned intoxication. For example, policy and programming aimed to change drinking norms and promote moderation require further development, implementation and evaluation. Approaches that encourage young people to make safer choices when they are drinking require further development and should address pre-drinking specifically [18]. For example, Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, runs a prevention program entitled ‘Pre-Thinking While You’re PreDrinking’ that focuses on staying safe by arranging transportation both to and from the public drinking establishment.
Pre-drinking also has implications for future research. Studies estimating the quantity of alcohol consumed by young people or assessing the links between alcohol use and related harms need to take into account the entire drinking occasion, including pre-drinking. Studies are needed examining the nature, extent and consequences of pre-drinking as well as the contribution of pre-drinking to overall consumption and gender differences in effects. To guide new prevention initiatives, further assessments of motives for pre-drinking are needed. Finally, research comparing jurisdictions and examining patterns over time is needed to assess the extent to which pre-drinking is influenced by policies affecting licensed premises, such as drink promotions and on- and off-premise alcohol pricing.

In sum, existing alcohol policies may not apply to the contemporary public drinking culture of young people and may exacerbate rather than reduce alcohol-related problems in this population. To make young people’s drinking occasions safer, comprehensive policy and prevention planning needs to be guided by intense and thorough investigations of young people’s drinking experiences and the impact of alcohol policy on their drinking behavior.

Declarations of interest

None.

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