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Alcohol Use As A Contributor To Homicide
A Longitudinal Study Of Alcohol Use And Homicide In Omaha, Nebraska: 1975-1989

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Background
There is a growing concern in both the popular and academic communities over the seemingly growing numbers of physical assaults and homicides. On a daily basis we are confronted with stories of seemingly senseless violence. For example, the lead story in the August 5, 1991 edition of the Omaha World-Herald states that the country is on a record-setting pace for homicides.

This report looks at one correlate of violence: alcohol use. The alcohol-homicide relationship is an important one, and the research reported on in this report examines patterns of alcohol use and homicide in Omaha.

Previous Studies
There have been many studies which have linked alcohol use and aggressive behavior. The pioneering work in this area was conducted by Wolfgang and Strohm and was released in 1956. These researchers illustrated that alcohol was a major variable in criminal homicide, citing that from 1948-1952, approximately 54.4 percent of all homicide offenders in the city of Philadelphia had used alcohol prior to the commission of the crime. More recent studies on the relationship between alcohol use and homicide include studies by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control, which demonstrated that alcohol was a factor in over half of all criminal homicides in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. Research by Graeme Newman (1979) also illustrates that excessive alcohol use is an important factor in domestic violence. Newman shows that alcohol consumption by either of the involved parties heightens the violence. Research by Glatt (1976) and Richardson and Campbell (1980) also supports the alcohol/violent crime relationship.

The correlation between alcohol and violence has been established in literature which has shown alcohol consumption on the part of the offender or the victim to be a "legitimizing" factor or context for aggression (Arias and Johnson, 1989; Greenblat, 1983). Richardson and Campbell (1980) also showed that intoxication increased the proportion of responsibility attributed to the situation rather than the individual.

All of the previously identified researchers were quick to point out, however, that the presence of alcohol is not in and of itself, enough to prove causation. With reference to this warning, care should be exercised when trying to establish a causal relationship between alcohol and violent behavior (Perrone, 1976; Amir, 1967). Nevertheless, the relationship between alcohol and violence continues to generate research because of its presence in so many of the violent crimes.

Methodology
Measurement of Alcohol Use. Alcohol use has been measured in many ways in the research literature, ranging from toxicology reports to self-reports. We take a strategy located somewhere in the middle: whether or not the inves-
In the study of alcohol and homicide, alcohol use is linked to the nature of the crime and the victim-offender relationship. Alcohol can play a significant role in triggering violent incidents, leading to homicides. The presence of alcohol is associated with higher rates of violence among acquaintances, especially among black females. The findings suggest that alcohol enhances the risk of homicide among family members and friends, particularly in cases involving black females.

### Findings - Aggregate Analysis

#### Type of Homicide

The study found that alcohol is more likely to be involved in homicides among acquaintances rather than by strangers. Alcohol plays a significant role in family and friend-related homicides, and the presence of alcohol is associated with higher levels of violence. The results indicate that alcohol use is a critical factor in the commission of homicides, particularly among family and friends.

#### Alcohol and Homicide

In 44.2 percent of the cases studied, homicide offenders had been drinking alcohol immediately before the crime. Victims who had been drinking alcohol were at higher risk of being murdered, and the percentage of homicide cases involving alcohol use remained constant across the 15 years of the study. The percentage of victims who were using alcohol at the time of death is approximately 15 percent below the widely cited national average of approximately 50 percent (Virkkunen, 1974; Mayfield, 1976).

When we examine alcohol and homicide by race and gender, we get the following picture. Black victims are more likely than white victims to have consumed alcohol prior to being murdered, 94 percent were murdered by family members or acquaintances. Among black victims who had been using alcohol, 43 percent were males. White female homicide victims were less likely to have been using alcohol than their black female counterparts (see tables 1, 2, and 3).
Policy Implications

Based upon the preceding findings, several policy implications are evident, and these implications may be grouped into three categories: prevention, interdiction, and treatment.

Prevention

With regard to prevention, our study shows that high risk alcohol-related homicides tend to occur in situations where both the victim and offender were known to each other. Educational efforts are needed to teach individuals conflict resolution skills which downplay the role of interpersonal violence. This education could be performed in schools, churches and other community service organizations.

Again, as the study has shown, most of the alcohol related homicides are committed with a firearm. Firearms need to be controlled to keep them out of the hands of previous felons and persons with a history of drug or alcohol abuse. When alcohol is coupled with lethal weapons, homicides appear more likely to occur.

Interdiction

A standard interdiction strategy centers around the role of the police. Police officers should be trained to deal with alcohol offenders as soon as they are identified. This training should include strategies for assessing the potential for additional violence, given the presence of alcohol in conflict situations such as domestic disturbances. Police policy on the handling of domestic/interpersonal disturbances should factor in alcohol use when making decisions to use arrest, separation or other approaches.

Treatment

An increasing number of individuals who are incarcerated in our nation’s prisons have been involved in or have had problems with alcohol and/or drugs. The corrections system must do more than encourage inmates to participate in treatment programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The corrections system should move more toward a comprehensive approach which includes alcohol rehabilitation, counseling and follow-up therapy. These strategies should be coupled with meaningful job training. This may prove more effective in the long run than simple drinking cessation programs.

Treatment also must be used outside of the prison setting in the sense of identifying potential homicide victims. Individuals who have been the victim or perpetrator of assaults or other crimes where alcohol is involved should be mandated to seek professional alcohol treatment. This is especially true in situations where alcohol and/or drugs have been involved and have had a history of such behavior. If police and social workers could identify these people and get them into the proper rehabilitation programs, this may have some impact on reducing the number of homicides we see.

References


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