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The Misconception of the Local Bar, and What Your Travel Distance Says About You

A seemingly simple question has perplexed alcohol researchers over recent decades—does having more retail alcohol outlets in a neighborhood increase alcohol consumption for people who live and spend time there (Scribner, 2013)? I can tell you this, do not ask my friends or family, because they are the first to blame locality on how much they drink...well, at least that is my brother's excuse he uses with my sister-in-law and if you are going to go that route, you have to be careful because in all verbal interactions, people must negotiate their desire to tell the truth with their desire to benefit themselves and their desire to please others (Mann et al., 2014).

There have been numerous studies throughout the years that have tried to explain alcohol consumption to alcohol outlet density around homes. The paper "Individuals' travel to alcohol outlets: The fallacy of the local bar", 2023, aims to characterize individuals' trips to outlets, describe these trip locations relative to other activities and estimate associations between alcohol outlet density and trips to outlets.

I attended college and also served on Active Duty with the United States Army for over twenty years, and I can tell you, my friends and I would travel outside our immediate area to bars to avoid people we knew, and experience different atmospheres and to meet new girls. Now, if we were going to drink in the barracks or at home, we absolutely would hit up the closest liquor or ABC package store.

Even though the paper has firm theoretical and empirical foundations, it is almost nearly impossible to measure travel to alcohol outlets methodologically. The proportion of the population who obtain alcohol either for on-premise consumption at a local bar or off-premise

consumption from a liquor store is relatively small, so sample sizes must be large to achieve stable estimates (Mehranbod et al., 2024).

The authors sought out a solution for this burdensome task of collecting data and settled on using household travel surveys. Travel surveys, commonly used by transportation planners to capture representative information about the geographic movements of populations, typically include large samples recruited via careful sample frames and collect detailed trip-level information necessary to describe travel patterns over time (lengths of trips, modes of transportation, etc.) (Kelly et al., 2013).

This study was conducted in Australia, Melbourne to be exact, and I cannot help to think if they would have just sought out a local military community, they would have had similar results with less worries about how accurate their travel surveys would have been. They say the military comprises less than one-half of one percent of the United States population, but military bases are microcosms that reflect the diversity, economic impact, and social dynamics of the regions they inhabit.

Of course, there are other alcohol outlets other than the local bar and liquor store, there are restaurants, pubs, nightclubs, and private clubs/bars. I personally have never been in a private club/bar but I hear there are very little rules enforced when it comes to the amount of alcohol you can consume. I know plenty of individuals who would be willing to travel outside their immediate area if they knew they would not be cut off and other rules were overlooked, such as smoking inside. The paper only extracts trips to retail alcohol outlets, they used two sub-types captured within social place ('pub or bar' and 'nightclub') and one sub-type within shop place ('liquor store') (Mehranbod et al., 2024).

Several other factors had to be addressed before collecting data, and they couldn't just randomly assign participants and then ask them where they went or what they bought. They need to account for the actual distances the alcohol outlets were from the participant's homes, the number of outlets by type and lastly, the household itself. When they talked about the household, variables included were the participant's age, binary sex, weekly household income and the day of the week that the survey was conducted (Mehranbod et al., 2024).

Next, they had to measure the individual-level alcohol density by the density of alcohol outlets per roadway kilometer (km) within participants' home local government areas (LGA) and home postcode. Additionally, there were trip-level description and individual-level description. For the trip-level description, they enumerated trips that began or ended at the bars and liquor stores and compared them to the locations the LGAs where alcohol outlets were located (Mehranbod et al., 2024). Individual-level description encompassed not only single type trips to alcohol outlets but had to sort out those trips that might encompass multiple destinations within that trip to consume or purchase alcohol.

I know when I was single, most of the time, my trip to either purchase or consume alcohol was to and from, but once I got married, I had to learn to multitask. That definitely is not something she, my wife, is fond of. Of course, now that we are older, with older friends, most of our alcohol consumption, if any, is at a local restaurant. The days of us bar hopping seem to be over- until our kids become a legal drinking age, and we happen to be their personal chauffeurs still.

Statistically speaking, there is a lot to digest with this study and I'll try to break it down in its simplest form. Not to get too analytical but they had to indicate whether participants travelled to any bar and liquor store within and outside their home LGA during the study

(Mehranbod et al., 2024). Then they had to estimate the likelihood of individuals visiting alcohol outlets, comparing travel within and outside their home LGA relative to alcohol outlet density in their home LGA and postcode (Mehranbod et al., 2024).

I can bore you with all that data, but I promised I would not, so we're just going to go with the results. Because, let's be honest, if we wanted the actual study results, you would just read their paper and not my article for the brevity version, and I appreciate all of you for that too. Among 23,512 respondents, 378 (1.6%) travelled to any bar and 79 (0.3%) any liquor store the survey day. Bar trips added 8.2 km (95% confidence interval [CI] 4.6, 11.8) and 18.1 min (95% CI 16.6, 22.6) to cumulative travel; 41% of attended bars were co-located in participants' home LGA. Greater bar and liquor store density within the home LGA were associated with overall trips to these outlet types.

Maybe I was wrong about using a military installation for this type of study. On average, there are more individuals living on an installation, and I can guarantee that the reported numbers for those who traveled to any bar or liquor store would be almost three times that of the respondents. Although, I think those numbers from a military installation are only because of the culture that surrounds drinking in the military. Individuals who drank alone to cope with negative emotions were at risk for developing alcohol use disorder (AUD) later in life (Grønkjær et al., 2022).

It is interesting that the study had over 23,000 participants, and the 1-day trip produced as many numbers as they did. Similar to my own experiences though, participants traveled greater distances for bars and shorter distances for liquor stores, and integrating the liquor store run into other activities or errands. In the discussion portion of the study, the first aim was to describe individuals' travel to alcohol outlets, and the second aim was to examine whether individuals'

chosen alcohol outlets were in the same neighborhoods as their homes, workplaces and other destinations (Mehranbod et al., 2024).

However, I found the third aim of the study to be the most interesting. The third aim was to examine associations between alcohol outlet density and trips to alcohol outlets within and outside of the home LGA (Mehranbod et al., 2024). There has always been this notion that if alcohol is easily assessable or available, more individuals will consume alcohol as opposed to undertaking healthier opportunities. I have always disagreed with that notion and the study had mixed results and obvious reasons for this outcome.

In conclusion, individuals travel beyond their residential area to bars, but travel to liquor stores closer to home (Mehranbod et al., 2024). I would also be remiss if I did not mention the dangerousness of over consumption of alcohol and its affects. Excessive alcohol consumption and alcohol use disorders (AUD) are among the leading preventable causes of premature morbidity and mortality and are considered a major public health concern (Wittgens et al., 2022). So, remember, even if it is a short trip to your local liquor store or an adventure even further with your friends, please drink responsibly.

Feedback on this article? Email joseph.rombold@NDUS.edu

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