

Overview of Alcohol Outlet Density Regulation

Alcohol outlet density regulation is defined as applying regulatory authority to reduce or limit alcoholic beverage outlet density (the number of alcohol retailers such as bars, restaurants, and liquor stores in a given area). Regulation is often implemented through licensing or zoning processes.

A retail alcohol outlet is a licensed establishment that sells alcohol beverages. Alcohol outlets are of two general types: on-premises alcohol outlets, which sell alcohol for consumption on site; and off-premises alcohol outlets, which sell alcohol for consumption elsewhere.¹

High alcohol outlet density, defined as having a high concentration of retail alcohol outlets in a small area, is an environmental risk factor for excessive drinking.¹

The Goal of Alcohol Outlet Density Regulation

One significant goal of alcohol outlet density regulation is to reduce easy retail access of alcohol by underage youth. In 2016, 69% of Illinois high school seniors reported beer, wine, or hard liquor would be “sort of easy” or “very easy” to get.²

Reducing the density of alcohol outlets both decreases the availability of alcohol and lessens opportunities for drinkers to interact with one another. This in turn reduces excessive alcohol consumption and related harms, including violence and public nuisance activities.³

Why Alcohol Outlet Density Regulation is Important to Communities

Areas with higher alcohol outlet density have higher levels of heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems, including violence, crime, alcohol-involved traffic crashes, and injuries.

Regulating alcohol outlet density, or the number of physical locations in which alcoholic beverages are available for purchase in a geographic area, is an effective strategy for reducing excessive alcohol consumption and associated harms.⁴

In addition, taking comprehensive and proactive steps to plan the number and location of alcohol outlets and to regulate how they are operated, while working collaboratively with alcohol retailers, can reduce alcohol problems, enhance the community’s business environment, and contribute to overall community health and safety.⁵

Considerations for Planning/Implementing Alcohol Density Regulation

Location can be an important consideration in assessing the effects of alcohol outlet density. Some locations, referred to as sensitive land uses, pose more risks than others. These locations include areas near schools, parks, playgrounds, and other places where young people are likely to congregate. Houses of worship, hospitals, and alcohol and other drug treatment centers are also sensitive land uses. Clustering, or the proximity of outlets to one another, must also be considered.⁵

Geographic areas with numerous alcohol outlets located in close proximity to one another may pose greater community risk than having outlets that are more geographically dispersed.⁶

Helpful Tips and Suggestions

It is important to have a method for measuring alcohol outlet density. Having a defined assessment process may help municipalities, local officials, and prevention coalitions determine what additional

controls on alcohol outlet density may be needed to reduce the risk of alcohol-related problems in high density areas.

There are many different methods for measuring outlet density. These methods often vary greatly in complexity, time to complete, data requirements, and additional information needed. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, which should be carefully considered before selecting a measurement strategy.

The CDC suggests using the following steps when measuring outlet density:

1. Build a measurement team.
2. Define the purpose for measuring density and select an approach.
3. Obtain and validate alcohol license data.
4. Categorize alcohol outlets by type.
5. Locate or geocode alcohol outlets.
6. Calculate alcohol outlet density.

Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping tools can also be used for assessing the density of retail alcohol outlets. GIS mapping allows researchers to understand, manage, question, interpret, and visualize data in ways that reveal relationships, patterns, and trends. GIS maps, reports, and charts have become an indispensable tool to tell visually the story of how alcohol outlet density is spatially connected to individual and community problems.⁶

Resources and Tools

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Guide for Measuring Alcohol Outlet Density

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Prevention Status Reports

Best Practices in Municipal Regulation to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms from Licensed Alcohol Outlets – Ventura County Behavioral Health. www.venturacountylimits.org

Regulating Alcohol Outlet Density – An Action Guide – Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) and The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

References

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