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Booze ban reduces trauma cases by 18.7% - study

According to a study by University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University (SU) researchers, less trauma cases were reported during lockdown levels with an alcohol ban in place compared to periods where alcohol sales were only restricted.

These findings, published in the *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*, suggest that alcohol sale bans may impact trauma in low- to middle-income areas with a potential decrease in the total trauma cases and number of assaults.

The researchers used data from all trauma-related patients presented to the emergency centre of Mitchells Plain Hospital from 1 March 2020 to 29 September 2020 and corresponding periods during 2019 were exported from an existing database.

The study found that a higher proportion of trauma cases were children, and a shift towards more presentations during weekdays and office-hours was noticed. It also found that less assaults occurred during periods where alcohol sales were banned, mainly due to a decrease in trauma from a sharp object. This also led to a significant decrease in open wounds.

According to the researchers, this is further evidence of the causal role of alcohol in violence-related injuries.

Dr Clint Hendrikse, of UCT's Division of Emergency Medicine, said a similar reduction also occurred in isolated Alaska Native villages, where an alcohol ban was associated with lower age-adjusted rates of serious injury from assault and motor vehicle crashes.

"The large differences which occurred during South Africa's lockdown levels 5 and 4 are probably confounded by less vehicles on the road as the economy was mostly shut down; social interaction were also strongly discouraged."

Said Hendrikse: "A more true reflection of the effect of banning alcohol sales is seen during level 3 where an 18.7% reduction occurred when the alcohol ban was reinstated. This is close to the estimated 20% reduction in trauma cases foreseen by the national government. A subsequent 41% increase when the ban was subsequently lifted further illustrate the effect of the alcohol sales ban. Although the lifting of the alcohol ban coincided with a move to lockdown level 2 with fewer restrictions, trauma-related cases returned to levels seen during 2019 and even in the month before the lockdown was implemented."

Dr Niël van Hoving, of the Division of Emergency Medicine at SU, said that the proportion of injured children also increased during periods where alcohol sales were banned.

“This was rather unexpected as anecdotal evidence indicated that domestic violence cases and child neglect increased after the alcohol sales were allowed under lockdown level 3. The higher proportion could also relate to the imposed restrictions of the lockdown itself as schools were closed for long periods. Although the exact reason behind the finding is most likely multifactorial, it could just be a result of less adults presenting to the emergency centre during these periods,” he said.

Van Hoving commented: “On-site consumption was only allowed under lockdown level 2, making it difficult to compare our results to other studies which mostly evaluated the effect of restricting on-site consumption. Nonetheless, international data suggest that the restriction of trading hours tends to reduce alcohol-related injuries during the time of the restriction and shortly thereafter.”

ENDS

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