The DRAM, Vol. 5(2): Wet, dry, moist: DUI characteristics based on alcohol sale restrictions

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Despite an overall decrease in arrests in the past 25 years, DUI continues to be one of the most frequently committed crimes in the United States (Webster, Pimentel, & Clark, 2008). This fact is made more frightening by the many victims DUI crimes can instantly claim: drivers, passengers, pedestrians, other motorists. Furthermore, it suggests that DUI behavior is still prevalent in our society despite current educational and preventative measures. This week, the DRAM reviews a study by Webster et al. (2008) that examines how the characteristics of convicted DUI offenders differ by the alcohol sales restrictions in their county of conviction.

Methods

- Researchers classified counties in Kentucky into the four following categories (see map in Figure 1):
    - Wet: allow alcohol sales; Dry: prohibit alcohol sales; Dry-exception: allow alcohol sales at only a small number of very specific businesses; Moist: Dry county that contains a 'wet' town or city
- Researchers obtained records of 21,647 DUI convictions occurring between 01/01/04 and 12/31/04 in Kentucky counties.
- These records included demographics and assessment results within 10 days after conviction from the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT: Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001), Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST: Skinner, 1982), and the DSM-IV-TR's alcohol abuse/dependence criteria (APA, 2000).

Results

- Wet counties had a significantly higher number of DUI convictions than dry counties, both before (11,000 and 3,496 respectively) and after (529.3 and 463.7 per 100,000 residents, respectively) controlling for population size.

- However, convicted DUI offenders in dry counties were more likely to be male and underage, more likely to have multiple DUI offenses, more likely to meet alcohol abuse and dependence criteria, and less likely to comply with treatment plans, than offenders in wet counties (see Figure).

Figure. Comparison of DUI offender characteristics across wet and dry counties (adapted from Webster et al., 2008). Click image to enlarge.
*p < .001

Limitations

- DUI assessment data came from over 100 different assessment programs
- Data was reported in counties of conviction, as opposed to counties of residence
- Assessment information was self-report
- It is difficult to generalize results because data was collected in a single state.

Conclusions

Webster et al's comparison of wet and dry counties indicates that, though the absence of alcohol in dry counties appears to deter DUI behavior, the people who do commit DUIs in those counties represent a more serious class of offender. These findings, particularly those from the alcohol assessments, suggest that limiting exposure deters DUI behavior in many people, but has less effect on those struggling with alcohol use disorders and those resistant to traditional treatment and sanctions.

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