Physical and sexual aggression at bars and clubs

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Physical aggression in and around bars and clubs
Why is it a problem?

- Bars/clubs are “hot spots” for violent crime and injury
- Emergency room studies have identified bars as high risk locations for violent injury
- Costs to society (social costs, health care, policing and incarceration)

Why does it happen?

A combination of factors

- Permissive environment
- Negative stimuli
- Social environment
- Effects of alcohol
- Image and masculinity
- Beliefs and attitudes
Permissiveness

- rowdiness
- sexual overtures
- sexual competition
- lack of or ineffective bar staff interventions


Wells, S. Graham, K., & Tremblay, P.F. 'Every male in there is your competition': Young men’s expectations of the role of the drinking setting in male-to-male barroom aggression. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 44, 1434-1462, 2009.

Negative stimuli

- crowding, congestion, poor traffic flow
- environmental irritants/unpleasant conditions
- provoking/frustrating factors (e.g., unwanted contact, bumps, spilled drinks, line-ups)


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Social environment

- Social pressure
  - expected to take action when provoked
  - encouraged by friends to respond to provocation

- Social consequences of inaction
  - social disapproval
  - teased/mocked

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Role of alcohol

- impaired cognitive functioning (i.e., information processing, problem solving, ability to consider consequences)
- reduced anxiety
- increased risk taking
- narrowed perceptions (alcohol myopia - focus on immediate situation)
- heightened emotionality
- expected effects of alcohol

Heightened concerns with image and masculinity

- need to look good/tough
- show they will not be pushed around
- concern in front of women


Beliefs and attitudes

- Belief that it is normal and acceptable to fight in bars
- Perceived peer approval


Sexual aggression at bars and clubs

- young adult women (ages 18-24) are most at risk for rape and sexual assault
- alcohol is involved in at least 50% of incidents
- sexual objectification experiences are linked to mental health and substance use problems among women
- how young men and women interact at bars and clubs may set the stage for what happens when they leave these settings
Young adult females recruited in a Canadian bar district

At the end of the night, female bar-goers were asked:

Persistence
Did anyone keep trying to hit on you when you had clearly given them the message that you were not interested?

Unwanted touching
Did anyone touch you sexually in a way that you did not want to be touched or do something else sexual to you that you didn’t want them to do?

Graham, K., Bernards, S., Abbey, A., Dumas, T. M., & Wells, S. Young women’s risk of sexual aggression in bars: The role of intoxication and peer social status. Drug and Alcohol Review (Special Issue on Understanding Alcohol and Other Drug Use During the Event), 33, 393-400, 2014.

Percent of women who reported sexual aggression that night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persistence only</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted touching only</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both persistence and touching</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Any sexual aggression that night</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
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Examples of persistence

A guy was trying to dance with me at a club. I declined. He kept coming back then continued to watch me dance all night.

A guy would not take no for an answer so he spit on me because I would not give him attention.

...followed around to several different bars by a man who kept getting too close, saying lewd things and occasionally touching me.

Examples of unwanted touching

Grabbed me and pulled me in to dance. Very scary when they come from behind and you have nowhere to go.

I have had guys come up behind me and try to grind me on the dance floor, the one guy trying to put his hand up my skirt, another guy touching my butt, etc.

Guys in every bar always rub up on girls and grab their butts or waist. It’s so common it’s shrugged off and the girl tends to just walk away.

Link between women’s alcohol use and experiences of sexual aggression

- women’s alcohol consumption on the survey night was positively associated with likelihood of experiencing sexual aggression
  - alcohol may make women less able to communicate clearly that the behavior was unwanted or less able to recognize risks
  - or more intoxicated women may be targeted because they are seen as more sexually available or less able to resist

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Link between women’s alcohol use and experiences with sexual aggression

- having a lower status position in the group was associated with increased risk of sexual aggression among women who had consumed five or more drinks
  - lower status women who are intoxicated might be seen as easy targets

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What typically happens when women experience unwanted sexual advances at a bar or club?

- women usually respond with evasion and indirect methods of discouragement
- third parties sometimes intervene but also sometimes encourage the initiator
- bar staff rarely intervene


How do women feel?

- some women felt flattered
- but many women felt violated, angry, disrespected and afraid
- incidents reduced women’s freedom of movement (e.g., forcing them to leave the bar)

Initiatives are needed to change the culture that promotes both physical and sexual aggression in bars and clubs, such as:

- setting and enforcing bar policies regarding unacceptable barroom behavior
- staff training on how to recognize and address aggression – this is especially important for sexual aggression, as very little is presently being done
- addressing normative beliefs and attitudes among young men

**Thank you!**

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