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The use of off-trade glass as a weapon in violent assaults by Young Offenders

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Abstract

Aims: To highlight the neglected issue of 'glassing' injury risk from off-trade alcohol bottles. **Participants:** 1. A survey of male Young Offenders ($n = 172$) recruited during their induction into Scotland's only Young Offender's Institution in 2007. 2. An interview sample ($n = 30$) recruited in the same way during 2008. **Measurements:** A self-complete questionnaire enquired about respondent's drinking and offending. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to qualitatively investigate issues raised by the 2007 survey. **Findings:** The survey comprised more than a quarter of Scotland's male Young Offenders. Over 80% had been drinking prior to their current offence. Approximately two-thirds reported using a weapon (80% while under the influence of alcohol). After knives, bottles were their most often 'used' weapon. Unlike knives, bottles were seldom reported as being 'carried'. Interviewees more often gave accounts of using bottles than any other potential weapon, suggesting that bottles may not be considered as a weapon (in the same way as knives), but simply happen to be omnipresent when alcohol-related violence occurs. On-trade glass was never mentioned during this research. **Conclusion:** There is a clear need to highlight the risks posed by off-trade alcohol glassware, and for this to be replaced with plastic containers where possible.

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Disclaimer

The content and comments herein are those of the authors and not the views of the Scottish Prison Service.

Introduction

In recent years, alcohol-related violence by young males has become a cause for concern across the UK and elsewhere (Engineer et al, 2003; Graham & Wells, 2003; Hughes et al, 2008; Ferguson et al, 2006; Leonard et al, 2003; Richardson & Budd, 2003). A related high profile issue is youth knife-crime (Bleetman et al, 1997; Eades et al, 2007; Hern et al, 2005; Maxwell et al, 2007; Squires, 2009; Webb et al, 1999). In Scotland this has been dubbed the “booze n’ blades’ culture” (Christian, 2005; Fraser, 2005; Leyland, 2006; Lynch & Black, 2008; MacLeod, 2005; Nicholson, 2007; *Scottish Executive*, 2005).

The use of sharp objects as weapons is not restricted to knives, nor for that matter other bladed weapons. Where alcohol is involved, glass has the obvious potential to be used as a weapon. To date concern and policy about ‘glassings’ (whether intentional or accidental) has tended to focus on the on-trade alcohol sector. That is in pubs and nightclubs, where research has been conducted by using recorded crime data or from the perspective of field observers, premises staff and injured parties (Cole et al, 1994; Cassematis & Mazerolle, 2009; Coomaraswamy, & Shepherd, 2003; Forsyth, 2008; Shepherd, 1994). Uniquely, this paper looks at alcohol-related ‘glassings’ from the perspective of violent offenders, who have used bottles (and other weapons) to inflict injuries on others while intoxicated.

Methods

The research for this paper was part of an ongoing study into the role of alcohol in young men’s offending. It was conducted inside Scotland’s only male Young Offenders Institution (YOI), which takes into custody all those aged between 16 and 21 years from across the whole country. The YOI’s population varies between 600 and 700 prisoners.

Self-completion survey

The initial phase of the research carried-out for this paper was a self-complete survey conducted in 2007. This comprised a short questionnaire on various aspects of Young Offenders' drinking behaviours and built upon similar surveys using the same methodology conducted in 1979 and 1996. The 2007 questionnaire differed from the previous survey only in that it contained some additional items on weapon use and alcohol brands.

The survey recruited Young Offenders during their induction into the YOI. This involved a prison officer giving the questionnaire to all potential respondents at this time and then collecting it when it had been completed. Thus recruitment was by convenience sampling (in a quasi-random fashion) depending on who (i.e. which offenders) was being inducted into the institution at the time of the survey. Recruitment continued until the numbers involved in the previous sample (conducted in 1996, $n = 154$) had been reached (i.e. exceeded) when the recruiting officer was instructed to stop. The number of rejected / non-filled-in questionnaires given out was seven, leaving a total of 172 for analysis. Thus the sample is between one quarter and one third of Scotland's total male Young Offender population at the time of the survey.

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants were informed that they did not need to answer any question they wished not to. This self-completion questionnaire method has a number of disadvantages, including the inability of the researcher to prompt and probe for more detailed answers and the potential for incomplete data or poor quality responses. As might be expected the survey suffered from some missed answers or vague responses to open-ended questions. Few questions were answered by every respondent, though it should be stressed that much of this 'missing data' was generated either because the

question concerned was not relevant (e.g. some offenders did not drink alcohol) or because respondents did not know the answer (e.g. they could not remember). Thus the base for the percentages reported in this paper is seldom the full 172 Young Offenders who responded to the survey.

Despite this limitation the findings of the 2007 survey were concerning and in need of more detailed investigation, particularly responses to questions relating to weapon carrying and bottle use which seemed contradictory. To provide some explanation for these patterns, qualitative interviews were carried-out with a further 30 Young Offenders in 2008.

Face-to-face interviews

To be compatible with the quantitative survey, interview participants were also recruited during their induction to the YOI. On this occasion the induction hall staff invited all the Young Offenders who were present to participate in the research and then introduced them to the university interviewer.

All interviews were conducted in private, within an interview room, which while out of hearing range of prison staff had a glass frontage, and the interviewer was given a security alarm. As well as being provided with a consent form and an information sheet, potential interviewees were verbally assured of the study's voluntary nature by the interviewer, plus the rules of confidentiality and that they were free to terminate the interview at any time. No Young Offender who was invited to take part refused or withdrew, although one appeared agitated and keen to return to his friends and so he was not interviewed.

All interviews were taped and later transcribed by the interviewer. The interviews gave the Young Offenders who participated the opportunity to describe in their own words their experiences of alcohol-related violence. To this end illustrative quotes are provided here (with pseudonyms, ages and current offences). Combining the interviews with the survey conducted during the previous year, illustrated how selling off-trade alcohol in glass containers can greatly increase the severity of street violence and leave behind an environmental health hazard affecting the wider community.

Results

Survey Findings

The survey respondents had a mean age of 18.5 years (base = 171). Most (90.6%, base = 171) reported drinking alcohol while they were in the community. Over half (53.4%, base = 163) of the sample were currently in custody for a serious violent offence (i.e. a 'Group 1 Crime', such as homicide or serious assault 'occasioning permanent impairment', 'permanent disfigurement' or 'danger to life'). Indeed, when other forms of violence are considered (e.g. common assault or weapon possession) nearly three-quarters (73.0%) were currently imprisoned for a violent act.

Most drinkers (81.3%, base = 146) stated that they had consumed alcohol prior to their current offence, with a small majority of drinkers blaming alcohol for this offence (56.8%, base = 140). Those imprisoned for a violent offence were more likely to have been drinking than those in custody for other offences (77.1%: 42.9%, chi-square = 12.356, $p = 0.001$), or have attributed blame to alcohol for their current imprisonment (65.4% : 26.7%, chi-square = 14.218, $p = 0.000$).

When asked what they had been drinking before their current offence, 43 (44.3% of those who could remember what they had been drinking, base = 99), stated *Buckfast* tonic wine (22 of whom also consumed other alcoholic drinks on this occasion). *Buckfast* is a caffeinated 15.0% ABV beverage sold in glass bottles, which has been identified as the dominant 'street drink' in parts of Scotland (Galloway et al 2007; Forsyth & Davidson, 2009). Despite being relatively expensive (upwards of £6.50 per bottle), *Buckfast* was also the beverage which these Young Offenders most often cited as their 'favourite' (40.6%, base = 133) or their 'usual' drink (39.7% of those who had at least one, base = 116).

This beverage choice was reflected in the settings where these Young Offenders drank. Only 23 (22.3%, base = 103) of those who had consumed any alcohol before their current offence, had done so in a 'public house' at some point during that drinking occasion (3 had done so in a 'club'). In contrast the figures for drinking at 'home', 'outdoors' or in an 'other' setting were 17 (16.5%), 30 (29.1%) and 39 (37.9%) respectively.

Thus the survey sample can be described as being characterised by young men in custody for a violent crimes, with many reporting these offences as being alcohol-related. Given the nature of Group 1 crimes, it was to be expected that many of their offences may have involved weapons, such as blades or glassware (e.g. in 'assault occasioning permanent disfigurement'). This was confirmed by subsequent questions which enquired about weapon involvement (not necessarily involving their current offence).

A majority of respondents indicated that they had carried a weapon (63.8%, base = 152). A similar number indicated that they had used a weapon (62.7%, base = 153). Reported weapon carrying and use was not restricted to those in custody for violent offences. For

example, a majority (34, 52.3%) of those who were not in custody for a Group 1 Crime reported having used a weapon to injure someone. As might be expected most weapon users were also weapon carriers (79.2%, chi-square = 31.032, $p = 0.000$), but carriers were not a subset of users and there were 18 (33.3%) supposed never-carriers who stated that they had used a weapon.

Some clue as to why this might be can be gleaned from the types of weapons reported. When asked what types of weapons they had either used or carried, the verbatim answer “knife” was the most popular response to both these open-ended questions ($n = 53$ carriers and 43 users). The weapon second most often reported as used was a “bottle” ($n = 21$), yet only two Young Offenders reporting carrying a “bottle” (less than the three who reported carrying a “gun”), only one of whom had used one. No respondent reported carrying or using any other form of glass (e.g. a pint tumbler).

This finding implied that bottles may not be considered as weapons, at least until they have been used or improvised as such, and perhaps not even then in some cases (i.e. relative to knives, alcohol-related glass crime was being under-reported). This discrepancy clearly required investigation by in-depth interview. It was hypothesised, that the 21 (22.8% of weapon users, or 12.2% of the sample) who reported using a bottle may be an under-estimate of the true extent of ‘glassings’ perpetrated by this population.

Interview Findings

The 30 Young Offenders interviewed in 2008 were very similar to those who responded to the 2007 survey. For example 18 (60.0%) were in custody for a ‘Group 1 Crime’. Table 1 compares the characteristics of the survey respondents and interviewees.

<Table 1>

Those who were currently in custody for non-violent offences were also able to describe their involvement in alcohol-related violence (often several such events). This would support the survey finding that many of those in custody for non-violent offences were weapon users.

From the accounts given by the 30 interviewees it was apparent that more of their acts of violence involved bottles than other weapons. For example, of the 20 interviewees whose current offence had involved a weapon (self-reported), 10 had involved a bottle or bottles, 5 involved a knife or knives, 2 other bladed instruments and 8 a variety of other weapons including a handgun (some reported using more than one type of weapon). This would support the hypothesis that relative to knives, glass may not be considered as a weapon by this population. Thus the figures for bottles in the previous survey, or indeed any similar survey of weapon use, may be an underestimate. In contrast to the survey method, when asked directly by an interviewer, some offenders did admit to carrying bottles for use as a weapon as is illustrated in the following quotes.

“If I’m going to go out with ma [my] pals and I’ve got a bottle then if someone starts anything you can hit them with a bottle.” (‘Gordon’, 18 years-old, Serious Assault)

“If I was drinking it and someone started giving me cheek [verbal abuse] then I could use the bottle as a weapon. I’ve done it once or twice or something, I flung a bottle at someone, I missed him, well one hit him on the back of the head.” (‘Tommy’, 19 years-old, Police Assault)

“We don’t carry knives down my way, just bottles.” (‘Adam’, 17 years-old, Racially-aggravated Assault)

As is implied by the final quote above, a distinction was made between knives and bottles. Some offenders indicated that they were deterred from carrying knives by the legal penalties for doing so. Others denied having ever carried a weapon, yet went on to describe acts of violence which they had committed using a bottle to injury someone.

“Have you ever used weapons like knives, bottles?” (Interviewer)

“Bottles yes. I’ve been thinking about it sometimes that I should walk out the house with a knife sometimes but I don’t but, but sometimes if I had it and something started happening and I had one. But I don’t do it, I wouldn’t carry one. I fight with a lot of people and then they wouldn’t fight with us if I had a knife. I’d show them ma knife and they would be ‘all right’ and walk away but I wouldn’t do it cos I’d get the jail. I’ve got a wean [child] and all that, just in case I got the jail for 2 or 3 years.” (‘Tommy’, 19 years-old, Police Assault)

“Did you carry weapons?” (Interviewer)

“No definitely not... Yes, hitting people with bottles and all that. They are going to batter me and it’s in my hand and I’m raging or they have a weapon.” (Duncan, 17 year-old, Serious Assault – authors’ emphasis)

As is illustrated in the second exchange above, rather than purposively carrying glass for use as a weapon, it was also the case that the bottle just happened to be in the interviewee’s hand, when someone aggravated them and they struck out, a process illustrated by the following exchanges.

“I definitely would not have done it if I was sober. I would have went down and put a stop to it, but I definitely would not have hit him with a bottle like that.” (‘Allan’, 18 years-old, Serious Assault)

“So how do you end up hitting someone on the head with a bottle?” (Interviewer)

“Cause I had the [vodka] bottle, it’s what I was drinking.” (‘Allan’)

“Eh I would have started fighting with him yes but I wouldn’t have hit him with a bottle.” (‘William’, 19 years-old, Serious Assault)

“Cause you wouldn’t have had the bottle?” (Interviewer)

“Yes [laughs] but I wouldn’t have done it anyway if I had it if I was sober.” (‘William’)

In common with many of the survey’s respondents, the interviewees above blamed alcohol for their violent offending. As the following accounts illustrate, such attribution may be partly explicable by the supposed effects of this drug upon violent individuals. For example from ‘disinhibition’ or ‘threat appraisal disruption’ (Collins, J. J. & Messerschmidt; Graham

et al 1997; Sayette, 1993). But it was also apparent that the presence alcohol-related glass was viewed as having had a role in the seriousness of their offence.

“We’d probably end up fighting, but if I was sober I would throw a few punches and that, but if I was drunk I’d pick up a bottle or a brick or something and then it would end up much, much worse.” (‘Gordon’, 18 year-old, Serious Assault)

“There is a boy I’ve had problems with for years and eh just disagreements problems for ages and I seen him one night. I’d had a half [bottle of] vodka or something, not much but enough. I seen him one night and he challenged me to a fight and cos’ I had a drink in me I wanted to go for it and we started fighting and I hit him with a [half full Buckfast] bottle.” (‘William’, 19 year-old, Serious Assault)

“What I thought was if someone smashes two [vodka] bottles and I was walking towards them, I would have ran away eh, but I smashed the bottles and he’s still coming towards me and I just hit him across the head, well just at the side of the face and then that’s when I ran away eh.” (‘Kenny’, 19 year-old, Serious Assault)

Thus glass can be seen as an escalator of violence when it occurs. The presence of glass could turn a drunken brawl into a serious crime, incurring similar harm to knife use. This is illustrated in the following accounts which involve both current and previous offences.

“I didn’t have a knife man it was the bottle I had, it was the neck of the bottle I stabbed him with. It was two Buckfast bottles and a ‘maddog’ [MD 20/20] bottle... If I hadn’t been out of it [drunk] I don’t think I would have went as far with man. I opened up three times man and stabbed him in the face and on the side of his head and that.” (‘Elliot’, 17 year-old, ‘Attempt Murder’)

“I went ‘who do you think you’re talking to?’ and then I just attacked him really. I did have a few marks on his face and [he] had to get a few stitches but he’s okay. I had a good amount to drink. I had a bottle and a half of Buckfast and two big bottles of Lambrini, big bottles of that. It’s like sparkling wine. It’s kind of fizzy. I don’t know ma [my] girlfriend had it and I just started drinking it.” (‘Gordon’, 18 year-old, Serious Assault)

“I was charged with serious assault and attempted robbery. It was a taxi driver. I ended up fighting with a taxi driver stabbing him in the throat. It wasn’t a knife; it was the end of a Vodka bottle. Slashed his throat with the end of the bottle and tried to take his money.” (Liam, 17 year-old, Possession of 2 Knives)

The above accounts also illustrate that bottle use was not restricted to those who did not carry knives. It was also apparent that glass bottles may not have been considered as weapons by some Young Offenders simply because of the ubiquitous nature of these

items in their lives. Not only were off-trade bottles their usual drinking vessels (no interviewee mentioned using any other form of glass in an act of violence), and that of their peers, but glass bottles were also felt to litter their communities, especially in the alfresco settings where participants often drank and fought.

“When we were about 14 [years old] and that we’d just meet up in the fields [facing the next former coal-mining community]. Then we’d fight all the time. Aye we used to pick up things on the way over, bottles whatever, not from the house but you always found something anyway.” (‘Adam’, 17 years-old, Racially-aggravated Assault)

“There is always bottles around you anyway. Not a stash of them, if you’re walking in the park you’ll always find some there and there are folk there and they have weapons you’re going to pick one up.” (‘Duncan’, 17 years-old, ‘Serious Assault’)

Discussion

This research was conducted within Scotland’s only male Young Offenders Institution, and as might be expected a relationship was found between alcohol use and violence. Alcohol was also found to be related to weapon use during acts of violence. One important factor in this linkage was that these Young Offenders tended to consume alcohol in off-trade settings from glass bottles. Here lies a potential route for designing out crime. In keeping with crime opportunity theory (Felson & Clarke, 1998), the replacement of glass with plastic or aluminium drinks containers can reduce the opportunity for violent offenders to commit serious crime. This is likely to be especially the case with heavy drinking population such as the young men who took part in this research. For them alcohol use (and drinking contexts) appeared to have interfered with their decision making and their use of glassware as a weapon was often situational in nature.

Previous research has looked at ‘glassing’ in on-trade settings, and as a result harm reduction interventions have been made (Forsyth, 2008; Warburton & Shepherd, 2000).

But our findings indicate that off-trade glass is a more salient issue with this age group. No participant at any stage of this research reported using any designated on-trade glass (e.g. pint tumblers) or even domestic glasses when carrying out their crimes. The failure to fully acknowledge this issue was mirrored by the Young Offenders' responses, which indicated that many did not view such ubiquitous glassware as a (designated) weapon. Here lies an obvious point of escalation, not only was alcohol use in itself felt to lead to more serious or uncontrolled violent outcomes, but this alcohol came packaged in a ready-made weapon, a glass bottle, which (like other less accessible weapons) these Young Offenders were more likely to use while intoxicated.

The beverages consumed by Young Offenders were interesting in this respect. A high incidence of off-trade wine consumption was apparent. This is of concern for two reasons. Firstly, because in comparison to the on-trade, off-trade drinking settings are unsupervised (i.e. in terms of social norms or supply and behaviour controls) increasing the risk of a more serious alcohol-related violent encounter, because in such settings it is less likely that an intervention will take place to prevent escalation (Navis et al, 2008; Norstrom, 1998; Scribner et al, 1999). Secondly, because drinking context, and product choice, is more likely to involve a ready supply of glass bottles for use as weapons, in comparison to say off-trade beer which is often sold in aluminium cans or 'white cider' sold in plastic bottles.

Of particular note was the high prevalence of the *Buckfast* tonic wine brand. The brand's popularity among Young Offenders was all the more remarkable considering it was not mentioned by any respondents who came from some large and populous parts of the country (e.g. Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh). Interestingly the incidence figures for this

brand were very similar to those recorded by contemporaneous research conducted in a Scottish town, which surveyed the prevalence of alcohol-related litter in a residential community. That unrelated research found 35.1% of all alcohol detritus and 54.0% of discarded glassware comprised *Buckfast* tonic wine bottles or their remains (Forsyth & Davidson, 2009). Similarly *Buckfast* was also the most often observed drink in a study of Scottish youth street drinkers by Galloway et al (2007). Given its popularity among both youth offenders and 'street drinkers', it would seem likely that if this one brand alone were to switch production to plastic bottles, this would have considerable impact on costs incurred to both health service and criminal justice system. Such a socially responsible move would of course also have a positive impact upon the young people involved in 'glassings' themselves, both victims (in terms of injury severity) and offenders (in terms of reduced jail time or non-criminalisation).

Implications

These findings suggest that the removal of alcohol containers linked to serious assault should be incorporated into violent injury prevention initiatives. To date such policies have primarily been focused at on premise drinking (e.g. making safer pint tumblers, Braiden, 2010; Home Office, 2010; Lucas, 2010). While there are obvious benefits from making safer bars, it was noteworthy that few of these Young Offenders had been drinking at the time of their offence on licensed premises and that no participant during this research mentioned using a drinking glass as a weapon. Instead their drinking tended to take place off premise and the 'glassing injuries they reported invariably involved bottles. From these findings it is suggested that developments in manufacturing safer alcohol glassware be extended to the off-trade sector.

Policies preventing alfresco consumption from glass containers should also be considered. Recent Australian initiatives, known as 'Accords', have begun to address these issues. For example the *Geelong Liquor Regional Licensing Accord* identified a problem locally with street-drinking around licensed premises, during which "some people would use empty bottles as missiles to throw at people or property" (Felson, 2008, p 309). The Geelong 'Accord' sought to eliminate street-drinking, reduce the size of bottles and prevent bar patrons from taking glass vessels outside (City of Geelong, 1997; Felson et al, 1997).

We would also recommend that procedures are put in place towards the surveillance of the types of alcoholic beverage container commonly used in glassing assaults, as well as the monitoring of which drinks brands are popular with offender populations, so that harm reduction measures can be taken promptly. Finally there is a need to highlight the potential harm caused by glassing assaults in a similar way to knife crime.

Conclusion

This research accessed serious offenders in the 16-20 year age group, and found alcohol-related glass to have been a factor in much of their violent behaviour. These findings demonstrate that alcohol and glass is a risky mix, especially in unsupervised, that is off-trade, settings. If off-trade alcohol was sold in aluminium cans or plastic instead of glass bottles, we maintain the number of serious assaults could be reduced. In the first instance, the manufacturers of brands proven to be popular with violent offenders and street drinkers should be encouraged to market their products in safer containers.

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Table 1: Characteristics of participating Young Offenders

Sample	Mean Age	Employed <i>n</i> (%)	Lives with parent <i>n</i> (%)	Current Offence* <i>n</i> (%)	
				Group 1 Crime	Any Violent
Survey respondents (<i>n</i> = 172)	18.5	51 (37.0%)	111 (65.7%)	87 (53.4%)	119 (73.0%)
Interviewees (<i>n</i> = 30)	18.3	10 (33.3%)	18 (60.0%)	18 (60.0%)	24 (80.0%)

* Offenders could be in custody for multiple offences