

# Guns, alcohol and violence: how can evidence make better laws?



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Laws and regulations designed to improve safety and prevent harm need to be built on evidence and properly evaluated. Associate Professor David Humphreys' research at the Department of Social Policy and Intervention seeks to understand how public policy can affect health and wellbeing, for better or worse.

Governments frequently undertake large-scale policy changes that aim to reshape or control people's behaviour. Such interventions have the potential to affect millions of people, so it would seem sensible for governments to ensure that they are based on measures that are known to be effective, and that they lead to the kind of changes they want to see.

Dr Humphreys has examined laws on key issues such as alcohol licensing in the UK and self defence in the US, and found that both evidence and evaluation are often thin on the ground. In the absence of these, a

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**Useful links:**  
[Do flexible alcohol trading hours reduce violence? A theory-based natural experiment in alcohol policy \(click here\)](#)

[Evaluating the Impact of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" Self-defense Law on Homicide and Suicide by Firearm \(click here\)](#)

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well-intentioned law may end up making little difference, or – more worryingly – actually make a situation worse.

The UK's Licensing Act (2003) (24 hour licensing) is a case in point, which Dr Humphreys has carefully analysed. Previous researchers in the 1990s had suggested that fixed closing times for pubs was a major cause of alcohol-related violence; as intoxicated people poured out of pubs into crowded streets, the potential for conflict soared. The theory was that if premises could set whatever trading hours they wanted, it would stagger closing times and reduce the numbers of drunken people in the streets all at once.

In practice, as Dr Humphreys identifies in his research, there was little actual evidence that this strategy would work. In fact it was possible the opposite might happen – by encouraging people to drink more, 24-hour licensing might actually increase the incidence of violence.

Dr Humphreys' own research, conducted in Manchester in the years after the Licensing Act was introduced, used a robust study design that enabled him to determine accurately what changes were the result of the Act, rather than just coincidental or caused by other factors. He found, in fact, that there was little evidence to support either an increase or a decrease in violence after the Act. So while not actively making matters worse, the Act has failed to achieve its aims. A House of Lords Select Committee on the Licensing Act has recently been set up to review the effectiveness of the Act, and in June 2016 Dr Humphreys presented his findings to committee members.

More recently, Dr Humphreys' research has focussed on the US's 'stand your ground' self-defence laws, which state that people can use lethal force if they believe themselves to be in danger. Nearly half of all US states now have such a law, but they are controversial, with some claiming that they have a deterrent effect and others claiming that they lead to increased levels of violence and harm. Dr Humphreys has carried out one of the few pieces of research that actually evaluates the effects of these laws.



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By analysing rates of homicide in Florida between 1999 and 2014, before and after the state introduced a 'stand your ground' law in 2005, Dr Humphreys showed that there was an abrupt and sustained increase in overall rates of homicide (more than 24%) after the law came into effect. Rates of homicide by firearm increased even more dramatically, by over 31%.

Alcohol consumption and the use of firearms are two areas in which changes to the law can have a dramatic impact, for better or worse, on levels of violence. Dr Humphreys' research shows how new laws may have little impact on violent incidents, as in the case of the UK's Licensing Act 2003, and may even escalate violent encounters instead of reducing them, as with Florida's 'stand your ground' law. Both examples highlight the urgent need to base laws on evidence and evaluate them properly after they are implemented.