

Bingeing linked to access

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By John Gibb

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As the Government prepares to introduce a major Alcohol Reform Bill, a new University of Otago study has highlighted an association between higher numbers of nearby liquor outlets and increased risk of binge drinking.

The Bill, which, at least partly, aims to increase community input into alcohol outlet-related licensing decisions, was to have been introduced to Parliament last month but is now expected within the next few weeks.

The Otago researchers found that people with more off-licences within a kilometre of their home were more likely to be binge drinkers and to be harmed by alcohol.

Off-licences are places, including supermarkets, liquor stores and convenience stores, where takeaway alcohol can be bought.

The study used a national survey to assess individual alcohol drinking patterns and self-reported harm from alcohol.

The types of alcohol-related harm included effects on performance at work, on relationships, and on physical health and finances.

There were 1925 respondents, 1770 of whom (92%) could be mapped according to their residential address.

These addresses were then compared with the location of alcohol outlets.

The researchers noted that in New Zealand over the past 20 years, there had been "a relaxation of central controls over supply and marketing of alcohol".

Since the liberalisation of the Sale of Liquor Act in 1989, the number of licensed premises had more than doubled, from 6295 in 1990 to 14,183 in June last year.

The proportion of alcohol sold by off-licences had also risen, from 59% to 68% of the total.

With each extra off-licence alcohol outlet within 1km, the odds of binge drinking increased about 4%, the study lead author, Prof Jennie Connor, of the Otago University's department of preventive and social medicine, said.

This did not sound like much, but the difference between five and 15 nearby off-licence outlets was a "48% difference in the odds of binge drinking and 26% more alcohol-related harm".

She said this was an important finding, considering that national alcohol policies were under review.

"We need to rethink the ease of obtaining liquor licences and how many alcohol outlets are appropriate."