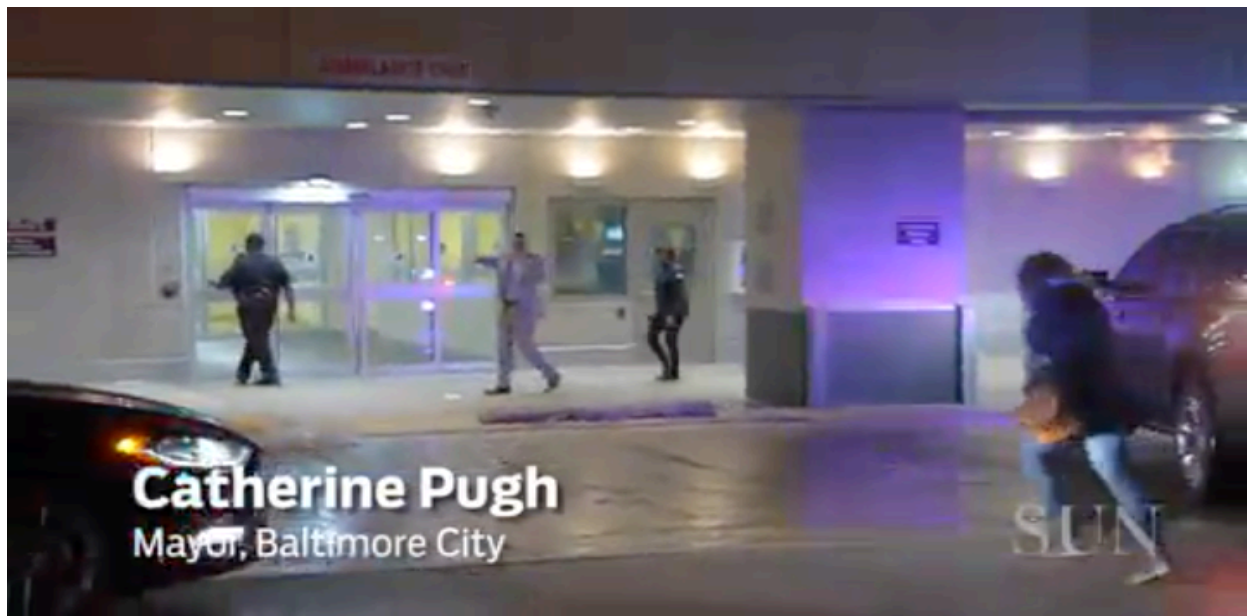


News Maryland Crime

Hopkins study linking violence, liquor stores prompts community leaders to call for more action



Bars and liquor stores are often associated with an increase in crime. But a new Johns Hopkins University study says that whether the alcohol is consumed on-site or off-premises makes a big difference.

By [Yvonne Wenger-Contact Reporter](#)
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Community leaders and advocates say research released Wednesday by the Johns Hopkins University showing that areas with greater access to liquor

stores experience more violence than those by bars bolsters their arguments that officials must do more to crack down on problem carryout stores.

The Rev. Eric Lee of Park Heights said the academics documented what he and his neighbors witness daily.

“People are just loitering and hanging out and engaging in criminal activities,” Lee said of liquor stores in his Northwest Baltimore community. “The liquor stores are open from 6 a.m. until 2 a.m., and you have children who have to walk through that. Not only is there a probability of them being offered drugs or alcohol, that element becomes normalized in a child’s mind. The normalization of criminal activity should not be the standard that our children see every day.”

The Hopkins study, published in the journal “Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research,” confirmed that increased access to outlets that sell alcohol is associated with increased violent crime, but researchers found even greater incidence of such crime near liquor stores and other outlets that sell alcohol for off-site consumption than near bars and restaurants.

The researchers examined 1,204 alcohol outlets in Baltimore and violent crimes from 2012 to 2016. They also looked at how accessible those outlets were based on how many there were and the distance between them. They found that for every 10 percent increase in access to carryouts, there was a 4.2 percent increase in violent crime, while the same increase in access to bars was associated with a 3 percent increase in violent crime.

The researchers suggested that the interaction between customers and bar staff, compared with a quick transaction with a store cashier, may be one of the reasons why businesses that sell alcohol for on-site consumption see fewer crimes such as murder, assault, rape and robbery nearby.

Pamela Trangenstein, who led the research while she was a predoctoral fellow at Hopkins' Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, said bar and restaurant staff are around patrons while they're drinking. They also check IDs and can stop potential offenders from entering in the first place. On the other hand, many liquor store employees stand behind acrylic or glass barriers and have only limited contact with customers, she said.

"Store clerks are usually working by themselves and they don't see the patrons drinking," Trangenstein said. "People can also buy larger volumes of alcohol for lower prices. It's a recipe for more danger."

People who buy alcohol to go also may purchase it and drink it in public, out of sight of the outlet and its staff, the researchers found.

The problem is compounded in low-income neighborhoods, where more carryouts are located, according to the study.

Efforts to reach various liquor store owners and their lawyers were unsuccessful. Officials with the Korean-American Grocers Association, the Maryland Retailers Association and the city liquor board did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

Closer regulation of liquor stores has long been an issue of concern for community leaders.

Lee, who is on the leadership team for the advocacy group Baltimore Good Neighbors Coalition, said the Hopkins study offers grounds to push officials, including commissioners on the city's liquor board, to do more to oversee the alcohol outlets and make sure they're following all rules and regulations. It also could be a tool to convince members of the City Council and the [General Assembly](#) to write laws that respond to the concerns of people who live near nuisance liquor stores.

The city overhauled its zoning code in the fall of 2016 after years of public hearings with a provision that required dozens of liquor stores in residential areas to close or convert to other businesses by June 2019. A few were given exemptions by city officials. Others are continuing to seek reprieves.

City Councilman John Bullock, who represents parts of West Baltimore, said by next summer he hopes the effects of the closures will be felt.

Bullock said the Hopkins research should inform the council's next actions. The council passed a resolution in late June calling for a hearing with the liquor board commissioners to discuss concerns about how they enforce liquor laws and work with police.

“It’s really important for us to use the data from our institutions and connect the research to our policy,” Bullock said. To the residents, he asked, “Be aware of your surrounding. Document what you see and report it.”

Council Vice President [Sharon Green Middleton](#), who represents parts of Northwest Baltimore, said forcing the closure of some liquor stores is a start, but the study is evidence that much more must be done.

Some stores near Pimlico Race Course have long plagued the community there with crime and violence, Middleton said. One problem exacerbates another — people gather on the sidewalks nearby where they sell drugs and commit other crimes, she said.

“There has to be extensive outreach for people that have problems with alcohol and drug addiction and who need employment,” Middleton said. “It’s a lot of culminating things within the community that help to make this a very bad situation.”

The state legislature created a 21-member task force to review Maryland's alcohol laws and the way they're enforced. The group also is looking at

alcohol's effects on the state economy and public health. Its findings must be made to the General Assembly by Dec. 1.

Daniel Webster, a Hopkins health policy professor and one of the study's authors, said tightening the regulation of alcohol sales, particularly for carryouts, should be part of the city's crime reduction plan.

"Reducing the number of off-site alcohol outlets in Baltimore has the potential to lead to fewer homicides and aggravated assaults," Webster said.

For instance, officials could put more limits on the hours and days the outlets can be open.

The mayor's office did not respond to a request for comment about how it might respond to the study's findings.

Lee, the Park Heights resident and community advocate, said people in many of the city's lower-income neighborhoods are crying out for a solution to the problems some liquor stores bring.

"This study will allow us to have evidence of the harm that unregulated liquor stores have," Lee said. "They contribute to the quality of life in our community. Armed with this evidence, we can go and ask for reforms and policies that allow for the effective oversight of liquor stores."

Baltimore Sun reporters *Christina Tkacik* and *Talia Richman* contributed to this article.

[**ctkacik@baltsun.com**](mailto:ctkacik@baltsun.com)

[**twitter.com/xtinatkacik**](https://twitter.com/xtinatkacik)

