

***Raising the Bar: Preventing aggression in and around bars, pubs and clubs*, Kathryn Graham and Ross Homel, Willan Publishing, Devon, 2009 (ISBN 978-1-84392-318-3)**

As contemporary media coverage of urban nightlife continues to be dominated by images of alcohol-related violence and disorder, *Raising the Bar* provides a timely overview of contemporary knowledge of the physical and regulatory environment of licensed venues. Kathryn Graham and Ross Homel's book addresses topics ranging from cultures of public drinking to the pharmacological influence that alcohol has on the physical and psychological temperament of the consumer. Drawing on the extensive knowledge of both authors in the fields of crime prevention and problematic drinking cultures, the book analyses elements of the licensed environment ranging from accounts of its physical layout, through to the influence of patrons and staff in affecting behavioural patterns within nightlife spaces. It utilises literature from around the world to outline the critical elements that contribute to incidents of aggression and violence in and around bars, pubs and clubs, and also outlines evidence-based strategies for their prevention.

Raising the Bar acknowledges that prevention of violent incidents is most likely to come from a combination of increasing knowledge of the licensed environment, improved training programs for staff and security, and the introduction of both physical and regulatory change in the structure of venues and governing strategies surrounding the consumption of alcohol. The general hypothesis here is that aggression and violence are symptomatic of a permissive licensed environment where the physical, commercial and social settings actively encourage, or do not minimise, the risk of violence. The authors insist that 'bar violence is a serious social problem that requires a serious societal response' (p 239). By altering the regulatory frameworks governing the licensed environment, the authors believe that we can influence the cultures of problematic drinking with which violence is often associated. In doing this, it is believed that rates of alcohol-related violence and aggression can be reduced.

While not written specifically for an Australian audience, this book does have significant bearing on the contemporary environment of Australian nightlife. Many of the strategies advocated in the book are being employed in an attempt to curtail late-night violence in and around the licensed environments in Australian states. These include significant regulatory alterations in New South Wales (NSW), such as: more stringent legislation and improved training programs for personnel employed in the private security industry; more comprehensive responsible service of alcohol (RSA) guidelines; and the development of the NSW Alcohol Linking Program for use by the NSW Police. For venues with high rates of alcohol-related violence, extra restrictions have been introduced and enforced as a result of recommendations resulting from the types of research projects discussed in this book. Some of the more specific strategies have included replacing glassware with plastic, proscribing designated times for the sale of 'shots' and preventing admittance to a venue after 2 am. Alongside these regulatory changes, 'high visibility' policing operations have taken place in recognised nightlife hotspots in an attempt to prevent violent incidents from occurring. Preliminary evidence suggests that these new strategies are showing some success in reducing alcohol-related violence. Of course, whether these initiatives are the foundation of substantial cultural and behavioural shifts will be a matter for future reflection.

There are a number of lines of analysis developed in *Raising the Bar*. First, the authors acknowledge that the normalisation of violence within drinking cultures has existed for generations, but that drinking is not always the cause of social harm. The link is far from inevitable. Second, the book analyses the barroom environment by focusing on the role of

the patron, the environment itself and staff in influencing rates of aggression and violence. The authors explain how routine activity theory, situational crime prevention theory and responsive regulation theory can together provide a fuller understanding of these issues. Finally, the book examines evaluated approaches that have been taken around the Western world in an attempt to prevent alcohol-related violence in and around licensed venues and nightlife/leisure precincts. Here, successful strategies are largely framed in terms of changing the environment of licensed venues so that they are less permissive of problematic behaviour. Such a strategy includes the 'Safer Bars Program' developed in Ontario, Canada, which focused on preventing and managing violence in licensed venues, as well as reshaping acceptable barroom behaviour by providing training programs for staff and management that focused on reducing violence. The program also provided: a risk assessment workbook to owners/managers of venues, which identified environmental factors that increase the risk of violence; and a pamphlet outlining the legal responsibilities of licensed premises. Across each of the strategies outlined in *Raising the Bar*, it appears critical to success that national and local governments are responsive to the contextually specific demands that their various nightlife precincts present.

The success of strategies in Australia will be largely dependent on popular reaction to what is widely seen as restrictive policy. There continues to be a significant moral ambivalence surrounding the consumption of alcohol, and the leisure and behavioural practices with which it is often associated. From one perspective, 'binge' drinking, and related disorder, has been an accepted practice in Australian culture. Yet at the same time, such practices and leisure activities have been seen by some as disrespectful, morally depraved and the cause of a wide range of social harms. These varying sentiments have actualised themselves through various contradictory state policy initiatives. For example, after Governor King prevented a large shipment of liquor from landing in Sydney in 1800, there was a marked rise in the prevalence of home-brewing (Dillon 1985; Dingle 1980). Similarly, the introduction of six o'clock closing times for licensed venues in 1916, an initiative of temperance societies across Australia, saw the creation of the 'six o'clock swill' in which patrons of venues would rapidly consume, or 'chug', as many drinks as possible before closing time (Fitzgerald and Jordan 2009; Chikritzhs 2009; Luckins 2008; Phillips 1980). In more recent times, increased taxation on ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages, commonly referred to as 'alcopops', has resulted in increased sales of straight liquor in those areas in which the tax was introduced (Kerr 2008). These examples display the largely oppositional temperament that many Australians hold towards restrictive alcohol-related government policy. However, as the evidence in this book indicates, contemporary strategies focused on manipulating the licensed environment are achieving positive results around the world.

One reservation regarding *Raising the Bar* is that its positivistic focus relies on ethnographic material mainly for background discussion. As it also relying on outdated/older ethnographic accounts, this does not engage fully with some contemporary processes that have transformed the modern landscape of nightlife. Gentrification and widespread renovation of 'old-style', traditionally working class pubs into upmarket middle-class bars is an important backdrop to the removal of risk factors related to problematic behaviours. In inner Sydney, for instance, these changes have certainly altered drinking practices and the type of consumer utilising the newly transformed city after dark.

Nevertheless, with the current lack of literature directed to a broad audience in this field this book provides an invaluable resource for anyone who has an interest in nightlife. There is no doubt *Raising the Bar* will play a significant role in shaping future policy and practice regarding alcohol-related leisure.

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