

# Changing alcohol environments to prevent sexual and domestic violence

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

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Elise Lopez, Assistant Director of the Relationship Violence Program at the Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health at the University of Arizona, focuses her research on environmental- and policy-level prevention of sexual assault. Working with the [Arizona Safer Bars Alliance](#), one of her areas of expertise relates to reducing sexual aggression in bar settings across Arizona by bridging the links between alcohol and sexual and domestic violence.

## EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ALCOHOL ENVIRONMENTS AND VIOLENCE

Elise has found strong connections between bar environments and violence. Her research has shown that where there are many bars located in the same area, there tend to be hotspots of police reports related to sexual and other types of violence. In addition, she has found that some bar environments might condone certain behavior associated with sexual violence as “acceptable” or “normal.”

Elise upholds what we know about sexual aggression and bar environments – namely that alcohol itself is not a cause of violence, but understands from research that alcohol use is associated with greater risk of perpetration and victimization. While no one knows how many rapes actually occur, data, which typically underrepresents the issue, show that [alcohol-related sexual assault is a common occurrence](#). In addition to these statistics, bars are often highly sexualized environments, and there tend to be many bars clustered around college campuses where they attract college students, a population at a higher risk of sexual violence.

## USING MAPPING TO FOCUS PREVENTION EFFORTS

In Elise’s research, she uses geographic information system (GIS) mapping to determine where reported rapes and other types of violent incidents are occurring in Arizona, and compares that with where there are issued liquor licenses. The data come from a variety of sources, including

police departments and departments of liquor license and control. These kinds of maps, and others like it, make it easier to identify areas with increased reported violence, and geographically focus prevention efforts.

GIS mapping can be used in a multitude of ways – from simpler color-coding and counting, to more complex functions that look at the relationship between alcohol outlet density and where violence is occurring. For communities that are interested in taking action in this realm, Elise suggests seeking out already existing resources – such as Google Maps and police department crime maps – to create visuals to use when making the case to community members, bar managers, or policy makers.

### **SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE SEXUAL AGGRESSION IN BAR ENVIRONMENTS**

Elise integrates research and practice through her work with the Arizona Safer Bars Alliance, which was created in 2012 to reduce sexual aggression in alcohol-serving establishments and consists of partnerships between the University of Arizona, Department of Health Services, and various agencies throughout the state of Arizona who are funded to do prevention activities through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Rape Prevention and Education Program funding.

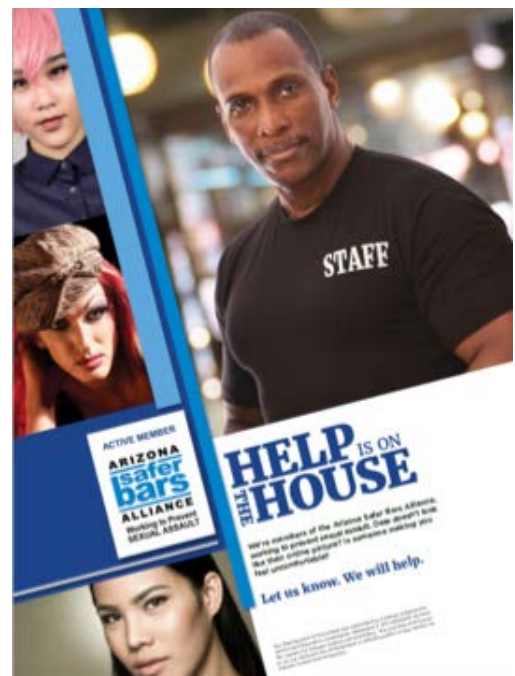
To lessen sexual and other types of aggression, she focuses on changing policies, practices, and procedures in bar environments. She says, “While education about sexual assault and interpersonal violence is crucial to inform individual and community knowledge, changing bar environments is key to preventing and reducing aggression, and hopefully down the line, reducing assault as well.”

For example, pricing policies can have a significant impact on the amount of alcohol that people drink. Elise works with bars on changing their policies around pricing – especially on pricing that might hyper-sexualize women and increase gender inequities, such as offering cheap shots or free cover nights for women. Elise also works with bars to improve their physical environments, particularly looking at things like increasing lighting, decreasing noise level, and improving general visibility.

### **THE NEED FOR BAR-SPECIFIC BYSTANDER PROGRAMMING**

Through the Arizona Safer Bars Alliance, Elise also stresses the importance of incorporating bar-specific bystander programming into staff trainings and has helped to develop a multi-session curriculum for people who work in bars. This curriculum is currently being evaluated and consists of an education program and content related to assessing risk for sexual violence.

A key part of bar-specific bystander training is getting at what the motivations are for bar staff to intervene in sexually aggressive or violent situations. A lot of bar staff



*The Arizona Safer Bars Alliance implements bar-specific bystander programming to show that violence is a community issue and “help is on the house.”  
Photo provided by Elise Lopez.*

struggle to determine what kind of behavior is considered sexual aggression, and thus when to intervene. Additionally, they may not know what kind of help to give. They might also be less willing to intervene in situations if they feel that doing so will cost them their tips. Arizona Safer Bars Alliance trainings helps bar staff uncover signs of sexual aggression that might later rise to the level of assault, and strategies for intervening safely and effectively to defuse these situations before they can escalate to an assault later.

### TIPS FOR REDUCING SEXUAL AGGRESSION IN BAR SETTINGS

Making the case to change policies and procedures in drinking environments, such as bars, can seem daunting. However, with the right evidence and tools – whether through data, mapping, or anecdotes from patrons and bar staff – Elise shows that it is possible. In many cases, collecting new data isn't necessary, and existing datasets can be used. Additionally, creatively encouraging bars to take action has been helpful, such as giving out freebies at trainings, hosting trainings at bars rather than an outside space, talking about the relationship between state statutes and patron safety around sexual violence, and organizing focus groups with community members and college students in order to bring the community voice to bar staff. This in turn can make it easier to engage more and more bars and eventually shift practices and norms throughout the state.

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Elise Lopez, DrPH, MPH, is the Assistant Director of the Relationship Violence Program in the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health at the University of Arizona. She has worked in health promotion since 2004 in community and research settings. Elise has worked primarily on programs that focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions related to sexual violence, sexual health, adolescent substance abuse, and trauma-informed care. Current projects include developing and implementing interventions for students found responsible of sexual misconduct, and evaluation of a bar staff bystander intervention training program.

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### RESOURCES

- [Arizona Safer Bars Alliance](#)
- [CDC Guide for Measuring Alcohol Outlet Density](#)
- [The Role of Alcohol Policies in Preventing Intimate Partner Violence: A Review of the Literature](#)
- [Exploring Alcohol Policy Approaches to Prevent Sexual Violence Perpetration](#)

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