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Why calling it alcohol fuelled violence is wrong

You may have noticed a trendy new phrase being used by talkback radio hosts, politicians, police officers and journalists: “alcohol fuelled violence”.

It started off with the anti-alcohol activists as a slur, moved into the parlance of the police as shorthand for drunks brawling, and is now used to describe every assault by someone who has had a drink sometime in the last day. It is as politically loaded a phrase as “man-made climate change” or “great big new tax”.

My issue with it is not that it links alcohol with violence (no denying the obvious) but that it gets the mechanism so wrong, and deliberately so. “Alcohol fuelled violence” says alcohol causes the violence, it literally fuels the violence so getting rid of it would end violence.

If that was true, then wouldn't every drinker become violent when or if sufficiently intoxicated? Wouldn't the judge and the archbishop start throwing punches if they simply drank enough? But the great majority of drinkers are not violent when intoxicated. They don't hit spouses or strangers. If they did the hospitals, prisons and graveyards would be much bigger and much fuller.

And is there no violence in the dry countries of the world? Or in our presumably dry secondary schools?

The good news is that alcohol-related violence is being thoroughly researched, and there are some interesting results emerging.

The complex reality is that alcohol is a dis-inhibitor. It lowers inhibitions which is why people gain the confidence to talk to complete strangers. It certainly lowers the inhibition against lashing out in those who want to do so. Those people - mainly men – no longer have that little part of the brain saying punching the policeman would be a really bad and stupid thing to do.

But alcohol does not create the underlying anger and desire to punch someone - that desire is already there but in check. The bloke who throws a punch in a nightclub at someone bumping into him was already predisposed to violence before he took a drink – but the alcohol removed his inhibition against doing so.