



Original article

The Impact of Drinking Age Laws on Perpetration of Sexual Assault Crimes in Canada, 2009–2013



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Sexual-assault crimes, primarily perpetrated by males against female victims, impose a substantial burden on societies worldwide, especially on youth. Given that approximately half of all sexual assaults involve alcohol consumption by the perpetrator or victim, it is reasonable to expect that minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) restrictions might have an effect on sexual-assault patterns. Canadian MLDA laws are 18 years in Quebec, Alberta, and Manitoba (MLDA-18), and 19 years in the rest of the country (MLDA-19). The present study assesses whether MLDA laws might have an impact on sexual-assault crimes.

Methods: A regression-discontinuity design was applied to sexual-assault crime data ($n = 12,980$ incidents) from the national Uniform Crime Reporting survey 2009–2013, a population-level registry of all police-reported crimes in Canada. Uniform Crime Reporting data does not include an explicit alcohol involvement indicator.

Results: Nationally, in comparison to males slightly younger than the MLDA, those just older had significant and immediate increases in sexual-assault perpetration of 31.9% (95% confidence interval: 8.7%–54.5%, $p = .007$). In MLDA-19 provinces, there was an immediate post-MLDA increase of 56.0% (95% confidence interval: 18.9%–90.8%, $p = .004$) in sexual-assault crimes by males just older than 19 years, whereas in MLDA-18 provinces no significant effect was found. For females, there was no evidence of MLDA effects on sexual-assault crimes.

Conclusions: Release from Canadian MLDA law restrictions was strongly associated with increases in sexual-assault perpetration by young men. These findings lend support to the potential effectiveness of population-level alcohol control policies for sexual-assault prevention among youth.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study provides evidence that release from minimum legal drinking age laws is associated with increases in the perpetration of sexual-assault crimes by young men. These findings lend support to the potential effectiveness of population-level alcohol control policies for sexual-assault prevention among youth.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Sexual-assault crimes, primarily perpetrated by males against female victims, impose a substantial burden on societies worldwide, especially on youth [1,2]. In Canada, total costs of sexual assault and other sexual offense victimizations reached \$4.8 billion in 2009 [3]. Canadian young adults (aged 18–34 years) have the second highest per capita rate of sexual-assault perpetration [4], while sexual-assault victims are also young, with the highest rate among youth (aged 15–24 years) [2]. In Canada, sexual assault of young women, especially postsecondary students, has become a prominent national issue, and many Canadian colleges and universities have been criticized for lacking comprehensive policies in this area [5].

Most of the literature estimating the prevalence of sexual-assault victimization and perpetration among youth draws on postsecondary student populations in the United States and Canada. Prospective surveys of male college students in the United States have found relatively high prevalence of self-reported engagement in sexually violent or sexually coercive behaviors of 10%–15% annually [6], whereas in a recent survey 32% of U.S. males aged 18–25 years reported perpetration of any sexual violence in their lifetime [7]. Based on cross-sectional research among Canadian postsecondary students, up to 16% of females [8,9] and 8% of males [8,9] reported sexual-assault victimization in the past year. In the United States, a 2011 national survey reported that 19.3% of women had experienced rape in their lifetime, with 78.7% of first instances happening before the age of 25 years [10]. Recent large-scale U.S. college surveys have found that up to 18.9% of undergraduate females had been a victim of any sexual assault since starting university [11]. In addition, a recent U.S. study found disturbingly high prevalence of sexual assault among college women—11.4% experienced attempted rape, and 8.5% experienced completed rape during their first year of studies [12].

A recent large-scale review [13] supports that sexual-assault perpetration is influenced by many factors, including traumatic childhood experiences, personality traits, endorsement of violent and/or rape-supportive attitudes toward women, abusive dating relationships, and sexual experiences in adolescence and adulthood; however, alcohol may also be an important contributing factor. Alcohol use by the victim, perpetrator, or both is a feature of approximately half of sexual assaults [14], with alcohol consumption considered to be an important risk factor for victimization and perpetration [14], especially among youth [4,12,15]. Alcohol is thought to interact with numerous individual and situational mediating factors to increase the risk of perpetration of sexual violence among males who were already predisposed to these behaviors [16,17]. Some such mediating factors from the cross-sectional survey and alcohol administration literature include individual traits of impulsivity, narcissism, reduced empathy, delinquency in adolescence, hostility toward women, engagement in casual sex, and perceived peer support or pressure [6]. Alcohol can increase misperceptions of social cues and facilitate aggressive behavior among perpetrators [6], but it can also be associated with normative beliefs about sexual availability and serve as an excuse for perpetration [6]. Alcohol can reduce victims' capacity to assess risk and impair their ability to avoid or escape harm [18]. In addition, young adult drinkers spend time in risky drinking situations, such as bars and parties, where they go to meet potential sexual partners, and where unwanted sexual advances are common [19]. For example, a recent survey of women recruited in a bar district in a mid-sized Canadian city

found that over 50% reported experiencing sexual harassment or sexual aggression on a single night out [19].

Minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) legislation is a primary population-level alcohol control policy limiting youth access to alcohol. In Canada, an expert group recently endorsed increasing the MLDA nationally to 21 years of age—from 18 years of age in Québec, Manitoba, and Alberta, and 19 years of age in the rest of the country. It is reasonable to expect that release from MLDA restrictions will be associated with increases in sexual assault crime perpetration by youth. According to the microlevel model proposed by Ullman [16], alcohol consumption by the perpetrator does not independently contribute to sexual-assault perpetration, but rather interacts with a complex set of behavioral and situational characteristics (e.g., drinking context) which mediate the impact of drinking on the probability of perpetrating sexual assault. Prior research not only has demonstrated significant and immediate increases in population-level drinking directly after the MLDA [20,21] but also changes in drinking context, with more frequent drinking at bars and night clubs—venues associated with increased likelihood of alcohol-related violence [22]. Situational factors and characteristics of attendees may contribute to this risk as effects are seen even with low levels of alcohol consumption [22].

The potential impacts of MLDA laws on population-level patterns of sexual assault have rarely been investigated: one study showed no relation between drinking age laws and criminal perpetration of sexual-assault crimes in California [23], and another indicated that raising the MLDA in New York State in 1985 was associated with increases (rather than expected decreases) in sexual-assault victimization in the newly alcohol-restricted age groups [24]. The present study aimed to assess the potential impacts of Canada's MLDA legislation on patterns of sexual-assault perpetration by men toward women reported to the police. Guided by Ullman's model of sexual-assault perpetration [16], we expected that in comparison to Canadian males slightly younger than the MLDA, those males just older than the MLDA would manifest abrupt and significant increases in their perpetration of sexual-assault crimes.

Methods

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Boards of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Northern British Columbia.

Data source

Police-reported crime data were obtained from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Incident-based survey, 2009–2013 [25]—a national database held and managed by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS), Statistics Canada. The UCR is a national population-level registry of police-reported crimes that have been substantiated through investigation from all federal, provincial, and municipal police services in Canada. Standardized reporting of criminal incidents to the UCR from their administrative records is mandatory for all Canadian police services; thus, UCR data capture virtually 100% of police-reported criminal incidents in Canada. The UCR does not contain an indicator variable capturing alcohol or drug use by perpetrators or victims.

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