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Off Premises Sunday Sales in Georgia Localities: Will it Affect Traffic Accidents?

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Discussions about public policy relating to alcohol cause a polarizing reaction to many people in this country, particularly in the South. The state of Georgia, for example, has a long history of policies regulating alcohol which reflects its membership as part of the “Bible Belt” where Sunday is regarded as a holy day and therefore alcohol cannot and should not be purchased on this day. Given that the impetus of alcohol control policy has generally widened the availability of alcohol since the Prohibition, the moral concerns of voters regarding alcohol regulation have been superseded in the public debate with safety and health concerns.

Public Safety and Public Concerns Regarding Alcohol

The negative health effects of alcohol abuse by individuals has been widely documented including both short-term and long-term threats to health (CDC Factsheet on Alcohol Health Effects). Apart from health risks, secondary effects of alcohol abuse have been linked to increased criminal behavior including spousal and child abuse, risky sexual behavior, and unintentional physical injuries. Access to alcohol for those who are underage heightens these concerns as teens and children do not necessarily perceive alcohol consumption as problematic. The final concern for many comes from the link between alcohol consumption and the increased likelihood that drivers under the influence of alcohol will cause property damage, injuries, and death to themselves and others through vehicular accidents (Middleton et al. 2010).

Given these legitimate concerns regarding alcohol consumption, the possibility of Sunday alcohol sales increasing the likelihood of negative incidents remains a controversial topic. The CDC’s “Community Guide” for alcohol policy calls for restricted days and hours for alcohol availability in order to prevent excessive alcohol consumption and related harms based on research conducted by others (Hahn et al. 2010). Hahn et al., and the studies that the Community Guide considers, are primarily studies from the Nordic countries of Sweden and Norway. They also consider the case of New Mexico which passed a law allowing local referenda to determine whether Sunday sale of alcohol for off premises consumption would be allowed.

The research summarized by Hahn et al. (2010) provides weak evidence for most of the negative short-term effects of alcohol consumption regarding violence and criminal behavior as a result of Sunday sales. However, they also document the stronger findings of increased driving under the influence charges due to Sunday sales of alcohol. Their most prominent case involves a New Mexico study conducted in 2006 and 2007 (McMillan and Lapham 2006; and McMillan, Hanson, and Lapham, 2007) which claimed a 32.3 percent increase in alcohol-related deaths in traffic accidents. Another 1996 county level study of Athens-Clarke County, Georgia examined one year of data during 1992-3 after passing Sunday sales for bars and restaurants and concluded that DUI cases were statistically higher for

Sunday compared with other days of the week excepting Monday (Ligon, Thyer and Lund (1996)). On the other hand, the relationship between Sunday sales of alcohol and increased vehicular accidents has been challenged by other research. Rudbeck and Maloney, (2009) contest the findings of McMillan and Lapham (2006) and McMillan, Hanson, and Lapham (2007). Using a more sophisticated econometric model with time series data from 1990-2005, Rudbeck and Maloney conclude that once the 1996 speed limit increase in New Mexico is taken into account, no significant relationship between Sunday sales and vehicular deaths exists.

Georgia's Sunday Sales Off-Premises Referenda

Georgia passed SB10 which allowed local cities and counties to vote on referenda regarding Sunday sales on April 12th, 2011. As a result of those referenda votes, 105 localities out of 128 passed referenda to allow Sunday sales. Additional referenda passed during the March 2012 primary elections. It is important to ask at this point, if Sunday off premises liquor sales will increase vehicular accidents. Do we see a noticeable decrease in alcohol-related accidents in the early hours of Monday morning, due to the restrictions on alcohol purchases on Sunday? If we do, we can expect to see that decrease disappear as a result of newly legal Sunday alcohol sales in the state. To examine this question, data was obtained from the Georgia Department of Transportation Office of Traffic Safety and Design. This data summarizes alcohol related accidents by day of week and hour of the day, total number of crashes, injuries, and fatalities from 2008 until mid-2011.

The table below highlights alcohol related accidents between 12:00 A.M and 5:00 A.M., the time when most drunk driving occurs. The table shows that alcohol related accidents are dramatically higher in the early hours of Saturday and Sunday. This occurrence is directly related to Friday and Saturday nights, a time period of increased alcohol consumption. With that said, alcohol consumption on Saturday night directly correlates to Sunday early morning alcohol related car accidents. The chart indicates that the percentage of accidents that occur on Sunday nights are significantly lower than Friday and Saturday nights, and correlate closer with weekday percentages of drunk driving. This finding would appear to indicate that Friday and Saturday nights are more of a “hotspot” for drunk driving.

These data suggest that removing access to alcohol in Georgia reduces alcohol related accidents, and that a change in alcohol sales policies could cause the early hours of Monday morning to produce the kinds of accident levels that are associated with weekends. Using these baseline data, future researchers can compare figures after Sunday alcohol sales go into effect and determine how the policy change influenced alcohol related accidents in Georgia.

Day	0:00am-0:59am	1:00am-1:59am	2:00am-2:59am	3:00am-3:59am	4:00am-4:59am	0:00am-5:00am	Overall Percentage
Sunday	11	5	9	11	6	42	26%
Monday	2	3	2	3	4	14	9%
Tuesday	1	5	1	0	1	8	5%
Wednesday	2	0	0	3	1	6	4%
Thursday	2	5	4	5	4	20	12%
Friday	5	4	9	4	2	24	15%
Saturday	8	11	7	11	9	46	29%
Total	31	33	32	37	27	160	100%

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