

# SIEPR

## *policy brief*

Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

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## The Effect of Blue Laws on Fatal Accidents

By *Daniel Steefel*

Blue laws have been enacted for hundreds of years to restrict commercial activities on Sundays. Although most states currently permit the on-site sale and consumption of alcohol on Sundays at locations such as football stadiums and bars, 14 states maintain blue laws prohibiting off-premise sales of distilled spirits. However, as a growing number of states have repealed or relaxed their blue laws over the last several years, this alcohol control policy has become a popular topic of debate. Supporters of these laws argue the importance of a uniform day of rest and the positive effects from decreased alcohol consumption, while opponents see the laws as unnecessary, religious-based restrictions of consumer choice and poten-

tial tax revenue. This paper adds to the policy debate by evaluating the effect of this alcohol control policy on a safety issue related to these blue laws: fatal car accidents.

In a study that garnered national media attention, Lapham and McMillan (2006) analyzed the effect of repealing a blue law in New Mexico in 1995. They found that repeal of this law increased fatal accidents on Sunday by 42 percent. Public officials subsequently have seized upon this figure to defend the bans by emphasizing the safety benefits of maintaining blue laws in their states.

This paper offers a more extensive examination of the purported connection between Sunday off-premise sales bans and fatal car crash-

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### About The Authors

The following four policy briefs, written by Stanford Public Policy Program students in a senior seminar taught by Dr. Michael Lovenheim in fall 2008, are descriptions of papers the students completed in the class. Each student independently conceived of his or her topic and conducted the analysis; Dr. Lovenheim chose the four most complete papers that best represent the type of independent and rigorous policy analysis that the program teaches the students.

**Daniel Steefel** is a senior from Littleton, Colorado majoring in Public Policy. Next year, he will be working at Bates White, an economic consulting firm in Washington, DC. Beyond Public Policy, Daniel is interested in business and statistical analysis related to sports.



**Joseph Ayers** is a Senior at Stanford University majoring in Public Policy with a concentration in the Design of Public Institutions. He recently finished playing professional baseball for the Arizona Diamondbacks and currently is pursuing career opportunities in Finance and Government.



**Jessica Lee** is a senior at Stanford University majoring in Public Policy with a concentration in Law and the Legal System and a minor in Chinese. She became interested in voting rights issues when she participated in Stanford in Washington and interned in the Voting Section of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. After graduation, Jessica will be working as an investment analyst at Bivium Capital in San Francisco.



**Daniel Berring** is a senior at Stanford University earning honors in Public Policy and a minor Chinese. He will graduate in June 2009. Next year, he will be working in Los Angeles as a Business Analyst at McKinsey&Company.



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es across all states between 1990 and 2007. Over the course of this sample period, 13 states repealed or relaxed their Sunday sales bans of distilled spirits, beginning with the state of New Mexico in 1995 and concluding with the state of Washington in 2005. The variation over time in the enactment of policy changes allows me to account for trends in fatal crashes that occur simultaneously, but are unrelated, to the repeal of blue laws. The study also examines other alcohol- and traffic-related laws, such as laws requiring seat belts or prohibiting driving with a

blood alcohol content above 0.08.

The results of this analysis indicate that repealing a blue law during the study period increased fatal crashes occurring on Sunday relative to weekdays by 7.5 percent. While not as large an effect as in the New Mexico study, this result still implies a sizable increase in fatal accidents due to the repeal of blue laws. For example, in 2007, there were more than 1,800 Sunday fatal crashes in states that still maintained a blue law related to distilled spirits, meaning that even 7.5 percent fewer crashes represent at least 135

saved lives. In addition, I find that enforcing a seat belt law reduces fatal crashes by 5.1 percent. Overall, the policy implication of this study is that blue laws related to off-premise alcohol sales do lead to a non-negligible reduction in fatal crashes, but there may be other less controversial traffic-safety measures, such as seat belt laws, that yield similar effects.

Lapham, S., and G. McMillan, 2006, "Effectiveness of Bans and Laws in Reducing Traffic Deaths," *American Journal of Public Health*, November 96 (11): 1944-1948.

## Does College Athletics Affect Post-Secondary Education and Career Achievement of Athletes?

By Joseph Ayers

The debate over "student athletes" in our society and the effects that athletics has on a person through high school, college, and beyond often becomes very polarizing. Negative outlooks center on the belief that there is too much emphasis on succeeding in athletics instead of academics and that athletes go through school below the normal development curve and ultimately emerge greatly disadvantaged from their peers.

The counter-arguments to

these negative views describe athletics as a societal tool that teaches children the importance of dedication and hard work and allows those unable to afford college an opportunity to receive a free education. What is missing from this debate is any systematic evidence on what really is happening to student athletes as they progress through college and into the workforce. Are they making the most of their opportunity to attend college by graduat-

ing and becoming productive citizens or are they leaving school with less education than their non-athlete counterparts?

To answer these questions, I compared the academic preparedness, collegiate experiences, and labor force success of three distinct groups: high school graduates who did not attend college, non-athletes who attended college, and students who attended post-secondary education and competed in



varsity sports. The data for this analysis come from a nationally representative cohort of eighth-graders in 1988 that are followed continually until 2000, and this comparison allows me to examine whether college athletics is associated with positive student outcomes relative to athletes' different peer groups.

Contrary to many of the stereotypes about college athletes, the results from these comparisons show they generally surpass those in the other groups in all areas. Athletes have significantly higher math test scores as high school seniors than both non-athlete college attendees and high school graduates not attending college, suggesting they are no worse prepared for college than their non-athlete counterparts and far better prepared than those who do not enroll. Consistent with their relatively high level of academic preparedness for

college, athletes are less likely to stop attending college before receiving their degrees: College athletes attained their bachelor's degree at an astounding 14.7 percent above regular college attendees. These students also were 0.9 percent more likely to earn a master's degree than the non-athlete college-goers. These results suggest that college athletes are not just settling for playing sports; they are forging on and receiving degrees at rates that surpass their non-athlete counterparts.

As former college athletes enter the labor market, they appear quite adept at becoming employed at relatively high-wage jobs. More than 90 percent of college athletes from the study were employed as of 2000, compared with 88 percent of other college attendees and 83 percent of high school graduates. Former college athletes also earn over \$3,000 on average

per year more than non-athlete college attendees and over \$5,000 per year more than non-college attendees.

Student athletes and collegiate athletics are responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars in costs each year paid for by collegiate institutions, students, and alumni. With a limited number of spaces available for students and even less financial aid to pay for them, expending resources on college athletes can be extremely costly to our society. However, my analysis suggests that college athletes tend to be more successful than their peers, both academically and upon entry into the labor market, which implies that the combination of athletics and higher education is much less detrimental to the development of well-educated productive citizens than critics often assert.

## How Effective Is Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act?: A California Case Study

*By Jessica Lee*

The right to vote is one of the most cherished features of American democracy, and the Voting Right Act of 1965 (VRA) is heralded as a landmark in civil rights

legislation. However, controversy consistently has surrounded Section 5 of the VRA, which mandates that before any proposed voting change is legally enforceable,

a covered jurisdiction must obtain "preclearance" from the U.S. Attorney General by demonstrating that the change does not have the purpose, and will not have the effect,

of discriminating based on race or color.

The VRA and Section 5 have been renewed four times since their inception. During the most recent reauthorization in 2006, heated debate arose regarding the constitutionality, effectiveness, and relevancy of the preclearance standards. The Supreme Court is now reviewing the constitutionality of Section 5 in *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District Number One v. Eric Holder, Jr., Attorney General, et al.* The plaintiff asserts that Congress no longer should be allowed to impose Section 5 because the “original emergency” of voting discrimination has passed. The validity of this argument rests in part on whether Section 5 increases voter turnout and voter registration, but there currently is little empirical evidence on whether this is so.

My thesis adds to the debate over Section 5 by examining its effect on voter turnout and voter registration in California for the presidential elections between 1968 and 2000. Four counties in California fall under Section 5 due, in part, to their large Hispanic populations in 1970 or 1972: Kings, Merced, Monterey, and Yuba. I collected data on voter turnout, voter registration, and percent Hispanic for all 58 counties in California. With these data, I

analyze whether the percent of the voting-age population that voted or registered in Section 5 counties has changed compared with those counties not covered by Section 5. By controlling for the percent Hispanic in each county, I am able to isolate the effect of Section 5 on voter behavior that is independent of the fact that covered counties tend to have larger Hispanic populations, which likely impacts voter turnout and registration. Furthermore, I also control for changes in turnout and registration that occur for idiosyncratic reasons, such as because an issue in the election is especially important to Latinos or because the candidates in the election are more “popular” than ones in the previous election.

I find that being a Section 5 covered county in California increases voter turnout by 6.7 percentage points and increases voter registration by 7.3 percentage points. I also show the impact of Section 5 on both turnout and registration has increased over time, such that by 2000, the effects on voter turnout and registration were 11.1 and 13.2 percentage points, respectively.

This study demonstrates that despite Section 5 being continuously criticized as an unnecessary provision, it has

had a significant impact on voter registration and turnout in California. Furthermore, the large impact of Section 5 in recent elections suggests that it is not irrelevant and outdated, as many opponents of the provision now assert. While this analysis cannot answer whether preclearance is constitutional, it does show that Section 5 continues to positively affect voter registration and turnout.

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# The Role of Communities in Solving California's Recidivism Crisis

By *Daniel Berring*

As long as there have been prisons, societies have wrestled with the difficulties of reintegration. In 2007, California released more than 125,000 prisoners; of that number over 65 percent already have reoffended in some capacity. California's recidivism rate regularly falls around 60 percent, making it one of the most recidivist states in the union.

The community into which an individual is released upon leaving prison is one among a variety of factors that can affect successful reintegration. A community focused on rehabilitation can help facilitate reentry with services and resources, while dysfunctional or antagonistic communities can isolate ex-offenders by scrutinizing their behavior and restricting resources (such as housing and employment) that often are considered critical for reintegration.

The goal of this paper is to estimate the effect of community-level factors in facilitating rehabilitation of ex-offenders in California. Measuring interpersonal ties is one way to determine community strength, but these ties are hard to observe, categorize, and quantify. Using institutions like churches and community centers, whose presence facilitates these

interpersonal connections, is one solution to this difficulty. Institutions such as vocational training facilities, which reflect community engagement with ex-offenders, also may be important. The presence of these factors suggests a cohesive, welcoming, and rehabilitation-focused environment.

Using recidivism data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, local data from city records, and county data from the U.S. Census Bureau, I examine whether recidivism is lower in areas with stronger measures of community strength. My measures of community strength focus on the measurable aspects of communities and neighborhoods, such as educational institutions, housing assistance, rehabilitation clinics, vocational training centers, and places of worship. Because community factors are not randomly assigned across localities, I control for a variety of socioeconomic factors (population, unemployment and poverty rates, and homelessness) that allow me to measure the effect of community strength, per se, on recidivism.

I find little relationship between my community measures and recidivism. This

result might indicate the minimal importance of community-level factors in reintegrating prisoners; strong communities may not compel behavior. Given the strong theoretical underpinnings connecting social networks and reintegration, however, that communities make no discernible difference in recidivism incidence is unlikely. The lack of significant findings in my study instead may demonstrate the difficulty of measuring community strength as it relates to recidivism. Categorizing neighborhood establishments gives a snapshot of a community but does not reveal its inner workings. Surveys do not unveil the psychology of interaction and the delicate functions of a community that still might affect successful reentry. The continued empirical uncertainty between recidivism and communities suggests a need for more research on this link and on assessing community strength. After determining what kind of impact local institutions can make and how they can exert that influence, public policy can focus on working with neighborhoods to facilitate change directly through communities.

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