The Alcohol Justice Field Guide to
Entertainment Zones, Party Zones & Social Districts

A citizen-advocate guide to reducing harm from unaccountable street alcohol sales.

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A. What Is an Entertainment Zone

In 2024, California passed SB 969 (Wiener, D-San Francisco), allowing any interested city or town to enact an "entertainment zone". Within these areas, also called "party zones" or "social districts," any bar or restaurants would be permitted to sell directly to customers on the street. The effect is an enormous, lucrative street party, where consumption happens in ad hoc, sometimes multi-block enclosures with little to no oversight or accountability. The bill itself provides absolutely no guardrails beyond the need to identify minors in the zone (there's no expectation that they be kept out).

Further complicating governmental or licensee capacity to mitigate the impacts of these zones, they are relatively novel in the United States. Certainly, Bourbon St. in New Orleans has long been an example of a sell-onto-the-sidewalk neighborhood—and Bourbon St. finds itself repeatedly wracked by violence and tragedy. But the hundreds, or potentially thousands, of zones, each with their own idiosyncratic rules (or lack of rules), create a monitoring nightmare even for organizations and jurisdictions that understand the potential risks of unmonitored alcohol sales.

Absent a rigorous state monitoring strategy, it falls on community members and local organizations to provide oversight. This strategy, referred to by a University of North Carolina team tasked with evaluated the impact of similar entertainment zones in their state as

Investigate, Document, and Act (IDA),[1] not only allows short term mitigation of local problems, it creates a paper trail that can be used to talk back to the legislators who overlook their own constituents in desperately pushing these measures.

Unfortunately, this approach is insufficient to document long-term harm to the patrons of these zones. That documentation can only come from professional public health surveillance. The growing tide of alcohol-related death in California, with a 70% rise in mortality in less than a decade,[2] has been supercharged by a swath of policies meant to induce residents to drink more. But by making a compelling case that they are hurting bystanders you can also end up saving lives.

B. Key Risk Factors and Community Concerns

Ten Ways for Citizens to Investigate Entertainment Zones

These ten areas below are intended to be helpful suggestions. There are useful routes to gather data that we omitted, and not all of the methods we listed will always bear fruit. When it comes to advocacy, *something is always better than nothing.* Decisionmakers always bank on the public being too confused, tired, or disempowered to act, especially when they are passing legislation benefiting a powerful special interest.

Any information you share, and any paper trail you leave, makes it easier to promote a healthy and safe environment for all.

1. Violence and Other Criminal Disruptions

Alcohol overconsumption—and the kind of "drunk tourism" that bills like CA SB 969 try to encourage—are associated with a number of immediate dangers. Prominent among them is the threat of violence, robbery, and sexual assault. "Entertainment zone" monitoring should include:

- Review of police activity logs, scanner monitoring, and other collection of local law enforcement data
- Collection and amplification of victim stories and media accounts of criminal disruptions
- Careful recording of first-person experiences by advocates and local residents, regardless of police involvement

2. Dangerous Driving In Local Areas

[1] Pruitt & Fliss. 2023. Alcohol Social Districts in North Carolina: Evaluation Plans, Feasibility & Recommendations. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Injury Prevention Research Center.

[2] Jiménez JA, Demeter NE, Pinsker EA. 2023. Deaths from Excessive Alcohol Use in California, 2020-2021. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Public Health.

Open-air alcohol sales areas are central to the idea of a city becoming a party destination. In the United States, public transit is too sparse and too unreliable to deal with much of the alcohol economy as it is. These zones will create magnets for individuals to travel and over-consume. Dangerous driving can be assessed through both public and semi-public channels:

- Records of traffic crashes and traffic stops, including the Traffic Injury Mapping System and other public databases. In particular, comparing days or historical periods where entertainment zones are in effect to ones in which they are not
- Media and social media accounts of traffic collisions
- Place-of-last-drink data kept by local law enforcement—depending on department policies, this may be offered on request, or may require a legal motion to access public records

3. Underage Access and Consumption

As part of entertainment zones' goals of reducing the number of employees bars and restaurants need to pay, youth access becomes more likely. Moreover, the open consumption within CA SB 969 makes it nearly impossible to hold any bar accountable for selling to youth, and the zones are ripe for "shoulder tapping." Youth use can be tracked via:

- Accounts from the youth themselves
- Sting operations conducted by the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) or local law enforcement within the party zone
- "Casual stings" where local residents note whether or not they are being carded, wristbanded, or otherwise expected to show proof of majority

Note that even in absence of illegal sales, large numbers of underage youth within party zones, especially while in the presence of other crimes or disruptions of concern, are strong reasons to question an existing entertainment zone's authorization.

4. Economic Harm to Non-Licensed Businesses

The success of these entertainment zones is predicated on their ability to draw additional business to the bars and restaurants within them. However, this assumes everyone who comes to the area comes there to drink. Other businesses, such as book stores or tutoring centers, may be actively harmed by simply finding themselves within an entertainment zone. Economic impacts can be assessed by:

- Conversations with shop owners detailing any problems arising from the zone
- Noting store closures and the nature of the stores that replace them
- Noting staffing or service changes in favored alcohol licensees—do they have fewer people than usual working when the entertainment zone is in effect? Do they have a

shorter or minimal menu? Are they engaging in “high-volume” alcohol sales strategies such as coolers full of mixed drinks that they did not engage in previously?

5. Undue Police or Emergency Vehicle Activity

The harm to persons is not restricted to street fights or violent muggings. Unaccountable alcohol use can be associated with accidental injury, domestic violence, poisoning, alcohol-involved overdose, and other less obtrusive sources of harm. It can be more difficult to track these outcomes, but in many cases, if an emergency vehicle attends, serious harm was at least a possibility. Emergency vehicle callouts can be tracked in multiple ways:

- For individuals living in close proximity to the entertainment zone, use a simple counter (or equivalent phone app, with one tap equaling one event)
- Ambulance calls can be less precise than police records, but are made public after some delay

When reporting these figures, we often let our fear for the person being loaded in the ambulance overshadow the truth that exposure to emergency situations traumatizes onlookers as well. The constant reminder that people are in harm’s way makes us expect harm, and the automatic act of empathizing with someone in one of the worst days of their life takes a toll on us as well. Do not discount your own emotional pain.

6. Littering and Quality of Life Impacts

While not all bars maybe be renowned for cleanliness, they are at least enclosed spaces. Entertainment zones create real concerns around liability for maintaining a clear and orderly space. Community advocates should consider documenting and reporting the following:

- Excessive litter, particularly but not exclusively the legally-mandated plastic cups, during and especially after the hours of the entertainment zone (slow cleaning by the city or town should be considered a problem with the zone, and in some cases licensees themselves can be held responsible for excessive trash in front of their doors)
- Unusual litter, including drug paraphernalia, batteries, and hazardous materials
- Damage to street signs, street lights, bus shelters, and other civic amenities within the zone

7. Licensee and Government Accountability

Despite the unusual circumstances under which alcohol is sold in entertainment zones, alcohol licenses often come with conditions, which are not superseded by the establishment of the zone. Similarly, those zones are often set with certain caveats or limitations imposed by local authorities. Despite the seeming free-for-all within the zone, both businesses and government should still be held liable for its orderly operation via:

- Understanding the requirements for the zones under CA SB 969, including size and nature of to-go drinks, mandatory mechanisms for identifying underage attendees, and reporting requirements by local law enforcement
- Accessing conditions on licenses from the city and CA ABC; both can impose conditions, and these often include hours of operation, noise, and expectations of minimal public nuisance
- Request and publicize the conditions for the specific zone as agreed upon by local jurisdictions

8. Daylighting Government Reporting

Within CA SB 969 is a mandate that local bodies monitor and report on the circumstances within and around these zones. Similar such procedural reports exist throughout all branches of government, and in cases where they might indicate problems with powerful businesses, authorities often bank on the public forgetting they exist. Do not let them forget about entertainment zones evaluations. Make sure this information is available to your neighbors by:

- Getting a commitment for when it will be released, and a promise for public dissemination, by the responsible body
- Ensuring public release either through follow-up with governmental agencies, or through a public records request
- Making it publicly available through shared drives or online repositories and archiving it—historical versions of these reports can be "memory-holed," or even available only on a hard copy in a filing cabinet

9. Media Surveillance

While the media can often be an asset, documenting outcomes that shock the conscience, they have a short attention span. Taking on the task of documenting coverage of these zones can create an easily understood, publicly accessible base for advocacy efforts. Some helpful tools for monitoring:

- Google news alerts set to gather articles about your area and the streets, businesses, or events that are tied to risky party zones
- Direct contact with reporters, which can result in two-way relationships where your tips drive their stories and their stories drive your base of evidence
- Active engagement in comments and social media; while this is often just noise for national stories, for a local interest piece around alcohol policy, your voice denormalizes harmful policies and draws out supporters who might feel outnumbered

10. Resident Interviews

The first impact will be felt by residents living within the borders set by these zones. They may not always know that they have the right to "reasonable enjoyment" of their home. By engaging them, citizen-advocates can both push back against the entertainment zone and protect residents' essential rights. Methods of engagement can include:

- Surveys, distributed either through word-of-mouth channels or through comprehensive mailing lists
- Flyers distributed in mailboxes encouraging them to speak up and/or engage their representatives
- Email lists or social media groups allowing residents to coordinate with one another

C. *How Advocates Can Reduce the Harm from Unmonitored Sales*

How to Document

Here are some hints and tips for how to accurately document alcohol harm within these zones:

- **Clearly record date, time, location, and what happened**.
  Think of the old journalistic saw: who, what, when, where, how. "I have seen bad things," is nowhere near as compelling as, "Early Wednesday evening, I saw a man chug his drink and fall into the street, nearly getting hit by car. On Thursday around 1 a.m., I heard screaming and saw from the window a figure knock a woman down and steal her purse."

- **Before and after**
  Entertainment zones will almost certainly result in additional litter, and likely property damage, vandalism, public urination, and other fundamental quality-of-life impacts. In addition, they risk changing the nature of a neighborhood, seeing stores, youth and educational resources, medical facilities, and other businesses that are actively harmed by an all-the-time party driven away. Make notes for how the impacted area was before the entertainment zone was established, or for the state of disorder on days/hours when it is not in effect, to make it clear what might be damaged or lost.

- **Identify licensees engaged in illegal or risk-conducive activities.**
  CA ABC will try and move to confront and discipline a licensee engaged in illegal activity, if they can identify one. A licensee that is repeatedly a problem can have their license suspended. But even if ABC is not able to act, harms publicly tied to a specific licensees' behaviors can encourage the licensee to change their behavior—or decide the entertainment zone is simply not worth the hassle.

- Amplify others' voices

  If you hear someone complain about an entertainment zone, ask if they will tell you all the details, and if they'll allow you to put their name to it. (Do *not* name someone who has not consented to be part of the record.) You are not only validating and boosting your own observations—not to mention validating the other person's—you are slowly growing a list of people who might join you in taking action.

How to Report

Making the streets safe again is a process, not a single victory. Citizen advocacy is an ongoing effort. If one complaint or account does not enact change, do not give up. Continue collecting, registering, and sharing accounts of the harms emerging from these districts.

Effective recipients for accounts include, but are not limited to:

- California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control.

  If you know the name the of the licensee(s) involved in the problem, you can submit via the ABC Complaint form https://www.abc.ca.gov/contact/file-complaint/

  If it is a more general concern with the zone, we recommend you email abccomplaint@abc.ca.gov, and cc advocacy@alcoholjustice.org

- Local law enforcement

  CA SB 969 mandates reporting by local law enforcement agencies. This may be a city police department, a county sheriff, a university security department, or possibly a national law enforcement organization. If you do not know who to contact, reach out to us at advocacy@alcoholjustice.org.

- Local leadership

  These zones are authorized by local leaders, and can be suspended by local leaders. Your councilmembers, mayor, town manager, or other central authorities can rapidly address an out-of-control party zone. They can be contacted directly, or addressed at town council meetings, depending on your capacity.

- State leadership

  State leaders allowed these zones to come into existence, and they should bear accountability for the outcomes. (They also often come from town and city politics, and remain accountable to their home constituency.) Do not just email them—in-person accounts via phone or office visit are far more impactful than a single letter.

- Local media and social media

Although local media has been greatly diminished in the last decade, it still exists, and reporters are still hungry for stories. Accounts of harm coming from party zones can quickly get picked up by reporters, and once there is local discussion about the risks, can help rally supporters for a safer alcohol sales environment.

Thank You for Taking This On

When seeing bills like SB 969 pass with little media coverage and little public conversation, it is easy to believe that everyone around thinks there are no problems with the current alcohol sales environment. This is not true. The industry and the legislators who depend on its money rely on sweeping changes to protective legislative passing in the dark, and being established before anyone can say, "Hey, this might hurt people."

But just because it passed in the dark does not mean the effects need to be buried away from public scrutiny. There are many avenues available to advocates and concerned community members, and nothing scares an elected politician like community solidarity fueled by the knowledge that they are doing wrong by their constituents. Please use the suggestions and processes in this document as a jumping off point for addressing entertainment zones—or any other mandated policies that bring risk and harm into the community.

We also welcome feedback as the zones mandated through SB 969 become entrenched. This is a living document, and should reflect the outcomes actually observed in the street, and the experiences of local residents. Reach out to advocacy@alcoholjustice.org with any question, comments, or suggestions, and we will incorporate them in future versions. We appreciate your commitment to protecting public health and community safety.