



What is the Best Closing Time for Sociability?

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OVERVIEW OF TAKEAWAYS

In this Tuesday Forum discussion, participants from cities across the U.S. and Canada discussed the pros and cons of different options for closing time and best practices for management of patron egress.

Various challenges are associated with a “hard stop” i.e. a set closing time hour. Described by many as the “witching hour,” the simultaneous close of multiple venues within the district results in a mass exodus of people onto the street. Closing time is associated with a high level of public safety incidents and sound disturbances, as well as peak demand for people seeking safe rides home.

Alternatives to a set closing time include flexible closing times and elimination of the closing time concept altogether. The nuances and unanticipated challenges with various iterations of closing time were explored, including the following questions:

- Is there a perfect hour for closing time?
- Where do people go when all bars close at the same time, but they still want to socialize?
- What happens when alcohol service outside has a “closing time”?
- Should extended hours permits be used as an incentive?

A participant from New Orleans shared how DUIs and alcohol-related safety incidents rose during the period of time when closing time was instituted temporarily in the city. Incidents were reduced when the rule was rescinded (and the city returned to no set closing time).

Simply changing the hour at which social venues must close will not, in of itself, create the desired effects of harm reduction and greater public safety. This is because service hours do not directly create or cause the issues that are associated with closing time. Time is just one of many variables in managing patron egress. Further, the rise of daytime parties begs the question of whether closing time is still relevant in a modern world.

The group’s conclusion was revelatory, though it may be controversial to alcohol policy regulators and enforcement staff: **It’s not about the hour when venues close...it’s about the management of crowds leaving venues.**

Safe, efficient management of patron egress is based on a combination of factors. Venues play a critical role in orchestrating the flow of customers; patrons themselves need a level of personal accountability and etiquette; and finally, environmental systems of order such as lighting and rideshare hubs facilitate safe egress.

DISCUSSION

IS THERE A PERFECT HOUR FOR CLOSING TIME?

Some cities close at 2:00 a.m.; others at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. When safety incidents occur, some cities choose to roll back closing time to midnight. Others offer closing time extensions.

Enforcement agency staff typically express concern about extending closing hours, as this change requires an extension of time when officers must be deployed. For example, if a city shifts closing time from 3:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., the common perception is that it shifts the problems and safety resource needs by another hour.

Regardless of the hour set for closing time, the simultaneous closing of social venues results in a mass exodus of people to the street. Sound disturbances and public safety incidents can occur with many people on the street. They may linger on the streets chatting or walk through residential neighborhoods to return to cars. Some get into fights. Others simply wish to return home – but ride-share services can be overwhelmed by many people simultaneously hailing rides. Parking lots become congested as people try to leave at the same time.

Participants agreed that the focus should, therefore, not be on determining a “perfect closing time hour” but on managing closing time. A larger question is whether having a set closing hour for all social venues is appropriate. The group discussed best practices for closing time and considered the concept of flexible hours and the lack of any set closing time.

WHERE DO PEOPLE GO WHEN ALL BARS CLOSE AT THE SAME TIME, BUT THEY STILL WANT TO SOCIALIZE?

A typical scenario is that patrons are still eager to socialize, even after closing time for venues licensed to serve alcohol. But where do they go? Some go to late-night food establishments. Others go to other social venues without the same rules as those that serve alcohol.

CASE STUDY: RALEIGH, NC

In Raleigh, NC, after bars close at 2:00 a.m., patrons go to hookah lounges (allowed to stay open until 5:00 a.m.) located within the hospitality district. Hookah bars are classified as “restaurants” and therefore do not need to abide by bars’ closing time, as they serve food and do not serve alcohol. However, hookah lounges have become the focal point for disturbances. People bring in their own alcohol to consume on-premise. There is currently an effort to change the classification of hookah lounges, so they’re not considered restaurants.

Further (perhaps unrelated to hookah lounge patrons), people continue to hang out in parking lots playing music loudly and thus disturb nearby residents.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ALCOHOL SERVICE OUTSIDE HAS A “CLOSING TIME”?

A pandemic-era innovation was the introduction of parklets and streeteries into the landscape of social districts. Some allowed consumption of beverage alcohol in outdoor areas (designated seating areas) or for people to openly carry beverages throughout the district. But what happens when there is a hard stop for outdoor alcohol consumption?

CASE STUDY: BLOOMINGTON, IN

Since the start of the pandemic in Bloomington, IN, bars and restaurants have been authorized to have outdoor dining, including the service of alcohol. But, venues are only allowed to serve alcohol outdoors until 11:30 p.m. Then, people are

required to move indoors inside licensed premises. Sensitivity in communication has been required to inform outdoor patrons that they must move inside and, further, that patrons cannot order large quantities of alcohol in the time before the “outdoor closing time” to be consumed outside.

SHOULD EXTENDED HOURS PERMITS BE USED AS AN INCENTIVE?

Some cities offer an extended hours permit to venues to incentivize good operations without a history of violations. But, as in the case of Ft. Lauderdale, FL, such systems can have unintended consequences.

CASE STUDY: FORT LAUDERDALE, FL

In Florida, the state sets a baseline closing time of midnight, with municipalities allowed to extend that closing time. In the past, venues in Ft. Lauderdale were allowed to operate until 2:00 a.m. or, if they had an extended hours permit, until 4:00 a.m. The intention was to offer extended hours as a “carrot” for compliance.

However, when it became public knowledge that almost all LGBTQ+ venues were denied requests for an extended hours permit, allegations emerged about discrimination. To create an equal playing field, the extended hours’ permit was eliminated, and all venues are now allowed to stay open until 4:00 a.m. within the entertainment district overlay.

WHAT ABOUT FLEXIBLE CLOSING HOURS?

One alternative to a hard stop/simultaneous closing time is a system where venues close at different hours, thus reducing the mass exodus outside.

CASE STUDY: NEW YORK, NY

Although not intentional from the outset, what has emerged in New York’s social economy is a staggered hours system for closing time. Community boards have a significant role in determining the closing time of social venues. What has resulted is inconsistent hours of operation for the same business on different days of the week and different operating hours for businesses located on the same block. This has resulted in perceptions of an uneven playing field for venues, where some have more operating hours than others in a seemingly arbitrary system.

Changes are underway to address inconsistencies in alcohol licensing. The Mayor has deputized the Office of Nightlife to create a universal application across all five boroughs. The process will be voluntary, which is why Office of Nightlife staff are undergoing engagement at borough board meetings to help achieve buy-in.

WHAT HAPPENS IN CITIES WITHOUT A CLOSING TIME?

CASE STUDY: NEW ORLEANS, LA

New Orleans’ nightlife is iconic for many reasons....among them that there is no set closing time. But, the city established a midnight closing time at the start of the pandemic. Howie Kaplan, New Orleans Director of Nighttime Economy, described what happened when a closing time was introduced: “There was a mad rush to down drinks with a closing time push.” Then, people left New Orleans for nearby parishes that did not have a closing time. When the closing time rule in the city was removed, data showed a reduction in both DUIs and incidents related to bars.

Kaplan describes New Orleans’ hospitality industry as “the solution to the problem,” not “the cause of the problem.” Thus “bars are not just bars. Places here take pride in their neighborhood. Their clientele comes from the

neighborhood.” This sense of ownership and stewardship of patrons of social venues is another critical aspect of safety. In New Orleans, residents advocated for keeping social venues open without a closing time.

Despite a set closing time, the city’s venues struggle to stay open 24 hours. Diners and late-night food venues cannot maintain a 24-hour schedule due to staffing shortages and loss of demand. The pandemic-era social conditioning to go to bed earlier continues to play out.

CASE STUDY: JEFFERSON PARISH, LA

A midnight closing time was established for the entertainment district in Jefferson Parish, while nearby communities did not have a closing time. Crime and assaults increased as a result of implementing the closing time. Kaplan speculated that this was because of the lack of eyes on the street.

WILL DAY PARTIES RENDER CLOSING TIME IRRELEVANT?

A socializing trend seen throughout the world is the rise of daytime parties. London, Las Vegas and New York are among the cities offering experiences traditionally experienced only at night, such as club dancing. Other examples include pool parties, brunches with DJs, etc. If it becomes more normalized for people to consume alcohol and socialize during the day, it begs whether a set “closing time” is relevant in the future.

CLOSING TIME MANAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Tuesday Forum participants discussed critical aspects of facilitating safe, effective closing time management. Participants emphasized that the variables that should be assessed are not necessarily the hour at which operations must cease, but the management practices for facilitating patron egress.

VENUE MANAGEMENT

How venues manage closing time is critical to how they behave on the street. First, from queuing guests that it is time to leave by gradually turning up the lights, lowering the music volume, and giving adequate time for the last call so people can order their last drink and have the time to consume it.

Security staff also play a role in orchestrating the flow of people safely out of the venue, encouraging them not to linger and in addition, helping with vehicular traffic management, e.g. forming lines where cars line up.

PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT

Environmental strategies can help manage the egress of patrons without hostile or aggressive methods sometimes used by enforcement (e.g. sirens, loudspeakers, etc.). For example, **bright lighting** in strategic areas can help discourage people from lingering. Systems of order through **organized rideshare hubs and managed taxicab line queues** can also help facilitate orderly access to safe rides home.

PATRON ETIQUETTE AND EDUCATION

Per participants, the onus of patron etiquette and personal safety should not be entirely on the venues’ shoulders. There is also an aspect of accountability for one’s personal safety to take into account. For example, patrons need education on protecting themselves and not becoming victims or targets of crime when going out. They should also respect the neighborhood and act with civility towards property and each other.