



Alcohol Retail Outlet Density

September 2026

Alcohol retail outlet density

- Alcohol is the most used substance in the U.S. Drinking alcohol can increase the risk of long-term health problems. It is also linked to at least seven types of cancer.¹
- In 2025, alcohol was involved in 90,801 emergency room visits and 1,665 deaths in Massachusetts²
- An **alcohol retail outlet** is a place where alcohol can legally be sold. **On-premises outlets**, such as restaurants and bars, sell alcohol for consumption at the licensed location, while **off-premises outlets**, such as liquor stores, grocery stores, and convenience stores, sell alcohol for consumption elsewhere. Learn more about alcohol retail outlets from the **Massachusetts Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission (ABCC)**^{3,10}
- **Alcohol outlet density** is a measure of how many places sell alcohol in an area. It can be measured by the size of the area or by the number of people who live there.
- **High alcohol outlet density** means there are many places that sell alcohol in a small area. Areas with more alcohol outlets may have a higher risk of excessive drinking.⁴
- Research shows that when alcohol is easier to get, people tend to drink more. This can also lead to more health and social problems related to alcohol use.^{5,6}
- To help prevent excessive drinking, public health experts recommend limiting the number of alcohol outlets in an area. Communities can do this through policies such as alcohol licensing and zoning.⁷

Alcohol outlet regulation in Massachusetts

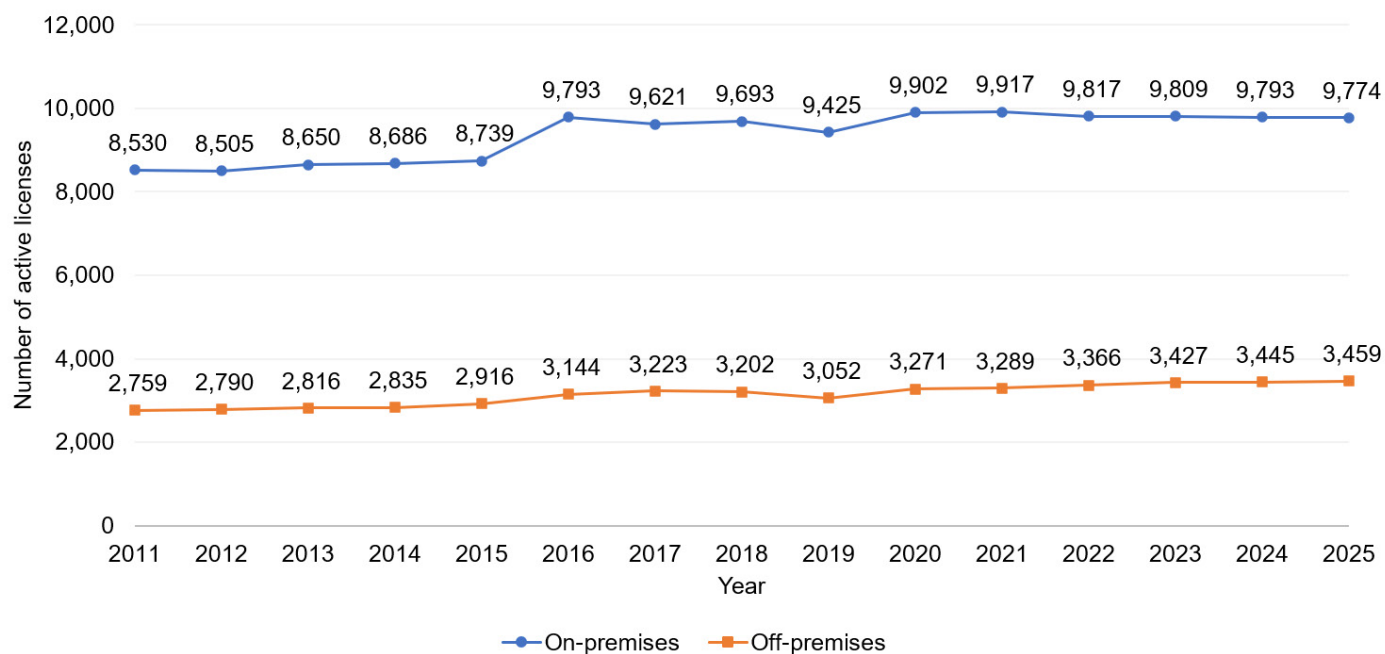
- In Massachusetts, state and local governments share responsibility for regulating alcohol outlets. At the state level, the ABCC leads this work. The ABCC is part of the Office of the Treasurer and Receiver General. Cities and towns also regulate alcohol outlets in their communities.
- Massachusetts law sets rules for where and how alcohol can be sold. Chapter 138 covers these rules. Section 12 applies to places where alcohol is consumed on-site. Section 15 applies to stores that sell alcohol to be consumed elsewhere. Section 17 sets limits on the number of alcohol outlets based on population.⁸

Why measure alcohol outlet density?

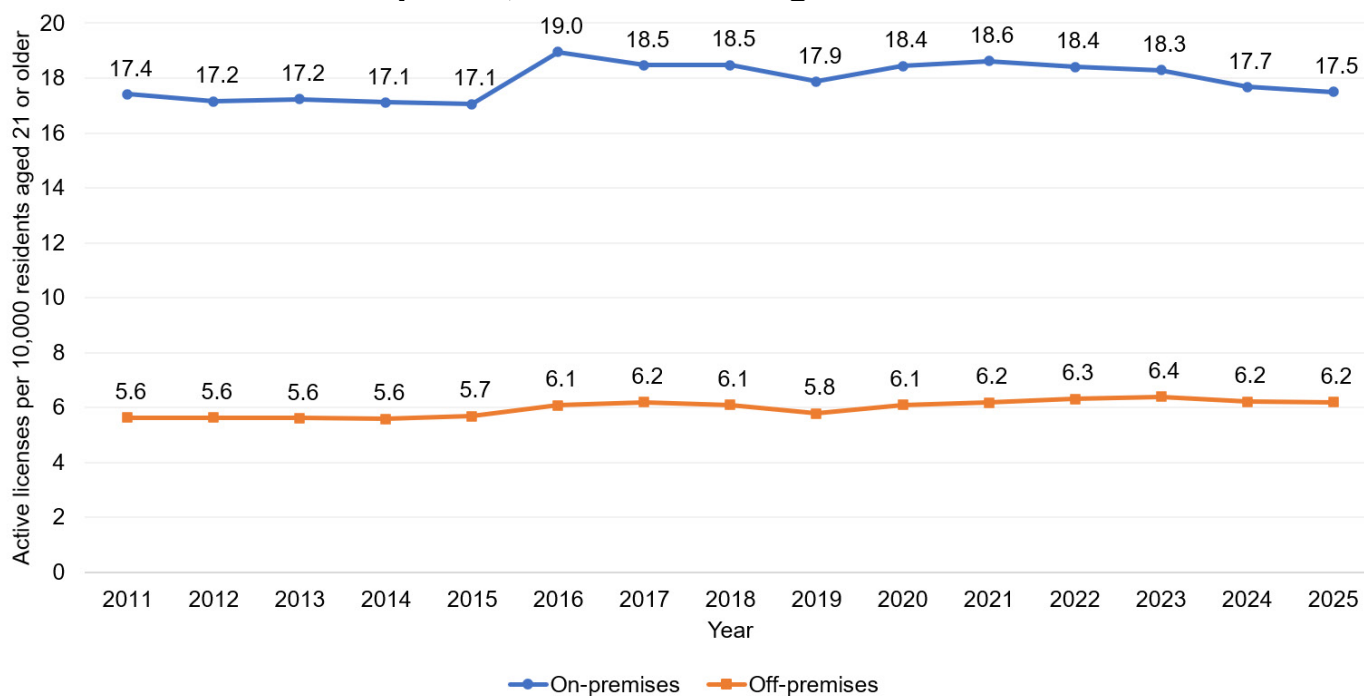
- Information about alcohol outlet density can help public health agencies and communities to:^{4,7}
 - Guide the development of recommended evidence-based prevention strategies to address excessive alcohol use
 - Identify areas with many alcohol outlets. This can help local officials decide whether to limit alcohol licenses or step up enforcement of alcohol laws in these areas.
 - Look at whether areas with more alcohol outlets also have more alcohol-related health and social problems

Statewide trends in active alcohol retail licenses, 2011-2025

Number of active licenses



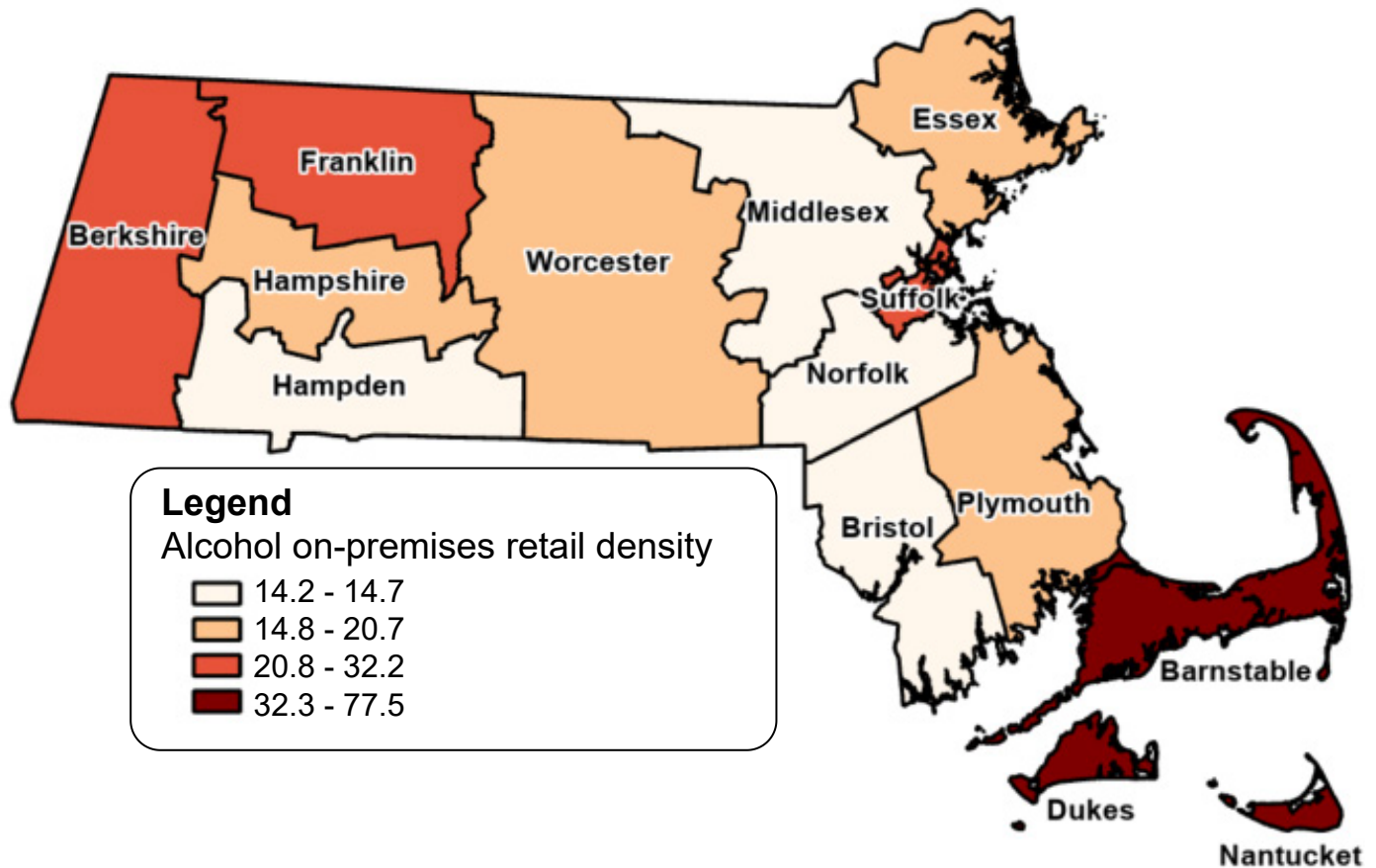
Rate of active licenses per 10,000 residents aged 21 or older



Notes: Rates represent active alcohol retail licenses per 10,000 Massachusetts residents aged 21 years or older.

Sources: Population estimates, UMass Donahue Institute.⁹ Alcoholic Beverages Control - Commission (ABCC).¹⁰

Active on-premises alcohol retail license rates by county

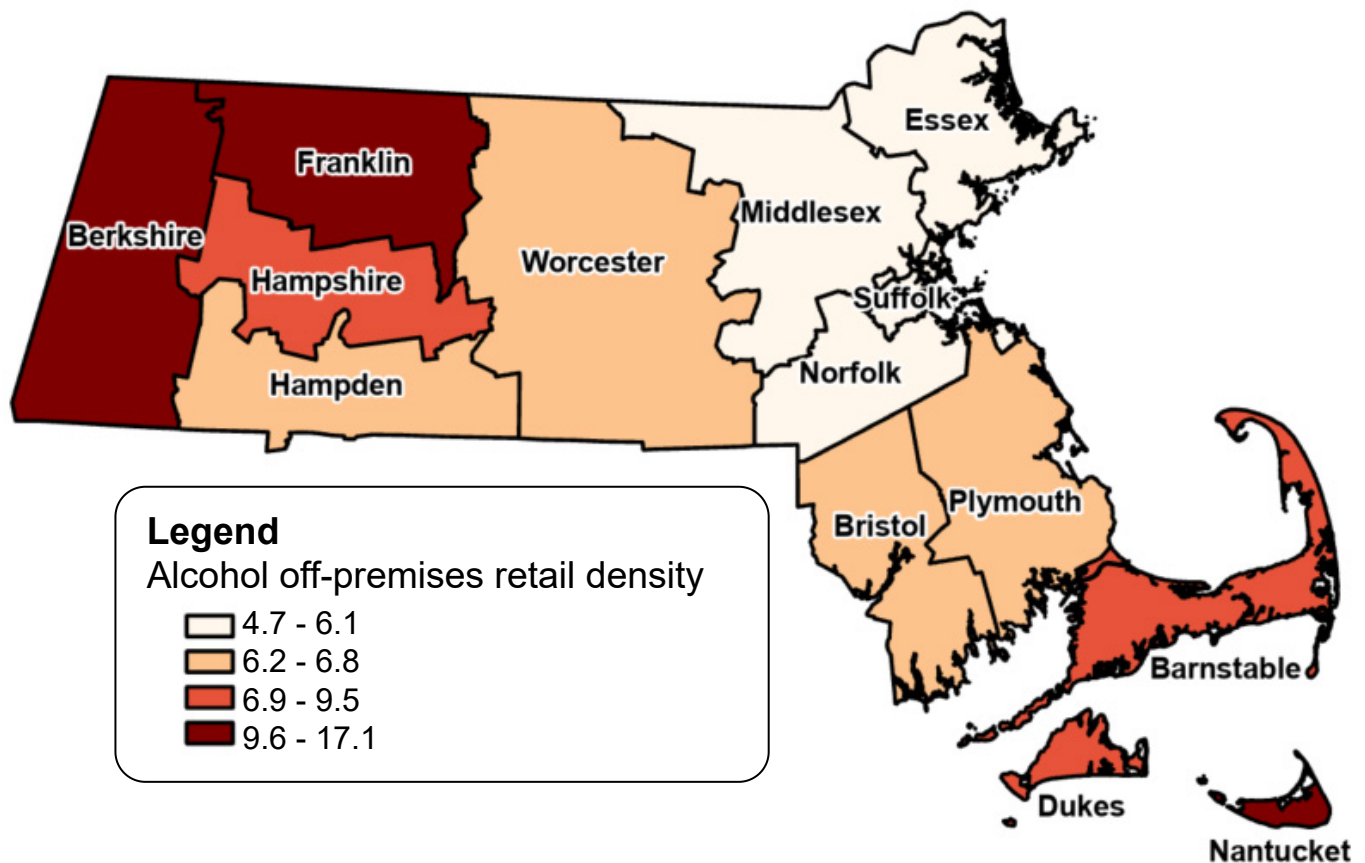


Notes: Rates represent the number of active on-premises alcohol retail licenses as of April 13, 2026, per 10,000 residents aged 21 years or older.

Rates are based on resident population estimates and do not account for seasonal visitors or tourism. In high-tourism areas (such as Barnstable, Dukes, and Nantucket counties), per-resident outlet density rates may be inflated and overestimate local residents' baseline exposure.

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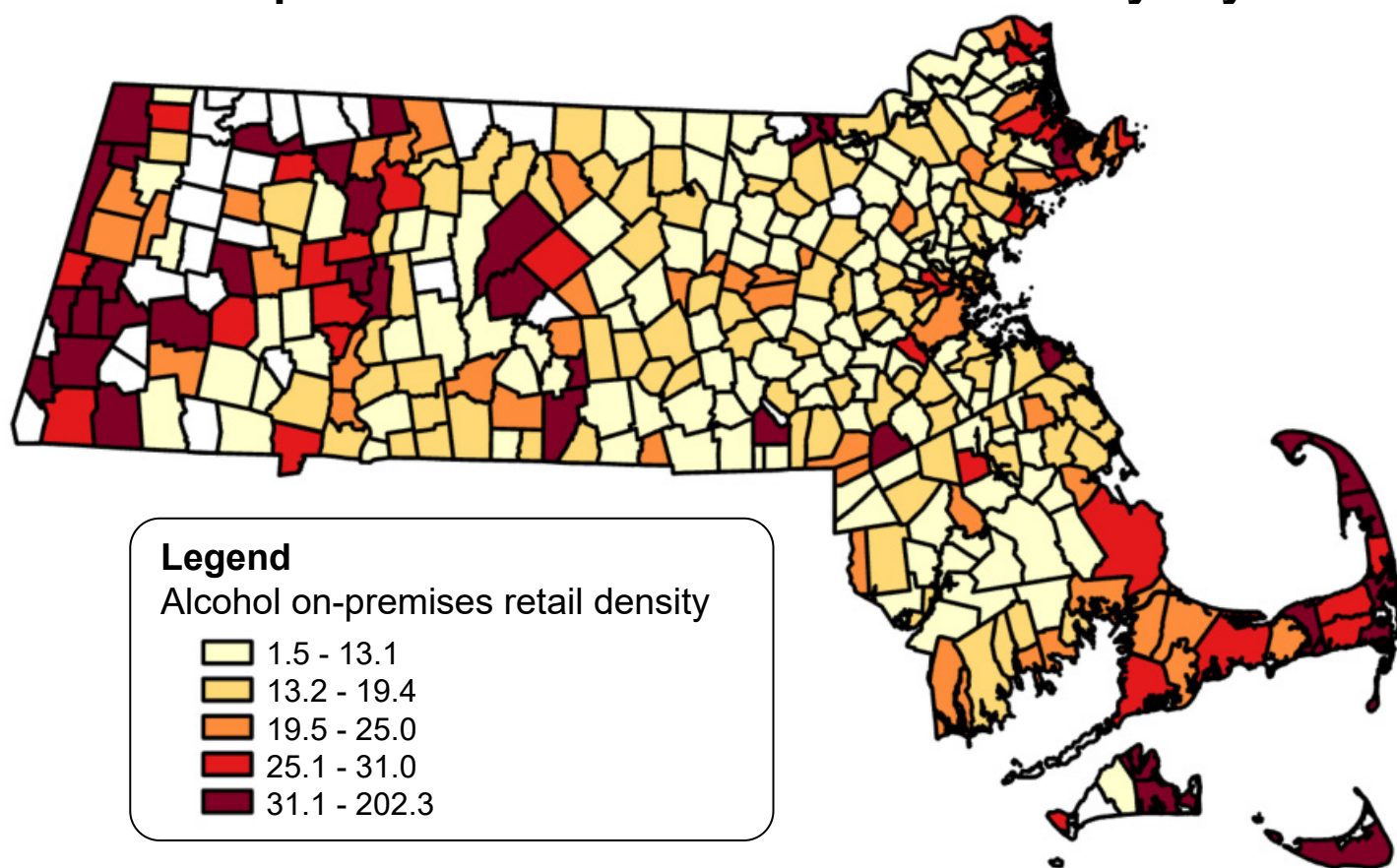


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Active on-premises alcohol retail license rates by city/town

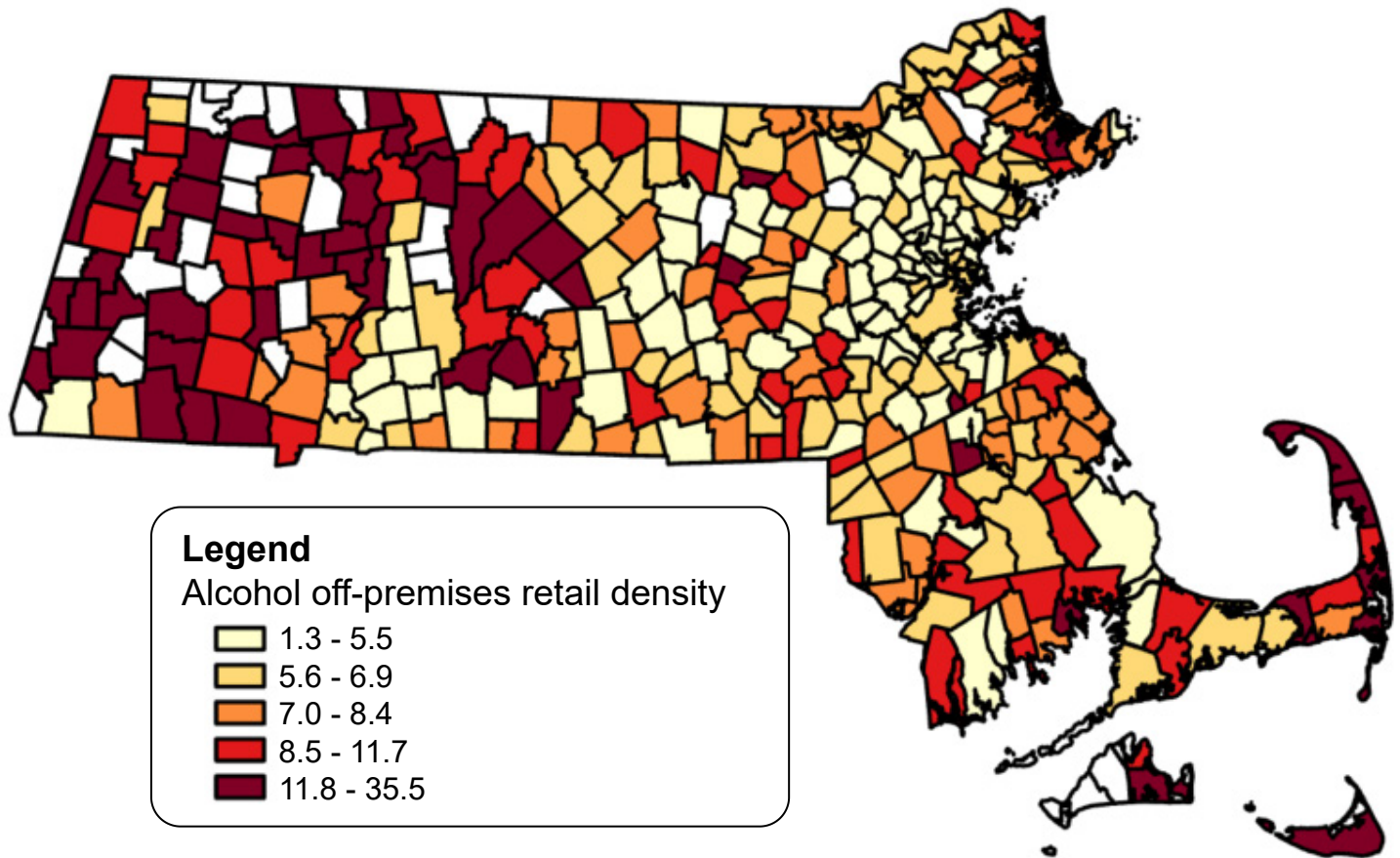


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References

- ¹ Office of the Surgeon General. (2025). Alcohol and cancer risk: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ² Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS) Dashboard. Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS) Dashboard
- ³ Campbell C, Hahn R, Elder R et al., The Effectiveness of Limiting Alcohol Outlet Density as a Means of Reducing Excessive Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol-Related Harms. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 37, 556-569
- ⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Guide for Measuring Alcohol Outlet Density. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Dept of Health and Human Services; 2017.
- ⁵ Babor TF, Caetano R, Casswell S, et al. Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity: Research and Public Policy. Second ed. Oxford University Press; 2010
- ⁶ David H. Jernigan Ph.D, Xixi Zhou B.I.D., Alcohol, Health and Safety in Massachusetts: A status Report, 2022.
- ⁷ Community Preventive Services Task Force. (2025, December 11). Alcohol excessive consumption: Regulation of alcohol outlet density. The Community Guide.
- ⁸ Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 138 Sections 12, 15 and 17.
- ⁹ Small Area Population estimates 2020-2030, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Office of Population. Developed by University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute's Economic & Public Policy Research Group using 2020 census data, including 2020 census counts for age groups and sex and in spring 2025, the modified age race census file for final estimates released August 2025 for use by DPH.
- ¹⁰ Resources for Local Licensing Authorities (ABCC). (2026).