Alcohol disproportionately targeted to underage drinkers, researchers say

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Young people who begin drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol problems later in life than those who wait until they are 21.

Dr. David Jernigan, an APHA member and Director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, says alcohol brands disproportionately target youths. Photo by CAMY

The problem is that alcohol is targeted increasingly — and often primarily — to those who are not of legal age to drink, according to a panel hosted Wednesday by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at George Washington University.
“What our current work finds is that alcohol ads continue to be so many places that young people are — the magazines they read, the music they listen to, the movies they watch and of course in the digital space,” said David Jernigan, the center’s director and professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “Let’s talk to our kids about alcohol marketing, not just drinking. Let’s recognize that we’re expecting kids to swim as well as fish would swim in a polluted stream, and we need to teach them about the pollution.”

Jernigan presented startling new data on the 10 most popular alcohol brands by ages 13-15, 16-18 and 19-20, which he released at the APHA 140th Annual Meeting in San Francisco. The center found that on television, magazines and radio, alcohol ads disproportionately target youth audiences and on social media channels, popular alcohol brands display underage people advertising their products.

But egregious marketing isn’t the only threat to youth alcohol abuse. Emmy Award-winning television reporter Andrea McCarren says public backlash is just as problematic. McCarren and WUSA News (a CBS affiliate) collected footage of teens carrying out beer from a Washington, D.C., liquor store, which had been purchased without IDs. The station then broadcasted a contentious follow-up conversation between McCarren and the store owner, which incited intense negative reaction from viewers.

In fact, one of McCarren’s children stayed home from school due to bullying from classmates.

“Never in my 27-year career have I felt under such threat, and been on the receiving end of such hostility, until I tapped into reporting on underage drinking,” McCarren said.

Visit CAMY online to learn more about the marketing practices of the alcohol industry on America’s young people.