Media encourages teen drinking
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Alcohol is not unfamiliar to college students. The problem of over-consumption has been linked to approximately 4,700 deaths in adolescents every year. Furthermore, alcohol has a disproportionate effect on different racial groups.

In a report titled Exposure of African-American Youth to Alcohol Advertising, researchers at the Bloomberg School of Public Health outlined the debilitating effect of alcohol on African American youth.

This recent study is especially important in demonstrating the relationship between the media and alcoholism among African Americans.

“The main implication of the study is that this is a vulnerable population, and that the alcohol industry’s current standards governing where they place their ads are not protective of this population,” Director of Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) David Jernigan said.

Results from an YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey) suggest that about 33 percent of African American high school students consume alcohol. Out of those students, 40
percent are binge drinkers. Since early alcohol use can be linked to social problems later in life, it is important to understand the causes and consequences of underage drinking.

Statistics also show that African Americans who binge drink usually do so more frequently and at a higher intensity than other racial groups. The average African American binge-drinker has about five episodes every month, with each episode averaging at seven drinks.

In addition, there is also a higher level of alcohol-related problems, such as violence, among African Americans, independent of the amount of alcohol consumption.

In an attempt to understand the problems that alcohol is causing in the black community, researchers compiled 14 longitudinal studies to find correlations between alcohol marketing to youths and underage drinking.

The researchers found that exposure to alcohol marketing during childhood and adolescence increases the probability that teens will start drinking at an earlier age. Moreover, the amount of alcohol consumed also increases for those who already drink.

Most importantly, the studies showed that drinkers younger than 15-years-old quadrupled their chances of alcohol dependence and are at least five times more likely to be involved in alcohol-related problems than those who waited until they turned 21.

The severity of the situation demanded an explanation. Numerous studies have been conducted to explore underage drinking in African American communities. All these studies point to one disturbing fact: African Americans are more exposed to alcohol marketing than other ethnicities.

Media ranging from billboards to music overwhelmingly advertise alcohol to African Americans. Music preferred by African American audiences, such as rap, contains numerous allusions to alcohol.

64 percent of popular rap songs produced between 1998 and 2009 contain alcohol references. Even in the three year period between 1994 and 1997, about 44 percent rap songs allude to drinking.

The researchers at the Bloomberg School of Public Health demonstrated that a significant connection can be made between overexposure to alcohol references in the African American community and the subsequent problems related to underage drinking and alcohol-related incidents.

In response to research studies and public outrage at alcohol marketing techniques, stricter standards have been adopted. In 2003, the alcohol industry agreed to only target groups that comprised of no more than 30 percent underage audiences.
Similarly, media networks such as ABC and NBC refused to air advertisement for distilled spirits; however, they have relaxed their restriction in recent years. The relaxation in standards exacerbates the problems that the black communities face.

“The thing we weren’t able to do before is that we weren’t able to get the data and facts from the television that we were able to do this time,” Jernigan said.