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'Thin-dustry': Alcohol industry preys on young girls

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Young girls are predatorily targeted by the alcohol industry. Its stellar success is confirmed by the dramatic rise in abusive and dangerous drinking among them.

"For years, boys were the focus of underage drinking interventions, but, for the past decade, researchers have seen the virtual elimination of the underage drinking gender gap," said David Jernigan, executive director of the Johns Hopkins University Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth.

Research concludes girls today are four times more likely than their mother to begin drinking before age 16, while the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that girls, ages 12 to 17, are drinking more than boys of the same age.

Some contend this explosion in dangerous female drinking is one of the nation's most profound cultural shifts, posing both serious long-term health and societal implications.

A study by UCLA, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins and Rand Corporation concludes the alcohol industry actually targets teens with their advertising. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports industry advertising influences children to make bad choices about alcohol use.

The Monitoring the Future Project reports that while progress has been made in reducing abusive drinking among 12- to 17-year old boys, young girls are headed in the opposite direction. Young girls are a special target of the industry.

A Georgetown University study reports that alcohol advertising is heavily directed toward young females, much more so than boys or older adult women.

Jernigan notes: "There is a whole raft of new products that have come out in the last 10 to 12 years that are oriented toward young females. Alcohol now gets sold to girls as a functional food: It gets sold with calorie information, a drink of fitness, a drink of health benefits."

Ironically, medical science confirms the opposite health result. Alcohol is an addictive drug. Because of gender differences in the manner alcohol is processed in the body, girls tend to become drunk faster than boys; become addicted more rapidly; and research reports they suffer alcohol-related brain damage faster. The link between alcohol use and breast cancer is clear.

In a bold demonstration of marketing imagination, a recent industry trend is packaging teen girl favorite "alcopops" (sweet-flavored alcoholic beverages) and other alcohol products targeted at females to resemble a food associated with fitness.

Defying imagination, their latest effort to reach the young female demographic resulted in the creation of a new line of premixed drinks marketed to associate product use with weight loss. The industry has even created its own label: "Thin-dustry." A new line of their products are now marketed as "skinnygirl cocktails." Reportedly, harmful health issues aside, industry efforts have been very successful financially.

Meanwhile, most adults have no awareness of industry efforts targeting young girls; the alarming rise in drinking among them; or the health and safety dangers associated with this explosion in abusive and unsafe drinking.

Most of us hold a vision of empowering youths to enable them to become tomorrow's future. Most, that is, but the alcohol industry (and with adult voices silent), which profits enormously from youths' alcohol abuse which threatens their health, safety and future.

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