

Comments on Surgeon General's Call to Action on Preventing Underage Drinking

Surgeons General Dr. C. Everett Koop and Dr. Antonia C. Novello both considered alcohol advertising and marketing practices significant public health risk factors. Surgeon General Dr. David M. Satcher remarked in 2000 that "(I)n public health, we can't do anything without surveillance...that's where public health begins." The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine brought these two concerns together when they recommended that "DHHS be authorized and funded to monitor these [alcohol industry] media practices and report to Congress and the public."¹

Longitudinal research funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism documents a relationship between youth exposure to alcohol marketing and underage drinking. Snyder et al. found that exposure to each additional alcohol advertisement above the monthly average of 23 predicted a one percent increase in youth drinking, while each additional dollar per capita spent on alcohol advertising in a local market predicted a three percent increase in underage drinking.² Stacy and Dent found that, in a sample of middle school students, an increase in viewing television programs containing alcohol commercials was associated one year later with a 44% excess risk of beer use, a 34% excess risk of wine or liquor use, and a 26% excess risk of engaging in three-drink episodes.³ Studying the same age group, Collins et al. found that exposure to in-store beer displays predicted onset of drinking for non-drinkers after two years, and that exposure to advertising in magazines and beer concession stands at sports or music events predicted greater frequency of drinking among drinkers after two years.⁴ From an econometric perspective, Saffer and Dave estimate that a 28% reduction in alcohol advertising would reduce adolescent monthly alcohol participation by between 4 and 16 percent, and binge participation between 9 and 33 percent.⁵

Youth continue to be exposed to unnecessarily large amounts of alcohol advertising. From 2001 to 2004, on television alone, the average number of alcohol ads seen by youth increased by 32 percent. Consistently over this period, close to a quarter of alcohol ads were placed on programming more likely to be seen by youth than by adults on a per capita basis. In response to pressure from the Federal Trade Commission and consistent monitoring by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, youth exposure to alcohol advertising relative to adult exposure has declined in magazines and on radio since 2001. However, in 2004, youth ages 12 to 20 still saw substantially more beer and ale, distilled spirits, and alcopops advertising in magazines than adults of legal drinking age and above on a per capita basis.

Self-regulation by the alcohol companies is the primary way that youth are protected from exposure to alcohol advertising. Effective self-regulation requires monitoring by an independent body, capable of tracking and publicizing the risk factors identified by Surgeons General Koop and Novello. In his Call to Action on Underage Drinking, the Surgeon-General should highlight the importance of alcohol advertising in youth drinking and stress the need for ongoing federal surveillance of this risk factor.

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, R.J. Bonnie and M.E. O'Connell, eds. (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2004), 240.

² Snyder, L. B., Milici, F. F., Slater, M., Sun, H., Strizhakova, Y. Effects of alcohol advertising exposure on drinking among youth. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 160 (2006): 18-24.

³ Stacy, A.W., Zogg, J.B., Unger, J.B., Dent, C.W. Exposure to televised alcohol ads and subsequent adolescent alcohol use. *Am J Health Behav.* 28 (2004):498-509.

⁴ Ellickson, P.L., Collins, R.L., Hambarsoomians, K., McCaffrey, D.F. Does alcohol advertising promote adolescent drinking? Results from a longitudinal assessment. *Addiction* 100 (2005):235-246.

⁵ Saffer, H., Dave, D. Alcohol advertising and alcohol consumption by adolescents. *Health Economics*, in press.