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Targeting Adults Who Provide Alcohol to Underage Youth: Results from a National Survey of Local Law Enforcement Agencies

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Abstract

Objective—We investigated what local enforcement agencies are doing to target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth; what types of enforcement activities are being conducted to target adult providers; and factors that encourage enforcement activities that target adult providers.

Method—We surveyed 1056 local law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and measured whether or not the agency conducted enforcement activities that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. We also measured whether certain agency and jurisdiction characteristics were associated with enforcement activities that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth.

Results—Less than half (42%) of local enforcement agencies conducted enforcement efforts targeting adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. Agencies that conducted the enforcement activities targeting adult providers were significantly more likely to have a full time officer specific to alcohol enforcement, a division specific to alcohol enforcement, a social host law, and to perceive underage drinking was very common.

Conclusions—Results suggest that targeting social providers (i.e., adults over 21 years of age) will require greater law enforcement resources, implementation of underage drinking laws (e.g., social host policies), and changing perceptions among law enforcement regarding underage drinking. Future studies are needed to identify the most effective enforcement efforts and to examine how enforcement efforts are prospectively linked to alcohol consumption.

Keywords

alcohol; adult provider; underage youth; enforcement

Introduction

Underage youth continue to drink alcohol and experience alcohol-related problems despite all states in the United States having an age-21 minimum legal drinking age (MLDA). About 25% of youth aged 12 to 20 consumed alcohol and 16% report binge drinking in 2011 [1].

Alcohol use is associated with a myriad of social and health problems among underage drinkers including alcohol poisoning, assaults, traffic crashes, poor academic performance, leaving college early, and risky sexual behaviors such as unprotected sex [2–5].

Social providers are a major source of alcohol for all underage drinkers [6–8] and one of the most common social sources is adults age 21 years and older (e.g., older friends, strangers, parents siblings). The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that among underage drinkers who did not pay for alcohol, 39% received it from an unrelated person age 21 years or older, and 22% received it from parents, guardians, or other adult family members [1]. A California study found that 46% of underage drinkers approached adults outside alcohol establishments to purchase alcohol for them (California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control [9].

Clearly simply having a law that prohibits provision of alcohol to underage individuals is not sufficient to prevent youth from obtaining alcohol. Additional policies and enforcement and awareness campaigns may also be necessary. Social host laws are examples of policies that can help reinforce the age-21 MLDA. Thirty-one states have social host laws, which allow adults to be held criminally and/or civilly liable for providing alcohol to underage youth or allowing underage drinking in their home [10–11].

To be effective, policies need to be well implemented, which means enforcing the policies and making sure people are aware that the policies exist and that they are being enforced [12]. Deterrence Theory suggests that to encourage people to comply with a policy, a severe penalty needs to be swiftly applied and individuals need to perceive a high certainty of getting caught [13]. Research suggests perceived certainty of getting caught is most important for creating a deterrent effect [14]. Deterrence may be specific (i.e., create deterrent effect among those caught violating a policy) or general (i.e., create a deterrent effect within a general population).

Studies have examined enforcement efforts for limiting commercial sources of alcohol (e.g., bars, restaurants) to underage youth [15–16]; however less is known about what enforcement efforts are needed to cut off social provision. One of the most effective methods for preventing commercial underage alcohol sales is compliance checks, where law enforcement agents supervise underage youth who attempt to purchase alcohol [16–19]. If an alcohol sale is made, penalties are applied to the server and/or the license holder. Although several studies have found these underage alcohol compliance checks to be effective, one study suggests that effects of compliance checks decay over time [16].

Some alcohol researchers and policy advocates have recommended certain enforcement strategies to limit social provision of alcohol to underage youth as part of a comprehensive effort to reduce underage drinking, though less is known about the effectiveness of these strategies [20–22]. These strategies include shoulder tap campaigns, parking lot observations, party patrols, and incident/complaint follow-up. These strategies are designed to create a deterrent effect among adults by creating an environment to increase adults' perceived certainty that they will get caught if they provide alcohol to youth. In shoulder tap enforcement, an underage youth decoy, under supervision of an undercover police officer

waits outside an off-sale alcohol establishment (e.g., liquor store) and approaches an adult who is about to enter the establishment and asks him/her to purchase alcohol. If the adult purchases alcohol for the youth, a citation is given [21]. Shoulder tap campaigns are similar conceptually to compliance checks. Observations of parking lots outside alcohol establishments aim to deter and prevent adults providing alcohol to underage youth in parking lots by helping to detect and hold accountable adults who agree to purchase alcohol for youth. Awareness of parking lot monitoring may create a general deterrence effect similar to the way visible enforcement monitoring decreases speeding [23].

Party patrols include special teams of officers who respond and investigate reports of underage drinking parties. Officers focus on enforcing underage drinking laws and shutting down parties where there is underage drinking. Because parties are one of the common sources of alcohol for 18 to 20 year olds, party patrols may be effective in getting to the source of alcohol for this age group and preventing access to alcohol among larger numbers of underage drinkers. Incident/complaint follow-up occurs when police systematically respond to reports by others about underage drinking at parties and adults providing alcohol to underage drinkers [21].

Some other strategies may be also used by enforcement agencies to decrease social sources of alcohol to underage drinkers. Cops in Shops programs have historically been used to deter youth from purchasing alcohol by placing undercover officers in participating establishments to identify and penalize youth. Used solely in this way, Cops in Shops is unlikely to deter adults from providing alcohol to youth. However, currently, the Cops In Shops program also recommends that a second police officer be positioned outside the establishment to apprehend adults who purchase alcohol for youth [24]. This may also create a deterrent effect among adult providers.

Other strategies may increase awareness of laws prohibiting illegal provision of alcohol to underage youth but do not involve enforcement of the laws. Building awareness of policies and enforcement activities is an important part of policy implementation [12]. In sticker campaigns, stickers are placed on alcoholic beverages to raise awareness about the law and consequences for buying alcohol for underage youth [25]. These awareness-building strategies may be a complement to deterrence-building strategies.

Many communities have been trying for the last few decades to limit the social sources where underage youth obtain alcohol [6, 8, 26], yet little is known about what local enforcement agencies are doing to target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth and the factors that encourage enforcement efforts that target adult providers. Agency and jurisdiction characteristics (e.g., staff resources, the local alcohol policy environment, perceptions regarding the seriousness of underage drinking) may play a role in determining whether alcohol policies that target adult providers are vigorously enforced. Enforcement of alcohol policies that target adult providers requires significant resources; thus, local law enforcement agencies with greater staff resources may be more likely than those with fewer resources to enforce these types of policies [12]. Enforcement of alcohol policies that target adult providers may also be more likely to occur in jurisdictions or communities that have social host laws. The presence of social host policies may indicate that a community is

concerned about underage drinking and wants to do something about it. If underage drinking is perceived to be common and a problem, underage drinking laws are more likely to be consistently enforced [27].

We investigated: 1) what local enforcement agencies are doing to target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth; 2) what types of enforcement activities are being conducted to target adult providers; and 3) factors that may encourage enforcement activities that target adult providers.

Methods

Data and Measures

We conducted surveys in a random sample of local law enforcement agencies in 2010–2011. We excluded the District of Columbia. Data on the demographic characteristics for the jurisdiction associated with each agency were obtained from the 2010 US Census. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota.

Local agency-level data—We used a multi-stage strategy to select local law enforcement agencies using a list of 15,833 municipal and county law enforcement agencies from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (available from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/cs1lea04.pdf>) for 2004 (the most recent list available at the time of the survey). First, we divided the U.S. states into 25 large states and 25 small states based on the number of agencies in each state (median = 300). Hawaii had only four local law enforcement agencies; all four were included in our sample. For the other 49 states, we sampled within each state based on the proportion of agencies that were county sheriff versus municipal police and ensuing equal numbers of large and small agencies (using median number of officers per agency). We selected 40 agencies in large states and 20 agencies in small states for a total of 1,484 agencies ($4 + 24 \times 20 + 25 \times 40$). Additionally, Texas has a unique type of law enforcement agency called “constables.” We randomly selected 20 of the 512 constable agencies, bringing our sample to 1,504 agencies. Given that this sampling strategy did not necessarily capture agencies in the largest cities (which tend to account for a high percentage of a state’s population), we added the municipal police agency from the three largest cities in each state if they were not already included in our sample ($n=127$). Our final sample consisted of 1,631 law enforcement agencies [28–29].

At each agency, we attempted to survey the agent/officer most knowledgeable about the agency’s enforcement activities pertaining to alcohol-related laws. One respondent per agency was interviewed. We identified potential respondents through agency websites and through telephone calls to the agencies (the list of agencies provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics included a telephone number for each agency).

We initially conducted the surveys via the telephone. The telephone surveys were administered by trained internal staff members who entered survey responses into an online data collection form. If requested by the respondent, we provided the option of completing the survey online (survey link was sent via email; 47% of participants from local agencies

completed the survey online). In addition, 10 local agencies completed the survey by regular mail or fax—these data were entered into our online data collection form by our research staff.

The overall response rate for the local law enforcement survey was 66% (1082/1631), with a range from 50% to 86% per state. Local agencies that did not respond to our survey were not significantly different (Chi-square tests; $\alpha = 0.05$) from agencies that did respond in terms of agency type, number of agencies in the state, or the proportion of Hispanic residents or proportion of residents living in poverty in the jurisdiction; however agencies in smaller jurisdictions (population < 10,000) and agencies in jurisdictions with a lower proportion of Hispanic residents (> 3%) were less likely to respond.

We measured both dependent and independent variables from the law enforcement survey. Our dependent measure was whether or not the agency conducted enforcement actions that targeted adults who provide alcohol to underage youth (yes vs. no). For agencies that did so, we asked the following question: “Which of the following efforts has your agency used to target adults who provide alcohol to minors” (each with response option yes/no): 1) shoulder tap enforcement campaigns, 2) education efforts, 3) sticker campaigns, and 4) other (e.g., parking lot observations and party patrols). Participants could select more than one response. We recoded these responses (for descriptive purposes only) to include some of the “other” responses as separate categories and to collapse some response categories; the six new categories are: (1) shoulder tap enforcement and/or parking lot observations, (2) party patrols, (3) incident/complaint follow-up, (4) cops-in-shops/undercover surveillance, (5) education efforts/sticker campaigns, and (6) other. We based our coding on the literature and our experience with local alcohol policy enforcement [20–22].

We measured several agency characteristics as independent variables. We created three measures of agency resources based on the following survey items “How many full-time enforcement agents/officers does your agency employ?” (we first calculated the ratio of number of officers per 1000 population then recoded this to a three-level variable due to a highly skewed distribution: <2, 2–3, >3); “Do you have any officers who are assigned specifically to enforcement of alcohol-related laws?” (yes, no); and “Do you have a Division that is dedicated specifically to the enforcement of alcohol-related laws (yes, no)?”. We also measured jurisdiction characteristics such as whether the agency had a social host law in their city or state (yes, no) and whether underage drinking was perceived as a serious problem based on the following survey item: “How common is underage drinking in your community?” (response options: not common, somewhat common, very common; recoded to “not/somewhat common” vs. “very common”).

We obtained demographic characteristics for the local law enforcement jurisdictions from the 2010 U.S. Census for additional independent measures. These included total population of jurisdiction, percent living in poverty, percent Black, and percent Hispanic. For analyses, these were coded as either dichotomous (based on median split), or three or four-level variables depending on the frequency distributions and the ease of interpretation (see Table 1). We also included a region variable developed by Kerr [30] which captures drinking

patterns associated with different regions of the country: Wet (North central/New England), Moderate (Mid-Atlantic, Pacific, South Coast), and Dry (South).

Analyses

We calculated descriptive statistics for all measures. Next, we examined associations between whether agencies conducted enforcement activities targeting adult providers (dependent measure) and agency and jurisdiction characteristics (independent measures). Our unit of analyses was the local agency. We conducted bivariate analyses between the dependent measure and each independent measure (chi-square, $p < .05$) and then multivariate regression that included all independent measures regardless of significance in bivariate analyses. These analyses were done using SAS version 9.3 [31]. All variables obtained for survey law data analyses were weighted to account for sampling and non-response [32].

Results

Local Law Enforcement Agency and Jurisdiction Characteristics

One-quarter of agencies (25%) had a full time officer assigned to enforce alcohol-related laws; few agencies had a specific division devoted to alcohol enforcement (7%; (Table 1). The average number of full-time sworn officers was about 3 per 1,000 population. About half of local agencies (49%) reported they had a social host law and a little over one-third of participants (38%) indicated that underage drinking was very common. About 42% ($n=448$) of agencies conducted enforcement activities that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. Among these, 57% conducted educational efforts, about one-fifth conducted shoulder tap/parking lot surveillance, and less than 10% implemented the other strategies (i.e., party patrols, incident/complaint follow-up, cops-in-shops/undercover surveillance).

Factors Associated with Enforcement Activities that Target Adult Providers

In bivariate analyses, agencies that conducted enforcement activities targeting adult providers were significantly more likely to have a full-time officer specific to alcohol enforcement, a division specific to alcohol enforcement, a social host law, to perceive underage drinking was very common, and reside in larger jurisdictions (population > 250,000) (Table 2). For example, among agencies that had a division specific to alcohol, 70% conducted enforcement activities that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. Results from multivariate analyses were similar to those in bivariate analyses with one exception: total population was not associated with conducting enforcement efforts that target adult providers (Table 2).

Discussion

Less than half (42%) of local enforcement agencies in the U.S. conduct enforcement efforts targeting adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. Among agencies that do, most employ educational strategies. For example, 57% of local law enforcement agencies said they were engaged in activities such as education and sticker campaigns, but only 19% of local agencies indicated they were engaged in shoulder tap or parking lot enforcement

campaigns, and less than 10% engage in any or the other enforcement strategies we measured. Thus, there is much room for improvement in current law enforcement strategies that target social sources of alcohol among underage youth.

Few of our agencies had a full-time officer (25%) or a division (7%) specific to alcohol enforcement, but agencies that did so were more likely to conduct enforcement activities that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. This finding and prior research [12] suggest that providing adequate enforcement resources and training may be an important point of intervention to prevent underage drinking and the harms that can result. Enforcement of adult provision laws was more common among local enforcement agencies in jurisdictions with social host laws. Implementation of social host laws may increase awareness of the seriousness of underage drinking, change community norms regarding the appropriateness of underage drinking, put greater public pressure on local law enforcement to enforce underage drinking laws, and encourage adoption of other underage drinking laws. In our study, enforcement agencies that perceived underage drinking was very common were also more likely to enforce laws that target adult providers. Local law enforcement and cities that perceive that underage drinking is a serious problem may be more likely to devote resources to enforcing laws that target adult providers. Greater awareness of underage drinking may be needed to increase enforcement efforts that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth.

Results from our study should be viewed in light of certain limitations. First, most of our data were based on self-report from local law enforcement agencies. Respondents may have over or under-reported agency efforts; however, we asked to survey the agency representative most knowledgeable about alcohol enforcement efforts within the agency in an attempt to reduce this potential bias. In addition, many agencies were willing to report that they did not conduct these enforcement strategies, suggesting that they are willing to provide what may be considered socially undesirable responses. Second, although we attempted to survey a representative sample of local agencies within each state, some bias may have been introduced due to non-response (particularly among smaller agencies). Third, our measure of enforcement activities did not ask participants about the frequency or intensity in which laws that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth were enforced. Future studies may wish to employ more detailed measures of enforcement and include questions on frequency and intensity of enforcement of laws that target adults who provide alcohol to underage youth.

Conclusion

Alcohol consumption is associated with a host of social and health problems affecting underage youth [2–5]; yet alcohol remains easily accessible to them. We suggested that social sources are a major source of alcohol to underage youth and examined what local agencies are doing to restrict adults who provide alcohol to underage youth. We found that less than half of local law enforcement (42%) agencies were conducting activities that target adult providers. Our results suggest that targeting social providers (i.e., adults over 21 years of age) will require greater resources, implementation of underage drinking laws (e.g., social host policies), and changing perceptions among law enforcement and others regarding

underage drinking. Future studies are needed to identify the most effective enforcement efforts and to examine how these enforcement efforts are prospectively linked to alcohol consumption.

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Table 1

Characteristics of local enforcement agencies and jurisdictions (n=1056)

Agency/Jurisdiction Characteristics	Mean (SD)
Total population	69,207 (331,923)
Percent African American/Black	8.8 (15.5)
Percent Hispanic	9.3 (14.2)
Percent below poverty level	15.0 (8.9)
Percent ages 15–20	8.4 (3.1)
Number of full-time sworn officers per 1,000 population	2.7 (4.8)
	Percent^a
Full-time officer(s) assigned to alcohol-related laws	
Yes	25.4
No	74.6
Division specific to alcohol enforcement	
Yes	6.9
No	93.1
Social host law	
Yes	48.6
No	51.4
How common is underage drinking in jurisdiction?	
Not/somewhat common	62.0
Very common	38.0
Region (based on alcohol consumption patterns)	
Wet (North Central/New England)	26.3
Moderate (Mid-Atlantic, Pacific, South Coast)	33.8
Dry (South)	39.9
Conduct enforcement efforts that target adult providers	
Yes	42.4
No	57.6
<i>[if Yes]: Types of strategies reported (n=485):</i>	
Shoulder tap enforcement and/or Parking lot surveillance	19.0
Party patrols	2.5
Incident/Complaint follow-up	8.4
Cops in shops/Undercover surveillance	1.2
Education efforts and/or Sticker campaigns	56.7
Other	18.7

^aWeighted to account for sampling and non-response (except for Region)

Table 2

Bivariate and multivariate models: Adult provider enforcement by agency and jurisdiction characteristics (n=1056)

Independent variables	Conducts enforcement targeting adult providers			
	Bivariates (X ²)		Multivariate Model ^a	
	Percent of agencies (n)	P-value	Odds ratio (95% CI)	P-value
Number of full-time officers per 1000 population		0.23		0.935
<2	47.9 (279)		0.94 (0.62–1.41)	
2–3	45.5 (126)		0.98 (0.64–1.50)	
>3	40.8 (80)		Ref.	
Full time officer(s) specific to alcohol enforcement		<0.001		<0.001
Yes	60.8 (174)		1.99 (1.43–2.77)	
No	40.4 (311)		Ref.	
Division specific to alcohol enforcement		<0.001		0.011
Yes	69.8 (67)		2.02 (1.18–3.47)	
No	43.5 (415)		Ref.	
Social host law		<0.001		0.001
Yes	53.7 (277)		1.63 (1.23–2.15)	
No	37.6 (190)		Ref.	
How common is underage drinking		0.02		0.049
Not/somewhat common	43.0 (272)		0.76 (0.57–1.00)	
Very common	50.4 (205)		Ref.	
Region		0.23		0.718
Wet (North Central/New England)	48.9 (206)		1.18 (0.73–1.90)	
Moderate (Mid-Atlantic, Pacific, South Coast)	45.1 (161)		1.01 (0.62–1.64)	
Dry (South)	42.5(118)		Ref.	
Total population		0.02		0.502
Under 10,000	41.6 (237)		0.72 (0.37–1.43)	
Between 10,000 and 50,000	49.5 (150)		0.94 (0.49–1.81)	
Between 50,000 and 250,000	52.8 (66)		0.87 (0.43–1.76)	
Over 250,000	55.2 (32)		Ref.	
Proportion African American/Black		0.31		0.592
< 1%	46.7 (203)		1.40 (0.81–2.42)	
1–10%	48.4 (177)		1.21 (0.72–2.02)	
10–25%	42.9 (57)		1.07 (0.60–1.92)	
> 25%	39.3 (48)		Ref.	
Proportion Hispanic		0.43		0.391
< 1%	46.6 (48)		1.14 (0.55–2.34)	
1–10%	44.2 (307)		0.97 (0.56–1.70)	
10–25%	50.6 (81)		1.36 (0.75–2.46)	
> 25%	49.5 (49)		Ref.	
Proportion below poverty		0.18		0.984

Independent variables	Conducts enforcement targeting adult providers			
	Bivariates (X ²)		Multivariate Model ^a	
	Percent of agencies (n)	P-value	Odds ratio (95% CI)	P-value
< 15%	47.6 (278)		0.99 (0.61–1.60)	
15–25%	45.9 (156)		0.97 (0.60–1.54)	
> 25%	38.7 (51)		Ref.	
Proportion aged 15–20		0.80		0.958
< 7%	44.8 (158)		0.98 (0.68–1.40)	
7–9%	45.8 (163)		0.95 (0.67–1.34)	
> 9%	47.3 (164)		Ref.	

^aState included as random effect; n=1005 due to missing data for independent variables