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Increasing Parents' Awareness of Social Host Laws: A Pilot Study of Coalition Efforts

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Abstract

States and municipalities across the U.S. are adopting social host ordinances (SHOs) to reduce alcohol use by underage youth in private settings. SHOs are most likely to be effective if parents and other adults are aware of them and they are enforced. We examined the association between coalition activities in northern California municipalities and parents' awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement. We collected survey data from 1,798 parents in a northern California county in fall 2014; all municipalities within the county had SHOs. We conducted descriptive and logistic regression analyses to determine whether parents living in municipalities with active coalitions were more likely to be aware of SHOs and SHO enforcement than parents in municipalities without active coalitions. Findings showed that 55.6% of parents in municipalities with coalitions were aware of SHOs compared to 35.7% in municipalities without coalitions. Parents in municipalities with coalitions were also more likely to be aware of SHO enforcement activities (16.3% vs. 8.7%). Regression analyses indicated positive associations between coalition activity and parental awareness of SHOs (odds ratio [OR] = 2.28, $p < .001$) and SHO enforcement (OR = 2.14, $p < .001$) when controlling for parents' attitudes related to youth drinking, parenting characteristics, normative beliefs regarding other parents' awareness and youth drinking, and demographics. These findings suggest that a multi-media awareness campaign implemented by coalitions was positively associated with parental awareness of SHOs and perceived SHO enforcement, which may help to prevent or reduce underage drinking.

Introduction

Underage drinking remains a public health concern, as alcohol is still the most commonly used psychoactive substance among youth and is associated with negative consequences, such as motor vehicle fatalities, physical fighting, sexual assault, and poor academic performance (Institute of Medicine/National Research Council, 2004). Results from the 2014 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey indicated that 37% of 12th graders reported drinking in the past 30 days, and 23% reported getting drunk at least once in the past month (Johnston et al., 2015). Underage youth most often obtain alcohol from social sources,

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including friends over 21 years old, parents or other adults at home, and at parties in private settings (Paschall et al., 2007). Identifying strategies to reduce the social availability of alcohol in potentially high-risk settings is therefore necessary to prevent or reduce underage drinking and related problems.

Because adolescents often obtain and consume alcohol in private settings, many states and municipalities have adopted social host laws or ordinances (SHOs) to deter the provision of alcohol to underage youth by adults and underage drinking in private settings with or without the awareness of property owners (Wagoner et al., 2012). To date, evidence regarding the effectiveness of SHO's has been mixed. A cross-sectional study found that local or state SHOs were unrelated to drinking at home or in someone else's home on the last drinking occasion, heavy drinking, or drinking consequences among adolescents (Wagoner et al., 2013). However, youth living in municipalities where SHOs had been in effect longer were less likely to report drinking with large groups of peers. A recent study in 50 California cities found that more comprehensive and enforceable SHOs (e.g., civil instead of criminal offense) were associated with less frequent drinking at parties during the past 30 days among adolescents who had already initiated alcohol use (Paschall et al., 2014). However, there was no association between SHOs and past 30-day alcohol use and heavy drinking.

The effectiveness of SHOs depends in part on parents' awareness of them, and their perception of whether SHOs are enforced. Parents who are aware of SHOs and perceive that they are enforced may be less likely to allow adolescents to drink in their homes compared to parents who are not aware of SHOs and enforcement. To date, very few studies have investigated whether local coalitions can increase parental awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement. This pilot study examines whether activities of local coalitions in a northern California county, where SHOs were present in all municipalities and the county, were associated with parental awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement. We also consider other parent characteristics (e.g., child monitoring) that are associated with youth drinking (Ryan et al., 2010) and might also affect parents' awareness of SHOs.

Method

SHO awareness campaign

We conducted this study in 12 municipalities that enacted SHOs previously, as had the county in which they are located, from 2007 to 2009. County and local SHOs prohibit adults from allowing underage drinking on their property, regardless of whether they are present when underage drinking occurs. The county and municipal SHOs all define hosting as a civil offense; in some of the municipalities, it may also be treated as a criminal offense under certain circumstances. All 12 SHOs have a response cost recovery provision to impose a fine for costs associated with SHO enforcement activities. Coalitions in five of these municipalities implemented a SHO awareness campaign in 2013 and 2014. The SHO awareness campaign included press releases every time a SHO violation occurred, SHO informational palm cards for parents and adults handed out at school events, paid media campaigns in local print and online media sources, letters sent to parents from school principals, SHO information posted on school websites, paid Facebook ads, and posters

at bus shelters. Coalition activities were implemented in collaboration with County health department staff, who also documented these activities.

Study sample and survey methods

This study is based on data from a parent survey conducted in the 12 municipalities. IRB approval was obtained for the study.

We recruited parents through 15 public middle and high schools in these municipalities. The schools sent an e-mail to all parents informing them of the survey, followed by an e-mail that contained a link for the online survey. A total of 2,092 parents completed the survey, and of these, 1,798 (86%) provided complete data for all study variables. Because the number of households contacted by each school is not known, the survey response rate could not be determined; therefore, we consider the sample of parents to be a convenience sample.

Survey measures

We based survey questions on the Montana Parent Norms Survey conducted to evaluate a statewide social norms media campaign to reduce drinking and driving (Perkins et al., 2007).

Awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement.—The survey asked parents, “Does your city/town have a Social Host Ordinance, an ordinance that requires the property owners where underage drinking takes place to pay fines and possibly the cost of police investigations? If yes, is the Social Host Ordinance being enforced?” Parents gave “yes or no/not sure” (1/0) responses to these questions.

Parenting characteristics.—The survey asked parents whether they allow their child to drink at home (regularly/occasionally vs. never); how concerned they would be if their child drank any alcohol in the past 30 days (quite/extremely vs. at little/not at all); whether they ever discussed rules with their child about alcohol use (yes/no); whether they agreed or disagreed that parents letting their children drink at home sends the wrong message (agree/strongly agree vs. disagree/strongly disagree); whether they agreed or disagreed that letting their child drink at home would keep them safe (agree/strongly agree vs. disagree/strongly disagree); and how often they know their child’s whereabouts when he/she is not at home (always vs. usually/sometimes/seldom/never).

Normative beliefs.—The survey asked parents whether they thought most (name of county) parents are aware of SHOs (yes vs. no/not sure); and their best estimate of the percentage of (name of county) high school students who binge drank in the past 30 days (six point range: 0-10% [1] to 80-100% [6]).

Demographics.—Parents reported their gender, age, race/ethnicity, residence zip code and the type of school their child was attending (high school vs. middle).

Data analysis

We first obtained descriptive statistics and conducted bivariate analyses (chi-square and t-tests) to compare parental awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement and other parent

characteristics in municipalities with and without active coalitions and SHO awareness campaigns. We conducted multi-level logistic regression analyses to assess the association between SHO awareness campaigns and parent awareness of SHOs and SHO enforcement when controlling for other parent characteristics. We conducted analyses in HLM version 7.0 software with clustering of observations within zip code areas treated as a random effect (Raudenbush et al., 2011).

Results

Descriptive analyses

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that less than half (48.4%) of parents in the total sample were aware of SHOs in their municipality, but a significantly higher percentage of parents in municipalities with active coalitions were aware of SHOs (55.6%) and SHO enforcement (16.3%) compared to parents living in other municipalities (35.7%, 8.7%). A significantly higher percentage of parents in municipalities with active coalitions had a child in high school (94.4% vs. 69.5%), allowed their child to drink at home at least occasionally (19.8% vs. 13%), were only a little or not at all concerned if their child drank in the past 30 days (17% vs. 11.2%), seldom or never knew their child's whereabouts (39.3% vs. 33%), and thought other parents in the county were aware of SHOs (18.9% vs. 14.1%).

Regression analyses

Logistic regression analysis results indicated that parents living in municipalities with active coalitions were more than twice as likely as parents in other municipalities to be aware of local SHOs and SHO enforcement when controlling for other parent characteristics (Table 2). Results also indicated that male parents were about half as likely as females to be aware of SHOs. Parent characteristics associated with awareness of SHOs included not being very concerned about their child drinking alcohol in the past 30 days, agreeing that allowing their child to drink at home would send the wrong message, discussing rules about alcohol use with their child, and perceiving that most parents in the county are aware of SHOs.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that a multi-media awareness campaign implemented by local coalitions in a northern California county is positively associated with parents' awareness of SHOs and perception of SHO enforcement. This pilot study is limited by the non-experimental, post-test-only design and a convenience sample of parents. We addressed these threats to validity to some extent by controlling for potential confounding variables in multi-level regression analyses. However, other potential confounders not included in this study (e.g., socio-economic status) may have influenced our results. Further research should assess the effectiveness of a SHO and SHO enforcement awareness campaign on parental/adult awareness of SHOs, and ultimately underage drinking, with experimental and longitudinal study designs.

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Table 1.

Demographics, percent or mean (SD)

Parent characteristics	Total Sample (N = 1,798)	Coalition Municipalities (n = 1,145)	Non-Coalition Municipalities (n = 653)	p
White	84.6%	84.1%	85.6%	.396
Female	76.5%	75.5%	78.3%	.193
Age	49.7 (5.88)	50.3 (5.50)	48.7 (6.40)	<.001
Child is in high school	85.4%	94.4%	69.5%	<.001
Parent aware that municipality has SHO	48.4%	55.6%	35.7%	<.001
Parent perception that SHO is enforced in municipality	13.6%	16.3%	8.7%	<.001
Parents allow child to drink at home	17.4%	19.8%	13.0%	<.001
Perception that other parents in municipality allow child to drink in home	17.1%	18.9%	14.1%	.010
Perception of how many teens in municipality binge drink	2.8 (1.23)	2.9 (1.15)	2.6 (1.33)	<.001
Parent discussed alcohol rules with child	89.1%	90.0%	87.6%	.122
Parent agreed that letting child drink at home sends wrong message	83.7%	84.1%	83.0%	.542
Parent level of concern if child had drink in past 30 days				
Quite/extremely concerned	85.1%	83.0%	88.8%	.001
A little/not at all concerned	14.9%	17.0%	11.2%	
Parent agreed that drinking at home will keep child safe	11.6%	11.1%	12.6%	.351
Parent knows where child is				
Never, seldom, usually	37.0%	39.3%	33.1%	.009
Always	63.0%	60.7%	66.9%	

Table 2.

Logistic regression results, odds ratio (95% confidence interval)

Variable	Parents aware that municipality has SHO		Parents perceive that SHO is enforced in municipality	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Municipality has active coalition	2.28***	(1.59, 3.27)	2.14***	(1.42, 3.23)
White	1.13	(.81, 1.58)	.76**	(.63, .91)
Male	.56***	(.46, .68)	.95	(.77, 1.18)
Parent age	1.04**	(1.01, 1.06)	1.04***	(1.03, 1.06)
Child in high school	1.21	(.75, 1.94)	.98	(.58, 1.65)
Allows child to drink at home	1.03	(.80, 1.33)	.95	(.66, 1.37)
Not concerned about child having a drink in past 30 days	1.54**	(1.11, 2.15)	1.22	(.83, 1.78)
Doesn't always know child's whereabouts	1.11	(.92, 1.33)	.99	(.81, 1.22)
Drinking at home would keep child safe	.63	(.38, 1.06)	.85	(.53, 1.36)
Allowing child to drink at home sends wrong message	1.60**	(1.20, 2.14)	1.18	(.84, 1.67)
Doesn't always monitor whether child is using alcohol or drugs	.86	(.72, 1.04)	.97	(.78, 1.22)
Discussed rules about alcohol use with child	1.53***	(1.33, 1.77)	1.02	(.71, 1.48)
Other parents are aware of SHO	8.10***	(4.98, 13.19)	3.93***	(3.20, 4.83)
Perceived binge drinking among other teens	1.16	(.99, 1.35)	1.12	(.98, 1.29)

*
p .05;
**
p .01;
***
p .001