

Communicating About Alcohol: Educational and Regulatory Policies

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Research and Public Policy**

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Prevention Strategies Reviewed and Evaluated

- Regulating Physical Availability
- Pricing and Taxation
- Altering the Drinking Context
- Education and Persuasion
- Regulating Alcohol Promotion
- Drinking-Driving Countermeasures
- Treatment and Early Intervention

Ratings of 31 Policy-relevant Prevention Strategies and Interventions

- 1) Evidence of Effectiveness – the quality of scientific information
- 2) Breadth of Research Support – quantity and consistency of the evidence
- 3) Tested Across Cultures, e.,g. countries, regions, subgroups
- 4) Cost to Implement and Sustain – monetary and other costs

^aRating Scale: 0, +, ++, +++, (?)

^bRating Scale: Low, Moderate, High

Education and Persuasion

Strategy or Intervention	Effective - ness	Research Support	X- Cultural Testing	Cost	Target Group
Alcohol education in schools	O	+++	++	High	High Risk Group
College student education	O	+	+	High	High Risk Group
Public service messages	O	+++	++	Moderate	General Population
Warning labels	O	+	+	Low	General Population

Education and Persuasion Strategies

- School-based alcohol education programs have been found to increase knowledge and change attitudes toward alcohol and other substances, but actual substance use remains unaffected
- Approaches that address values clarification, self-esteem, general social skills, and “alternatives” approaches that provide activities inconsistent with alcohol use (e.g., sports) are equally ineffective.
- Programs that include both resistance skills training and normative education (which attempts to correct adolescents’ tendency to overestimate the number of their peers who drink) have modest effects that are short-lived unless accompanied by ongoing booster sessions.
- Programs that include both individual-level education and family- or community-level interventions may not be sufficient to delay the initiation of drinking, or to sustain a small reduction in drinking beyond the operation of the program.

Education and Persuasion Strategies

Public service announcements (PSAs)

- Messages prepared by nongovernmental organizations, health agencies, and media organizations that deal with responsible drinking, the hazards of drinking-driving, and related topics.
- Despite their good intentions, PSAs are an ineffective antidote to the high-quality pro-drinking messages that appear much more frequently as paid advertisements in the mass media.

Education and Persuasion Strategies

Counter-advertising

- Disseminating information about a product, its effects, and the industry that promotes it, in order to decrease its appeal and use.
- Tactics include health-warning labels on product packaging, such as those that explain that alcohol may cause birth defects when consumed during pregnancy.
- Although a significant proportion of the population reports seeing these warning labels, research indicates that exposure produces no change in drinking behavior per se.

Summary: Education and Persuasion Strategies

- The impact of education and persuasion programs tends to be small at best.
- When positive effects are found, they do not persist.
- Among the hundreds of studies, only two show significant lasting effects (after 3 years), and the significance of these is questionable when reanalyzed (Foxcroft et al. 2003).
- The time is past for arguments on behalf of *substituting* education for other, more effective approaches.
- If educational approaches are to be used, they should be implemented within the framework of broader environmental interventions that address availability of alcohol.

Regulating Alcohol Promotion

Strategy or Intervention	Effectiveness	Research Support	X-Cultural Testing	Cost	Target Group
Advertising bans	+	+	++	Low	General Population
Advertising content controls	?	O	O	Moderate	General Population

Regulating alcohol promotion

- The marketing of alcohol is a global industry.
- Alcohol brands are advertised through television, radio, print, point-of-sale promotions, and the Internet.
- Exposure to repeated high-level alcohol promotion inculcates pro-drinking attitudes and increases the likelihood of heavier drinking.
- Alcohol advertising predisposes minors to drinking well before legal age of purchase.
- Advertising has been found to promote and reinforce perceptions of drinking as positive, glamorous, and relatively risk-free.

Regulating alcohol promotion

Legislation restricting alcohol advertising

- A well-established precaution used by governments throughout the world, despite opposition from the alcoholic beverage industry.
- Findings suggest that while the restrictions have not achieved a major reduction in drinking and related harms in the short-term, countries with greater restrictions on advertising have less drinking and fewer alcohol-related problems (Saffer, 1991).

Regulating alcohol promotion

Industry Self-regulation Codes

- Self-regulation tends to be fragile and largely ineffective
- These codes may work best where the media, advertising, and alcohol industries are all involved, and an independent body has powers to approve or veto advertisements, rule on complaints, and impose sanctions.
- Few countries currently have all these components.

Best Practices

- Minimum legal purchase age
- Government monopoly of retail sales
- Restriction on hours or days of sale
- Outlet density restrictions
- Alcohol taxes
- Sobriety check points
- Lowered BAC limits
- Administrative license suspension
- Graduated licensing for novice drivers
- Brief interventions for hazardous drinkers

Least Effective Practices

- Voluntary codes of bar practice
- Promoting alcohol-free activities
- Alcohol education in schools
- College student education
- Public service messages
- Warning labels
- Designated drivers and ride services

Conclusions

- Opportunities for effective, evidence-based alcohol policies are more available than ever to better serve the public good.
- Popular policy options (e.g., school-based alcohol education) have relatively small or zero effects on population rates of alcohol-related morbidity and mortality.
- Unpopular policy options (e.g., alcohol taxes, availability restrictions) can have substantial effects.
- The Precautionary Principle suggests that alcohol promotion communications should be limited in the interests of public health, and that alcohol education should not be a substitute for more effective strategies.
- There are still too many instances of policy vacuums filled by unevaluated or ineffective strategies and interventions.
- Industry-sponsored education programs should not be used until they have been systematically evaluated by independent researchers.
- Industry compliance with self-regulation advertising codes should be evaluated regularly for both exposure and content guidelines.

