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The Problem-Drinker Driver Project

Research
Note
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New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

Marguerite T. Saunders, Director

A Gateway to Impaired Driving: Alcohol Purchasing Practices of 16 to 20 Year Old New York Residents¹

Barbara J. Hoffmann, M.S., Project Research Scientist

Bill Williford, Ph.D., Project Co-Director

Studying the alcohol purchasing practices of underage persons has important implications for prevention efforts in the highway safety field. The 16-20 year old population has experienced a reduction in their involvement in alcohol-related crashes since the passage of the 21 purchase age, however alcohol-related crashes continue to be a leading cause of death for young adults.

An indication of the alcohol purchasing patterns of 16-20 year old New Yorkers can be obtained by analyzing data from the 1986 Youth Alcohol Survey². Considering the respondent's age, what is the prevalence of purchasing alcoholic beverages? Are underage respondents more likely to purchase alcohol in a store than in a bar? Are sellers checking for proof of age? If an underage person indicates they have purchased alcohol in a store or in a bar, were they proofed? Does this vary by purchasing location, i.e. are people more likely to be proofed in a bar or club versus in a supermarket, convenience store or liquor store, and how prevalent is the use of phony proof?

Questions about purchasing were considered for underage purchasers only, i.e. those respondents who were 16-20 years of age at the time of the survey (December, 1986). At that time, the 21

purchase age law had been in effect for one year. Questions regarding purchasing and proofing practices were asked for all possible choices of alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, wine coolers or liquor), for each possible purchase site: in a bar, club or restaurant; in a store (presumably a supermarket or convenience store); or in a liquor store.

Findings: Of the total underage population, 16% indicated that they had purchased alcohol at some time in the past month. The vast majority (80%) of these underage purchasers indicated they had bought beer at least once in the past month; 34% said they had purchased liquor; 26% bought wine coolers; and 13% purchased wine. Approximately 29% indicated they had used phony proof.

Location of Purchase: Overall, of the underage purchasers 80% reported purchasing alcohol in stores; 50% reported purchasing alcohol in a bar. By beverage, 80% of the underage respondents who purchased beer, reported they had done so in a store; 58% of those purchasing liquor obtained it in a liquor store; and 63% reported purchasing liquor in a bar or club. Nearly 90% of those purchasing wine coolers did so in a store.

Proofing Practices: Less than half (46%) of the underage population who attempted to purchase beer or wine coolers in a store were asked for proof. Slightly more underage respondents reported being proofed in a liquor store (51%) or in a bar or club (49%).

Refusal Rates: Of those respondents reporting that they had been proofed when purchasing beer or wine coolers in a store, 62% indicated that they were subsequently refused sale; 52% were refused the sale of alcohol when proofed in a bar; and 46% were refused sale when proofed while attempting to purchase liquor or wine in a liquor store. Generally, those underage respondents who were not refused the sale of alcohol were using phony proof.

Conclusion: About 1 out of every 6 persons aged 16-20 years reported purchasing alcohol at least once in the month prior to the Youth Alcohol Survey. Beer was the beverage of choice, and stores were preferable to bars as a purchase site, although half of the underage purchasers succeeded in purchasing alcohol in a bar.

It appears that 16-20 year olds are only being proofed about half the time, regardless of where they attempt to purchase alcohol. Even when proofing does occur, approximately 40-55% of the underage respondents still succeed in purchasing alcohol, largely due to the use of phony proof. (It should be noted that these findings are based on 1986 data and may not accurately reflect the current situation.)

These findings clearly support the need for additional efforts to reduce the accessibility of alcoholic beverages to young New Yorkers, thus closing this gateway to alcohol-impaired driving. This could be accomplished by initiating underage alcohol possession laws, more stringent monitoring of proofing practices, and the development of training programs for those who sell alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol Purchasing Patterns for an Underage Population

General Patterns:

% Who Purchased Alcohol 16% (274/1783)

% Who Used Phony Proof 29% (79/274)

Type of Beverage Purchased

Beer 80%

Liquor 34%

Wine Coolers 26%

Wine 13%

Location of Purchase:

Type of Beverage	Location	
	In a Store	In a Bar
Any Alcoholic Beverages	80%	50%
Beer	80%	50%
Liquor	58%	63%
Wine Coolers	89%	17%
Wine	80%	34%

Proof of Age:

Location of Purchase	% asked for Proof	% proofed who were refused sale
Liquor store	51%	46%
Bar	49%	52%
Supermarket/ convenience store	46%	62%

¹ All questions or requests regarding this research note should be directed to: Barbara Hoffmann, Office of Criminal Justice Services, New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, 194 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12210; (518) 473-4386.

² The Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse sponsored a series of statewide youth alcohol surveys from 1982 to 1986. The 1986 sample contained 3,000 young New York residents aged 16-24.