
PREVENT YOUTH ACCESS TO ALCOHOL



Policy Brief

Underage Drinking

It is illegal for minors under 21 to purchase, possess or consume alcohol, with good reason. Yet underage drinking is widespread in Oklahoma. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey reports that three of every four Oklahoma high school students have consumed alcohol and over one-quarter engages in episodic heavy drinking (binging on five or more drinks in a row within the last month). The average age when youth first try alcohol is 11 years for boys and 13 years for girls.

Consequences

The consequences of underage drinking are well documented. Alcohol is a factor in the four leading causes of death among persons ages 10 to 24: automobile accidents, unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide. Alcohol also impairs a young person's ability to make judgments about their sexual behavior, resulting in increased risks for unplanned pregnancies, sexual assault and STDs.

Alcopops... The New Threat Targeting Young Girls

For most teens, beer is the drink of choice. But a new threat has appeared on the horizon that has become increasingly popular with underage drinkers, especially girls: alcopops. Alcopops are flavored alcoholic beverages that are sweet and sugary and taste like lemonade, cola, punch or tea. An American Medical Association study reported that alcopops are the beverage most frequently consumed by teenage girls. The *Monitoring our Future Report* found that 13% of 8th graders, 23% of 10th graders, and 30% of 12 graders have consumed alcopops during the 30 days prior to being interviewed.

Easy Access

The proper classification for alcopops is at issue in most states. These drinks do not fit neatly into the traditional alcohol categories: wine, beer or distilled spirits. Manufacturers market these products as "malt beverages" – a practice that allows their placement in grocery and convenience stores, making them easily accessible to underage drinkers. Yet the Federal Alcohol and Tobacco Trade and Tax Bureau (TTB) issued a report in 2003 that puts the industry classification into question.

RECOMMENDATION:

The 2009 Children's Agenda supports preventing youth access to alcohol by appropriately reclassifying flavored alcoholic beverages (Alco-Pops) as distilled beverages, as currently defined in Oklahoma law, thereby requiring such beverages to be sold only in liquor stores.

According to the TTB:

“[Alcopops] exhibit little or no traditional beer or malt beverage character....Brewers ...remove the color, bitterness, and taste that are generally associated with beer...This leaves a base product to which brewers add various flavors, which typically contain distilled spirits, to achieve the desired taste profile”.

Need for Proper Classification

Even though the brewers start with beer, the production process removes the alcohol derived from beer and replaces it with distilled spirits. This is done for the purpose of gaining the regulatory advantages associated with beer: lower taxes and wider availability. In Oklahoma, beer is taxed at \$0.40 per gallon, whereas spirits are taxed at \$5.56 per gallon. Beer can be sold in convenience stores, which are generally open 24 hours per day and the product can be sold “cold and ready to drink”. Spirits can be sold only in liquor stores, which are closed on Sundays and holidays and the products must be sold at room temperature. Classifying Alcopops as beer keeps them cheap and easily accessible.