

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH FROM THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL ADVERTISING

From Evidence to Action provides background information and highlights policy directions from the Alcohol Policy Network (APN), housed at the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA). This document provides summary information from OPHA's research report, *Advertising of Alcoholic Beverages in Canada: Media Scan, Research Review, Degree of Compliance, and Expert Analysis Report*. This document serves to (1) provide a brief introduction to the limitations of current alcohol advertising regulations in protecting children and youth from exposure, (2) summarize the research evidence and policy recommendations from OPHA's research report, and (3) provide public health and health promotion intermediaries direction on how to strengthen current alcohol advertising control policies.

Introduction

Of the many psychoactive substances, alcohol is the only one that we allow to be mass advertised in our society through various mediums. Although advertising is a legitimate marketing tactic used by alcohol producers to promote their products, research has identified its direct contributory effect to individual drinking behaviour and levels of alcohol-related harm, particularly among children and youth ^{1,2}.

Effects of Alcohol Advertising among Youth

Among youth, alcohol advertising has been found to “promote and reinforce perceptions of drinking as positive, glamorous, and relatively risk free” ³. These perceptions are often shaped by techniques used by advertisers to link alcohol to physical attractiveness, sex appeal, humour, and popular music ⁴. With a more favourable attitude towards drinking, a social norm that accepts and promotes both heavy and underage drinking is more likely to occur ^{3,5,6}. Alcohol advertising has been linked to various health consequences, including heavy drinking, drinking in dangerous situations and fatalities from motor vehicle crashes, especially among young drivers 16 to 20 years old ^{5,7}.



Commercial for Bud Light, “Close Encounters”, aired in 2010

Harmful Drinking Practices among Youth

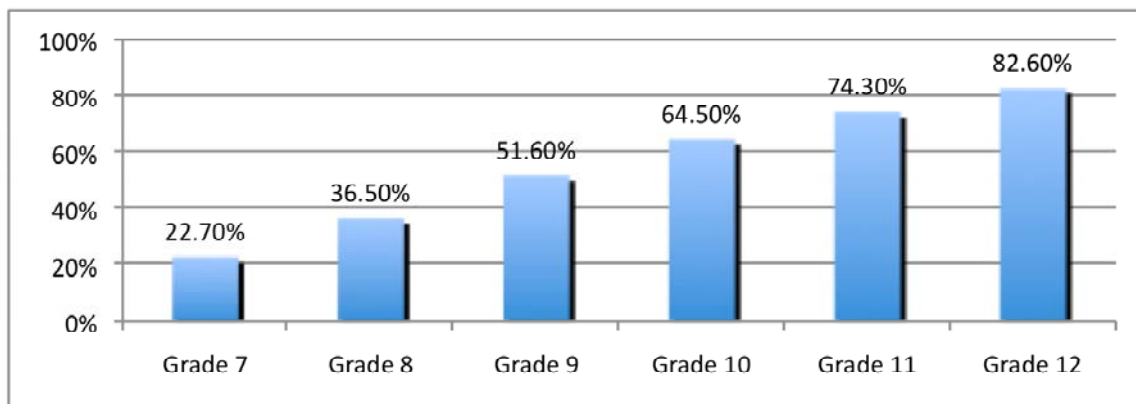
Current patterns of alcohol misuse among underaged youth both in Canada and Ontario are alarming. According to the 2009 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey, the average age that youth in Canada start to drink alcohol was at 15.9 years of age, well below the legal age of purchase⁸. Data from Statistics Canada also indicate that more than a

quarter of youth aged 12 to 19 are heavy drinkers; consuming five or more drinks per occasion⁹.

In Ontario, alcohol is the most commonly used drug among students in grades 7 to 12¹⁰. Almost two-thirds (58.2%) of students reported use of alcohol over the last 12 months. One-fifth (21%) of students reported drinking at hazardous levels (defined as a pattern of drinking that increases the likelihood of future medical and physical problem), and a quarter (25%) reported heavy or binge drinking at least once in the last month¹⁰.

In terms of drinking patterns, use of alcohol significantly increased with grade, with rates climbing by more than ten percent with each grade (Figure 1). Among grade 12 students, 83% reported use of alcohol over the last 12 months.

Figure 1: Past Year Alcohol Use, 2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey¹⁰



Limitations of the Current Alcohol Advertising Regulation System

Despite federal and self-regulatory guidelines that restrict alcohol advertisements from appealing to Canadian children and minors (Box 1); this population may be exposed to more than 300,000 alcohol ads each year through radio and television alone¹¹.

Box 1: Alcohol Advertising Regulations in Canada¹²

In Canada, responsibility for regulating alcohol advertisements is shared between:

1. The federal government, through the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC)'s *Code for Broadcast Advertising of Alcoholic Beverages*,
2. Individual provincial/territorial governments that have legislation controlling alcohol advertising, and
3. The advertising industry, through Advertising Standards Canada (ASC)'s *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards (CCAS)*.

Since 1996, however, a relaxation of the process to pre-approve alcohol advertisements in Canada occurred increasing the role of industry self-regulation.

The voluntary pre-clearance mechanism provided through ASC as a means of enforcing the CRTC regulations represents one of the largest gaps in alcohol advertisement regulations in Canada. Without key deterrents in place that guard against potential irresponsible alcohol advertising, young and impressionable children will not be protected from exposure to alcohol advertisements. Even if contravening ads are pulled by advertisers, it is done in a post-facto manner with exposure already having occurred (See Box 2 for an example).

Further to the limitations in the review mechanism of alcohol advertisements, other limitations in the ASC and CRTC alcohol advertising regulations include:

- Lack of widespread knowledge of ASC's *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*;
- Lack of an independent complaints body with powers of sanction to enforce the CCAS;
- CRTC regulations have not been updated since 1996;
- Regulations do not mandate place restrictions; and
- Not all media sources for which alcohol may be advertised is regulated.

Deficiencies in the current system to control alcohol advertising pose a public health and safety threat, particularly to underage audiences. Therefore, it is recommended that current federal, provincial/territorial and self-regulating alcohol advertising regulations be strengthened.

Box 2: Sample Contravening Alcohol Ad Shown in Ontario ¹³



This advertisement by Bacardi Canada Inc was distributed nationally in the newspaper in 2006 and seen in Toronto, Ontario on posters, billboards and websites. ASC received two complaints regarding the breach of this ad to the ASC Canadian Code of Advertising Standards. The complainants alleged that the advertisement degraded and demeaned women. The infraction was made to Clause 14 (c) of the CCAS (Unacceptable Depictions and Portrayals).

Advertiser's Verbatim Statement: "Bacardi Canada Inc. is a member in good standing of Advertising Standards Canada. The company undertook what was felt to be responsible steps to ensure the creative in question was acceptable, by pre-submitting to ASC and securing approval according to the Code for Broadcast Advertising of Alcoholic Beverages, which applies to print as well as broadcast advertising in British Columbia. We also undertook a full review of the existing and historical creative aired in Canada, to ensure this was consistent and in keeping with what was felt to be accepted areas of creative. While we do not agree with the Council's decision, we respect it and the process that was followed. We have committed to cease exhibiting of the creative in question."

Presenting the Evidence

Evidence in addressing various alcohol advertising issues are presented in Box 3. Literature reviews and key informant interviews were conducted around three major categories of alcohol advertising themes: the effectiveness of alcohol advertising, alcohol advertising countermeasures, and elements of an effective alcohol marketing regulatory system. To assess perceived content violations in relation to the CRTC code, alcohol advertisements were also sampled and presented to both youth and content experts through survey questionnaires.

Box 3: Evidence ¹⁴

A. Evidence From Literature Reviews and Key Informant Interviews

- **Effectiveness of Alcohol Advertising:** High levels of alcohol advertising exposure among the youth population is associated with adolescents drinking both earlier and heavier. This association has been attributable to elements of alcohol advertisements that create favourable attitudes among youth towards drinking, thereby affecting intentions to consume alcohol both underage and as adults.
- **Alcohol Advertising Countermeasures:** In order to protect children and youth against harmful effects, alcohol advertising countermeasures in Canada have included a variety of social responsibility messaging initiatives, including alcohol media literacy campaigns, social marketing campaigns, health warning labels and signage, as well as strategic measures, such as introducing alcohol strategies.
- **Essential Elements of a Regulatory System:** Research has identified three essential elements to an effective alcohol marketing regulatory system: content restrictions, volume restrictions, and an overall supporting infrastructure consisting of a supporting legal context, commitment of all stakeholders, transparency of decision-making, a mandatory pre-screening system, an effective complaint system, an independent advertising committee, effective sanctions, monitoring, as well as coverage of all forms of marketing activities and flexibility to adjust restrictions accordingly.

B. Evidence From Survey Questionnaires

- **Youth Perspective:** Content analysis of eight alcohol ads to both of-age and under-aged youth revealed a number of potential violations, particularly around showing the effects of alcohol use and associating alcohol with skilled and dangerous activities. In general, the advertisements used in the questionnaire were more likely to be seen by under-aged than drinking-aged students and suggest that current regulatory practices do not restrict exposure of under-aged drinkers to alcohol advertisements in any meaningful way.
- **Content Expert Perspective:** In evaluating twenty-five recent alcohol ads, use of alcohol was assumed in many of the ads, and all ads were seen to encourage use of alcohol. The main concerns around inappropriate alcohol advertising were around the over-saturation of marketing, which normalizes alcohol use especially among youth and young people, and therefore can lead to a tolerance of intoxication, further dependence, and risky-use.

Control Measures to Protect Children and Youth

Evidence suggests that current Canadian guidelines and procedures to control the amount of inappropriate alcohol advertising are inadequate. This finding points to the need for proper regulation and enforcement of alcohol advertising to protect impressionable children and youth against the harmful effects of alcohol advertising. Table 1 illustrates three major categories of evidence-informed recommendations made to strengthen the regulation of alcohol advertisements in Canada: regulating scope, regulating procedures, and the provision of additional supports.

Table 1: Strengthening the Regulation of Alcohol Advertisements in Canada¹⁴

	Recommendation	Who Should be Responsible?
REGULATING SCOPE	1. Strengthen content restrictions	Federal, Provincial and/or Territorial Governing Bodies
	2. Develop and implement codes for volume restrictions	
	3. Increase coverage of alcohol advertising regulations	
REGULATING PROCEDURES	4. Reinstate federal mandatory pre-screening process	
	5. Improve current complaints system	
	6. Create an independent panel of representatives with a public interest mandate to judge the appropriateness of alcohol advertising	
	7. Enforce effective sanctions	
	8. Implement an effective monitoring system	
	9. Increase transparency of alcohol advertising regulation decisions	
	10. Increase consultations with federal and provincial health agencies	
	11. Develop and implement a public health informed advertising standards code for advertising of alcoholic beverages	Advertising Standards Agencies
ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS	12. Advocate for additional limits on alcohol advertising; cultivate collaborations and partnerships between different sectors	Public Health and Community Interest Groups (e.g. public health units, provincial and national NGOs, provincial and national public health agencies)
	13. Conduct additional research to identify elements of effective counter-measures	
	14. Increase public awareness around the limitations of the current system	

The Role of Public Health

Research clearly indicates that exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with adolescents drinking both earlier and heavier. To protect children and youth from the harmful effects of alcohol advertising, public health can work with relevant stakeholders and government departments to affect favourable changes in alcohol advertising control measures through three key action areas (see Box 4).

Box 4: Public Health Action ^{12, 14, 15}

1. Strengthen local restrictions on alcohol advertising
 - ☑ Advocate for restrictions on the content of alcohol advertisements to address all elements appealing to youth (e.g. ‘alcopops’, alcoholic energy drinks, and party scenes’)
 - ☑ Craft definitions around appropriate alcohol advertising content (e.g. Allowing product information only)
 - ☑ Advocate for volume restrictions based on the viewing habits of under-aged viewers (e.g. Limit time of day alcohol ads would be allowed on television, limit exposure to alcohol promotions and content on new media sources such as Facebook and YouTube)
 - ☑ Collect data through local surveys on youth exposure to alcohol advertising
 - ☑ Include reference to minimizing alcohol advertising and sponsorship within regional strategies or municipal alcohol policies with priority given to venues frequented by underage youth including schools, malls, transit, sporting and recreational venues, community events, etc.
2. Support counter-advertising
 - ☑ Promote common messaging around appropriate alcohol consumption (e.g. social norm campaigns; support for Ontario’s Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines)
 - ☑ Reach out to and engage young people in health promotion initiatives (e.g. use both traditional and new media outlets for recruitment and production of initiatives)
3. Build support and political will for healthier alcohol advertising practices
 - ☑ Partner with and mobilize community groups to address local alcohol advertising and sponsorship issues
 - ☑ Disseminate knowledge on how current alcohol advertisements are regulated in Canada
 - ☑ Advertise widely the advertising complaint process; encourage complaint submissions about advertising that falls short of CRTC and ASC standards and include local politicians and health authorities on all communication
 - ☑ Regularly highlight areas in the current alcohol advertising system that require updating; use data to support claims (e.g. Table 1) and include local politicians and health authorities on all communication
 - ☑ Request an advertising standards code to be developed specifically for advertising of alcoholic beverages
 - ☑ Obtain local support for a provincial alcohol strategy inclusive of alcohol advertising initiatives

Ultimately, the challenge for Public Health is in changing public attitudes and the normalization around the acceptability of intoxication, especially among children and youth. The 2007 report *Reducing alcohol-related harm in Canada: Towards a culture of moderation* by the National Alcohol Strategy Working Group recommends that the Federal government “coordinate funding for research and publication of an annual report documenting the exposure of underage youth in Canada to alcohol advertising” and that all provincial governments “review existing advertising regulatory systems with a view to updating the standards, especially as they pertain to youth, as well as the mechanisms of receiving and responding to consumer complaints about alcohol advertising”¹². The working group suggest that “a coordinated approach to ensuring the standards are upheld, that appropriate changes are made over time and that youth are not over-exposed to alcohol advertising is essential to successfully implementing a culture of moderation”¹².



Print advertisement for Gibson's Whiskey , 2010

In Ontario, the impact of introducing a comprehensive supported provincial alcohol strategy would be positive and immediate. Research shows that many problems related to drinking can be reduced or partially avoided through careful planning and a precautionary approach¹⁶. Further, research suggests a combination of both population-level policies and more individualized focused interventions is required¹⁶. Several provinces in Canada have introduced alcohol strategies or alcohol frameworks within the last five years based on principles within the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion with a positive mix of population and individual and/or clinical approaches (see Box 5). Alcohol strategies from British Columbia and Nova Scotia address advertising and sponsorship issues within their frameworks, including updating existing regulations and improving complaint systems¹⁶.

Box 5: Approaches to Alcohol Policy¹⁶

- ✓ Community Capacity and Partnership Building
- ✓ Healthy Public Policy
- ✓ Health Promotion, Prevention and Education
- ✓ Research and Evaluation
- ✓ Prevention, Early Intervention, and Treatment
- ✓ Communication and Social Marketing

Ontario can build an alcohol strategy that not only works towards a culture of moderation, but also ingrains common messaging around low-risk drinking. Such movement will result in positive effects in protecting children and youth from harmful drinking practices that result in part, from alcohol advertising. No single measure can act as a definitive solution to tackle the effects of alcohol advertising on young people’s drinking, and therefore regulation should be complemented with other policy levers and interventions, while given adequate time to have an effect¹⁷.

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