

Outdoor alcohol ads boost kids' urge to drink

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In the world depicted in an alcohol billboard, bikini-clad babes clutch icy bottles, frothy beer flows over frosty mugs and the slogan reads, “Life is good.” Ads like these may target adults, but children are getting the message too, a University of Florida and University of Minnesota study shows.

Adolescents attending schools in neighborhoods where alcohol ads litter the landscape tend to want to drink more and, compared with other children, have more positive views of alcohol, researchers report in this month’s issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs.

UF and UM researchers counted the number of alcohol ads within a two-block radius of 63 Chicago schools and compared students’ opinions on drinking when they were in sixth grade and again two years later. The result" The more ads for alcohol there were in a neighborhood, the more students were interested in drinking alcohol, the findings show.

Most of the ads researchers found were beer signs in storefronts, although they also counted billboards, bus stop signs and other types of ads. In total, there were about 931 ads for alcohol around the schools. On average, there were about 28 ads in each neighborhood, after excluding 22 schools where there were no ads. One school had more than 100.

“The majority of the ads were just brand information only,” said UF epidemiologist Kelli A. Komro, Ph.D., who studied these more subtle logo-only signs as well as more elaborate, image-laden billboards.

“Sometimes we think that those as are not so powerful, but the majority

of the ads we found were those kinds of ads and still we found the association with increased intentions to use alcohol.”

About half of all teens sample their first alcoholic drink by the time they are 15, according to the U.S. Surgeon General, which released a report on teen drinking earlier this year. Teens who start drinking this early are more likely to have trouble in school, become addicted to alcohol, smoke cigarettes and use drugs than adolescents who don’t drink, the report states.

Prior research has shown that adolescents’ intentions and attitudes about alcohol generally predict their later behavior, said Komro, an associate professor of epidemiology and child health policy in the UF College of Medicine. To gauge students’ thoughts on drinking, the researchers asked them a series of questions, such as whether they planned on drinking in high school or if they thought drinking made teens popular.

By eighth grade, the students who attended schools with more alcohol advertising in the surrounding neighborhood had more intentions to drink alcohol and gave fewer reasons for not drinking when researchers surveyed them, the study shows.

The ads also seemed to have the same effect on teens who were already drinking in sixth grade and those who had not yet imbibed, Komro said.

“A lot of times advertisers say ads are targeted to people who are already drinking, so we looked at kids who were already drinking in sixth grade and kids who were not,” she said. “Among those kids who were not drinking, we still found the association between exposure to the outdoor ads and increased intentions to use alcohol. The ads are working even for the kids who are not drinking.”

Ads like these influence children by changing their perceptions of what

is normal, said Steven Thomsen, Ph.D., a professor of communication at Brigham Young University who studies the effects of advertising on children. If kids believe that most people drink and all their peers drink, the chances are greater they will also drink, Thomsen said.

“The importance of this (study) is they determined that these messages have an impact on normative beliefs, which are the assumptions we make about how the world works,” Thomsen said. “It doesn’t have to be a (TV) commercial (to be effective).”

Restrictions that limit or eliminate alcohol advertising around schools could help students stay alcohol-free, Komro said.

“I think results from this study and studies like this study clearly indicate that there should be policies to ban alcohol advertising near the schools,” Komro said. “It clearly shows that exposure is dangerous for our children.”

Source: University of Florida

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