

Study suggests sports stadiums serve alcohol to minors and intoxicated fans

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In a novel study looking at the propensity of illegal alcohol sales at sports stadiums, researchers reported that nearly one in five people posing as underage drinkers, and three out of four seemingly intoxicated "fans" were able to buy alcohol at professional sporting events. They also found that location mattered: sales were more likely if the attempt took place in the stadium stands rather than at a concession booth.

"We saw that sporting events can be fertile ground for illegal alcohol sales, and that the seats provide an especially high risk environment at events that every year attract an average of 130 million people," said lead author Traci Toomey, PhD, with the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. The study is published in the upcoming issue of the journal, *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and was funded by the Substance Abuse Prevention and Research Program (SAPRP) of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

From September 2005 to November 2006, researchers conducted alcohol purchase attempts with pseudo-underage (i.e., persons age 21 or older who appear under 21) and pseudo-intoxicated (i.e., persons feigning intoxication) individuals to assess the likelihood of illegal sales of alcohol at stadiums that house professional hockey, basketball, baseball, and football teams. Purchase attempts were made at 16 sport stadiums in five different states.

For pseudo-underage purchase attempts, the researchers hired two men and five women who were 21 years or older, but were judged by a panel

to look between 18 and 20 years old. For pseudo-intoxicated attempts, the researchers hired two male and two female actors (all over the age of 30) based on their ability to appear intoxicated. Their authenticity was assessed by a panel of eight to ten people who had worked in the hospitality industry. The actors – who had played similar roles for two prior studies – attempted to purchase alcohol while showing signs of obvious intoxication. In their interactions with sales staff, they dropped their money, repeated questions and slurred their words.

They found that the overall sales rates to the pseudo-underage and pseudo-intoxicated buyers were 18 percent and 74 percent, respectively. For both groups, the odds of being able to buy alcohol from the stands were three times as high as the odds of being able to purchase it from a concession booth. "We know already that there's a link between alcohol use and problem behaviors among fans," Toomey said. "But there's more that sports stadiums can do to prevent sales to people who are clearly drunk. If people are intoxicated, we don't need them to consume more alcohol."

Sales to "intoxicated" buyers were also more likely if the seller did not seem to notice the apparent intoxication, and servers in the stands were less likely to notice the intoxication level of the buyers than servers at the concession booths. In the "underage" group, buyers were almost three times more likely to purchase alcohol if in the stands than at the concession booths. When in the stands, sales increased along with the distance of buyer from seller. Toomey called the results significant. "Combining thousands of fans with significant alcohol sales could be construed as a recipe for some serious problems, like increased instances of violence and drunk driving," she said.

In the past few years, there have been several well-publicized alcohol-related problems at professional sporting events in the U.S. involving drunken behavior of fans and subsequent problems, either during or

after stadium sporting events. Several of these incidents have resulted in lawsuits targeting the alcohol vendors for serving alcohol to fans who were obviously intoxicated, the authors write.

"Given the results of this study, stadium management and local and state elected officials may want to consider banning or restricting alcohol sales in the stands at sporting events, as some stadiums have already done," Toomey said. "However, if such a policy is not politically feasible in a particular stadium, vendors in the stands may need to receive additional training regarding responsible service of alcohol—training that could include how to check age identification and more clearly recognize signs of obvious intoxication." Toomey added, "In addition, law enforcement and community groups need to actively monitor and work with stadiums to promote responsible alcohol service at these events."

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