

Alcohol and tobacco advertising bans don't work

August 16 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- Bans on alcohol and tobacco marketing are among the least effective tactics for combating underage drinking and smoking, according to a Penn State economist, who has studied the effects of advertising since 1985.

"My conclusion is that the emphasis on advertising bans and similar regulations in the public health literature is misplaced," said Jon Nelson, professor emeritus of economics. "More effective policies need to be sought to deal with issues of youthful risk-taking associated with alcohol and [tobacco](#)."

Among the deficiencies, Nelson reported that there were problems with how researchers selected people to participate in their studies and how they drew conclusions from the data they collected.

"The studies, in fact, are deficient in so many respects that the big question is whether there's any influence of marketing at all, especially the mass media," Nelson said.

Policy makers and advocacy groups use these studies to initiate and justify bans on alcohol and tobacco product advertising in order to lower the social costs associated with using these products and to promote youth health. According to Nelson, the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization are among the organizations that uncritically cite these studies in their advocacy of tobacco and alcohol advertising bans.

Nelson recommended several ways to improve studies on youth alcohol and tobacco behaviors. Researchers who explore advertising's influence on youth drinking and smoking should better identify why variables, such as peer and parental influences, are included in the study and choose variables that more effectively measure the exposure of alcohol and tobacco marketing in youth behavior.

In a recent review of 20 youth drinking studies and 26 [youth smoking](#) studies published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Nelson found that only 33 percent of the results were statistically significant in linking marketing with youth drinking. He considered only 49 percent of the results significant on marketing and youth smoking behavior.

"These studies should be done against a well-defined scientific standard for an empirical investigation," said Nelson. "There is really no such thing as a perfect study, but the object should be to get closer to those acceptable standards."

Nelson identified longitudinal studies that measured the influence of a range of alcohol and tobacco marketing efforts including mass media, in-store displays, branded merchandise, movie portrayals and brand recognition. The participant in a longitudinal study is interviewed or surveyed over two or more years.

Nelson looked at these studies in two categories, youth drinking and youth smoking. Although these studies had common features, they were treated separately because they used slightly different models to explore advertising receptivity and exposure. Nelson then offered critical assessments of the studies in each category, paying particular attention to the consistency of empirical results among the studies.

The review reinforced findings in Nelson's previous work. In 2001 and 2010 studies, he showed advertising bans in European countries did not

reduce adult [alcohol](#) consumption. In 2003 and 2006 studies, he reported a similar finding for tobacco advertising bans.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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