

British children more exposed to alcohol promotion than adults: Experts call for urgent changes

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Children in Britain are more exposed to alcohol promotion than adults and need much stronger protection, warn experts on *BMJ* website today.

In an editorial to coincide with publication of the UK's first independent [alcohol](#) strategy, Professor Gerard Hastings at the University of Stirling and Dr Nick Sheron at the University of Southampton argue that urgent changes to Britain's "flawed" [regulatory system](#) are needed to provide much stronger protection for [children](#).

A new analysis conducted by the Rand Corporation for the European Commission shows, for example, that 10-15 year olds in the UK see 10% more [alcohol advertising](#) on TV than their parents do. Even more shocking, when it comes to the specific sector of alcopops, they see 50% more.

RAND's analysis was unable to draw any sensible conclusions about relative exposure via digital and social media, the corporation did note, however, that young people are the heaviest users, and alcohol marketers are exploiting the resulting opportunities with enormous energy.

That this commercial activity is harming children is beyond dispute, say the Hastings and Sheron. Indeed, findings from 13 peer reviewed studies on the impact of alcohol marketing on young people were absolutely clear cut: "alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that adolescents

will start to use alcohol, and to drink more if they are already using alcohol."

Yet this deeply regrettable state of affairs is completely predictable, they argue.

They point to the voluntary commitment made by the drinks industry - restated most recently in October 2012, a month after the new analysis was published - to restrict its advertising to media that "have a minimum 70% adult audience."

The so called 70:30 split is based on the share of the US population above the legal drinking age of 21, but has been applied generally around the globe, with a ratio of 75:25 in the UK.

However, the authors explain that in the UK only 21% of the population is under 18, and of these 5% are infants, so the voluntary guidelines allocate these children an audience share of 25% even though they comprise only 16% of the population. "The RAND study shows that this is delivering exactly the result that would be expected: children are more exposed than adults," they say.

The Rand analysis also suggests two further conclusions. Firstly, the disproportionately high exposure of children to alcopops advertising cannot be explained simply by the regulatory system; deliberate targeting must also be at play.

"We have to assume that drink advertisers are not deliberately aiming their campaigns at children, but internal documents do show that they are enthusiastically targeting the profitable group of [young people](#) aged between the minimum [legal drinking age](#) and 21," write Hastings and Sheron, who is also a consultant hepatologist at Southampton General Hospital.

The danger that "such neatly targeted campaigns will spill over into younger groups" is also clear from the analysis, they add.

Secondly, digital media "are tearing up the communications rule book" they say, resulting in marketing that is "simultaneously more powerful and less controllable."

"Our children urgently need protection from alcohol marketing," they conclude. "Voluntary codes and partial measures have all too obviously failed, and digital media is set to multiply the resulting harm."

Central to this week's strategy recommendations is a complete ban on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, they add. "The Rand report confirms that such a step is long overdue."

Provided by University of Southampton

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