

YOUTH ACCESS TO ALCOHOL: A COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECT TO REDUCE THE SUPPLY OF ALCOHOL TO TEENS

ABSTRACT

This is a description of a community action project targeted at reducing the illegal and irresponsible supply of alcohol to young people. The Youth Access To Alcohol (YATA) project was implemented in 2002 in twenty communities in New Zealand, with the aim of reducing the alcohol-related harm experienced by young people in New Zealand, through reducing the supply of alcohol by adults to young people. The communities include a mix of rural and urban from both Islands in New Zealand.

The project uses a community action approach, which has included setting up collaborative partnerships of key agencies, the delivery of key strategies and multimedia awareness raising campaigns. The communities are encouraged to identify unique issues in their community regarding alcohol abuse and young people and to develop action plans incorporating a range of strategies that include tested strategies as well as innovative ideas. Communities are trained to implement several tools to monitor changes in their community over time.

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in New Zealand. While many New Zealanders enjoy alcohol in moderation much of the time, problem drinking is creating some serious health and social issues. Of particular concern in many countries is hazardous drinking among youth (Babor et al, 2003). In recent years in New Zealand, heavy drinking and harmful drinking patterns have been increasing amongst younger people, they are drinking more often and the average amount being consumed in a drinking session has also increased (Habgood, 2001). It is estimated that 20.1% of all deaths in the 15 to 34 age group can be attributed to alcohol, mainly from road injuries, followed by suicide, assault and miscellaneous injuries (De Bonnaire et al, 2004). In attempting to understand and respond to the issue of youth drinking it is important to remember that young people's behaviour is significantly influenced by the world they live in. In New Zealand the youth drinking culture mirrors an adult drinking culture that accepts risky drinking and views being intoxicated as socially acceptable.

Teenagers are less inhibited about drinking than adults, 59% of 12 to 17 year olds believe it is ok to get drunk (as long as it is not every day) compared to 39% of those 18+ (De Bonnaire, 2004). Recent research indicates that alcohol use is common among young people; more than 8 out of 10 teenagers have drunk alcohol at some point in their lives. Many teenagers drink alcohol frequently and in high quantities with nearly 25% of current drinkers drinking alcohol at least once a week and over half of the current drinkers have had an episode of binge drinking (more than five drinks in one session) in the past month (Clark et al, 2004). It is illegal in New Zealand for anyone under the age of 18 years to purchase or be sold alcohol in or from licensed premises. Whilst there is certainly room for improvement in areas such as identification checking, licensed premises do not appear to be the primary source of supply. Underage youth usually obtain alcohol either directly or indirectly from adults. Efforts to reduce underage drinking, therefore, need to focus on adults and must engage the society at large (Bonnie et al, 2004).

New Zealand research indicates that young people have relatively easy access to alcohol with most acquiring it from parents, older siblings, peers and other adults. 54% of current drinkers acquire alcohol from parents. Of those who do purchase alcohol for themselves (15%), only 20% of those teenagers are routinely asked for identification (Clark et al, 2004). Whilst in some instances there is probably little harm done, in many cases the amount and type of alcohol supplied puts the young people concerned at risk of considerable harm. The kinds of harms young people have identified have included vomiting, memory loss; getting into a fight or argument and getting into a sexual situation they weren't happy with (Kalafatelis et al, 2003).

Research also suggests that the main influences on why young people choose not to drink alcohol are parent's attitudes, policies and legislation. More than 50% of young people aged 13 and 14 years who do not drink choose not to because their parents do not approve and more than 40% do not drink because it is illegal. Additionally, nearly one quarter of 13 & 14 year olds do not drink because they cannot get it (Clark et al, 2004).

One strategy that has been found to be effective in reducing underage drinking is to reduce the supply of alcohol to underage youth (Holder, 2003). In order to reduce the supply of alcohol to young people it is necessary to address the issue of illegal and irresponsible supply. The Sale of Liquor Act 1989 (SOLA) provides a vehicle to inform people about the laws around supply of alcohol and the ability to monitor and enforce the law.

METHODOLOGY

The YATA project is a community action programme. It is designed to support communities with tools, resources and skills to enable them to initiate strategies that have sustainable long-term impacts on reducing alcohol related harm in their communities.

The programme includes national co-ordination, provision of resource material and the facilitation of strategy development and formative evaluation. Support for the programme includes regular workshops for representatives of community teams, advice and consultancy from staff to assist in programme planning, training for community teams on "Strengthening Community Action on Alcohol" (Collie, 2002), and the communication of regular information between community teams working on the project via list serves and websites.

The various YATA community teams include representatives from a range of organisations including, but not limited to, the health sector, Safer Community Councils, Police, Injury Prevention, community organisations, local council and youth workers. Each community has differences in terms of the people involved, the amount of time they have to devote to the overall project and the strategies that they implement. However, there are some elements of the project that are common and consistent across all the communities. In many communities the project is part of a larger project addressing either youth health, or youth alcohol use.

GOALS, OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES OF YATA

The overall goal for the YATA programme is to encourage and support community action targeted at reducing the illegal and/or irresponsible supply of alcohol by adults to young people. The goal is supported by several objectives including:

- Reducing the alcohol-related harm experienced by young people/rangatahi in New Zealand by reducing the supply of alcohol by adults to young people
- Ensuring that alcohol is only supplied to those under 18 by their own parents, in limited quantities, for consumption in a safe supervised environment.
- Increasing the knowledge and understanding of the laws around the supply of alcohol to those under 18 years

Research has demonstrated that a clear mission is critical to the success of community mobilisation efforts (Bonnie et al, 2004). The various objectives of the project have been identified with interventions and strategies targeting key audiences in each community.

Parents

Through a variety of measures parents are encouraged and supported to reduce the per occasion amount of alcohol supplied to their children and other young people, and to communicate with their teenage and pre-teen children about alcohol consumption. Strategies include organising parent evenings/forums at local schools and public meetings, developing material for parents on legal aspects of alcohol issues, and involving parents in helping to run safe events for young people.

Retailers of Alcohol

Retailers are encouraged and supported to promote good management practices in licensed premises, make no sales of alcohol to minors from licensed premises and to become actively involved in supporting community activities that promote the safer use of alcohol. Initiatives include providing training seminars for serving staff about laws, host responsibility and customer service. Many are involved with supporting the 'Think Before You Buy Under 18's Drink' Campaign, which involves distributing resources informing about the laws and fines associated with illegal supply of alcohol. Other initiatives include getting involved in alcohol accords, running their own mystery shopper campaigns and having clear signage displayed regarding identification (ID) requirements and seeking ID from all those under 25 years.

Other Adult Suppliers

The target audience of other adult suppliers includes initiatives to increase the number of adults who know the law around supplying alcohol to minors. Local media and social marketing strategies are used to inform the general public and police have actively enforced laws and prosecuted any suppliers at the point of sale.

Policy Makers

Policy makers are encouraged to have easily understood legislation around the sale of alcohol, and to ensure consistent and effective enforcement of the legislation. Some of the strategies for this audience have included advocating for clearer definitions in the SOLA, lobbying local government for a local alcohol policy and having a formalised liquor liaison group.

Young People

Objectives for the communities include involving young people in the decisions that affect them. Initiatives include providing alternative entertainment that is alcohol free, increasing the amount and range of youth focused information available to young people around safe partying and increasing the number of young people who believe it is socially acceptable to drink without getting intoxicated. Some strategies include supporting Youth Councils, surveying young people as to their needs for entertainment and developing resources for young people around partying and alcohol issues and laws.

Research has confirmed that positive outcomes can be achieved by implementing a broad range of strategies that mobilise communities across physical, social, economic and legal environments; and by building coalitions that engage residents, advocacy groups, government agencies and non-government agencies. The flexibility for communities to choose partners as well as being able to implement initiatives tailored to specific problems has proven to support success. (Bonnie et al, 2004).

MONITORING & EVALUATION OF YATA

Monitoring and evaluation strategies provide mechanisms that enable each community to be informed about the type and level of alcohol-related harm they are experiencing and to assess impacts of their community action on reducing harm.

Monitoring to assess the impact of community-based actions presents a challenge because in any one community there are often activities addressing health and welfare issues and it is difficult to control the influence of other factors. The approach with YATA has been to encourage communities to implement several monitoring tools in an attempt to increase validity of results. The tools chosen were based on research carried out by Harold Holder (Holder, 2003) and include:

- An environmental scan to provide an overview of a community including the unique characteristics of the community, community projects and services and all aspects relating to youth and alcohol.
- The collection of proxy indicators as quantitative data that can be used as a means of indirect measures of change for e.g. liquor infringement notices detailing the supply of liquor to minors, minors purchasing alcohol, disorder and violence, drink drive data, as well as school suspensions and expulsions, and emergency department data.
- A time series of panel surveys as a means for obtaining qualitative data to gauge change.
- Monitoring of the media to provide an indicator of community awareness of and response to community action strategies. Media monitoring has been demonstrated to be an excellent indicator of the community awareness of and response to projects aiming to reduce alcohol-related harm (Bonnie et al, 2004).

RESULTS

A wide range of interventions have been implemented across the communities all of which have contributed to the overall success of YATA. A number of new initiatives have been tried and tested, two of which were particularly successful.

‘Should You Supply’

A community-based campaign designed to reduce levels of problematic drinking among under-18's by discouraging inappropriate supply of alcohol by adults. The campaign was originally run and evaluated in 2001 in two South Island districts (Ashburton and Waitaki) (Kypri et al, 2002).

The main indicators of the campaign's effectiveness were changes in the levels at which parents supplied their teenagers with alcohol for unsupervised drinking and levels of binge drinking among teenagers. The indicators were measured in Ashburton and Waitaki as well as Clutha (a demographically similar district where the campaign was not implemented). Baseline surveys were carried out in all three districts with samples of students and parents. Follow up surveys were conducted after the campaigns. Analysis of data indicated that parental supply of alcohol for unsupervised drinking decreased in Ashburton and Waitaki.

Results demonstrated that the campaign was modestly successful in achieving short-term reductions in the level of supply of alcohol for unsupervised drinking. As a result of this campaign resources were produced to assist YATA communities to launch this campaign in their own communities. The campaign has become well known as the ‘Think Before You Buy Under 18's Drink’ campaign and the campaign has since been run to varying degrees in almost all the YATA communities.

‘Controlled Purchase Operations’ (CPOs).

These are planned operations designed to monitor and enforce the provisions relating to the sale of liquor to minors in the SOLA. They involve supervised volunteers aged under 18 who attempt to purchase alcohol from licensed premises, particularly off licensed premises. Should a volunteer's purchase prove successful, the premises' operator, manager or licensee is liable to prosecution or other sanction via the Liquor Licensing Authority or District Court. In 2004 the ‘Controlled Purchase Operation Guidelines’ were produced to assist communities to implement this strategy (ALAC, 2004). Most of the YATA communities continue to conduct CPOs as part of their YATA strategies and many of these have led to prosecutions.

DISCUSSION

YATA has evolved into a formal programme as a result of a call for action from many communities. It provides a formal structure for those communities that have demonstrated a readiness to address issues of supply of alcohol to teens. The activities carried out are based on evidence and best practice, whilst allowing flexibility and opportunity to try new initiatives and ways of monitoring these. In consultation with key members of YATA communities a number of new resources have been developed to assist them with their interventions.

A formal external evaluation of the programme and its resources will be available in April 2006.

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