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Liquor Ads Taking Aim at Young Binge Drinkers

Binge drinking is an increasing concern in the United States. A recent report from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) finds that one in ten adult deaths is linked to binge drinking through illnesses the binge drinker contracts—such as hepatitis—or accidents that happen to the drinker or that he or she causes—including homicide and domestic abuse. The CDC defines binge drinking as five or more drinks in a row for males and four or more drinks in a row for females.

Binge drinking also remains a concern among young adults. A new report from the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) and the [Boston University School of Public Health](#) finds that liquor now trumps beer as the drink of choice for underage (ages 13 to 20) binge drinkers, likely because of increased marketing by alcohol companies.

“Spirit firms have taken a page from the beer playbook in their marketing to young people,” said David Jernigan, PhD, director of the [Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins](#) in a conversation with [NewPublicHealth](#).

The report on youth binge drinking was published in the *Journal of Substance Use* and found that spirits accounted for 43.8 percent of binge episodes, while beer accounted for less than one-third (31.4 percent) of binge episodes. “The inclusion of some relatively expensive brands in the top twenty-five binge brand list suggests that variables other than price are driving youth brand preferences with respect to binge drinking,” said Jernigan.

“Binge drinking accounts for most of the alcohol consumed by youth in the United States, and is associated with a host of negative consequences, including drunk driving, sexual assaults and suicide,” according to Timothy Naimi, MD, MPH, a lead author of the study and an associate professor at the Boston University School of Public Health.

“Identifying the types of alcohol and specific brands youth are choosing when they binge drink is important for the development of public health interventions designed to curtail this dangerous public health problem,” said Naimi.

The study also confirmed that binge drinking remains the predominant pattern of youth drinking in the country. Two thirds (67 percent) of all youth

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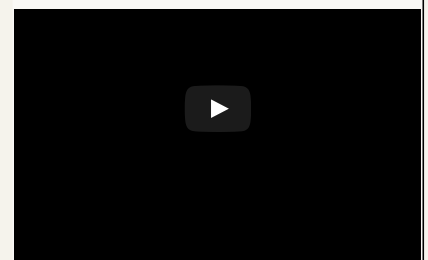
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drinks were consumed during binge drinking occasions, and more than half of youth drinkers reported binge drinking during the past 30 days.

Jernigan said that by starting alcohol consumption at a young age—often in high school or before—drinkers develop a tolerance for alcohol which is what fuels their binge drinking. “And in college they often adapt their lifestyle to accommodate the binge drinking, such as dropping Friday classes or switching to less rigorous majors,” he said.

Effective strategies to reduce binge drinking include:

- Interventions from peers, health providers and parents
- Reduced exposure to alcohol marketing
- Increased alcohol taxes
- Decreased availability

Many of these strategies are the very same ones that have been effective at preventing and reducing youth smoking, Jernigan points out. The perception of social norms when it comes to drinking also drives some much of the consumption, according to the researchers.

“Advertising of alcohol to young people creates a very harmful shadow peer group,” said Jernigan. “Young adults often think their peers drink more than they actually do, and feel the need to keep up with their perception of the level of drinking around them.”

Jernigan said that parents have a very important role to play in preventing underage and binge drinking by not supporting it when teens are young and by addressing the harms. “Young people whose parents were permissive about their drinking in high school are more likely to drink in college,” he said.

Jernigan pointed to a very effective—though underfunded—media campaign by the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), “[Talk. They Hear You.](#)” which gets \$1 million in funding by the government each year, while alcohol companies spend in excess of \$100 million on youth marketing.

Tags: [Alcohol](#), [Alcoholism](#), [Substance Abuse](#), [Substance use](#)

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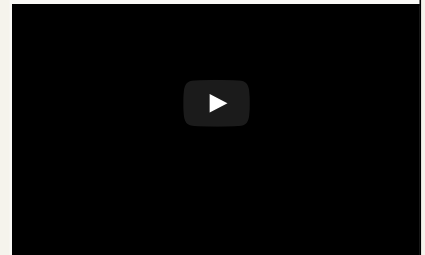
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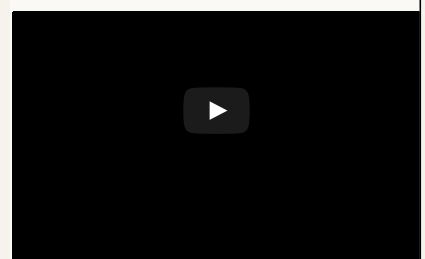
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