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Are alcohol ads really the way to stop Metro's skid?

By [Fredrick Kunkle](#) March 14



Stock photo: As Metro prepares to run ads for booze for the first time to help its bottom line, some warn that the biggest impact may be on young people. And that's not good.

You're not allowed to eat or drink in Metro, but soon you'll be able to fantasize about getting sloshed.

Of course, that's not the stated intent of the new [alcohol ads coming to Metro](#). The idea — approved late last year by the transit agency's governing board — is to raise money for the beleaguered transit system. But as we head into the one-day bender better known as St. Patrick's Day, it's worth noting that some health researchers warn that [alcohol advertising](#) can have an unintended and harmful impact on young people.

[\[How TV ads entice kids to overeat\]](#)

In a world awash in advertising — you'll probably see an ad for acai berries inside your coffin lid before you go — it's hard to imagine that any ads can have any impact at all. Ads for booze are no different than any of other form advertising: they take a product as ordinary as floor wax and transform it into something cool, sexy or fun — and kids, being kids, are perhaps more likely to believe the hype.

Studies show that the more young people are exposed to such ads, the more likely they are to start drinking, according to David Jernigan, an associate professor in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society and director of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health's Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. Or, if they're already drinking, the more likely they are to drink more, Jernigan said.

[Bud Lite ads hitch a ride with Metrobuses]

A 2003 report by the International Center for Alcohol Policy for the World Health Organisation found “no compelling evidence of an association between advertising and drinking patterns or rates of abuse among young people,” according to a study cited by two researchers at the School of Health and Social Care at Oxford University.

Yet those same researchers went on to conclude, after reviewing seven studies involving more than 13,000 young people, that there is “some evidence” for a link between alcohol advertising and young people’s drinking behavior. Those were longitudinal studies that attempt to track people over a period of time and control for a variety of outside influences.

An American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement issued in October 2010 said media, including movies, play a substantial role in shaping the attitudes and behavior of young people toward tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.

The Pediatrics policy paper, citing research by the Center on Alcohol Advertising in Berkeley, Ca., said 9- to 10-year-olds were able to identify Budweiser frogs almost as frequently as Bugs Bunny. The same white paper said a study of more than 3,500 South Dakota students found 75 percent of fourth-graders and nearly 90 percent of ninth-graders recognized the Budweiser ferret ad. Jernigan says one study found that for every alcohol ad a young person saw, he or she was likely to drink 1 percent more.

The thing is, Metro sometimes behaves like someone on a downward spiral. And it’s arguably part of a dysfunctional family – the compact between the federal government, Maryland, Virginia and the District— that demands a lot while starving the system for attention, especially financial attention.

As Metro’s woes mount – angry customers, ebbing ridership figures – its stress increases. And instead of receiving the help it needs (basically, a dedicated source of funding), the system resorts to the bottle. The payback is \$5 million a year. That’s cold comfort for a troubled system. And, as with others ruined by drink, it’s the kids who may end up paying the most.