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STUDY: U.S. NEEDS TO STOP TEEN DRINKING

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Sep. 9, 2003 5:04 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AP) _ Alcohol and youth make a dangerous combination, a \$53 billion problem that can lead to increased crime and traffic deaths and one the government, parents and industry need to solve, the Institute of Medicine said Tuesday.

The institute, a health policy advisory center affiliated with the National Academies, urged higher federal and state taxes on alcoholic beverages, tougher state drinking laws, better state identification cards and improved policies for detecting and stopping underage drinking parties.

As the report was being issued, the alcoholic beverage industry said it will increasingly target its advertising away from youth.

The Beer Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States said their members plan to limit advertising to media with 70 percent adult audiences.

The current standard is a majority adult audience _ over 50 percent _ and the Federal Trade Commission said Tuesday, in its own report, that the industry has improved to 99 percent compliance.

The FTC study was issued at the request of Congress because of the suspicion that newly popular flavored alcoholic melt beverages were being targeted at youth.

The FTC concluded that was not the case but noted that young legal drinkers and the underage tend to watch many of the same shows and read the same magazines.

Besides advertising, the FTC said national alcohol policy should deal with the ways underage drinkers obtain beverages they cannot legally drink.

Nonetheless, Jim O'Hara of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University said alcohol companies have to do more to keep their advertising from reaching children.

"There's still too much advertising in the magazines and on the television and radio programs that attract our kids," he said.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest welcomed the Institute of Medicine report as "a historic first step toward ending decades of complacency about one of the most damaging and widespread public health and safety threats facing society."

Alcohol use is deeply rooted in American society, the report observed, but underage drinking is a significant factor in traffic fatalities, suicide, violent crimes and academic failure.

Richard J. Bonnie, a professor at the University of Virginia and chairman of the institute's committee that prepared the analysis, said a major goal needs to be to persuade adults to avoid behavior that would encourage underage drinking.

The need is a "comprehensive program involving all sectors of society and a common acceptance of responsibility," he said.

The committee estimated the cost to American society of underage drinking at \$53 billion annually in losses stemming from crime, traffic crashes and other activities.

A 2002 study found that 72 percent of 12th graders and 39 percent of eighth graders reported having consumed alcohol in the previous year.

Federal and state excise taxes are potentially important tools for preventing and reducing underage drinking, the report suggests. The committee said that even small changes in these taxes can reduce drinking by youths, who tend to have limited incomes.

Bonnie said he expects opposition to higher taxes, but evidence shows that they have a significant impact on youth drinking.

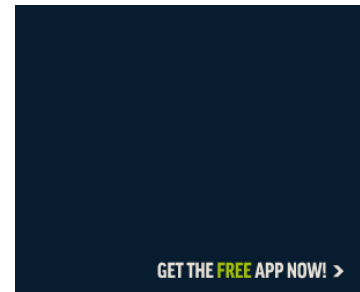
The suggestion drew prompt opposition from Jeff Becker, president of the Beer Institute, who charged that the report "relied on a compilation of existing information, much of which contained erroneous conclusions. ... Given this, we are not surprised to see misguided recommendations such as raising beer excise taxes."

State taxes vary, but federal alcohol taxes amount to \$2.14 per 750-ml bottle of 80 proof spirits, 33 cents per six-pack of beer and 21 cents per bottle of wine.

Among the report's recommendations:

- _Increase the frequency of compliance checks to make sure merchants follow minimum-age drinking laws.
- _Require sellers and servers of alcohol to complete state-approved training.
- _Have a federal requirement that states achieve specified rates of retailer compliance to qualify for federal funds.
- _Adopt regulations on Internet sales and home delivery of alcohol, in states that allow them, that require customers to verify their identity and age at the time of delivery.
- _Have the alcohol industry join public and private groups to create and finance a foundation that focuses on reducing underage drinking.

Establish in the entertainment industry rating systems and codes to make sure that young people are not exposed to unsuitable



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