
Law Officers' Views on Enforcement of the Minimum Drinking Age: a Four-State Study

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Synopsis

Qualitative data on enforcement of the minimum drinking age in the United States were obtained through indepth interviews with law enforcement officers in May and June 1992. Interviews were conducted with 37 supervisory and line law enforcement personnel in 15 city and county law enforcement agencies in four States. The selected agencies had varying levels of enforcement as measured by

arrest rates. Interviews focused on the social and political context of enforcement of the drinking age, constraints to enforcement, and officers' recommendations for improving enforcement efforts.

Officers generally perceive an acceptance of youth drinking by many segments of their communities, and they do not receive significant encouragement from community members to increase enforcement efforts. Political factors are thought to play some role in determining enforcement levels, especially in sheriffs' departments.

Reported constraints on enforcement of the minimum drinking age include resource limitations, a number of practical problems, perceptions that punishments are inadequate, time and effort required for processing and paperwork, and the low status accorded enforcement of the minimum drinking age. Officers report facing a number of evidentiary and procedural challenges. Officers suggested a number of ways in which enforcement of the minimum drinking age could be improved.

THE MINIMUM LEGAL DRINKING age of 21 in the United States is commonly seen as a highly successful public health measure. All States now have age-21 laws, and passage of "21" has been shown to reduce rates of youth drinking and morbidity and mortality from traffic crashes (1-3).

Although there is abundant evidence of the effects of age-21 laws on youth drinking and involvement in traffic crashes, relatively little is known about the mechanisms by which these effects are achieved. Conceptually, reductions in youth drinking associated with age-21 laws may be related to a variety of factors. Youth may choose not to drink, or to drink less often, because of perceptions of decreased social acceptability or increased risks from parental or legal authorities. Parents and legal authorities may, in fact, exert greater efforts to monitor and punish youth drinking. Similarly, older youth and adults may furnish alcoholic beverages to minors less frequently, and licensed alcohol outlets may sell to minors less frequently, because of their perceptions that it is

illegal, morally wrong, or because they might be caught. And law enforcement agencies may, in fact, devote greater effort to enforcing prohibitions against selling or providing to underage persons.

It is clear that law enforcement efforts can influence compliance with age-21 laws in a variety of ways—by signaling disapproval of providing alcohol to youth and youth drinking, by encouraging closer monitoring by parents, and by creating deterrents to the provision of alcohol to youth and to consumption of alcohol by youth.

Recently, considerable attention has been focused on enforcing the minimum drinking age. A number of sources suggest that such enforcement is not given high priority by many law enforcement agencies (4-6). Several recent studies have found that alcohol is readily available to youth from commercial sources in many communities (7-12). Finally, recent research shows that rates of enforcement of the legal drinking age vary enormously across States and counties (13).

In general, rates of enforcement are extremely low

relative to the incidence of underage drinking. An estimated 2 of every 1,000 occasions of illegal drinking by youth under 21 result in an arrest. When enforcement actions are taken, they are typically focused on individual young drinkers, rather than commercial outlets or private persons who may supply alcoholic beverages to youth. For every 1,000 arrests of a 16–20-year-old for underage possession of alcohol, only 130 outlets have any action taken against them, and only 88 adults 21 or older are arrested for furnishing alcohol to youth (13).

To understand better the social and political context of enforcement of the drinking age, constraints to enforcement, and officers' recommendations on how enforcement efforts can be improved, we conducted a series of indepth semi-structured interviews with 37 supervisory and line law enforcement personnel, in city and county law enforcement agencies, with varying objective levels of enforcement, in Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, and Oregon.

Background on Enforcement

All 50 States and the District of Columbia now have a minimum drinking age of 21. However, statutory language and procedures for enforcing the law vary considerably from State to State. States have laws that prohibit some or all of the following: possession by a minor, possession with intent to consume by a minor, consumption by a minor, misrepresentation of age by a minor, purchase by a minor, sale to a minor, and furnishing to a minor.

Complicating enforcement efforts is the fact that many States allow underage persons to obtain and possess alcohol in certain circumstances (4,14). Five States allow underage youth to possess alcohol if they do not intend to consume, and six States have no laws against minors attempting to or purchasing alcohol. Many States allow persons younger than 21 to possess and consume alcohol in private residences, private establishments, or when accompanied by a legal guardian 21 or older.

There are also significant differences across States in the definition of consumption by minors. Twenty-one States have no specific statutory language which prohibits the consumption of alcohol by minors, although possession of alcohol may be prohibited. Sixteen States have no statutory language explicitly prohibiting the deliberate misrepresentation of age by youth to obtain alcohol, and 19 States do not explicitly prohibit youth from using false identification to obtain alcohol.

Minimum drinking age laws are enforced by State administrative agencies (usually referred to as Alco-

holic Beverage Control or ABC agencies), police departments, and county sheriffs' departments. Given that ABC agencies have many liquor laws to enforce, limited enforcement staff, and no jurisdiction or authority to cite or arrest minors (4), the burden of enforcing the age-21 policy frequently falls to county or local law enforcement officers, and in this paper we focus on their efforts.

Methods

Interviews of police supervisors and officers were conducted in 15 law enforcement agencies in Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, and Oregon. As part of a larger study of drinking age enforcement (13,15), these four States were selected on the basis of the availability of detailed enforcement data for ABC agencies and county and local law enforcement agencies.

Several criteria were used to select agencies within the four States. First, for each State, one agency in each of the following four categories was selected:

- HI<21, HI>21: High arrest rates for liquor law violations both for those younger than 21 and those older than 21;
- HI<21, LO>21: high arrest rates for younger than 21, low arrests for older than 21;
- LO<21, HI>21: low arrest rates for younger than 21, high arrest rates for older than 21;
- LO<21, LO>21: low arrest rates for younger than 21 and for older than 21.

Uniform Crime Report data from 1988–90 were used to classify each agency into one of the four categories. Classification of an agency's arrest rates as high or low was considered within each State, rather than across States, since a high rate of arrests in one State would be considered average in another.

Second, each agency had to serve a population of at least 3,000 and no more than 60,000. Third, in large States, selected agencies had to be close enough to allow reasonable travel time for the interviewer. Fourth, the numbers of city and county agencies selected were roughly equivalent.

Four enforcement agencies in each of three States that satisfied these criteria were selected as candidates for interviews. For the fourth State, three agencies were selected since there were no agencies in the LO<21, HI>21 category. In total, 15 agencies were selected as candidates for indepth interviews.

A recruitment letter describing the study and requesting the agency's participation was sent to the chief or sheriff of each selected agency. Approx-

imately 1 week later, we contacted the agencies by telephone to again request permission to schedule and conduct interviews with department members. We requested an interview with the chief or sheriff of each agency, as well as interviews with one or two line officers per agency, particularly any officers with special training or experience in liquor law enforcement.

Of 15 candidate agencies, 12 agreed to participate. Three alternate agencies were recruited to replace those that did not agree to participate. The final list consisted of eight city police agencies and seven county sheriff agencies. On average, the county agencies served a population of 22,472, and the city agencies served a population of 9,927. Because neither States nor agencies within States were selected randomly, generalizations of the results to other States and localities must be made with caution.

Visits to agencies began approximately 2 weeks after the initial recruitment letter was mailed. Respondents were selected by the chief, sheriff, or highest ranking officer in each agency according to the guidelines specified in the recruitment letter. In all, 37 law enforcement officers from 15 agencies were interviewed in person, giving an average of 2.5 interviews per agency (see box). One researcher conducted all interviews during May and June 1992; the range of interviews per agency was one to four.

Interviews were conducted while the officer was alone with the interviewer; the single exception was an interview with two officers simultaneously. Most interviews were conducted in private offices or squad rooms, although one or more was held in dispatcher area, lunch room, shared office, and so forth, and one on-duty officer was interviewed in a squad car. Most officers were on duty at the time of their interviews.

Interview sessions usually lasted 40–45 minutes, with a range of 15 to 90 minutes. Several interview sessions were interrupted or terminated as subjects responded to calls. All interviews were tape-recorded.

An interview schedule was developed and pilot-tested before field implementation. The schedule consisted of two parts: a brief set of questions for the highest ranking officer concerning the agency's characteristics and a longer set concerning enforcement of the minimum drinking age for all interviewed officers. The questions covered the social and political context of drinking age enforcement, constraints on enforcement, and recommendations.

Interviews were semi-structured: items were sometimes read in different sequence, were modified slightly, or, in some cases, questions were omitted. If new information was offered that was not reflected in the interview instrument, the interviewer followed up

with additional prompts, pursuing new issues as they emerged.

Results

Results of the interviews are presented in three sections. The first section summarizes officers' accounts of the social and political context of underage drinking and enforcement of the minimum drinking age. The second section summarizes officers' understandings of the constraints faced in drinking age law enforcement. The third section presents officers' recommendations for improving enforcement of the minimum drinking age.

Social and political context.

Evaluation of the problem. Officers were asked to describe, in general, underage drinking in their communities and to compare its severity with that in neighboring communities. Most officers said that the problem was comparable to that in other area communities of similar size and population. Some officers pointed to distinctive characteristics of their jurisdiction that they felt caused the problem to be more severe, most often noting the presence of entertainment districts, parks, "main drags," and other popular gathering locations for area youth which draw underage drinkers to the area.

Overall, line officers' descriptions of underage drinking were more specific than supervisors' descriptions. Moreover, line officers in HI<21, HI>21 agencies tended to characterize underage use as a more serious problem than did supervisory officers in those agencies. This suggests that, in general, line officers may be more knowledgeable about the extent of the problem in their communities than their supervisors.

In general, officers reported that the incidence and severity of underage drinking in their communities have either remained the same or worsened over the past decade. Alcohol is perceived to be the drug of choice for youth in communities of the agencies surveyed. Some officers reported a slight decline in the incidence of underage alcohol-impaired driving in their communities, although underage use remains widespread. Many of them speculated that anti-drinking-driving messages are affecting youth, but messages about alcohol use are having very little effect.

Overwhelmingly, officers cited legal-age purchasers as the most frequent source of alcohol for underage drinkers. Legal-age friends and siblings were mentioned most often. Many subjects noted that

some adults were willing to purchase alcohol for underage drinkers at a profit. Some of these adults are well-known by underage buyers as reliable "connections"; officers reported that it was unlikely that an underage drinker will divulge his or her source when asked to do so.

In general, officers reported that the use of false identification by minors to purchase alcohol was rare, especially when compared with the frequency of adult (noncommercial) provision to minors. Use of false identification was described as unnecessary because of the ease of finding a willing adult provider. Many also remarked that false identification is especially ineffective in small communities because merchants typically know local residents well and will be aware of an underage person's attempt to purchase alcohol.

Perceptions of community attitudes. Officers reported that stopping alcohol use by youth is not a high community priority compared with other law enforcement activities. Most interviewees reported a certain degree of acceptance of underage drinking in the community. For example, one officer reported,

I think the gateway drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, whatever, are abused a lot more in this small community than cocaine or heroin. If you make a bust on LSD or heroin, the people really get upset [saying], 'My God, do we have that here?' Well, that's one time, and every day you have alcohol . . . but they don't get as shocked, it [doesn't] excite them that much. They have just as big or more of a problem there than they do with that one-time LSD that you turn up.

Few officers reported receiving pressure from persons or community groups outside the agency, such as school or citizen groups, to pay increased attention to enforcing laws against underage drinking. However, several interviewees did report receiving regular encouragement to enforce the minimum drinking age from the liquor control commission in their State.

Most officers were able to recall at least one fatality related to underage alcohol use in their community during their tenure in the agency. However, they overwhelmingly reported that such events had minimal (and usually very brief) effects on attitudes about underage drinking in the community.

Perceptions of the roles of community members. Officers indicated that many parents consider an underage alcohol violation a "lesser" crime, cer-

Rank of Police Officers and Supervisors in 15 Law Enforcement Agencies Interviewed in Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, and Oregon, 1992

City agencies	County agencies
Supervisory:	Supervisory:
Chief 6	Sheriff 5
Assistant chief 1	Chief 1
Lieutenant 2	Undersheriff 1
	Captain 1
Line:	Line:
Detective 1	Detective 1
Patrol officer 8	Deputy 10
Total 18	Total 19

tainly not as worrisome as violations involving illicit drugs. A number of officers reported that parents and other adults in their community viewed alcohol use as something of an understandable rite of passage for youth that does no real harm. Many reported hearing frequent pleas to "Go out and catch real criminals" or "Leave my kid alone, he was only drinking."

It was reported that some parents provide alcohol to their children and other minors, supervise its use, and order police officers off their property if they arrive on the scene. On the other hand, officers felt that most adults were concerned about the issue, particularly when a given adult's son or daughter was involved.

With a few exceptions, most officers reported satisfactory cooperation from owners and managers of alcoholic beverage outlets in enforcing the minimum drinking age. Several officers mentioned that some merchants are eager to cooperate with police agencies to the point of detaining an underage person attempting to buy alcohol until police are notified and can come to cite the person. Some officers reported that merchants with repeat liquor law violations had been fined, cited, or had liquor licenses suspended by the State alcoholic beverage commission. However, most of these actions resulted from offenses unrelated to the sale of alcohol to minors, such as frequent fights or assaults, sales of illegal drugs on the premises, or after-hour sales of alcoholic beverages. These actions were reportedly more often initiated by agents of the State alcoholic beverage commission than by local officers.

Most officers reported that their agencies conduct sporadic walk-throughs of bars and liquor stores. Some agencies do this at the request of the State

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ABC. Officers from several agencies reported conducting formal sting operations at bars and liquor stores at irregular intervals. Occasionally, agents of the State ABC handle or assist in these operations. Officers typically cited insufficient staffing or funding as reasons for not performing sting operations more frequently.

In several of the jurisdictions where officers were interviewed, persons younger than 21 are allowed to sell or serve alcohol in retail stores and bars. Officers reported that these clerks often experience considerable pressure to sell to their peers, and often they serve as a connection for their underage friends. In addition, in some of these jurisdictions persons younger than 21 may enter a bar. One officer noted that an officer must see physical evidence that an underage person is drinking in the bar before a citation can be issued, and when officers do arrive, the minors simply put their drinks down. When asked if any effort is being made to change the law, the subject thought it unlikely because ". . . the tavern owners in [the State] are very powerful."

In general, there seemed to be a relatively low level of joint activity by police and alcohol merchants with respect to drinking age enforcement. Most agencies did not engage in regular monitoring of local alcohol outlets, nor did officers seem to perceive the need for such.

Political environment. Officers were asked to describe the extent to which political factors constrained drinking age enforcement. Most reported that they received good support from political leaders and groups in their communities. Several noted that political factors play a part in decisions on law enforcement in general, including liquor law enforcement. For example, asked if political barriers existed to enforcing drinking age laws the way that he wanted, one officer replied, "Absolutely. There's political everything in this town . . . If Daddy is a doctor, then the child is going to get by with a lot more than if Daddy is a ditchdigger. I'm sure that's not only here, that's everywhere."

Some officers, especially nonsupervisory officers, reported that their agencies were sometimes criticized by the local business community or press for being too aggressive in efforts to enforce the drinking age. For example, one officer reported, "The business people here in this town—they've got a lot of clout. They're the ones that run the chamber of commerce and the city council. Politically, it [trying to increase liquor law enforcement efforts] would probably kill you." Political constraints on drinking age enforcement seemed most evident in agencies with elected heads (sheriff's departments).

Enforcement constraints.

Personnel. Officers in virtually every agency cited personnel shortages as an obstacle to enforcement of the legal drinking age. Officers in both rural and urban agencies reported that insufficient staffing often forced officers to give priority to other areas of law enforcement, resulting in relatively few citations and arrests for underage drinking.

For example, several agencies surveyed assign two officers per shift to cover the entire jurisdiction, which can be hundreds of square miles encompassing several cities and townships. On weekend nights, when most drinking by underage persons takes place, officers may learn of parties or gatherings involving underage drinking but are unable to respond because other calls (traffic crashes, assaults, and so on) are assigned higher priority. A party "bust" with subsequent arrests can occupy most or all of the on-duty force of a small agency for several hours, leaving officers unable to respond to other calls.

An officer from a rural agency reported,

. . . there is . . . and they [underage drinkers] know it . . . too many of them and not enough police officers. Not just here, but everywhere. They believe it is not a high priority for us. They're playing like a roulette . . . and more often than not, they believe they're gonna win. And I believe they do.

Officers from two agencies reported that their agencies received grants for alcohol-related enforcement (particularly driving under the influence [DUI]). During the grant periods, the number of citations and arrests rises significantly because the agency had one or two officers on the street during peak periods assigned exclusively to DUI enforcement. Administrators in these agencies were enthusiastic about having these officers devoted to DUI duty but pessimistic about the ability to sustain high levels of

enforcement once the grant ends. One agency head reported the recent loss of such funding and predicted that alcohol-related arrests (especially DUI) would drop to lower, pre-grant levels.

Juvenile detention facilities. A lack of juvenile detention facilities in some communities was reported to influence the level of enforcement of the minimum drinking age. In most jurisdictions represented in this study, it was reported that any juvenile detained by a police agency must be held in an area separate from adult detainees. In the absence of a separate juvenile detention facility, a juvenile detainee must be constantly supervised by a police officer until he or she is released to a parent or guardian. The process of locating and waiting for the arrival of a guardian can occupy an officer for hours.

Alternatively, a juvenile can be transported to the nearest juvenile detention facility with available space. Some officers reported frequent round-trips of 100 miles or more to take juveniles to detention facilities. One interviewee, whose agency had a detention facility, complained that his facility was often filled to capacity with juveniles from other communities and that offenders from his own jurisdiction could not be housed.

An officer from a rural agency without a detention facility reported,

If [agency] had a holding facility it would wake the juveniles up. Anybody over 18 we can take care of. Anybody under 18 realizes there's not much we can do to them, other than call their parents to come get them, or cite them and let them go on their way. There's no holding cell or anyplace they can be put in so they don't worry about that.

Identifying the source of confiscated alcohol. Usually at least one officer per agency knew of one or more alcohol merchants or other adults who regularly provided alcohol to youth. However, most officers reported that identifying the source of confiscated alcohol is usually impossible. When asked if his agency can identify the source, one officer replied,

One-hundred percent of the time no. Very rarely can you actually track it down. Because if they're under age and they're getting it, they're not going to tell you the truth . . . The majority of them will say they got it from home. We've got no way of proving any different.

'Officers reported that stopping alcohol use by youth is not a high community priority compared with other law enforcement activities.'

This was a typical response across all States and agency types.

Little monitoring of bars, liquor stores, or other establishments selling alcoholic beverages was reported. Aside from a few reports of sting operations, most agencies were not able to provide the investigative effort necessary to catch offenders in the act. Consequently, citations for providing alcohol to minors were rare in many of the agencies surveyed.

An officer from one agency reported close cooperation with the local court system in attempting to persuade underage violators to divulge the source of their alcohol by offering a "deal" that offenders may accept to avoid the full force of the law. Many officers, especially those from agencies covering smaller towns, said they know which persons do most of the providing but are typically unable or unwilling to cite these people, apparently because of the perceived difficulty of obtaining a conviction. Moreover, most agencies reportedly do not consider it cost-effective to conduct investigative efforts to identify adult providers of alcohol, despite the belief of most officers interviewed that youth most often obtain alcohol from legal-age adults.

Perceived ineffectiveness of the court system. Most officers were extremely skeptical of the court system's ability to mete out what they considered to be appropriate punishment to young alcohol offenders. Many officers reported that the penalties for drinking offenses are light and unevenly applied, resulting (in their view) in negligible deterrent effects.

Many officers were dismayed at what they perceived as judges' unwillingness to apply appropriate penalties. Officers frequently complained of courts assigning "slaps on the wrist" or light penalties. An officer from a suburban agency reported,

The problem comes with the court actually following through, and that's rare. Like so many other ordinances or crimes, the law is there, it clearly provides for punishment of some sort—fines and/or incarceration—but it's

rare that those people actually receive those sentences. The certainty that you'll actually get the penalty that it says it's possible for you to get is unlikely. I think we're lacking in the belief that there's a certainty of punishment.

An officer from a rural agency reported,

You might as well forget about charging a juvenile with anything short of murder. It just doesn't work. The juvenile system in [this State] does not work. And the juveniles know that . . . You have to take a juvenile [to court] 20 or 30 times before they'll give him a 6-month probated sentence. You keep taking him over there and they keep letting him go, pretty soon he has no respect for any kind of law enforcement . . . I'd like to see a complete overhaul of the juvenile system.

For many officers, the perception that punishment is insufficiently certain and severe appears to lead to a sense that their enforcement efforts in this area amount to a waste of time. Several reported that repeat offenders become more defiant with each citation or arrest. A number of officers said they deliberately avoid making underage drinking citations or arrests because they are convinced that it will result in little or no punishment.

Processing and paperwork. Some officers complained of the large volume of paperwork sometimes associated with juvenile offenses, which is especially frustrating to them when combined with the perceived ineffectiveness of the court system. One supervisory officer said that his officers " . . . dislike dealing with juveniles altogether. There's tons of paperwork. They have to treat them with kid gloves. And then [the courts] pat them on the hand and they go out the next night and do the same thing."

The processing of drinking age violations, especially possession violations, often is considered a mundane task for arresting officers. This, combined with the aforementioned perception of ineffective court-administered punishment, seems to discourage some officers from issuing citations or making arrests, particularly in cases of possession or borderline intoxication.

On the other hand, procedural requirements do not seem to impede citations or arrests in DUI cases, despite the fact that the arrest process for DUI typically consists of several field sobriety tests and many hours of supervision and processing. Several officers stated that, in contrast to drinking age

violations, DUI involving a minor presents a clear danger to the minor and others. Most officers expressed a strong desire to keep DUI offenders of all ages off the road.

Low status of enforcement of the drinking age. Citations or arrests for providing to minors or possession or consumption by minors do not seem to bring much favorable publicity to the law enforcement agencies surveyed. Police actions targeting illicit drugs seem to garner much more attention and acclaim from community groups and persons, including the local press. One officer suggested that liquor-related citations and arrests are low-status activities for law enforcement officers, reporting, "Drug busts bring glory, DUI arrests do not."

Dissatisfaction with existing law. In some agencies surveyed, State law allows officers to treat consumption of alcohol as possession, meaning that if an officer can smell alcohol on a minor's breath, he can cite him or her for possessing alcohol. Officers in jurisdictions where that is not the case must see actual physical evidence of alcohol possession before a minor can be cited. Officers reported that this is especially problematic at large parties where underage drinkers drop their alcoholic beverages as police arrive on the scene. Officers who were able to cite minors for "possession by consumption" were very enthusiastic about this law and reported it was much easier to process a citation this way.

Many officers reported frustration with existing case and statutory law concerning possession of alcohol. A number of officers felt that the courts place an unreasonable burden of proof upon an arresting officer to provide physical evidence of alcohol consumption. For example, one officer reported that underage drinkers in his jurisdiction will often transfer alcoholic beverages from their original containers into plain, plastic containers or "squeeze bottles." Despite his suspicion that these containers are used to conceal alcohol, he is reluctant to inspect the bottles because that suspicion may not meet the court's standard for probable cause.

Another officer reported that defense attorneys in alcohol-related arrests of underage persons sometimes demand laboratory tests on samples of confiscated beverages with the knowledge that these tests are costly, and lack of such tests will often result in dismissal of the case.

Discretionary enforcement. Officers commonly reported that they are forced to make judgement calls at the scene of underage drinking violations. For the

reasons cited previously (personnel shortages, lack of a holding facility), officers feel they cannot issue citations or make arrests every time they witness a violation of underage drinking laws. Officers must decide on a case-by-case basis whether a violator will be arrested or not. In cases involving large parties or gatherings of underage drinkers, few youth, if any, are typically cited for underage drinking. Respondents offered a number of examples of situations in which officers would often decide not to cite underage drinkers.

1. The officer is satisfied that the offender's parents or guardian, once notified, will handle the matter more effectively than the court system.

2. The offender shows enough fear or remorse at the time of being caught or questioned that the officer feels an appropriate lesson was learned and further punishment is unnecessary.

3. The officer does not have the time to complete a citation or arrest because of other calls away from the scene that are assigned higher priority.

4. The officer performs other tasks at the scene that take priority over citations. For example, several officers reported that the most important thing to do at a keg party is to confiscate or dispose of the alcohol before any more can be consumed. Officers arriving at the scene of such a party will often move first to find and confiscate the alcohol, during which time most underage drinkers flee the scene or discard their drinks.

Most officers reported that party "busts" are considered routine and are not threatening to underage drinkers or adult providers at the scene. Officers believe that underage drinkers are aware that citations are rarely issued at a "busted" party, and that youth are not deterred by the potential consequences of taking part in such a party.

Agency-wide consensus for underage drinking policies is rare, given the discretion used by individual officers. In agencies where more than one officer was interviewed, officers often differed substantially in their evaluations of the severity of the problem and best approaches to enforcement. Moreover, line officers rarely reported encouragement from supervisors to increase underage drinking enforcement. It seems clear that an officer at the scene of an underage drinking violation typically has considerable latitude to cite or dismiss the person based upon the officer's evaluation of the seriousness of the offense, the time and effort involved in shepherding the case through the judicial system, and the certainty and severity of the penalty.

'Given the real constraints to drinking age enforcement described in this paper, it seems unlikely that enforcement directed at youth could reach a high enough level to constitute a credible deterrent. On the other hand, enforcement aimed at suppliers seems a more promising approach.'

Officers' policy recommendations.

Relative emphasis of enforcement efforts directed at youth, merchants, and other adults. Officers were asked whether they thought it would be more effective to target youth, merchants, or other adults to enforce the drinking age. Most suggested that a combination of these approaches would be most effective. However, most interviewees were pessimistic about the viability of targeting merchants, citing the personnel costs required for surveillance and investigation. Most respondents perceived that in a majority of cases, alcohol obtained by underage drinkers is initially purchased legally by an adult and then provided to the minor. Moreover, adult-to-minor transactions are reportedly very difficult to locate without a major investigative effort. Most supervisory officers stated that this is rarely viewed as cost-effective or justifiable.

Sanctions against merchants. Many officers supported increased penalties for merchants who violate the law. One officer said,

I'll tell you the biggest thing, if you want to control [illegal sales]. If you take their license away for a while and just completely shut them off from sales, that hurts them worse than anything you can do to them. You can say I'll fine you \$500 or whatever, but if you take the license away and say you cannot sell . . . that controls it. But you need a pretty strong court system to do that in a community like this.

This officer considered the local court system to be weak and very susceptible to political pressure, largely opposed to sanctions against merchants.

Expanded sentencing options for youth. Most officers thought fines were not a particularly effective

punishment for youth. However, there was strong support for community-service penalties for underage drinking violators. Such penalties are reportedly used in the jurisdictions of a number of agencies. Typically, such penalties include tasks like collecting trash from public grounds or streets, cleaning public buildings, or doing lawn maintenance. Reports concerning the effectiveness of such penalties were mixed.

Several officers suggested that community-service penalties should be connected to alcohol, such as working in a detoxification center or working with crash victims in a hospital or physical therapy center. Many officers noted that youth seemed to think they were immune to alcohol-related injuries, and that these sorts of penalties could help convey the risks of drinking and of drinking and driving. An officer serving a rural area reported, "I believe fines are normally paid by parents. I think a good [penalty] would be some kind of community service work in an alcohol abuse situation . . . to see the outcomes, firsthand, of what happens to people who do drink."

Several officers suggested that publicly identifying underage violators might be an effective penalty. Suggestions included the publication of offenders' names in newspapers, on bumper stickers, or in other ways. Overall, there was a great deal of support for alternative penalties for underage drinkers. However, officers perceived little public support for these sentencing options.

Some of the States where surveyed agencies are located have laws that deny driver's license privileges for youth convicted of a drug or alcohol offense. This law was very popular among officers in areas where it is in force. For example, one such law calls for suspension of driver's license privileges following a first offense for any youth drug or alcohol conviction. Most in favor of this idea felt that, from the perspective of youth, driver's license denial is a far greater penalty than jail, fines, or community service. Some officers felt the law was not being applied by the courts to the extent that it should be. Officers reported that the penalty is seen by some in their communities as very harsh, and consequently the courts are hesitant to apply it.

Beer keg labeling. Off-sale alcohol outlets in the jurisdictions of several participating agencies are required by local ordinance to log the purchasers of beer kegs by means of a label attached to each individual keg. This requirement is meant to aid police in tracing the source of confiscated alcohol and in identifying persons involved in providing alcohol to youth. Officers reported occasional use of this

technique. Problems with label removal were reported. Several officers thought that the law resulted in a reduction in keg use, but that it was offset by an increase in use of other containers (for example, cans and party balls that are more difficult to trace).

Education. Many officers said that enforcement must be combined with educational efforts to reduce underage drinking. There was widespread and enthusiastic support for the DARE Program among officers in agencies that participated in the program, and a desire to implement the program in some agencies where it was not in place. In addition, some officers advocated a cooperative effort between schools and police agencies to educate youth about alcohol.

Penalties for parents. Many officers recommended that parents become more aware of their children's behavior. Officers suggested greater responsibility and liability for parents of repeat underage drinking violators. One suggested that parents be held legally responsible for actions of juveniles after the first offense.

Another officer reported that his agency sometimes requires that parents be called to the scene of the violation to view the situation firsthand; it eliminates the need to detain juveniles at a police facility and also inconveniences parents. Many officers said that parents will often disbelieve descriptions of drinking situations when they come to pick their children up at the police station. Forcing parents to view the scene of a keg party or "garbage cans full of empty beer cans" helps in getting them to understand the gravity of the situation, according to this officer.

Discussion

Police officers have direct contact with virtually all of the principal players in underage alcohol-related offenses: youth, parents, schools, alcohol merchants, and the court system. Thus, officers have a unique vantage point on underage drinking, enforcement of the minimum drinking age, and the social and political contexts of youth drinking.

Police officers seem very aware of the extent of underage alcohol use in their communities. This awareness seems to be particularly true of line officers, especially those who are often involved in alcohol-related enforcement efforts.

Officers perceive an acceptance of youth drinking by many in their communities. They do not receive significant encouragement from community members to increase enforcement efforts. According to the

officers interviewed, many parents are concerned about underage drinking; however, a significant number consider it to be a relatively minor offense and will sometimes object to enforcement efforts involving their children.

Bar and liquor store owners are generally cooperative, although police and merchants seldom join in cooperative efforts to enforce the drinking age. Political factors are thought to play some role in determining enforcement levels. In particular, political constraints were reported by officers in sheriffs' departments, which have publicly elected heads.

A number of constraints on enforcement of the minimum drinking age were reported. These include resource limitations, such as personnel shortages and lack of nearby juvenile detention facilities. They also include practical problems, such as the difficulty of identifying the source of alcohol in the possession of youth. The perception that punishments handed out by the courts are inadequate also seems to discourage vigorous enforcement of the minimum drinking age. Time and effort required for processing and paperwork involved in arrests for underage drinking also make these enforcement efforts relatively unattractive for many officers. The low status of enforcement of the minimum drinking age appears to have a similar effect.

Officers reported facing evidentiary challenges, such as proving possession, and procedural challenges, such as lacking probable cause to search "squeeze bottles." Finally, discretionary enforcement of the drinking age is also an important concern. It is clear that many factors affect the exercise of this discretion. An apparent lack of consistent department-wide policies seems to contribute to the high level of variability in line officers' actions.

Officers had many suggestions on how to improve enforcement of the minimum drinking age. Although there was agreement in principle that enforcement efforts aimed at merchants and other adults make some sense, officers were pessimistic because of costs and other difficulties associated with such efforts. There was strong support for increasing the severity of sanctions against merchants, which could include suspension or revocation of licenses. There was also strong support for increasing the sentencing options for youth, such as community service and denying driver's license privileges. Beer keg labeling, working with the schools, and penalties for parents and guardians were also recommended by some officers.

In summary, officers perceive a number of factors that often work to discourage vigorous and consistent enforcement of the minimum drinking age: a lack of

community consensus in favor of strong enforcement efforts; a variety of constraints related to resources, practical concerns, and legal issues; and significant discretion in making enforcement decisions.

Finally, it is important to note the limitations of the sample of law enforcement agencies used in this study. As explained earlier, the sample is purposive and is limited to communities with populations between 3,000 and 60,000 in four States. Most noteworthy is the exclusion of large urban areas, which might be expected to show even lower levels of drinking age enforcement than the small to medium-sized communities represented in this study (15).

Conclusion

The findings from interviews with law enforcement officers in four States suggest that efforts to increase levels of drinking age enforcement face significant obstacles. This being the case, it is useful to encourage thought and discussion about the rationale for increasing levels of enforcement. If the purpose is to create a meaningful deterrent to youth drinking, it seems likely that efforts to increase enforcement levels will not have the intended result.

Enforcement actions are very low relative to the incidence of youth drinking. Given the real constraints to drinking age enforcement described in this paper, it seems unlikely that enforcement directed at youth could reach a high enough level to constitute a credible deterrent. On the other hand, enforcement aimed at suppliers seems a more promising approach.

As detailed in this paper, such an approach faces its own set of obstacles. Nevertheless, suppliers—especially commercial suppliers—are smaller in numbers than youth drinkers and reasonably efficient techniques exist to pursue this type of law enforcement (such as "stings"). Enforcement aimed at noncommercial sources of alcohol, such as legal-age friends, acquaintances, and strangers faces greater challenges. In the future, research and policy should begin to focus on these sources of supply as well as youth drinking and commercial provision of alcohol to minors.

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