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Doubly illegal: Qualitative accounts of underage alcohol access through theft

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Abstract

This study investigated sources of alcohol for underage drinkers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were individually conducted with 47 youths, ages 15–18, who reported drinking within the last 12 months, to explore alcohol access. Theft was one method that some youths reported using to obtain alcohol. In addition to 9% of respondents who reported stealing alcohol from commercial outlets themselves, a total of 26% respondents reported occasions when their close friends stole alcohol. Our findings unveiled that teens had a body of knowledge that some drew upon for stealing alcohol. Youths revealed detailed knowledge about store layout, theft protection devices and store policies. In particular, respondents disclosed knowledge about which aisles have blind spots, how to remove security tops on bottles, and no-chase policies. Theft of alcohol from commercial sources may be reduced by examining the weaknesses of existing theft prevention practices, and revising store policies.

Keywords

youth; alcohol; alcohol access; theft

Introduction and purpose

Even though provision of alcohol to people under the age of 21 is strictly limited by US law, youths find ways to access alcohol. When alcohol is readily available, consumption and associated problems tend to increase (Babor, Caetano, Casswell, et al., 2010). Adolescents are able to obtain alcohol through a number of social and commercial sources. Survey studies indicate that a minority of youths obtain alcohol through theft from a store (Harrison, Fulkerson & Park, 2000). However, studies about consumer behavior have found adolescent shoplifting to be common with 40% of apprehended shoplifters being adolescents (Baumer & Rosenbaum, 1984). Moreover, a large majority of shoplifters tend to be amateurs with no known criminal background (Baumer & Rosenbaum, 1984). One study suggests that dishonesty can occur when circumstances are right, such as temptation, ability to rationalize, and perceived low risk of apprehension and punishment (Nettler, 1989). Very little is known about the circumstance under which youths steal alcohol from stores or how they decide which stores to target, and how that decision is shaped by their knowledge of store policies and procedures. These issues are addressed in the present study using qualitative data from a sample of young drinkers. With limited research indicating how youths access alcohol from commercial sources by shoplifting, these findings provide more insight as to how alcohol is

being accessed illegally by some youths. Ultimately, youths who are caught stealing alcohol from commercial outlets are at risk of facing the consequences for petty theft and being a minor in possession of alcohol.

Methods

Design

Youths, ages 15 to 18, were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The initial list of potential respondents for this qualitative study was generated from participants in Wave 1 of the 50 California Communities Youth Survey (CCYS), a longitudinal telephone survey of teenage drinking and smoking behaviors and beliefs in 50 mid-sized California cities (Lipperman-Kreda, Grube, & Friend, in press; Paschall, Grube & Thomas, 2011).

Sample and Procedures

Youths who reported on the CCYS that they had consumed alcohol on at least four occasions in the past 12 months were recruited for this qualitative study. Research staff contacted potential respondents by phone. The sample was limited to respondents who resided within 150 miles of the San Francisco Bay Area, California, and stratified based on gender to have an equal proportion of males and females. In-depth interviews were conducted in the homes of youth respondents. Prior to the interviews, parental consent and youth assent were obtained using protocols approved by the IRB of the first author's affiliation. The sample consisted of 47 youths (25 males and 22 females). The response rate was 78%. Trained interviewers used a critical incident approach, where respondents were asked to provide detailed information about their last drinking occasion, including how they obtained alcohol, and how and why this source of alcohol was selected.

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2009). The transcripts were first coded for *a priori* themes created in conjunction with the interview guide. These broad themes included the sources of alcohol, how alcohol was acquired, and where and with whom it was consumed. One team member coded the transcripts for these themes, and every fifth transcript was double coded by another team member for reliability testing. Discrepant codes were resolved through discussion. Data were analyzed using pile sorts, in which, four researchers grouped printouts of coded segments for thematic similarity, then wrote descriptions of how the groupings were related. This process required discussion and consensus on resulting clusters of coded transcript segments. Brief quotations illustrate the prominent and recurring themes we identified.

Results

Stealing alcohol was discussed by some youths when asked how they obtained alcohol. Youths who had no social sources through which to access alcohol said that it was a potential way to access alcohol. One 17 year old boy said, "*You have two options if you're underage. You either stay outside, try to have somebody get it for you or you can just take the alcohol.*" In youths' descriptions of theft, three recurring areas of knowledge that facilitated theft were identified: characteristics of large commercial outlets such as inattentive cashiers and blind spots (i.e., aisles without security cameras), the ineffectiveness of theft prevention devices, and no-chase policy.

Characteristics of commercial outlets

Large commercial outlets such as grocery stores were the primary targets for theft. Youths perceived them to be easier targets than smaller outlets, such as convenience stores, because

cashiers are busy and may not pay close attention to youths in the alcohol aisle. As one 17 year old female described: *“in a liquor store the cashier’s gonna be watching you and in a big supermarket it’s more open. [...] it’s just some open place and there’s no one around, you can just steal it more easily than in a small business.”*

Youths also reported knowing the layout of large commercial stores, in particular the locations of security cameras and blind spots. Youths used blind spots to slip a bottle of alcohol into a pocket or backpack unnoticed. A 17 year old boy discussed how he and his friend strategized: *“We had a whole system. As it turns out, the only aisle in every store that doesn’t have security cameras is the pet food aisle. So my friend looks really old, and I’d have the backpack. He’d go and he’d grab the handle [1.75 liter liquor bottle], walk into the pet food aisle, put it into my backpack and we’d walk out.”*

Alcohol theft prevention devices

Anti-theft devices such as bottle security caps are designed to prevent theft of alcohol without having to lock it up. These caps contain sensors that set off an alarm if the security checkpoint at the store exit is passed. The security caps were perceived as easy to remove. A 16 year old girl explained: *“...there’s like these black things on the top. [...] usually you can hit them on the ground and it will come off really easily. Last weekend when I got the bottle of Jack Daniels, I brought it out of the store, and I barely touched it and it popped right off.”* Information on how to remove security tops was shared among peers. One 16 year old boy said this about removing security caps from bottles: *“If you successfully do a trick that has a good rate of success then everyone’s gonna know. Then they’re ‘Oh, all you’ve gotta do is do this and this.’”*

No-chase policy

A no-chase policy prohibits store employees from chasing or apprehending a shoplifter. Store employees can potentially be terminated for violating this policy. Youths indicated that they know which stores have a no-chase policy and that such policies prohibit a store clerk from approaching or accusing a customer of stealing. A 16 year old girl explained how the policy works:

“[T]hey have a no-chase policy, I think that’s why people go there, because at other stores in town there are a couple that do, they are allowed to follow you out, but at [name of store] they are not allowed to even touch you, even if they grab your shoulder, you could sue them. They aren’t allowed to touch you and they’re not allowed to chase you out of the store. So once you make it out the door, you’re good.”

An 18 year old male who worked for a grocery store discussed an encounter when he caught other youths in the act of stealing alcohol. Because of store policy, he was unable to stop them from stealing, but could have alerted store management:

“They’re standing right by the double doors with their purses open putting something in. I just stopped and I’m like, ‘Really? Right in front of me? They’re like, ‘What? I was just looking for something in my bag.’ I’m like, ‘Get out.’ And they’re like, ‘Says who?’ I’m like, ‘Me. Get out.’ But I just kept walking. I don’t know if they left, or if they actually stole it because legally I’m not really supposed to do anything about it. I can’t chase people. The most I can do is tell management.”

Because of the perceived low risk of getting caught, some youths stole repeatedly from larger commercial outlets. A story of an overly confident friend who abused the no-chase policy was told by a 16 year old girl: *“...the grocery store down the street has the no-chase-*

policy, [...], so he [friend] decided it would be a good idea to go in there and just take some beer and walk out. And he actually did it successfully two or three times.” Although the respondent’s friend succeeded in stealing alcohol from this store several times, when he attempted to walk out of the store with a case of beer, he was stopped by police, after having his license plate recorded by the store manager.

Discussion

The accounts from this study demonstrate that youths have detailed knowledge about how to steal from commercial outlets. Overall, these findings illustrate how security measures designed to decrease theft, have failed to deter some youths who have learned to circumvent theft prevention efforts. Furthermore, store policies may have unintentionally made it easier for underage drinkers to steal.

Limitations

Youths interviewed are not a representative sample; therefore, their experiences may not represent those of youths in general. Moreover, because this is a qualitative study, it is unclear how pervasive the methods used by youths in our sample are in the general population. Answering this question would require a quantitative study with a representative sample. In spite of these limitations, these important findings highlight some of the weaknesses of current theft prevention strategies employed by retailers. In general, a continued effort to raise awareness about how youths obtain alcohol is needed to inform preventative measures designed to limit access.

Research has shown that underage frequent drinkers were more likely to use commercial sources to obtain alcohol than were infrequent drinkers (Harrison, Fulkerson & Park, 2000). Thus, limiting access is important because reduced access has been linked with reduced consumption (Dent, Grube & Biglan 2005). The *We Don’t Serve Teens*, a national campaign by the Federal Trade Commission to prevent underage drinking emphasizes the essential role retailers can play in reducing teen access to alcohol (2011). Recommendations for reducing underage theft include using theft deterrent devices and having an open floor plan which allows store management and staff to better monitor their stock of alcohol.

The findings of this study suggest that proprietors of commercial outlets should reevaluate the efficacy of their security measures and the possible implications of their store policies in order to implement effective strategies that limit underage access to alcohol. Locked case displays and alert store clerks may be needed to reduce access theft of alcohol.

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Figure 1.
Alcohol Theft Prevention Devices
Theft deterrents such as bottle security caps help prevent theft of alcohol from commercial sources.