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Youth Acquisition of Alcohol and Drinking Contexts: An In-Depth Look

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Abstract

Despite efforts to limit underage access to alcohol, alcohol availability remains a challenge for youth drinking prevention. This paper fills a gap in our understanding of alcohol consumption among youths by systematically investigating how and under what circumstances they obtain alcohol and the context within which they consume it. Qualitative interviews (n=47) were conducted with teens to collect information about where and how they obtain alcohol and the contexts within which they drink. Respondents were knowledgeable about commercial and social sources and used this knowledge in their decision making regarding where to obtain alcohol. Teens used their social relationships to circumvent existing policies designed to limit underage access to alcohol. Findings indicate that the majority of teens' drinking occasions occur in their own or someone else's home.

Alcohol is the most commonly used and abused drug by youths in the U.S.. Although rates of alcohol use by teens have fallen dramatically since the 1980's, consumption remains relatively high. Data from the 2013 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey indicate that 62% of high school seniors report drinking in the past year, and 40% report doing so in the past 30 days (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014). The consumption patterns of young drinkers are particularly problematic with 22% of high school seniors reporting heavy episodic drinking (five or more drinks in a row) during the previous two weeks and 26% reporting having been drunk at least once in the past month.

This study is based on availability theory which states that the greater availability of alcohol in a society, the higher the average alcohol consumption (Single, 1988). There is substantial evidence that availability and easy access are related to greater consumption of alcohol and to alcohol-related problems (Dent, Grube, & Biglan, 2005; Paschall, Grube, Black, & Ringwalt, 2007b). Therefore, restricting access to alcohol is a widely advocated policy approach to reducing underage drinking (e.g., Grube, 2010; Saltz, Grube, & Treno, in press; Toomey & Wagenaar, 1999). Relevant policies include enforcement of underage sales laws, reduction of outlet densities, and restrictions on hours and places of sale. The primary purpose of such access policies is to increase the "full price" of alcohol to youths, including

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the opportunity costs to obtain alcohol and the potential costs to adults for selling or supplying alcohol to youths (Grube, 2007, 2010; Grube & Nygaard, 2005). There is evidence that restrictions on the physical availability of alcohol to young people can substantially reduce drinking-related problems for this age group. For example, increasing the minimum drinking age in the U.S. to 21 significantly decreased alcohol-related traffic crashes, arrests for driving under the influence (DUI), and self-reported drinking among adolescents and young adults (e.g., Fell, Fisher, Voas, Blackman, & Tippetts, 2008; Lovenheim & Slemrod, 2010; McCartt, Hellinga, & Kirley, 2010).

We have some understanding of where teens obtain alcohol. Large scale surveys such as the 2005 Oregon Healthy Teens Survey (OHT) ask about the frequency of youths obtaining alcohol from commercial sources (grocery stores, convenience stores, gas stations, liquor store, bar/night club/restaurant), and social sources (friends 21 or older, friends under 21, home without permission, a parent, a brother or sister, the internet, a stranger, or a party). Data indicate that 25% of 11^{th} grade drinkers and 16% of 8^{th} grade drinkers obtained alcohol from at least one commercial source in the past 30 days (Paschall et al., 2007b). An even larger percentage of alcohol is obtained from social sources, such as friends under the age of 21, friends over the age of 21, and parties. Eighty-seven percent of 11^{th} grade drinkers and 81% of 8^{th} grade drinkers obtained alcohol from at least one social source (Paschall et al., 2007a).

Individual characteristics have been shown to play a role in where teens access alcohol. For example, younger and older adolescents usually obtain alcohol from different sources and drink in different contexts. Parties, friends, and adult purchasers are the most frequent sources for older adolescents (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Park, 2000; Schwartz, Farrow, Banks, & Giesel, 1998; Wagenaar et al., 1996; Williams & Mulhall, 2005). Commercial sources are less important than social sources for adolescents overall, but become more important with age (Wagenaar et al., 1996). Family sources are more important for younger adolescents and become less important with age (Wagenaar et al., 1996). Older adolescents are less likely than younger adolescents to drink at home or in the presence of parents or other adults (Mayer, Forster, Murray, & Wagenaar, 1998). There is some evidence that there are differences in access to alcohol based on race/ethnicity. A study conducted in Wisconsin found that teens accessed alcohol primarily through social sources, but that the specific social sources differed by race (Friese & Grube, 2008). Native American teens were more likely to have gotten alcohol from an adult or from someone under 21 than White teens who were more likely to have obtained alcohol from their own parents. Teens, however, did not differ in access to alcohol from other social sources.

Studies have shown that youths change their strategies for obtaining alcohol as needed. For example, when commercial sources of alcohol are restricted, adolescents may switch to social sources or use a larger number of alternative sources (Paschall et al., 2006; Dent et al., 2005). Though there have been efforts to limit access through social sources (e.g., social host laws, shoulder-tap operations, party patrols), limiting access to alcohol from social sources has been described as one of the most significant challenges for youth drinking prevention (Holder, 2004). This paper fills a gap in our understanding by systematically investigating how and under what circumstances teens obtain alcohol and the context within

which they consume it. This study enhances our understanding by providing details about youth access to alcohol that can increase our understanding of precisely how teens access alcohol in different contexts and thus guide prevention efforts focused on reducing availability of alcohol to teens.

Methods

Teens, ages 15 to 18, were recruited to participate in qualitative semi-structured interviews. The initial list of potential respondents was generated from participants in Wave 1 of a longitudinal computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) survey of teens in 50 California cities selected to be geographically representative of medium sized cities in that state. The survey study from which the participants were selected focused on residents in mid-sized cities with populations between 50,000 and 500,000. Youths who had reported drinking alcohol on at least four occasions in the past 12 months were selected for recruitment into the qualitative study. The geographic distribution of the sample was limited to respondents residing within 150 miles of the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California, and the sample was stratified based on sex.

Recruitment included sending a letter to the parents of the selected teens informing them about the qualitative study and letting them know that they and their teen would be contacted and invited to participate in an interview about alcohol and drugs. Within one week of sending the letter, parents were contacted by telephone and asked for their permission to conduct a one-hour in-person interview with their son or daughter. Verbal consent from parents was obtained prior to speaking with the teen. Then the teen was asked about their interest in participating in the study, and if interested, the teen provided verbal assent. Teens were paid $50 for their participation. The interviews took place in the teens' homes. Prior to the interview, a parent/legal guardian was asked to sign a consent form and the teen was asked to sign an assent form to participate. The interviewers followed an interview guide to direct the questioning, and used probes to elicit richer responses. The interviews lasted about an hour and were digitally recorded. Institutional review board approval for this research was obtained from the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.

In total, 47 youths took part in the study out of 60 youths who were contacted (response rate: 78%). The sample consisted of 25 males and 22 females, the slight disproportion explained by a shortage of potential female respondents that fit the recruitment criteria. Several differences exist between those who participated versus those who refused. Those who refused were more likely to be White than those who participated (88% vs. 73%). The teens who refused were more likely to be male (77% vs. 53%), and more likely to have a parent with a college degree or higher (77% vs. 65%). However, participants and non-participants did not differ significantly in their drinking behavior, with teens who were interviewed reporting drinking on 15.5 days in the past 12 months compared to 13.5 days for those who refused.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as method of data collection because they provide the flexibility of open-ended questions, as well as allow the researcher to focus on a

narrowly defined topic. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews were chosen over focus groups because the interviews dealt with sensitive topics which would not lend themselves to a group setting.

Interviews were conducted by four trained interviewers (2 male and 2 female), though one male interviewer conducted most of the interviews. All interviewers had at least a Master's degree in a qualitative research field. Interviewers participated in an all-day training to introduce them to the study methodology, research questions, and techniques used to discuss sensitive issues with youths. In addition, interviewers completed human subjects training. In order to pilot-test the interview protocol, each interviewer conducted one interview. After the initial interviews were completed, researchers reconvened to discuss whether the questions or probes worked. Minor changes to the order of the questions were made in order to improve the flow of the interview.

Using a critical incident approach during the interviews, youths were asked to describe the last instance that they had acquired and used alcohol, including where and with whom they had consumed the alcohol. If the methods of acquisition described in these instances were not the most common way the youths were getting alcohol, they were asked to talk about occasions that were illustrative of the most common methods they used. Lastly teens were also asked about recent experiences with obtaining and drinking alcohol, and if some sources of alcohol were more desirable than others, and why.

Interview audio recordings were 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 alcohol was consumed. Each transcript was coded by one team member. Every fifth transcript was double coded by another team member for reliability testing. Kappa coefficients were calculated to assess consistency of coding. Kappas ranged from .69 to .85 suggesting good agreement between both coders. Discrepant codes were resolved through discussion. Data were analyzed using pile sorts, in which, four researchers grouped 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 some of the prominent and recurring themes.

Results

Our analysis suggests that distinctions between social and commercial sources of alcohol for teens are blurred rather than discrete categories. We encountered many instances of social and commercial sources of alcohol that have been described in previous research (Paschall et al., 2006; Dent et al., 2005), but surprisingly we also found situations where the distinction between social and commercial sources was unclear. Although sources of alcohol identified by teens in our sample can be situated within the social to commercial continuum, each source is also characterized by varying degrees of dependence on the strength of the social relationships between the teen and the provider. This paper will describe the four types of alcohol acquisition we identified, the system of reciprocity and exchange, as well as

social networks used by youths, and lastly the drinking contexts and locales where teens consume alcohol.

Methods of acquisition

Along the social to commercial continuum of alcohol sources, methods of acquisition were categorized into four broad types. They are: provision without exchange, provision with exchange, shoulder-tapping, and theft. We defined provision without exchange as cases where no reciprocal exchange, monetary or otherwise, occurred between the youth and the provider. Whenever any type of exchange was involved in the acquisition of alcohol, we defined the transaction as provision with exchange. Shoulder-tapping described situations where teens approached strangers outside of commercial outlets to buy them alcohol, and theft described cases where alcohol was taken without the consent of the source.

Provision without exchange—When provision without exchange occurred, it was usually parents, relatives, and close friends who provided alcohol to youths. Occasionally, teens were provided alcohol at parties with no expectation of reimbursement. Unless the teen was a close friend of the host, however, we found this to be rare. When some parents were on vacation with their teen, especially on trips overseas where the minimum drinking age was lower than in the U.S., they allowed their teen to consume alcohol. One parent offered his teenage daughter whiskey while on vacation: *"When we were on vacation my dad was asking me if I wanted a beer. He's like, 'Well, you're 16, do you want a beer?' I was like, 'no, I don't like beer.' My mom was like, 'She only drinks whiskey.' And so my dad got out a bottle of whiskey and gave it to me. I didn't drink it all but [he] gave it to me and I was drinking that and he kept handing it to me. I mean he doesn't do that a lot, it's every once in a while. Over the summer when we're on vacation he'll do it but he definitely will not give me booze or buy me alcohol [on other occasions]."*

Some parents allowed drinking in the home during holidays or other special occasions such as birthdays and family gatherings. A 16-year-old respondent explained how his father allowed him to drink alcohol, but only with the family. The following quote also illustrates the mixed messages the teen received about what, when and how to drink: *"My dad's the youngest of 5. We have big families and my family's always having parties and stuff. Cousins of mine who are under 21, they're drinking beers 'cuz we're with the family, and this year my dad started allowing me to. He told me, 'Only with the family you can drink. And I'd prefer only beer. Don't get drunk. You can socialize with your family.' But he was like, 'if they ever offer you hard alcohol and I'm not there and you can't resist, just don't mix it. Just take it straight.' And he's like, 'take only one or two.'"* Another teen described a situation where he was provided alcohol by his parents because they *"want to cultivate an appreciation of [wine]"* in him, and described how *"they had some fancy, schmancy new wine a few weeks ago where they said 'hey, try some of this.'"*

Provision with exchange—The provision of alcohol with exchange took many forms. A frequent method of purchase was to recruit the help of someone who is 21 or older. Teens often asked older siblings and older friends to purchase alcohol for them. One teen stated: *"From what I know it's the kids that have older siblings, they generally have a lot easier*

time [getting alcohol] than the ones who don't." Several youths described parents purchasing alcohol for them and their friends, but requiring the teenagers to chip in money to do so. One youth revealed: *"We were going to a party and we were trying to find the alcohol, and my friend's dad said that he would get it for us. We just basically ask sometimes and he says, 'Yeah.' He never brings change back but it's never a lot of change that we'd have to actually worry about. There's a few [parents that do this]."*

Another teen who frequently attended small gatherings in homes with friends on his soccer team stated that, in regards to parents buying alcohol for him and his friends, *"some parents will tell you you gotta chip in if I'm gonna go buy it, but some parents won't really care."* In this case, the parents of the youth bought the alcohol on the condition that the youths would drink it in the home, and believing that they could monitor the youths.

The most obvious situation of provision with exchange is purchasing alcohol from a commercial source. However, instances of purchasing alcohol from commercial outlets were rare. One teen described how purchasing alcohol from small liquor stores that do not "*look like they really care"* is possible. Another teen reported that some gas station mini-marts, which in California can be licensed to sell alcohol, may sell alcohol to youths. Another teen said: *"It's not easy in [town] and this immediate city unless you know someone who's 21 or has a fake ID. There's not really a store that would sell a minor alcohol around here, but there's not that many liquor stores. Most of the stores are [large grocery markets]."*

There were some instances of youths knowing about small commercial outlets that sold to minors, but they charged more for alcohol or engaged in some form of risk management. One youth described how some stores make extra money by selling alcohol to teens: "*Some stores have really made quite a business off of selling to kids. There is one store that for Halloween just had a line of kids outside it and they upped the prices a little bit, I think they add on 30% or something. They probably make a lot of money. Sometimes I've been there and they are just completely sold out of something. So I have to imagine they do pretty well for themselves."* Another respondent described how clerks at a store engaged in a form of risk management by reducing opportunities for adult patrons to observe and potentially report their illegal sales: "*At this one store they have this weird thing. They'll sell you anything you want as long as you are in the store alone. So if you walk in and there is an old lady buying a lottery ticket in the store, they won't sell to you. So you have to wait and that's why the kids are waiting outside […] because they have to wait until everyone is gone and then they kind of signal you in. You hand over your backpack and they put it in your backpack and you walk out."* One teen reported that her friend goes to a liquor store where *"he gives the guy [clerk] the money, and then he'd have to act like he was stealing it [the alcohol]."*

Overall, purchasing alcohol from any commercial source was considered difficult. One youth who admitted that he looked younger than his friends reported that he had tried to purchase alcohol and was not able *"to get away with it."* Several teens mentioned not trying to purchase alcohol from commercial outlets because they were concerned about not being able to purchase alcohol and as a result might be embarrassed. One teen reported that he goes into stores to purchase alcohol if he has *"been told by a friend that this guy will [sell*

alcohol to minors], [otherwise] it's just an embarrassment." Another youth also reported that he has never tried to buy alcohol himself because if the clerk says no he does not want *"to look stupid."*

Fake identification cards (IDs) were another option for purchasing alcohol, but this was rare and none of the respondents had a fake ID themselves. One teen described how a friend found an ID of someone who was 21. The teen was able to use the ID to purchase alcohol because he looked a little like the person whose ID he had found. One interviewee knew a source for ID's where the picture on the card would be a picture of the youth, but the youth felt that the cost ($300 each) would be too high for most teens.

Some teens developed relationships with clerks at small commercial outlets in order to purchase alcohol. Consider these two examples of youths using social relationships to get alcohol from commercial sources. One youth described: *"My friend Ray [had a] very weird relationship. This guy at one of the liquor stores was very fond of him and would let us buy stuff without an ID or anything. This guy just thought he was really nice. It was weird. My friend Ray was actually really scared of him, but he would just go in and buy, but we just always thought that the liquor store guy had always this weird crush on him. After a while we knew what his schedule was and so, we knew what hours to go when he was working."* Another youth told how her friends befriend clerks in stores: *"We call them Mexican marts or the country markets, the ones out in the middle of nowhere. There are usually Mexicans or Indians working. I know people who have gone there so many times and tried to get alcohol. They're like 'no I can't do that,' but if they go so much, they finally just let 'em. One guy I know, he's gone so much and gets to know the person so that the guy will trust him and then he just sells to him every weekend. Sometimes there will be a designated time because a certain person is working or they'll be like, 'I can't today because the cops have been looking at me.'"*

As these quotes illustrate, clerks at small commercial outlets may work regular and predictable hours. Teens can befriend individual workers, or at the very least develop some rapport, to eliminate suspicion that the teen may be part of a law enforcement sting operation to catch clerks selling alcohol to minors. Developing social relationships by frequenting the same outlet repeatedly, or taking advantage of a possible romantic interest, allowed these teens to purchase alcohol from small commercial sources. At the same time, these relationships allowed the clerks to sell alcohol to youths without the risk of getting caught.

We also found instances where teens who were adept at stealing alcohol from commercial outlets would sell the stolen alcohol to other underage youths, effectively becoming commercial sources themselves. This quote regarding the theft and sale of alcohol was a response to an inquiry about how youths get the money to buy marijuana: "*But I guess for a regular teen, they just buy their weed. Probably just get a job. Or a lot of people what they'll do is they'll go steal bottles [of alcohol] and then sell their bottles for whatever it is that they want to do."* Another teens described how an acquaintance stole alcohol and sold the bottles to other teens: "*There's a [name of grocery store] right across from [the school] and he was going and stealing alcohol and he came out and he would sell it to kids on campus."*

Shoulder-tapping—Shoulder-tapping (also known as "Hey, Mister") is the act in which a teen asks an adult they do not know to purchase alcohol for him or her. Shoulder-tapping is used infrequently, in part because it is considered more risky, costly, and time intensive than getting alcohol through known sources. For example, teens have no recourse if the approached adult decides to take their money and not purchase them alcohol. In addition, the adult might turn the youths in to authorities instead of completing the transaction. One teen reported that it is more likely that teens would approach someone who would rip them off than someone who would not. Youths understand that they have to pay extra if they ask a stranger to purchase alcohol for them. In addition, rejection is common and one youth reported that it sometimes takes two hours to find a person willing to purchase alcohol. One teen who reported that shoulder-tapping is the most common way he gets alcohol explained *"I don't know anybody over 21 who will buy me beer."*

Shoulder-tapping occurs inside and outside of small and large commercial outlets. Some teens preferred large commercial outlets, like supermarkets, because there are more people entering and leaving the store than at a smaller outlet. One youth described why it makes sense to approach people inside a supermarket: "*I went into [name of store]. I just walked in … walked to an alcohol aisle, asked somebody and I walked out. It was a very smooth operation. We usually do it outside, but then sometimes there's nobody outside, so we just go inside. Outside you have a 50/50 chance of them being on their way out, so they're not going to do it. And also they're already in the store, they're already buying alcohol."* Other teens preferred to shoulder-tap at small commercial outlets, one noting that some small liquor stores had groups of people, frequently homeless people, hanging out in the front and that it was easy to ask one of them to buy alcohol for him. Some teens reported that late night was a good time to shoulder-tap, because many people shopping at that time were shopping for alcohol.

When teens used shoulder-tapping to get their alcohol, they were judicious in their choices of whom to approach. One youth compared it to *"picking out fruit at the market."* Teens were most likely to approach younger adults or homeless people. College students were considered ideal candidates for shoulder-tapping. One teen stated that he preferred to select someone who was part of a group so that he could be certain that the person would not take his money and run off. The same interviewee stated the following in regards to selecting a person to shoulder-tap: "*Avoid old people. I mean, just people that look like they wouldn't be down. You just got to sort of tell, you know. If they have a walker, they wouldn't be down. If they have a little [cane], I don't know. That's a definite turn off. I don't know, white hair. Your senses sort of tell, you know? It's sort of instinct. Well, like somebody with a skate[board], or somebody with a flannel [shirt], or somebody that just looks chill."*

Theft—We identified instances of theft of alcohol occurring from all sources, including theft from home and commercial sources (for further details about instances of theft from commercial sources in this study sample see Jennings, Friese, Moore, & Grube, 2011). Teens who took alcohol from home tended to be very strategic about the process. One teen revealed: "*Well, usually what I would do is if I'm going to take from them is take when they're both [parents] out. And what I do is I look at how everything is placed beforehand and then see where everything is and then get what I need and I would put a limit to how*

much I'm going to take out and how much they won't notice and then put everything back in its original place and I would usually place it in like a water bottle and probably hide it in the back of my closet." However, stealing alcohol from home was not a suitable way of obtaining alcohol for all. Reasons for not taking alcohol from home included that parents did not have much alcohol in the home, the youth thought that the parents would notice if alcohol was missing, the youth needed larger quantities than they could safely take, and ease of getting alcohol elsewhere. For example, one teen reported: *"I think a lot of kids […] their parents have alcohol and sometimes they take that, but that has never been an option for me because my dad doesn't drink and my mom has the occasional bottle of red wine or a glass."* Youths also reported being concerned about getting in trouble. In response to whether he had ever taken alcohol from home, one youth said: *"no, I get scared because I always think my dad is going to find out, and then I'll get in trouble."* Another teen explained that he would not take alcohol from home because *"all he [dad] drinks is Crown Royal, and I don't dare to touch his stuff 'cuz he would notice."*

There were some instances of theft from siblings and friends. One teen described an instance when she had stolen alcohol from a sibling and got caught: "*it was my older sister's and I took it from her room - she had like a fifth of Captain Morgan and I drank most of it and there was this much at the bottom and I filled the rest up with water and it was way off colored and she's like, 'wow, do you think I'm stupid?'"* We also encountered some situations where teens stole from parties and saved the alcohol to drink with close friends at another time. Teens considered this easy to do because most of the people at these parties were inebriated.

Although theft of alcohol occurred in small and large commercial outlets, teens most often stole alcohol from the larger outlets because it was easier to do so. One youth noted that: "*At the [name of store] with the bazillion cashiers it's easy and at the [name of store] with the one camera and one guy who is always looking the other way. It's generally better to go to the big one, yeah; it's easier to slip out."* Although theft from small commercial sources was rare, there were some youths who were successful. For example, one youth said: "*I remember one time I was with my friend and he just walked into some small corner store. There's a little corner store right there and he just went in there, took the bottle and walked out and nothing even happened. The register is right there and then the alcohol is right here. I guess store owners in [this city] are just pretty inattentive."*

Methods of theft varied, but some teens who stole alcohol had well-established techniques. This teen described his strategy for stealing alcohol from a grocery store: "*We had a whole system and it turns out the only aisle in every store that doesn't have security cameras is the pet food aisle, so my friend looks old and I have the backpack and he'd go and he'd grab the handle [1.75 liter bottle] and walk into the pet food aisle and put it in my backpack and we'd walk out."*

Reciprocity and exchange

Most often when alcohol was purchased by teens it was done as a group. The strength of the social relationships between members of that group had a significant impact on how the money was pooled. There was a higher likelihood that with their close friends, teens would

have a system of reciprocity established whereby one teen would put up all the money on one occasion, and a friend might do so the next time. Youths described the importance of reciprocity when it comes to their decision-making of whether to pay for alcohol consumed by others. One respondent described a situation where she would be comfortable paying for alcohol: "*If it's someone that you hang out with a lot and are close to in that group of people who drink I think it was just a 'next time' or I'd be like, 'okay, I'll pitch in for you and you can pay me back or I'll pitch in for you because you're my friend.'*" Another youth also talked about reciprocating with close friends: "*I'll chip in to just help with the money and everything, and if it's my friend's alcohol and they're just like, 'here, whatever, just drink,' 'cuz I've always been generous with them, you know.*"

When purchasing alcohol with acquaintances or people that they were not close to, teens were stricter about how much each person needed to contribute, and monetary contributions were expected. The following excerpt describes how tensions can arise between youths when they do not contribute to the purchase of alcohol: "*It's just that a lot of times what would happen is people would be drinking other people's share, and haven't contributed. So, then it causes a lot of tension and people would get really mad and frustrated and just yell at each other. So, it's kind of unnecessary drama.*"

People who bought alcohol for underage drinkers also expected varying levels of compensation for their efforts depending on their relationship with the teen. The following quote illustrates how a teen with a close relationship to the purchaser might have to pay less in the exchange: "*My friend, she's a junior. Her older brother and her are really close and he's 21. So if I ever need [alcohol], I just go to her. She can get me a handle [1.75 liter bottle of alcohol] for $20.00 just 'cuz her brother's okay with it. So I'll give her $20.00, or me and my friends will chip in and she'll give it to me that day or the next day. I know the brother, too. I've been to a couple parties that he's at. We're not best friends, you know, but we're relatively close. So the one time that I did get it from her, he knew who I was, so he said $20.00 is fine. But usually he charges $30.00 for kids he doesn't know very well. I gave her $20.00 at school and then the next morning before class she gave me it, and I just put it in my locker.*"

When acquaintances bought alcohol for youths, they usually charged a small amount for the transaction, which the youths understood to be fair, if it was not excessive. Compensation might also involve things other than cash. One teen described: "*Someone I know will buy you booze if you just give them $3 extra. They will do it for really cheap. Just like a tip basically because it's their time you know. Or this one guy, if you smoke a bowl [of marijuana] with him he'll do it for you. Sometimes I would buy from someone, I would buy them a pack of cigarettes or give them money for a pack of cigarettes and they would get me a bottle.*" One teen described how he and his friend who is over 21 traded marijuana for alcohol: "*When I had money to buy all the weed that I wanted to, I was sharing it with [friend] all the time just because […] me and him were really good friends and he gave me free alcohol, so it worked out.*" In some cases where alcohol was provided at parties, youths were asked for a small entrance fee to cover the expense of the alcohol ($2). These were, however, larger parties, such as graduation parties.

In cases of shoulder-tapping, where the youths did not know the people they were asking to buy alcohol for them, there was always some kind of exchange. One teen noted that when shoulder-tapping: *"Nobody really expects to get their money back anyways 'cuz it's usually like a few dollars. So it's like they're willing to get ripped off as long as they get alcohol."* Teens did not expect change back when shoulder-tapping, and sometimes they gave some of the alcohol to the purchaser.

Social networks and youth alcohol acquisition

Social networks were important in acquiring alcohol as well as for getting information on how to obtain alcohol. Groups of friends, once they identified a reliable source of alcohol, took advantage of it together. This may be an older sibling or an older acquaintance of somebody within the circle of friends, or a friend with a fake ID. A respondent said very succinctly: *"There's one person who can get it [alcohol] and then everyone asks them to get it for them."* Information about how to get alcohol through direct purchase and theft was also shared within social networks. Another teen stated: *"I don't know anybody who has a fake ID because you really don't need it here. If you really want to drink, you can go get a drink, like I said everybody has connections […] it's a small town."*

Youth Drinking Contexts: Social dimensions of drinking

Largely, teens saw alcohol consumption as a social activity to be done with others on weekends. As one youth noted: "Sometimes I see people maybe drinking too much, like drinking every day or drinking before school or stuff, which is not good, but I would say that mostly the drinking culture is at the weekends, at parties." This quote reflects the belief that there are certain times and places where alcohol consumption is appropriate. Drinking alone was viewed as strange or as being symptomatic of having an alcohol abuse problem. Drinking alone was reported on very few occasions in our interviews. For example, one youth took a bottle of beer from the refrigerator at home because he was "stressed out."

Drinking contexts and locales

Alcohol consumption with other youths occurred in three social contexts: hanging out, kickbacks and parties. Hanging out included socializing with one to three others and tended to be a rather low key and quiet affair. Hanging out could take place in a range of settings, most often in the home, but also at parks, other open spaces, or schools. Kickbacks (also called kick-its) involved a slightly larger group of people, up to about 12 individuals. Kickbacks tended to occur in homes when parents were away or were permissive of youth drinking. Kickbacks were typically attended by close friends and music and noise was kept to a minimum to avoid drawing the attention of neighbors or law enforcement. Parties were large events with loud music, and frequently guests who were not known to the host personally were in attendance. One teen described the distinction between kickbacks and parties: "*Well, a kickback is just like when it's maybe just like 10 people or so, just relaxed. Doing whatever it is there is to do. Whereas a party is kind of more dance and just activity-oriented. At a party you wouldn't know everyone as well as you would a kickback, where it's more of a personal gathering in a kickback."* Some teens preferred to hang out or attend kickbacks rather than parties because of the threat of law enforcement: "*Well, I think there's*

more hanging out or little kickback things than there are parties. Parties get shut down really quick, the cops always come to them 'cuz of the music and the [noise]; there's too many kids. If you have your friends hanging out, there's not gonna come that much, just a few people [in] your back yard and you're okay. You're not playing loud music or anything."

Parties were generally held in someone's home. Parties tended to be large, with around 100 people or more in attendance, and were frequently broken up by police. One youth estimated that one out of three parties is broken up by the police. Texting and other social media are often used to spread information about a party or get-together. Even in cases where the teen planned a small get-together, word often got around and the size of the get-together would quickly increase, becoming bigger and louder than the teen had anticipated. It was typically the neighbors who called the police with noise complaints. Law enforcement would arrive at the location, break up the party, usually without any consequence to the partygoers or the host(s), and youths would be free to move on to the next party. One teen reported that parties get started early because they are likely to get interrupted by the police: "*[The big parties] get broken up pretty quick. Kids will come at like 9:00 and just try to party as hard as they can for two hours at the most and the cops will show up and then everyone leaves."* It is important to note that attendees at parties are generally expected to bring their own alcohol. None of the youths interviewed hosted parties where they supplied all of the alcohol. It would likely be outside the teen's financial means to purchase alcohol for a large group.

Youth alcohol consumption occurred overwhelmingly in a home, including drinking while hanging out, at kickbacks, or parties. We came across multiple instances where teens' drinking in a home was sanctioned by parents. When a home was not an option for drinking, parks were a common place to meet. A respondent explained why she and her friends drink at parks: "*My boyfriend was here from Florida and he asked me, why does everyone do stuff at parks? So I realized we do do everything at parks. Sometimes cops are an issue but I guess we have nowhere else to go besides other people's houses if their parents weren't home or if their parents didn't care. I think it was just the only place we had, it was somewhat secluded, especially at night and the only other people that would be at a park at night were other people doing illegal stuff. I mean, who wants to be in the park when it's pitch dark?"*

Discussion

This study provides in-depth information about how teens acquire alcohol and the contexts within which the alcohol is used. Our findings highlight that even though policies aimed at reducing underage access to alcohol and underage drinking can be successful in limiting availability of alcohol and in reducing consumption and problems, youths have found ways of circumventing these policies.

For the most part, youths reported that getting alcohol directly from commercial sources is difficult and not frequently attempted. This suggests that enforcement efforts, such as compliance checks and shoulder-tap operations, may have an effect on youth access to alcohol. Interestingly, some youths reported avoiding purchasing at commercial sources out

of fear of being told no and potentially feeling embarrassed. Thus, compliance checks or reward and reminder programs that reinforce clerks for saying no to underage purchasers (e.g., Moore et al., 2012) may have the added benefit of deterring youths from attempting purchases of alcohol as well as increasing the likelihood of clerks refusing a sale to a minor. Likewise, shoulder-tapping was rarely used and often as a last resort. Teens, not knowing whether they will actually get alcohol or whether the potential buyer might report them, perceived it as risky. These findings suggest that shoulder-tap operations may not be an efficient use of prevention resources. These findings also suggest that shoulder-tap interventions, if they are used, should target customers who are just over 21 because they are the group most likely approached by teens.

Although commercial outlets were not teens' first choice for accessing alcohol, their narratives also demonstrate that they have some strategies for accessing alcohol through these sources. For example, establishing relationships with sales clerks was used to minimize the risk for the sales clerk and the teen. It would appear that minor decoy operations would be unsuccessful in uncovering such practices because of the relationship between the seller and the teen. Multi-component community-based interventions that include community mobilization, enforcement, responsible beverage service programs, and reward and reminder interventions may be necessary to change clerks' norms and behaviors regarding sales of alcohol to minors (e.g., Saltz, Grube, & Treno, in press).

Theft of alcohol from commercial outlets was rather uncommon. However, some youths have developed strategies to do so. An in-depth analysis of theft of alcohol indicates that youths have detailed knowledge about store layout, theft protection devices, and store policies (Jennings, Friese, Moore, & Grube, 2011). In particular, respondents disclosed knowledge about which aisles have blind spots, how to remove security tops on bottles, and no-chase policies (Jennings et al., 2011). Stores can likely reduce theft of alcohol by examining weaknesses that are currently being exploited by teens.

As policies and enforcement strategies targeting commercial outlets have made it more difficult for youths to buy alcohol, teens rely on people they know who are over 21 to get them alcohol. It appears that some people over 21 use this as a way to make extra money by charging teens a fee for purchasing alcohol. Many enforcement strategies targeting commercial access to alcohol, such as compliance checks and shoulder-tap operations, would not have an impact on this method of alcohol access because the buyer and the teen know each other and the alcohol is purchased legally by the buyer. In addition, the alcohol is often handed over to the teen away from the alcohol outlet, where the exchange could not be observed by law enforcement. This limits what law enforcement can do. Effective ways to prevent these exchanges may include educating those over 21 about the risks they take when they furnish alcohol to minors and strictly enforcing social host ordinances and provision to minor laws. Little research, however, has investigated the effectiveness of such interventions.

There is some access to alcohol through parents, although it appears to be relatively rare for parents to supply alcohol for teen parties and kickbacks. Instead, parents were more likely to provide alcohol to their teens when they were with them, such as in the context of family

meals, celebrations or vacations. This is consistent with findings from interviews with parents of the teens interviewed for this study (Friese, Grube, Moore, & Jennings, 2012). But even though parents are not a primary source of alcohol for teens, the home is the primary location for the consumption of alcohol. Most of the drinking occurs in homes, often when parents are at home. This is consistent with findings from a quantitative study of California teens who hosted parties (Friese & Grube, 2014). This study found that of the teens who hosted parties at home, 64% reported that at least one parent was home at least part of the time and 70% of teens who reported having alcohol at their party indicated that at least one of their parents knew that there was alcohol at the party. Parents may permit drinking in the home because they think that letting the teens drink at home is safer than if the teens were to drink outside the home. One potential intervention is to pass social host ordinances and educate parents about the consequences of furnishing alcohol to minors in their home. Because the home is a primary drinking location, educating parents about the risks of providing underage drinkers with alcohol may be an important way of supplementing environmental and enforcement strategies.

Drinking contexts were usually social occasions, either smaller get-togethers like kickbacks or parties. Some teens expressed awareness that large, noisy parties are more likely to get broken up by police, although there were usually no consequences for the teens at the party or the hosts. Nonetheless, it appears that youths may have adapted their behavior as a result. First, teens may start parties early knowing that neighbors are likely to call the police by 11 pm. Second, youths may opt for smaller get-togethers that are unlikely to attract unwanted attention. Kickbacks typically occur in private homes, even when parents are at home. Because these kickbacks are unlikely to come to the attention of law enforcement, the only way to curb drinking in these contexts is to engage parents. Parents need to be aware of the risks they are taking by letting teens drink in their home. In addition, stricter enforcement of minor in possession and social host laws may be needed. Almost all of the teens interviewed reported having had some contact with police because of drinking at parties, but few negative consequences were reported. Current enforcement strategies may do little to curb underage drinking at parties and may simply move teens from one party location to the next.

Limitations of this study are that the teens interviewed were drinkers selected from a small number of communities and are not a representative sample. Therefore their experiences may not be representative of experiences of other teens. In addition, youths in Northern California may not be representative of youths in other areas of the U.S.. Because this is a qualitative study with a non-representative sample it is unclear how pervasive some of the methods used to obtain alcohol are.

In spite of its limitations, this study is important because it provides us with in-depth information about how teens are using social relationships to circumvent policies designed to limit their access to alcohol. In addition, the home is an important site of intervention because it is a primary setting for the consumption of alcohol by minors. These findings suggest that current enforcement strategies need to adapt to fill the loopholes as evident in youths' ways of accessing alcohol.

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