

Drinking and the price children pay

COMMENT

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There is an urgent need for more stringent legislation and monitoring of alcohol usage by South African youth

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YOU DON'T have to go far to find an advertisement telling young people that alcohol is the fun lifestyle choice. They are bombarded with images of successful millennials bonding over a beer, cheering with champagne and sipping success in the form of cocktails at sunset.

But the reality for most teenagers is much grimmer and often comes with a price that includes real risks for their sexual health.

The Soul City Institute's recent research into alcohol availability, marketing and sexual health risks among urban and rural youth in South Africa found that both are heavily exposed to persuasive and appealing alcohol advertising within their home environment.

This, coupled with easy access to alcohol as well as fairly low pricing, encourages alcohol misuse. Indeed, this misuse can be tracked to real and related health risks, including risks to their sexual health, and HIV/Aids in particular.

The Soul City Institute, as part of the STRIVE research consortium, conducted the community-based study in a rural village in Mpumalanga and an urban township in Gauteng in a bid to assess the density of alcohol outlets and explore young people's perspectives on alcohol advertising, marketing and availability, as well as their drinking patterns and sexual health and safety.

Our research showed that the adverts attract youth with creative use of colour, images and slogans. Young people in the research told us that the advertisements showing young people having fun encouraged them to try various brands and beverages.

Despite a plethora of regulations, the research found many alcohol-selling outlets located within a 500m radius of schools. And, as if this wasn't enough, school-going youth in these areas were also able to gain entry to alcohol-selling outlets (taverns and bottle stores) and buy alcohol during school hours.

Their access to taverns is further facilitated by promotional activities and pricing including celebrity events, competitions and discounts that include "happy hour", "ladies' night" and "buy one, get one free" specials.

The young people told us of experiences of alcohol-related risky sexual behaviour in and near taverns in their communities and on their way home from such places. These incidents include unprotected, unplanned and transactional sex, sexual assault and sex that was later regretted.



CHOICES: Research has shown that many alcohol-selling outlets are located within a 500m radius of schools and are accessible to the youth.

PICTURE: DAVID RITCHIE

Why does this matter? We already know that alcohol use among young people in South Africa is high, with 49% of youth aged 13 to 19 reporting ever having drunk alcohol, according to research published in the *South African Medical Journal*. The drinking rate in the US among youth aged between 12 and 20 is just over 30%.

In addition, research shows strong and consistent evidence that alcohol consumption is associated with sexual risks for HIV infection, including unprotected sex and sex with a casual partner. In the country with the greatest number of HIV-positive people in the world, this is a major worry.

A recently published review of 12 longitudinal studies which followed more than 35 000 young people confirmed that youth who were exposed to higher levels of alcohol marketing are more likely to start drinking and to binge-drink or drink in a hazardous manner. And youth who start drinking before the age of 15 are six times more likely to become dependent on or

abuse alcohol later in life compared to people who start drinking after the age of 21.

The alcohol industry argues that self-regulation of advertising is best, but there is strong evidence internationally which shows self-regulatory measures on alcohol advertising are ineffective. The South African Liquor Act has minimal regulations around alcohol marketing and advertising, yet there has been a huge outcry about the Control of Marketing of Alcoholic Beverages Bill, developed by the Department of Health in 2010.

The alcohol and advertising sectors in particular argue that banning alcohol adverts would have a negative economic impact, including significant job losses. What they fail to take into account is the economic impact of alcohol-related harm such as vehicle crashes and violence, which cost the country billions of rand.

Despite the importance of this bill and its potential to protect young people from

adverse health outcomes, public engagement around the bill has been limited. Youth perspectives in particular have not been heard. It is time to create a platform for their voices to be heard and for public debate on policies that address youth alcohol abuse and misuse to be increased.

We must urgently push for appropriate alcohol legislation, such as regulating alcohol marketing. Global best practices have also shown that increasing the price of alcohol and limiting outlet density will decrease alcohol consumption, and we need to push for all these interventions to be implemented as soon as possible.

We must regulate and monitor alcohol marketing and availability to ensure that school surroundings are free of such exposures. We need to ensure that alcohol policies prioritise public health, and South Africans must become active participants in determining the policies that guide us if we truly want to ensure that our children and youth claim their future.