

INFORMATION SHEET

The Societal/Environmental Domain

One way to categorize prevention strategies is to consider those that attempt to alter the environment in which individual children grow, learn, and mature (individualized environments) and those that attempt to alter environments in which all children encounter threats to their health, including illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (shared environment).

Generally, strategies targeting the individualized environment seek to socialize, instruct, guide, and counsel children in ways that increase their resistance to health risks. Specific programs may teach parenting skills to parents or life skills to children, educate parents and children about health risks, or provide specialized services to young people at high risk. All of these individualized strategies seek to prepare and assist individual children in coping with a world that presents myriad temptations and potential threats to their health and well-being.

The limitations of individualized approaches have led to increased emphasis on the shared environment, the world in which children face and cope with health threats. The shared environment can be a neighborhood, town, city, state, or the nation as a whole. Properly designed and managed, the shared environment can support healthy behavior and thwart risky behavior for all children, regardless of how well prepared they may be by their individualized environments.

Environmental strategies have been found to be more efficient because they affect every member of a target population. Training store clerks to check ID reduces the availability of tobacco and alcohol for all neighborhood young people regardless whether they are aware that these strategies are being implemented. Environmental strategies also produce more rapid results. Enforcement of the minimum alcohol purchase age can produce more or less immediate reductions in youth alcohol use. Environmental strategies can also enhance the prevention efforts of many communities that already have a number of programs aimed at the individualized environment (Klitzner, 1998).

The following are environmental strategies that have been evaluated and found to be effective:

Price Interventions

Increasing the price of alcohol and tobacco through excise taxes is an effective strategy for reducing consumption—both the prevalence of use and the amount consumed. It can also reduce various alcohol-related problems, including motor vehicle fatalities, driving while intoxicated, rapes, robberies, cirrhosis mortality, suicide, and cancer death rates (Sloan, Reilly, & Schenzler, 1994).

Minimum-Purchase-Age Interventions

Increasing the minimum purchase age for alcohol to 21 has been effective in decreasing alcohol use among young people, particularly beer consumption. It is associated with reductions in other alcohol-related problems, including alcohol-related traffic crashes, suicide, deaths resulting from pedestrian injuries, other unintentional injuries, youth homicide, and vandalism. Outcomes related to minimum-purchase-age laws for tobacco are not known because such laws have only recently begun to be enforced.

Enforcement of minimum-purchase-age laws against selling alcohol and tobacco to minors through the use of undercover buying operations (also known as “decoy” or “sting” operations) can substantially increase the proportion of retailers who comply with such laws. Undercover buying operations conducted by community groups that provide positive and negative feedback to merchants are also effective in increasing retailer compliance, as are more frequent enforcement operations.

“Use and lose” laws, which allow for the suspension of the driver’s license of a person under 21 years of age following a conviction of any alcohol or other drug violation (e.g., use, possession, or attempt to purchase with or without false identification), are an effective means for increasing compliance with minimum-purchase-age laws among young people. Penalties should be swift, certain, and meaningful. Penalties should not be too harsh, however, since severity is not related to their effectiveness and, if too severe, law enforcement and judicial officers may refuse to apply them.

Community awareness and media efforts can be effective tools for increasing perceptions regarding the likelihood of apprehension and punishment and can increase retailer compliance. They also offer a means for changing social norms to be less tolerant of alcohol and tobacco sales to and use by minors, and for decreasing the costs of law enforcement operations.

Deterrence Interventions

Deterrence laws and policies for impaired driving have been effective in reducing the number of alcohol-related traffic crashes and fatalities among the general population and particularly among young people. Reducing the legal blood-alcohol-content (BAC) limit to .08 or lower has been shown to reduce the level of impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes.

Enforcement of impaired-driving laws is important to deterrence because it increases the public’s perceptions of the risks of being caught and punished for driving under the influence of alcohol.

Law enforcement efforts to detect and arrest drinking drivers include sobriety checkpoints, which do not result in high levels of detection of drinking drivers, and passive breath sensors, which allow police officers to test a driver’s breath without probable cause and substantially increase the effectiveness of sobriety checkpoints.

Administrative license revocation, which allows for confiscation of the driver’s license by the arresting officer if a person is arrested with an illegal BAC or if the driver refuses to be tested,

has been shown to reduce the number of fatal traffic crashes and recidivism among driving-under-the-influence offenders. Actions against vehicles and tags have been mostly applied to multiple offenders, with some preliminary evidence that they can lead to significant decreases in recidivism and overall impaired driving.

Impaired-driving policies targeting underage drivers (particularly zero tolerance laws setting BAC limits at .00 to .02 percent for young people) and graduated driving privileges, in which a variety of driving restrictions are gradually lifted as the driver gains experience (and maturity), have been shown to significantly reduce traffic deaths among young people.

Interventions Addressing Location and Density of Retail Outlets

Limitations on the location and density of retail outlets may help contribute to reductions in alcohol consumption, traffic crashes, and certain other alcohol-related problems, including cirrhosis mortality, suicide, and assaults. With respect to illicit drugs, neighborhood antidrug strategies, such as citizen surveillance and the use of civil remedies—particularly nuisance abatement programs, can be effective in dislocating dealers and reducing the number and density of retail drug markets and possibly other crimes and signs of physical disorder within small geographical areas.

Restrictions on Use

Restrictions on use in public places and private workplaces (also known as “clean indoor air laws”) have been shown to be effective in curtailing cigarette sales and tobacco use among adults and young people. Additional benefits of clean indoor air laws are that they reduce nonsmokers’ exposure to cigarette smoke, and they help to alter norms regarding the social acceptability of smoking. The effects of restrictions on alcohol use have not been systematically evaluated.

Server-Oriented Interventions

With respect to alcohol, server training programs have been found to affect beliefs and knowledge, with mixed findings regarding impacts on server practices and traffic safety.

Retailer education for tobacco merchants has led to relatively small, short-term reductions in sales to minors.

When server training is combined with enforcement of laws (against service to intoxicated patrons, against sales to minors), training programs are much more effective in producing changes in both selling and serving practices.

Education and training programs are important in teaching servers about laws, the penalties for violation, recognition of signs of intoxication and false identification, and ways to refuse sales, but they generally are not sufficient when used alone to produce substantial and sustained shifts in compliance with laws.

Counter-Advertising

Counter-advertising campaigns that disseminate information about the hazards of a product or the industry that promotes it may help reduce cigarette sales and tobacco consumption. The limited research on alcohol warning labels suggests that they may affect awareness, attitudes, and intentions regarding drinking but do not appear to have had a major influence on behavior. Studies have suggested that more conspicuous labels would have a greater effect on awareness and behavior.

REFERENCE

Brounstein, P., Zweig, J., & Gardner, S. (1998, December) Science-based practices in substance abuse prevention: A guide. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Division of Knowledge Development and Evaluation.

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Categories of Environmental Strategies

1. Public Policy

Policy includes the laws, regulations, or formal rules enacted by a government entity or its representatives. Public policy as an environmental strategy seeks to influence both the total amount of substances consumed and how they are consumed across time and situations. The power of policy strategies is that they can...

- Influence when, where, and how many individuals use substances
- Lower the probability of negative outcomes
- Can create shifts in thinking about use
- Can help redefine what is considered appropriate substance use
- May lead to additional and stronger policy or legislative changes over time

2. Enforcement

Enforcement of laws and regulations reinforce local policies and norms. In order to be effective, these laws and regulations must be enforced consistently across the board. Community enforcement of policies, norms, and availability of drugs might include:

- Compliance checks
- Cops in shops
- Sobriety checkpoints
- Citizens' surveillance
- Nuisance abatement
- Patrolling of areas that drug dealers frequent

3. Community Education

Community education is the practice of educating community members about local laws, regulations, and policies regarding substance use, as well as available resources for prevention and treatment. The goal is often to increase knowledge and influence attitudes, in an effort to change behavior. Some examples might include:

- Server training
- Merchant education on laws and penalties

- Public awareness campaigns
- Police training (including cultural competency)

4. Collaboration

Organizational silos often develop due to the nature of funding streams—each has its own culture, language, and way of doing business, which can create barriers for individuals trying to access services. The collaborative path is not straight or narrow, but characterized by “fits and starts.” Some important characteristics of effective collaborations are:

- Leadership is critical at all levels
- Data brings people together, informs planning
- Collaboration takes time, needs to be sustained
- Communication, respect for diversity, and trust
- Representation from the affected population
- Process, like the SPF, keeps everyone on track

5. Advocacy

Advocacy is an active promotion of a cause or principle. It involves action that leads to a selected goal but can be nested with other initiatives. Importantly, it does not necessarily involve confrontation or conflict. We use advocacy when routine work does not get you where you want to go or there are roadblocks. In many cases previous experience or research indicates you cannot achieve goals in any other way. You must have enough energy, enthusiasm, and support to last for what could be a long time. In developing an advocacy strategy, remember to:

- Recognize and identify your allies
- Communicate how your goals are similar
- Decide who is best to take the lead
- Identify your opponents and why
- Start with the cause and not the opponent
- Involve potential opponents, as well as allies
- Develop a plan of action with your team

6. Media and Communications

The goal of media and communications is to impact attitudes, perceptions, and behavior—changing and/or reinforcing community norms. They allow you to advance the prevention message by increasing awareness and helping to gain support for prevention policies. Some important channels include:

- Television, radio, and newspapers

- Movies and movie trailers
- Billboards
- Printed insert materials
- Commercials or PSAs
- Electronic
- Collateral/giveaways