Public Opinion in Ventura County on Underage Drinking and Policy Strategies

Alcohol is involved in the deaths of more teens than all other illicit drugs combined — by a four-to-one ratio. Underage drinking is a factor in nearly half of all teen automobile crashes and 50 to 65 percent of youth suicides. Alcohol abuse is linked to as many as two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens and college students, and it contributes substantially to homicides, suicides and fatal injuries. It is also a major factor in unprotected sex among youth.

A recent survey of Ventura County residents shows substantial public concern about underage drinking and its impact on youth and the community. In 2004, the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department contracted with the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at the University of California, Fullerton to conduct a survey concerning alcohol use in Ventura County and to benchmark public sentiment regarding underage drinking. The survey results in this fact sheet pertain to questions about public perceptions of the impact of underage and binge drinking on public health and safety, the quality of neighborhood life, and the public’s support for policies designed to limit youth access to alcohol.

Survey Methodology

Between May 5 and August 17, 2004, the SSRC administered a telephone survey to individuals 18 years of age and older residing in 2,021 randomly selected households in Ventura County. This is a population-based survey, meaning that rather than targeting heads-of-households, respondents were randomly selected from among all adults in the household. Consequently, the results can be generalized to the entire population of non-institutionalized civilians 18 years of age or older residing in households with telephones in Ventura County. The SSRC’s estimated response rate for this telephone survey was 68.40%; a very acceptable outcome for the random digit dialed technique and questionnaire length. A detailed description of the survey methodology may be found in the full report on the Ventura County Limits website (www.venturacountylimits.org).

Summary of Findings

Public Concern Regarding Health and Safety Issues

- There is significant public concern among Ventura County residents about alcohol and drug-related community health and safety risks. In particular, respondents express strong concern about drunk driving, teenage drug use, and teenage drinking.

- Ventura County adults are acutely aware of events and problems associated with alcohol and other drug use.

- Survey respondents were presented a list of issues and asked whether they had heard about each one, “in the last three months on the radio or TV, read about it in newspapers or magazines, or talked about it with friends, school officials or someone like that.”

- More than three quarters of the survey respondents remember hearing about or discussing the deaths of young drivers and issues related to drug use among teenagers.

- More than two thirds remembered stories or discussions about alcohol and violence.

- More than half (57%) report hearing about binge drinking among young people, and many (46%) have also heard something about how easy it is for teenagers to obtain alcohol.
• Just more than one quarter (27%) of the respondents remembered hearing anything recently about proposals to increase the enforcement of alcohol sales laws.

Public Concern Regarding Alcohol-related Issues and Neighborhood Quality of Life

• Ventura County residents express high levels of concern about drinking and driving near their homes, followed closely by “binge drinking” and “drinking in homes where only youth are present.”

• Additionally, Ventura County residents show concern about a “lack of family-friendly environments,” and people drinking outside liquor stores near their home.

Public Support for Alcohol-Related Policies

A growing body of research suggests that municipal policies that shape the times, places and occasions where alcohol is available to young people are among the most effective ways to prevent alcohol-related problems for the entire community. The data presented below gauge public support in Ventura County for a variety of policy strategies that other communities have used successfully.

Public Support for Policies Designed to Limit Access to Alcohol

Research on underage drinking consistently shows that youth possession of alcohol decreases as the perception of “being caught” increases. Survey respondents were asked about a number of policy enforcement options that have been developed to prevent and deter youth access to alcohol. They expressed their degree of support for each of the policy options on a scale of 1 to 4 with four representing the highest support, and one the least.

• Ventura County residents expressed the most support (3.30) for “imposing penalties for older persons who illegally provide alcohol to teenagers.”

• In addition, residents expressed strong support for a law that allows police to bill for the cost of service if they have to come back the same night after providing a warning at a house party where underage drinking is occurring (3.24).

• Respondents also approved of police decoy operations (3.11), using trained teens (to deter adults from selling to minors or buying alcohol for them).

• Also favored, though less strongly, are proposals that would enable police to issue a citation to any adult who permits parties in her or his home involving teen drinking (2.98), and citations for adults who purchase alcohol for teenagers (2.90).

Ventura County residents are clearly concerned about underage and binge drinking and impaired driving. These behaviors pose health and safety risks to the general population as well as to those consuming the alcohol. The Institute of Medicine’s National Research Council points out that responding to these concerns is a collective responsibility. According to these survey results, Ventura County residents will respond favorably to enacting policy solutions that effectively address problems brought about by underage drinking.

3 American Medical Association, Office of Alcohol/Drug Abuse (2001)

Ventura County Limits, a Community Partnership for Responsible Alcohol Policies and Practices, is an initiative to address underage and binge drinking problems by means of a countywide Community Partnership. The Ventura County Behavioral Health Department with funding from the State Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs and the active participation of stakeholders from across Ventura County is guiding this initiative.