Developing a whole-of-community campaign targeting underage drinking in a pro-drinking culture

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Abstract: Developing a Whole-of-Community Campaign Targeting Underage Drinking in a Pro-Drinking Culture

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Background: Underage drinking is a major public health issue for Australia, as it is for many countries. In 2011, 34% of 15-year-old, 48% of 16-year-old and 59% of 17-year-old Australians were current drinkers; compared to 11% of US 14-15-years olds and 25% of US 16-to-17-year-olds. Parents remain the most common source of alcohol for underage drinkers in Australia.

Program background: The majority of interventions targeting adolescent drinking, and the supply of alcohol to teenagers, have been predicated on the assumption that parents are opposed to their teenagers’ drinking (which is not universally the case in Australia). With the exception of several US-based interventions (such as Project Northland and Communities that Care), they have also not addressed the influence of adults other than parents. Evaluations of Project Northland have raised questions about its ability to be generalized to other populations. This would include countries such as Australia and the UK which have a lower alcohol purchase age (18 years); absence of legal constraints on the consumption of alcohol by children, or provision of alcohol by parents, on private premises; and greater cultural acceptance of teen alcohol consumption. The aim of the current program is to develop, implement and evaluate a community-based intervention (including school curricula, community activities, traditional and new media) targeting underage drinking in a regional Australian community.

Evaluation Methods and Results: We conducted extensive formative research with adolescents (n=411), parents (n=387), and community members (n=484); including focus groups and interviews, online surveys, school surveys and a CATI survey. Across all three groups we found significant misperceptions of social norms; that their peers’ attitudes to underage drinking were far more liberal than their own. They also reported experiencing direct and indirect pressure to drink (adolescents) and to condone drinking (parents and community members). We then developed and tested messages for a communication campaign targeting adolescents, parents and community members. Our original intent was to focus on community social norms – to address the gap between individuals’ beliefs and their perceptions of the beliefs of their peers. However, we found that all three of the target groups (particularly parents) were not ready to hear that message. Even when the messages were crafted using data collected within the community, participants questioned the accuracy of the numbers cited. Thus, campaign messages were developed to bring the community along a change process – introducing the issue of underage drinking as of concern to the community (phase 1 – completed), followed by a call to action (phase 2 – current), with later phases to provide specific strategies and local data to address perceived social norms.

Conclusions: While outcome evaluation data will not be available until late 2014, process evaluation and anecdotal feedback demonstrate high community awareness, acceptance and ownership of the intervention messages.

Implications for research and/or practice: Interventions targeting underage drinking can be effective in regional communities – even where teen alcohol use is high – but messages must be developed in partnership with the community and resonate with both community concerns and readiness for change.

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