



“Alcopops” and California Youth A Conversation with Middle and High School Students

A Summary Report

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Introduction

“Alcopop” is a term coined by the popular media to describe bottled alcoholic beverages that resemble sweet drinks such as soda and lemonade. Alcopop products have an alcohol content similar to or slightly higher than beer, with an appearance and taste more like a low alcohol mixed drink; and a palatability more like a soft drink or a fruit drink. Examples of alcopops sold in the United States include Smirnoff Ice, Mike’s Hard Lemonade, Bacardi Silver, Skyy Blue, Seagrams Coolers, Zima, Jack Daniel’s Country Coolers, Lynchburg Lemonade, and Hard Cola. The names themselves do not indicate that these beverages contain alcohol. This combination contributes to concern about the appeal of these beverages to youth, and thereby their contribution to underage drinking and the harm it can cause.

The widespread use of alcopops by youth has been well documented. Over half (55.8%) of high school seniors reported using alcopops in 2004.¹ An Alcohol Policies Project study on alcopops determined that teens are twice as likely to have tried alcopops than adults and three times more likely than adults to be aware of alcopops.² It was estimated that 51% of teens between the ages of 17 and 18 and 35% of teens between the ages of 14 and 16 have tried alcopops.

Less is known about how youth perceive alcopops. How do young people think alcopops drinks compare to other alcoholic beverages? Does the appeal of alcopops vary across different age groups or genders? Why would young people drink alcopops rather than other alcoholic beverages? Does this affect the amount they might drink, or the potential for harm? How accessible are alcopops to young people? Statistical studies do not provide solid answers to these kinds of questions, and the answers are necessary to a full understanding of why and how youth use these beverages.

The California Prevention Institute (CPI) implemented this project to inform evidence-based prevention strategies and public policy concerning alcopops. Statistics alone do not provide sufficient guidance to specifically target prevention initiatives to youth most at risk for using alcopops. Neither do statistics provide the detailed guidance necessary to develop effective prevention initiatives, or to develop public policies that will help protect use against illegal and harmful use of these beverages. In addition to generating answers to the questions identified above, this project uses empowerment strategies that CPI has developed to involve youth themselves in developing awareness and solutions for underage drinking and associated problems. To do this, we train youth to lead group discussions and record responses using focus group techniques. This brief summary describes that process and highlights the results of those group discussions.

The Participants and the Process

To organize our conversations with California youth, CPI worked through prevention organizations that serve youth across the state. These organizations, including providers for Safe and Drug Free Schools, Friday Night Live affiliates, and other members of California’s prevention community, recruited youth leaders to lead the groups by asking

¹ Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G. & Schulenberg, J. E. (December 19, 2005). *Teen drug use down but progress halts among youngest teens*. University of Michigan News and Information Services: Ann Arbor, MI. [On-line]. Available: www.monitoringthefuture.org; accessed 03/03/06.

² *Summary of Findings: What Teens and Adults are Saying about “Alcopops”*. Alcohol Policies Project: Center for Science in the Public Interest; May 2001.

questions, facilitating the discussions, and taking notes concerning the ideas of participants, and the degree of consensus or difference of opinion. Leaders were trained using a youth focus group procedure and training materials developed by CPI and successfully applied in other projects. The training included instruction in ensuring inclusiveness of participation and rules of mutual respect, in taking complete and accurate notes, and in assuring and achieving anonymity of responses.

The group conversations took place between January 15th, 2006 and February 22nd. The participants were recruited through school and community outreach to youth who were not involved in prevention activities sponsored by the organizing agency, and who represented varying levels of exposure to risk. The location, number and size of groups are summarized in the table in Appendix One of this report.³

In summary, the results reported here are based on conversations involving 304 California youth in 41 groups. Just over half (51 %) of these youth were juniors or seniors in high school; boys (52 %) and girls (48 %). Participants were ethnically diverse. The largest number (43 %) were Hispanic/Latino; just over one fourth (27 %) were white, non-Hispanic; 13 percent were African American, 12 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and five percent other.

While youth participants were diverse, they do not represent a statistical sample. The thoughts and comments they offered were not meant to support numeric estimates of their exact prevalence. They were meant to provide insight into the ways in which youth perceive, think about and use alcopops. Therefore, our analysis was qualitative rather than quantitative. We identified the themes that constitute the similarities in discussions and comments across these diverse groups, differences in opinion when they occur, and the characteristics that distinguish youth that have different experiences with alcopops. We identify those common themes, and those differences, that are more or less prominent in the experience of youth, but we do not assign these responses to different numbers of young people in the state. The intention is to give deeper interpretation and understanding of the statistics concerning the prevalence of attitudes and use that have been documented through statistical surveys.

The remainder of this summary highlights what the youth told us.

Are California youth aware of Alcopops?

Alcopops is a term coined to refer collectively to a range of products that have diverse names and tastes. The products are thought to be successful because they are the classic “bridge” drink for people who do not like the taste of alcohol.⁴ There was strong consensus across the groups, including the youngest, that the participants and their peers were aware of these drinks, and perceived that they were different than other alcoholic beverages. Typically, participants referred to different examples by (approximate) brand name. While participants were not always familiar with the term

³ Parental consent was obtained according to the policy of the hosting county agency. Focus group participants were provided a monetary incentive of \$10 upon completion of the session; co-leaders received a total of \$20 per facilitator. The youth were drawn from a wide variety of settings related to different risk environments, including standard classrooms, alternative and community schools, and foster care. Details are provided in the full report of findings available from CPI.

⁴ “Alcopops” *Saturate Youth Market*. Nutrition Health Review: The Consumers’ Medical Journal. 2003; 88:3.

alcopops, they clearly recognized this beverage by its dominant characteristic – a palatable, sweet taste. This was true whether they had actually tasted them or not.

- *“Everyone knows what they are and a lot of people drink them. They like them because they taste like soda.”*

Youth gained their awareness through multiple channels, including peer communications and advertising. On a per capita basis, underage youth were exposed to 63% more alcopops magazine advertising than legal-age adults in 2001, and this grew to 72% in 2002, and finally to 92% in 2003.⁵

Our youth conversations prompted widespread discussion of advertisements for alcopops, and clearly indicated widespread exposure to these messages. Discussion included specific references to numerous ads, and lively discussion of what they liked or disliked about specific ads. The most widely referenced ads were the TV commercials. Just a few examples out of many comments give the sense of the impression these make on youth.

- *“Smirnoff Ice on TV with the bottle crashing on to some ice”*
- *“An ad that I remember is a bunch of girls trying to lose weight and they choose to use a drink because it get you drunk but is calorie free”(Bacardi Silver)*
- *“Smirnoff Twist TV ad where screwdriver is ...to a bottle and unscrews it. They unveil a new flavor as if it is a major invention.”*
- *“The Smirnoff ad with the naked lady that has the orange peel wrapped around her”*
- *“The Smirnoff ad that shows the girls drinking that are pretty, and innocent, and delicate”*
- *“The one with the race car driver and the gorgeous models” (Smirnoff Ice)*
- *“The one with the guy Snowboarding with the girl in the bikini and they go into the pool”*
- *“Smirnoff Twist”*
- *“Bacardi-with rappers”*
- *“Bacardi and diet cola”*
- *“Mike’s Hard Lemonade commercial is fast paced and chaotic—it’s cool”*

In addition to pervasive exposure to TV commercials, youth discussed (in order of prominence of mention) presence of alcopops in music videos, movies and TV shows; ads in magazines and newspapers; billboards; ads in stores; internet adds; and a variety of less mentioned sources including radio, vehicle posters and even clothes.

The high level of advertising awareness was evident in the discussion of themes that are used to appeal to youth including attractive and “cool” people (including ties to well-known celebrities); sex appeal; and an association with fun, activity, and music. Again, comments highlight the level of awareness of our young discussants.

- *“They always use pretty girls and attractive people”*
- *“People in the ads are always cool and sober, they aren’t drunk and acting stupid”*
- *“Add fruit, fun, and stir it in a glass with ice”*
- *“They use tropical settings and make it seem like everyone is laid back and relaxing”*
- *“They look real icy, and the bottles are cool—the colors and the way they are shaped”*
- *“I really like the bottles, I have a bottle collection at home”*
- *“Mike’s Hard Lemonade has really cute bottles, so I want to drink it”*
- *“The music they play, it’s our music, it’s the stuff we listen to”*

⁵ Youth Overexposed: Alcohol Advertising in Magazines, 2001 to 2003. The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. Georgetown University; Apr 2005.

Studies have found that alcopop advertising female youth in particular, documenting, for example, that nearly half of all girls aged 16-18 report seeing alcopops ads on TV, compared to only 34 percent of women 21 or older.⁶ Our discussants frequently associated advertising appeals, such as packaging, to girls.

Finally, there were varying opinions about the impact of these advertisements on behavior. Some comments indicated a degree of oversaturation with alcopops ads, but these were more often an expression of dislike for commercials generally. A substantial number of more specific comments volunteered that these advertisements do influence the drinking behavior of them and their peers.

- *"The more and more you see it, the more obligated you feel to taste it. If it tastes good you will want more"*
- *"They show you these pictures over and over again and make it sound so good, they make you crave it and you have to try it"*
- *"The more you see something the more you want it"*
- *"Maybe, probably, when I go to a party I'm going to want to try the drink that I saw"*
- *"It's like a deodorant ad—cool people use it and then you want to buy it at the store"*

What is the Alcopops "image" for California youth?

The discussions by participating youth were lively, and revealed clear themes in the way that California young people perceive alcopops. Several broad characterizations are widely shared by young people. California youth clearly see alcopops as ...

- **Palatable and "sweet".** The dominant characteristic of these drinks is their drinkability. They are seen as more "...like soda or juice..." than other alcoholic drinks. There is a clear consensus among youth that these drinks taste good.
- **Easy to drink.** Youth also were in broad agreement that alcopops are easy to drink compared to other alcoholic beverages.
 - *Beer and wine burn the throat, but (alcopops) don't hurt*
 - *Hard liquor takes your breath away, (an alcopop) is a smooth drink*

While not as widely discussed, there are other characteristics of alcopops on which there is broad agreement.

- **Easier to conceal.** Youth believe that alcopops are less detectable on the breath than beer or "hard" liquor. The color and odor of these drinks make them easier to conceal in other ways also. Participants mentioned that they can be poured into soft drink bottles and consumed without attracting attention. This makes it easier to avoid getting caught drinking.
- **Easier to control.** Many youth believe that it is easier to control one's intake of alcopops compared to other alcoholic beverages. This is based partly on a misperception about the strength of alcopops compared to other alcoholic beverages. Participants were more than twice as likely to state that alcopops are "weaker" than other forms of alcohol, as opposed to thinking they were about the

⁶ *Teenage girls targeted for sweet-flavored alcoholic beverages.* American Medical Association. Dec. 16, 2004.

same. Many participants associated drinking alcopops with getting a “slow buzz” rather than getting drunk. One consequence was that they take some of the “worry” out of drinking.

- *It's a drink you can control without passing out. You feel comfortable drinking them.*
- *These drinks don't teach you a lesson because they're easy to drink.*

There was less consensus concerning the physical effects of alcopops compared to other liquors. Participants were evenly divided about whether alcopops would be more or less likely to produce a hangover or to make the drinker feel sick.

Who is attracted to Alcopops?

The youth discussions clearly indicated that alcopops are more appealing to some youth than others. There was consensus that two groups of young people were specifically attracted to alcopops – girls, and younger teens.

- **Teen Girls.** Research also demonstrates that girls are more at-risk for alcopop use than boys.⁷ The AMA research on alcopops consumption found that more teen girls had consumed alcopops in the past six months than teen boys (31 % versus 19 %). Teen girls reported drinking alcopops more than other alcoholic beverages while women 21 or older reported alcopops as the type of alcoholic beverage they drank least often.

California youth share the perception that alcopops are more attractive to girls than boys. The perception that alcopops are for or preferred by girls was a consistent theme across the groups. Participants sometimes explicitly indicated that alcopops are not for boys, suggesting that their may be some stigma attached to these drinks among males, especially older teen males (see below). Alcopops are “chicks beer’ not heavy duty stuff.” In several cases, alcopops were considered “fancy” beverages “like something Carrie Bradshaw (HBO’s *Sex in the City* character) would drink”. In the discussions, the appeal of alcopops to girls was linked back to issues of taste, strength, and attractiveness of packaging.

- **Younger Teens.** Among teens who are current drinkers, 78.5% of eighth-graders, 71.3% of 10th-graders, and 64.8% of 12th-graders reported drinking alcopops in the past month.⁸ These data clearly suggest that alcopops have their highest relative popularity among younger teens, and that youth transition to other alcoholic beverages as they get older. There was a strong consensus among California youth that alcopops were most targeted at the youngest teens. However, this was seen as primarily true for boys. Group participants perceived that older boys were less attracted to alcopops, while older girls still found them appealing.

⁷ Layman, M. *Alcopop drinks lure young adults*. Spectator Online. Seattle University. Jan 21, 2005. <http://www.spectator-online.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2005/01/21/41f0b8efb7d00>

⁸ These figures are derived from MTF data by dividing the % of teens reporting last month alcopops use by the % of teens reporting any alcohol use. Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2005). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2004. Volume I: Secondary school students* (NIH Publication No. 05-5727). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, Table 4-7, p. 126.

- **Light drinkers.** Another widely held perception among our group participants was that alcopops are most popular for youth who are “light” drinkers, or who do not want to get drunk. Examples of these kinds of comments include.

- *Drink (alcopops) to relax, don't want to get too drunk*
- *Drink (alcopops) at the river where you don't want to get too drunk*
- *Most alcopops are very popular because it doesn't have any effect and it is like a soft drink.*
- *You can't really feel it. I mean you can feel it slowly, but not really*
- *Teens drink to get drunk so they choose the hard stuff (not these) if they want to get messed up.*

This theme was consistent, and respondents referenced the idea of not getting “drunk” or “buzzed” or gaining a “slow” or low grade “buzz” from consuming alcopops. This type of effect was considered desirable for casual social gatherings or “fancy” social events (as opposed to occasions of “wild” parties or for drinking to get “wasted”).

A corollary of these perceptions is that alcopops are not as appealing to those teens who are interested in getting drunk.

How do California youth get alcopops?

There was broad consensus among California youth across the groups that alcopops are “easy to get.” Teens have a similar perception about alcohol of any kind, but the groups consistently mentioned some attributes of alcopops that make them even easier to access.

- **Considered to be “lighter.”** Youth repeatedly referenced the idea that because alcopops are “lighter” store clerks and family-run convenience stores were more willing to sell them to underage youth, adults (over 21 years of age) would more readily purchase them on youths’ behalf, or parents were more willing to provide them for youths’ consumption.
- **Less concern about security.** Whether true or not, youth conveyed the impression that alcopops could be stolen more easily because there was less security related to them than to other forms of liquor. Some participants perceived it to be less difficult to acquire them in the home environment because parents were less concerned about them as alcoholic drinks.

Overall, these findings create an image of youth taking advantage of the alcopop reputation as a “fun”, “light”, “kiddie” drink in order to obtain them from consenting or tacitly consenting adults. This theme suggests that the perception of alcopops as less harmful or something other than traditional alcoholic beverages is widespread and not limited to youth.

Conclusion

These youth-led focus groups provide important insights into the role of alcopops in underage drinking in California. Important implications of what these youth told us include the following.

- California youth are very aware of alcopops as a distinct type of alcoholic beverage. This awareness is fueled by advertising as well as peer interaction, and the youth are very familiar with the youth-oriented appeals of the alcopops advertisements, particularly on television.
- California youth share perceptions of what makes alcopops different than other alcoholic beverages. They are seen as palatable and sweet, easy to drink, easier to conceal physically and after consumption than other alcoholic drinks, and they are often seen as producing a “buzz” that is easier to control and less dangerous than other alcoholic beverages.
- California youth agree that alcopops are more appealing to girls than to boys, that they are more appealing to younger teens (though this is mostly true for boys), and that they are more appealing to lighter drinkers.
- California youth agree that alcopops are more available, and that the adult perception that they are less serious as alcoholic beverages makes them easier to obtain through a variety of methods.

Taken together, the perceptions of these youth suggest that alcopops fill a specific niche in underage drinking in California. This niche has three primary components. First, alcopops are a “transitional” drink that appeals to inexperienced and younger drinkers because of its non-alcoholic taste and ease of drinking. The potential here is to encourage younger drinking, and to remove initiation difficulties associated with taste and harshness. Many young drinkers of alcopops may transition to other alcoholic drinks that are more amenable to binge drinking and other high risk drinking behaviors. Second, alcopops appeal to youth who do not wish to be associated with “hard” drinking but who seek the social acceptance of light drinking. In this case, alcopops may make underage drinking more appealing to some youth. Finally, alcopops suit the tastes of some teen drinkers, particularly girls, who prefer their taste and image. These drinkers will also tend to transition to other alcoholic beverages in their adult years.

These results provide a more in depth picture of the appeals of alcopops to California’s youth, the motivations of California youth to use alcopops, and the contribution of these beverages to underage drinking. This understanding, developed through the involvement of California youth themselves, provides a basis for prevention planners and public policy makers who are concerned with underage drinking in our state.

Appendix One
Summary of Location and Size of Alcopops Youth Focus Groups

ID	County	Middle School	High School	# Groups	# Youth
1	Alameda		X	4	25
2	Contra Costa	X	X	4	25
3	Del Norte	X	X	3	21
4	Fresno		X	2	21
5	Kern		X	4	31
6	Marin		X	1	4
7	Monterey		X	2	17
8	Orange		X	2	19
9	Placer		X	1	5
10	Sacramento	X	X	5	41
11	San Diego	X	X	3	31
12	San Mateo		X	3	13
13	Santa Cruz	X	X	4	26
14	Sutter-Yuba	X		1	8
15	Trinity		X	1	5
16	Ventura	X	X	1	12
				41	304