

2009

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Recommended Citation

Bryant, Donald Tex (2009) "An Effective Alcohol Prevention Program in Kent County, Michigan," *Michigan Journal of Public Health*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mjph/vol3/iss2/8>

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

An Effective Alcohol Prevention Program in Kent County, Michigan

Donald Tex Bryant

ABSTRACT:

Over a two year period the “Making Sobriety Attractive” program directed by Alert Labs has significantly decreased the use of alcohol and marijuana at a high school in Kent County, Michigan. The program uses an environmental approach by placing posters with messages that correct students’ misperceptions of alcohol and drug use at their school with the correct data about the actual use of these substances. The figures for the actual use are drawn from an annual survey of the students. As students begin to accept the messages about the actual use of illegal substances, their own use declines as they want to be like the majority of students who do not drink or use marijuana at their school.

In most surveys, whether national, statewide or local, the illegal substance most used by teenagers of high school age (13-18) is alcohol. In the State of Michigan according to the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)¹ 43% of high school students have had at least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days. In the same survey, 25% reported binge drinking (having 5 or more drinks in a two hour period) in the past 30 days. Needless to say, the illegal consumption of alcohol, which often leads to negative consequences, such as driving under the influence, is a serious problem for high school youth in Michigan. In the 2007 YRBS 9% of students reported driving under the influence of alcohol in the past 30 days.

An effective alcohol and other drug prevention program managed by Alert Labs, “Making Sobriety Attractive,” has demonstrated that it has significantly lowered the use of alcohol at a high school in Kent County, Michigan over a two year period. The core of the program is an environmental communication campaign based on a social norms strategy which addresses the students in the high school. The program was first effectively used at Grand Valley State University.

If you are not familiar with the social norms approach, let me illustrate the basic principal of the strategy with a story taken from my own experience:

This past Christmas I was at my granddaughter’s home listening to a conversation between my granddaughter and her dad, my son. They were discussing what she wanted for Christmas that year. She stated clearly that she wanted an iPod.

He replied, “Oh, you want an MP3 player.”

“No,” she stated. “I want an iPod.”



He then asked why it had to be an iPod and not another brand of MP3 player, which was just as good and a lot cheaper.

She stated, “Well everyone has an iPod and I want one too, just like everyone else.”

The main point of this story is that my granddaughter perceived that all the other kids with MP3 players had iPods and that she wanted to be like them. Whether she was right or not about most others owning an iPod doesn't matter! She believed they did and she wanted one. The prevention strategy of the “Making Sobriety Attractive” campaign recognizes that high school students' perceptions about the amount of alcohol that is consumed by their peers at their high school is similar to my granddaughter's perception that all students with MP3 players had iPods. Most students want to be like the majority of their peers. If they believe that the majority drink alcohol, then they believe they should drink also. In fact, though, in the average high school in Michigan the majority of students abstain from the use of alcohol, as shown in the statistics above.

The “Making Sobriety Attractive” campaign corrects this misperception by the use of evidence gathered at the school. By demonstrating that the majority of students at the high school abstain from the use of the alcohol, then the actual use rate declines as the correct norm becomes accepted at the school. That is, students want to be like the majority and if they come to recognize that the majority do not consume alcohol, then more and more choose not to drink. The percentage who drink at a high school begins to decline over time as the correct norm replaces the misperception.

As stated above the “Making Sobriety Attractive” program has made effective use of this strategy and the statistics support its effectiveness. At the high school mentioned above, over a two year period, the percent of students who have used alcohol in the past 30 days has decreased 19.1%. The percent who have used marijuana in the past 30 days has decreased 17.3%. Binge drinking has dropped 16.6%. At the same time, the misperception of alcohol and marijuana use changed by 8.0% and 10.5% respectively. The decrease in last 30-day alcohol use is statistically significant (at the 5% level of significance).

The “Making Sobriety Attractive” program has two primary components—a poster campaign which highlights statistics about the positive social norms concerning alcohol and drug use and an annual survey of students which collects statistics to be used in the poster campaign. The MSA staff provides the high school staff with 9 different posters to be put up in the school over the course of the school year. There are enough copies of each of the 9 posters to place one in each classroom and in halls and other places students gather. Each month a new poster is put up by a staff member at the targeted school.

A sample of the poster is shown as Figure 1. Notice several features about the poster. First, the poster is attractive to students. The posters used in the campaign have been vetted by a focus group of students to be sure that they will draw the students' attention. Secondly, two prominent statistics appear—one shows the students' misperception and the other shows the correct statistic, the actual result of measuring alcohol use. Instead of stating that 36% drink alcohol at



the school, a positive statement is made about the percent who did not use alcohol in the past 30 days. This figure corrects the misperception. Social norms prevention theory stresses that a positive rebuttal be used. Teens tend to dismiss negative statements about behavior and will change their behavior when given positive statements about the majority of their peers. The social norm approach works best with students who are not heavy drinkers, those who drink alcohol 6 or more times in a 30 day period, although even some of this group will significantly decrease their drinking behavior.

Figure 1



Another important piece of information is also found on every poster used by Alert Labs in the “Making Sobriety Attractive” campaign—the source of the data. As you can see in Figure 1 the statement at the bottom of the poster states that the statistics came from the students themselves, from a survey taken by the students, usually in the spring before the current school year. It is very important for any effective social norms campaign to use local data. If data from the State of Michigan YRBS survey had been used instead, then it would be easy for students at the school where the campaign is underway to dismiss the facts as coming from students at other high schools and therefore is not at all “like us.” As stated, every poster uses data generated from surveys taken by students at the school where the campaign is underway. (You can see other samples of posters at <http://alertlabs.org>.)

The second primary component of the “Making Sobriety Attractive” campaign is the annual survey of students. Each spring students are surveyed about their use of alcohol and other drugs and about their perceptions of others use of these substances. The others include friends,



students in general and parents. The survey has approximately 80 questions and is adapted from a survey developed by Linda Lederman, et al, at Rutgers University. The questions on that survey have been modified over time and adapted for high school use as it was originally developed for college students. A version of the high school survey is available on the Alert Labs website.

The survey is given before spring break at the school as the data gathered then for the past 30 days use of alcohol and other illegal substances is more representative of student behavior throughout the school year. Data collected after spring break tends to be skewed higher as there is an overall increase in the consumption of alcohol during spring break. The survey is taken by the majority of students at the school; students may opt out if they do not wish to take the survey. At the high schools with which Alert Labs works the survey is taken on one day by all the students; it is usually taken in English class as all students must take English each year.

We at Alert Labs believe that the results of the surveys are accurate. Studies in social norm theory, especially in regard to self-assessment of alcohol use, have indicated if the correct steps are followed, then the results will be accurate. A description of the steps to follow are listed by Dr. H. Wesley Perkins of Hobert and William Smith College in the first issue of *The Social Norms Review*ⁱⁱ. One challenge in the survey is to eliminate liars. To eliminate liars affecting the results, a question or two is inserted each year which clearly identifies student responses as either truthful or not. Also, care is taken during the analysis of the data that each student's replies are consistent. Those who are identified as not being truthful or who are inconsistent with their answers have their answers removed from the data.

The data is primarily analyzed for statistics to be used in the posters for the coming year. Alert Labs retains a statistician (the author of this paper) to provide deeper analysis of the data. This analysis is used to sharpen the focus of the social norms campaign each year. For instance, if the use of marijuana by the students is not changing as anticipated, then deeper analysis may reveal why and how to adjust campaign messages in order to achieve better results.

Because Alert Lab's "Making Sobriety Attractive" campaign is funded by a Drug Free Communities grant, Alert Labs is able to offer other free services at the high schools which it serves. One of these is the STARR program, a brief intervention program (adapted from SAMHSA's BASICS program) for students who are identified as having alcohol or other drug problems that are resulting in disciplinary or other consequences. The intervention is led by a specialist in alcohol and drug prevention and treatment. Most of the students are referred to him by administrators at the schools for breaches of drug policy at the school. Some of the students in the program are self-referred or referred by a school counselor, friend or parent. The sessions occur over four visits of approximately one hour each scheduled at the school which the student attends.

As stated earlier, the high school campaign is an outgrowth of a similar successful program at Grand Valley State University. The Executive Director of Alert Labs, Dr. Nancy Harper, also led the program at the university from 1999 to 2006. Between 1999 and 2002 data gathered from a random sample of students at the university indicated that binge drinking declined 39.5% and



abstention increased 30.4%. Drinking moderately or abstaining increased to 78.7% in that time frame, an increase of 25.4% from the baseline measurement. Alert Labs expects similar results at the high schools that it serves as the length of time spent at each school increases.

The use of alcohol by teens is the most significant of all illegal drugs used by teens in Michigan and often leads to serious consequences. “Making Sobriety Attractive” is an effective environmental prevention program which significantly reduces the use of alcohol and other illegal drugs, as demonstrated by the data listed before. Its main components are the use of a poster campaign populated with data gathered from an annual survey of students.

Alert Labs is branching out beyond the schools that it serves through the Drug Free Communities grant. For instance, it has a client which is a non-profit agency that is implementing the “Making Sobriety Attractive” campaign at a high school in the state of Washington. If you have an interest in implementing the program at a high school or a college please contact Dr. Nancy Harper or Shannon Welsh, the project manager, through the Alert Labs website. You may also contact the author of this article (see below in the author’s box) for more information.

ⁱ Michigan YRBS Reports, “2007 Michigan YRBS Report,” Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey, <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/YRBS/2007/2007-Alcohol%20and%20Other%20Drug%20Use.pdf>, accessed July 11, 2009

ⁱⁱ Dr. H. Wesley Perkins, “Critical Concerns for Evaluating Social Norms Interventions with Survey Data,” *The Social Norms Review*, 1 no. 1, page 1

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Donald Tex Bryant helps health care providers meet their challenges. If you want more information about meeting the challenges of providing quality health care or more about prevention services, visit www.bryantsstatisticalconsulting.com for a free report and links to other articles that Mr. Bryant has written.

