

Prevention Research Center

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Young people able to buy beer at stores even without proper ID, new study finds

Grocery, convenience store clerks fail most often to ask for proof of age

BERKELEY – Clerks at grocery and convenience stores were more likely to sell alcohol to a young person without asking for an ID than other stores, according to a recent statewide study. In fact, convenience stores throughout Oregon sold alcohol 38 percent of the time to a young-looking 21-year-old who attempted to purchase beer without an ID card.

Liquor stores and drug stores fared the best, only selling alcohol 14 percent of the time without asking for identification. The study also found the decoys were less likely to be able to purchase alcohol at stores participating in the Oregon Liquor Control Commission's Responsible Vendor Program. The study, published in the journal *Prevention Science*, was conducted in 45 Oregon communities in 2005 by PIRE's Prevention Research Center and the Oregon Research Institute.

"This research points the way to more effective strategies for reducing sales of alcohol to minors. For example, law enforcement agents should carry out more frequent compliance checks at the types of outlets that are most likely to sell alcohol to underage patrons," said Mallie J. Paschall, Ph.D. and lead author of the study. "Programs like the Responsible Vendor Program may have a positive impact on protecting our young people. Age 21 laws are effective, but they require that the adults who regulate, manage and sell in alcohol outlets all do their jobs."

The research study used underage-looking decoys who were, in fact, 21 years old, but did not carry age identification. These decoys attempted to purchase beer at 385 different stores and were

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successful 34 percent of the time. Purchase rates were highest at convenience stores and grocery stores, 38 and 34 percent respectively, but were relatively low – 14 percent – at liquor and drug stores.

Stores participating in the Oregon Responsible Vendor Program were less likely to sell to minors, the study found. One-third of the outlets were participating in the program at the time of the study. Under this program, new store staff read and sign a brochure, *What Every Store Clerk Needs to Know About Selling Alcohol*, store owners or managers provide at least four employee trainings on responsible alcohol sales each year, stores have a written alcohol sales policy that all staff read and sign, and stores post a warning sign regarding the minimum legal drinking age and the store's alcohol sales policy. Additionally, the RVP offers incentives for participating outlets, such as reduced sanctions for selling to underage buyers.

“Researchers, policy makers, and safety experts agree that the 21 drinking age law has been effective in reducing deaths and injuries and other alcohol related problems among young people,” Paschall said. “But making the law most effective requires implementation and enforcement. This study provides insight into how prevention and enforcement efforts can be more effectively focused.”

The communities in Oregon ranged in size from 150 to 53,000. Young-appearing adults were recruited through newspaper classified advertisements. Photographs of potential buyers were reviewed by three people who work with youth, and the age appearance of the three females and two males hired was estimated to be between 18 and 19 years. Their appearance in the photographs was judged to be consistent with their appearance in person so that it was clear that sales clerks should be asking for ID. They attempted to purchase a six-pack of light beer, and when asked for identification said they did not have it with them. They answered truthfully when clerks asked their age.

Stores clerks who asked for proof of age were less likely to sell to the decoy. Alcohol was purchased by decoys in 99 percent of the outlets where proof of age was *not* requested, but in only 13 percent of the outlets where proof of age was requested. In addition, alcohol outlets with a relatively large number of salesclerks were less likely to sell alcohol to an underage-looking decoy.

PIRE, or Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, is a national nonprofit public health research institute with centers in eight U.S. cities that is supported primarily by federal and state research and program funds. For more information or to obtain a copy of this published study, contact Michelle Blackston at (301) 755-2444.

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