



Enforcing Underage Drinking Laws (EUDL) Program Implications from EUDL Project Evaluations

Over the past 12 years, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has dedicated part of its Enforcing Underage Drinking Laws (EUDL) funding to evaluate EUDL programs that use environmental strategies to curtail underage drinking. Although “cause and effect” conclusions are difficult to assert in this kind of action research, the findings by researchers thus far are valuable to communities that are endeavoring to promote behavioral change in underage drinking prevention.

BLOCK GRANT PROJECT

The first EUDL evaluations involved the early block grant programs that received funding and technical assistance in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Four years of block grant program outcomes were formally evaluated by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine. Mark Wolfson and colleagues reported that, because of EUDL efforts, most states showed a noticeable increase in collaboration between existing substance abuse agencies and law enforcement agencies. As part of EUDL, most states conducted educational initiatives targeting underage drinking laws and substantially increased enforcement focused on youth. Communities used compliance checks more extensively, which resulted in an improvement in the rates of compliance by merchants. Additionally, the evidence showed short-term changes in youth behavior, particularly in reduced driving after drinking. Further, there was a greater perception of the consequences for underage drinking and provision of alcohol to minors.

COMMUNITY TRIALS PROJECT

The Community Trials Initiative was one of the first targeted discretionary programs to be evaluated. This initiative promoted the use of identified best practices and evidence-based strategies to reduce underage drinking. For research purposes, 14 communities in each of the five states were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the comparison group. Intervention sites were provided training and technical assistance and implemented program strategies through local coalitions and strategic plans, which included compliance checks, driving-while-intoxicated (DWI) enforcement, enforcement to reduce social availability, and educational outreach for policy changes. The evaluation showed that, in the pilot communities, law enforcement agencies had a truer picture of the level of community support for the enforcement of underage drinking laws compared to control communities. Enforcement in intervention communities also achieved statistically higher rates of compliance checks and party patrols than did control communities. Of the intervention communities, 85 percent (29 communities) improved local policies, compared with only three comparison sites. Six of these improvements were in social host policies and four were in tougher minor-in-possession laws. Over the 4 years of the demonstration program, a repeated survey conducted with law enforcement showed a 12 to 14 percent improved commitment to enforcing underage drinking laws with 87 percent of police officers being supportive. Some implications of the research and suggestions shared by Mark Wolfson of Wake Forest University School of Medicine and lead evaluator of the Communities Trials Initiative include:

- Carefully study and evaluate the nature of the underage drinking problem in your community. This improves the selection of evidence-based strategies that are a good fit with local conditions. There is room for innovation; however, the time for using strategies where there is evidence of ineffectiveness is long past (e.g., fatal vision goggles).
- Implement strategies fully and with fidelity to research-based practices. While considering local conditions, it is also important to pay attention to what is known through research about how strategies need to be implemented to maximize their effectiveness.
- Pay attention to sustainability. Ensure your EUDL accomplishments are sustained by having a plan to maintain funding and by attending to data collection and reporting. Policy changes may support long-term changes in the ways that States and localities can address underage drinking.

RURAL DISCRETIONARY PROJECT

Rural areas were evaluated in the OJJDP-funded Rural Discretionary project in collaboration with the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Although the results of this evaluation are not yet available, Dr. Robert Saltz, investigator and lead evaluator, shared some of the challenges of implementation and evaluation in rural communities. Implications of the research for rural communities include:

- Expend the resources and effort to recruit and retain qualified staff. Offer training as needed. Project coordinators need a clear understanding of the relationship between collecting outcome data and choosing strategies aligned with defined needs to the project.
- In interpreting data for rural areas, understand that communities with small populations and proportionally small numbers of harms related to underage drinking can pose methodological challenges in measurement and interpreting the effectiveness and trends.
- An implementation challenge for rural communities is that there seems to be a higher level of familiarity among all the residents of a town, which can work either in favor of or in conflict with EUDL goals. For example, underage decoys may not work as well if the decoys are known to the sellers, whereas unknown decoys may raise a higher level of suspicion than would be experienced by retailers in urban areas.

“An environmental approach, one that emphasizes macro- or system-level entities such as policy influences, establishments that serve alcohol, and cultures or social networks that perpetuate attitudes or behaviors toward drinking causing changes at the macro level—such as decreasing access to alcoholic beverages by those younger than age 21—produce changes in individual behavior. Implications from this work include the suggestion that there be a standardized system for local law enforcement to record and report to military bases all incidents including arrests and citations that involve military personnel across 50 states. Collaboration between base commanders and community coalitions as well as between base and community enforcement are critical.”
(Spera et al., 2010)

MILITARY DISCRETIONARY PROJECT

Under the military discretionary program, policy changes and increased enforcement operations at five Air Force Installations and adjacent communities in four States (Arizona, California, Hawaii, and Montana) have helped to reduce underage drinking and its attendant behaviors, thereby improving military readiness and the health and safety of airmen. Six core EUDL environmental strategies were implemented at each intervention site: (1) enforcement aimed at reducing social availability; (2) compliance checks of liquor retail establishments to reduce commercial availability; (3) impaired-driving enforcement through increased driving-under-the-influence (DUI) checkpoints; (4) local policy development; (5) community-based media campaign and awareness of binge drinking; and (6) alternative alcohol-free activities.

Outputs and outcomes from the five sites studied showed:

- Enforcement activities to reduce underage access to alcohol increased by over 900 percent.
- Enforcement actions of impaired-driving laws increased by 1500 percent.
- Eighty percent of the communities implemented policies, programs, and campaigns to deter underage access and availability.
- Non-alcohol-related activities increased more than fivefold.
- Those communities where the core activities were fully implemented experienced 7 percent to 14 percent reductions among airmen in propensity for problem drinking.
- This study suggests that interventions contributed to a comprehensive strategy toward changing a culture of drinking in the community.
- In general, the more environmental activities that a community coalition implemented, the greater the positive outcomes.
- Evaluators suggested the expansion of this program to other military-base communities. The evaluation of the expansion is currently underway.

SUMMARY

One of the themes that is repeated throughout these various program evaluations is the importance of skilled community wide coordination of available prevention partners and key institutions with law enforcement. This is often accomplished by establishing a coalition and consistent community education about the underage drinking laws and their consequences targeted to various constituencies and decision makers. In addition, a strategic plan is needed that aligns strategies with the intervening variables (environmental factors, such as alcohol density, service hours, and social access) and policies that effect underage drinking. Visible, well-communicated, and consistent enforcement of ordinances and laws is critical. Sustainability of EUDL efforts will be accomplished through States and communities sharing what they have learned, through challenges and successes, and through continued collaborations between partnering agencies. The translation of research-based strategies to practice in alignment with careful community assessment and the understanding that each community has both commonalities and uniqueness will continue to advance the field.

To read more about the studies on which this paper is based and find other research based resources on deterring underage drinking please visit <http://www.UDETC.org/research/evaluation>.

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