Perceptions of Underage Drinkers by Bartenders in a Midwestern University Town

Michael J. Swanson, BS; Katherine Plominski, JD; Megan A. Moreno, MD, MSEd, MPH

ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol consumption by Wisconsin college students is associated with both morbidity and mortality; underage bar access is a significant contributor to this problem. This two-part study will review strategies used by the city of Madison to reduce underage drinking in bars and will introduce pilot data exploring bartenders as potential partners in prevention.

Methods: First, data and strategies from the City of Madison Office of the Mayor regarding underage drinking were reviewed. Second, a convenience sample of 15 employed bartenders completed a one-on-one interview. Questions explored bartenders’ views regarding identifying and serving underage patrons. Data were collected via written notes and analyzed by all authors to obtain thematic consensus.

Results: Current Madison underage drinking prevention efforts focus on enforcement, alcohol establishment licensing and bartender training. Citation data suggests prevention efforts have decreased individual and increased bar citations. Bartender interview data revealed 3 major themes: (1) Bartenders felt they could identify underage patrons; (2) Bartenders were not concerned with legal or employment ramifications regarding serving an underage patron; (3) Bartenders described barriers to participation in prevention.

Conclusion: Additional opportunities for prevention efforts exist. Further research should consider strategies to change local policies, modify bartenders’ work environments, and establish motivators for bartender prevention participation.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive research has shown that college students under the age of 21 are at an elevated risk for “widespread, dangerous and disruptive” levels of alcohol consumption. Approximately 60% of college students consumed alcohol, and over a third of these students reported drinking more than 10 times in the last month. Although colleges devote many resources toward the prevention of problem alcohol use, alcohol-related harm among college students remains a significant national problem. Wisconsin has the second highest rate in the nation of underage binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as consuming more than 5 drinks for males and more than 4 drinks for females in a single drinking session. Alcohol consumption data from 2009 on the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) campus suggests 43.2% of the undergraduate population drink at binge levels. Additionally, 42.8% of students reported doing something they regret due to drinking, 40.5% could not remember what they did while drinking, and 28.2% missed class due to drinking.

The impact of underage college drinking is felt both on the local UW-Madison campus and in the surrounding community. Environmental aspects of college towns, such as bar-saturated streets and perceived ease of bar access, has been suggested as a catalyst that allows college students to drink to dangerous levels. Areas within the immediate vicinity of the UW-Madison campus, defined as having a population of individuals ages 15-24 as greater than 50% of the population, has an outstanding prevalence of alcohol-serving establishments. Over 100 businesses within this targeted area have a license to serve alcohol. These licenses combine to legally be able to serve over 12,000 individuals at any one time in an area with a 2005 population of roughly 16,000. The highest density of these establishments is in the State Street and Langdon Street areas. In 2003, 73% of incidents reported in this area included bat-
tery, fights, disturbances, and liquor law violations, all of which were believed to have been alcohol-related.10

The city of Madison currently uses several strategies to reduce underage drinking. These strategies include giving citations for alcohol-related infractions (current infraction data for the city of Madison is provided in Table 1). Another strategy is to reduce illegal admittance of underage patrons to bars. The role of bartenders in efforts to reduce underage drinking remains unexplored. The purpose of this study was to understand the bartenders’ perceptions and attitudes of underage drinking.

**METHODS**

**Study Setting**

One-to-one interviews were conducted between June and August 2009 at public spaces near the UW-Madison campus. The UW-Madison Institutional review Board (IRB) approved this study. Due to the potential for illegal behavior disclosure during the interviews, the IRB permitted only limited demographic data collection and allowed only written notes as documentation during interviews.

**Participants**

Inclusion criteria limited subjects to bartenders over age 18 years currently employed within a 3-mile radius of the UW-Madison campus. Recruitment was done via flyers posted on the UW-Madison campus and word of mouth. Bartenders contacted research staff to be included in the study. No incentive was provided to participants.

**Interview**

Interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. All interviews were conducted with 1 author (MS), using a semi-structured format. Participants were asked to discuss their perceptions and interactions with underage patrons at their respective bar establishments. (See Table 2 for question examples.) Written notes were taken during all interviews.

**Analysis**

Written notes were typed and reviewed by 3 raters. Data were first examined by each individual rater, then reviewed to determine consensus among all 3 raters. All quotes included below are revised to protect confidentiality.

**RESULTS**

Fifteen bartenders were interviewed. Three common themes were derived from the data: (1) Bartenders expressed confidence in their ability to identify underage patrons. (2) Bartenders were unaware of and unconcerned about legal ramifications of serving an underage patron. (3) Bartenders identified several barriers to their participation in prevention efforts.

**Theme 1: Confidence**

The majority of bartenders expressed confidence in their ability to identify underage patrons. Bartenders who had more experience felt they could identify underage patrons with more accuracy. There were several ways in which bartenders described identification of underage patrons. First, bartenders described identification of underage patrons as more likely to order certain drinks. Bartenders said underage drinkers were less likely to order wine or beer and often ordered unusual cocktails such as “vodka and Coke” or ordered multiple drinks at once.

Second, bartenders identified underage patrons as more likely to order certain drinks. Bartenders said underage drinkers were less likely to order wine or beer and often ordered unusual cocktails such as “vodka and Coke” or ordered multiple drinks at once.

Third, underage patrons were more likely to pay in cash. One bartender mentioned the use of name-matching on a credit or debit card as a means to validate an
It is not my job to check IDs, I serve drinks.

Last, bartenders believed younger physical appearance was a reliable indicator of underage status. Two participants described the younger appearance as: “They congregate in corners and look out of place.”

Theme 2: Legal Ramifications
The majority of bartender participants could not cite specific laws or regulations pertaining to knowingly serving an underage patron. Many bartenders felt legal ramifications, if cited, would be directed to the bar owner. This idea was expressed by 1 study participant who said: “I can’t get in trouble with the police because I can deny knowing they were not 21...It is not my job to check IDs, I serve drinks.”

Bartenders who were aware of possible legal ramifications felt that denying knowledge of the patron’s age constituted sufficient legal protection. Some bartenders did recognize a concern for job loss if the bar owner became aware of serving underage patrons but felt confident in deniability if confronted.

Theme 3: Barriers to Participation in Prevention
Bartenders were asked about barriers to their participation in underage drinking prevention. They mentioned that lower light level, massive crowds, loud music, and rowdy patrons combined to hinder efforts for reducing underage alcohol consumption. This feeling was expressed by 1 study participant who said: “I just don’t care about not serving them, because my only job is to serve as many customers as possible.” No consensus could be achieved among the participants regarding the type of regulations or interventions that could assist prevention efforts. Many bartenders said that they felt it was simply not their duty to question the age of a patron. One study participant said: “It is not my job to stop underage drinking; if they got in, then I serve them as fast as possible.” Additionally, bartenders cited the need to serve a large volume of drinks to maximize tip profits.

CONCLUSION
Current data suggest a decline in underage citations reported by the City of Madison Police Department, but underage alcohol consumption rates in Madison are still among the highest in the nation. This high level of consumption continues to lead to risky behaviors that have negative personal, community, and university ramifications. Currently, campus health services have shown success using motivational interviewing, diary cards, and take-home exercises to reduce dangerous drinking.11–14 Despite current efforts and advances, more opportunities exist to reduce underage drinking in bars. This study identified bartenders as a unique population who believe they can identify underage drinkers but are unmotivated to prevent their consumption of alcohol and are unconcerned about legal or employment consequences of serving alcohol to this population. It is possible that new efforts toward improving bartenders’ knowledge of potential legal ramifications, perhaps through increased development of education training programs and increased expectations for bartender licensing, may increase bartenders’ willingness to assist in prevention efforts. Current research indicates legal-age students who provide alcohol to minors would reconsider their behaviors if legal consequences were heightened; suggesting the same to bartenders may result in a similar reaction.15

In addition, current state and Madison municipal laws have inconsistencies, which may impact bartenders’ ability to participate in efforts to reduce underage drinking in bars. First, Wisconsin state law does not directly address the issue of sobriety requirements for bartenders, while Madison municipal law states that bartenders may drink while serving but cannot be legally intoxicated. A bartender who has been drinking during a work shift may be less likely to identify or intervene with an underage patron trying to drink in his or her establishment. Second, Wisconsin state law does not require a licensed bartender at each serving location in a multi-location establishment. Specifically, this state law does not require the licensed bartender to be present at the serving location; the licensed individual potentially could be in an office and unable to supervise unlicensed bartenders. Finally, no state or municipal laws require the use of identification scanners, a technological tool used to verify the authenticity of a state-issued identification (ID). These tools help reduce the number of underage patrons getting into bars by removing the subjectivity of a bar doorman’s ID inspection.

There are several limitations to this study. First, our study was intended to focus on 1 university community; university-specific norms of alcohol consumption and campus environments should be considered when interpreting this data. Second, our sample size was small and likely featured selection bias in that bartenders who volunteered for this study may have had differ-
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