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Teens Buy Fewer Sugary Drinks at School When States Ban All Sugar-Sweetened Beverages, Not Just Sodas

Even the most comprehensive school beverage policies had mixed results on teens' overall consumption of sugary drinks

Chicago, November 7, 2011 – Middle school students buy fewer sugary drinks at school only when state policies prohibit schools from selling all sugar-sweetened beverages, according to a study published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. States that ban only sodas have the same effect as states that allow all sugar-sweetened beverages when it comes to limiting teens' purchases at school.

This is the first major study to examine the impact of state laws and regulations on students' in-school purchases and overall consumption of sugary drinks.

“We found that banning only sodas does nothing to stop kids from buying sugary drinks at school,” said lead author Daniel Taber, PhD, MPH, an investigator with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study. “Only when sales of all sugar-sweetened beverages—sodas, sports drinks and fruit drinks—were prohibited, did we see fewer students buying such drinks at school.”

Researchers analyzed state laws and regulations governing the sale of beverages in middle schools for the 2006–07 school year. They also tracked students from 2003–04 to 2006–07 to assess their access to sugar-sweetened beverages in school; in-school purchases of such drinks; and overall consumption, both during and outside of the school day. During the study period, most students progressed from fifth to eighth grade.

In states that banned only soda and states that had no school beverage policy at all, about two-thirds of eighth-grade students had access to sugary drinks at school, and slightly fewer than 30 percent purchased such beverages at school during 2006–07. Even in states that banned all sugar-sweetened beverages and allowed only milk, water and 100% juice—52 percent of eighth-grade students had access to sugary drinks at school, and 20 percent purchased such beverages at school. While in-school access to sugary beverages was significantly lower in states that banned all sugar-sweetened beverages, it is unclear why such drinks were still available on campus. According to Taber, it may be due to inaccurate student reports or schools' lack of compliance with state laws, but more research is needed to determine the cause.

The researchers found mixed results when they examined the impact of such policies on the total amount of sugary drinks teens consumed both during and outside of school. In 2006–07, about 85 percent of eighth-grade students reported consuming sugary drinks at least once per week regardless of state beverage policy, but more students reported frequent consumption (at least daily) in states that banned all sugar-sweetened beverages than in states that had no school beverage policy.

For those students who reported losing access to sugar-sweetened beverages at school during the three-year study period, there was a slight decrease in the percentage who reported consuming sugary drinks infrequently (at least once weekly), but a slight increase in the percentage who reported consuming one or more drinks per day. Because the study analyzed the number of students who reported daily consumption and not the actual number of servings consumed each day, the authors cannot conclude whether students' average daily servings increased or declined.

“This study tells us that it will take comprehensive beverage policies to create a healthier school environment and decrease the amount of sugary beverages students purchase at school,” said Frank Chaloupka, PhD, co-director of Bridging the Gap. “At the same time, it underscores the importance of policies that extend beyond schools to discourage consumption of sugary beverages—and encourage children to purchase and drink healthy beverages, like water, low-fat milk and 100% juice.”

[Previous research](#) shows that the average teenager consumes roughly 300 calories per day (or 13 percent of total daily calories) from sugar-sweetened beverages. It also shows that drinking sugary beverages leads to higher overall caloric intake and greater risk for being overweight or obese. In 2007, the Institute of Medicine recommended that all sugar-sweetened beverages be banned in schools to prevent health problems.

Taber and colleagues conclude broader policies that could reduce consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages outside of school, such as sugar-sweetened beverage taxes and regulations of food marketing aimed at children, are needed to help improve children's overall health.

To examine the impact of different types of state beverage policies on U.S. middle school students, researchers used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class for 2003–04 and 2006–07 to track a sample of approximately 7,000 students in 40 states from fifth to eighth grade.

The article, “Banning all sugar-sweetened beverages in middle schools reduces in-school access and purchasing but not overall consumption” was co-authored by Jamie F. Chriqui, Lisa M. Powell and Frank J. Chaloupka.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

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