



September 2021 Newsletter

The Critical Importance of Research for Alcohol Regulation An Interview with Steve Schmidt By Pamela Erickson

Most of us know that research is critical for good alcohol policy, but accessing and understanding research is easier said than done. Oftentimes, research findings are written in "academic language" making it difficult to understand the practical uses of such findings. And, how would a lay person know if the research is good or not? And, what if there is no research available or very dated research?

To answer some of these questions, I interviewed Steve Schmidt, Senior Vice President for Public Policy and Communications at the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association since 2006. (NABCA is an association of "Control States" which comprise 17 states and several municipalities that own part of the alcohol business.) Before working at NABCA, Steve was Director, of the Bureau of Adult Education for the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board for 12 years. In these roles, he has developed a deep understanding for the importance of research for sound alcohol policy.

According to Steve, research will help policy-makers achieve the right balance. When contemplating a new policy or revising an existing one, you often get different perspectives from public health and industry lobbyists. So how do you decide who is right? How do you find the facts? It's research that will help.

Research can determine if the particular policy has consequences and the magnitude of those consequences. Will it increase consumption? Will it foster violence or domestic abuse? Will it impact underage drinking or driving under the influence?

A good example is the question of why we have a 21-year age restriction for drinking. Advocates suggest dropping the age to 18. However, research suggests otherwise. When MRI technology became available, it was possible to view the development of the adolescent brain. Scientists found a great deal of development going on and that frequent alcohol use interfered with that development. They found that the human brain matured around the mid-20's, making it unwise to lower the age to 18.

It's also important to know whether the research is good or not. There's a lot of stuff out



there that's presented to policy makers. How do we know its credible? Steve said you must dig deeper. Ask these questions: What is the source of the information, who funded it, were accepted methods used, and where was it published?

In evaluating research, policy-makers may want to use some helpful resources.

For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has an independent task force of scientists that review research and make recommendations for communities about various prevention policies.

NABCA has been hard at work to provide help in accessing and understanding research. For a number of years now they have engaged with Dr. William Kerr of the Alcohol Research Group, a highly regarded public health research organization. He has assisted NABCA develop The Collection which is a summary of relevant alcohol research. Below is a description of The Collection:

The Collection: An Alcohol Research Summary

Alcohol regulation should be guided and supported by the science. NABCA has partnered with the alcohol research experts at the [Alcohol Research Group](#) (ARG) to provide its members a comprehensive overview of the latest scientific evidence on important topics related to alcohol policy. **The Collection: An Alcohol Research Summary (The Collection)**, formerly named the Annotated Bibliography, seeks to help states 1) understand the evidence on alcohol-related harms, 2) identify effective policies to reduce the harm associated with alcohol, 3) evaluate and improve their existing alcohol regulatory systems and 4) determine where more research is needed.

Another helpful source is a book called: "*Alcohol, No Ordinary Commodity*," written by several of the world's most prominent researchers. Chapter 16 is about how to choose a good set of policies. It includes a chart on pp.243-248 that rates various policies.

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) provides evidence-based findings and recommendations about community preventive services, programs, and other interventions aimed at improving population health. These findings are listed on The Community Guide.

Various organizations also provide policy papers. NABCA produces both white papers, publications and webinars accessible on their website: [nabca.org](#). The Center for Alcohol Policy produces policy papers, publications and conduct a survey of Americans to test their support for alcohol regulation. These materials are available at

[centerforalcoholpolicy.org](#). Finally, my website has a lot of policy papers, PowerPoint presentations and webinars using simple language to explain these complex regulations. It is accessible at [www.healthyalcoholmarket.com](#).

So, the final question is: what if there is no research? First it is important to note that you don't necessarily need research results to pass a policy. It's just very helpful. The fact is that many of our laws and policies have no research one way or the other. Steve had some further ideas. He suggests that you talk to experts and ask them to estimate the impact. Also ask them if there is any research in the pipeline. (There may be research that hasn't been published yet.) But it is important to be up front and acknowledge the lack of research as these may be situations where a review period along with data collection is needed.

A final note is that every year we learn more about alcohol and its impacts from research. So, it is important to keep in touch with sources such as NABCA and CAP to be informed about the latest results.

Sources:

[Effect of alcohol use on the adolescent brain and behavior](#), by Briana Lees, Lindsay R Meredith, Anna E Kirkland³, Brittany E Bryant, Lindsay M Squeglia, NIH, National Library of Medicine, March 2020

[Alcohol Use and Your Health](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[The Collection: An Alcohol Research Summary](#), National Alcohol Beverage Control Association ([nabca.org](#))

["Alcohol, No Ordinary Commodity"](#), Second Edition, Thomas Babor, et al, Oxford University Press, 2010