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Preventing Alcohol-Related Problems Through Health Policy Research

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Abstract

Alcohol-related health policy research is responsible for guiding the implementation of laws and public health policies that have reduced alcohol-related highway injuries and deaths, as well as other alcohol-related problems over the last 40 years. This research, which tests theories about potential policy changes and responds to specific problems, has examined a vast array of prevention programs. This article briefly identifies 10 program categories and highlights four programs to illustrate the scope and complexity of the individual health policy areas within the categories listed.

The founding in 1970 of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) coincided with a large increase in Federal research funds for studies of alcohol policies related to highway deaths and injuries, as well as injuries flowing from alcohol-related crime and health problems resulting from heavy alcohol consumption. Alcohol-related highway fatalities were at an all-time high in 1970, and there were an estimated 100,000 alcohol-attributable deaths in the United States (Modad, Marks, Stroup, et al. 2004; NIAAA, 1997). In the 40 years since the founding of NIAAA, those losses have been substantially reduced through the implementation of laws and public health policies growing out of research that has been summarized in *Alcohol Research and Health (AR&H)*. By 2001, alcohol-attributable deaths declined to 75,766 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2004).

Health policy research lies at the nexus of the science-to-practice continuum. At the point where science is incorporated into policy or law, theory is tested by reality and programs growing out of research are challenged by the need to respond to specific events embodying previously unmeasured conditions. Moreover, novel and untested concepts bubble up from practitioners, legislators, and advocates vying for attention in forming health and safety programs. Policies develop where there is a need for action not currently identified in any law. Programs may build on those policies, providing an opportunity for researchers to evaluate the concepts embodied in the policies that, given convincing positive results, will lead to the institutionalization of the policy in law.

For example, research and practice became intertwined in the movement leading up to the passage of the Federal minimum drinking-age law. A number of States followed the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 during the 1970s by lowering their drinking age to 18 (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1987). When research demonstrated that lowering the drinking age increased impaired-driving crashes of the affected age-groups, the trend was reversed and States began to raise their minimum drinking age. When the benefits of this action were confirmed by researchers (Wagenaar 1983; Womble 1989), the Federal Government passed legislation providing a strong incentive for all States to raise the minimum drinking age to 21 (23USC158 1984). Thus, the policy and research groups both

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Introduction

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