

Overview of Shoulder Tap Operations

Underage youth often obtain alcohol from adults who illegally provide the alcohol. Shoulder tap operations are a law enforcement strategy designed to hold adult providers of alcohol to youth accountable for their illegal behavior. Shoulder tap operations focus on the adult who is providing alcohol to an underage youth. Underage volunteers are recruited, selected and trained to serve as decoys. The underage decoy, supervised by an officer, approaches an adult going into an establishment to buy alcohol and asks the adult to purchase alcohol for them. If the adult makes the purchase for the decoy, the adult provider is detained by the officers and dealt with appropriately.

Shoulder tap operations can be implemented as either an active enforcement detail where arrests and/or summonses are issued or as an educational opportunity. For instance, once the target has agreed to the purchase for the decoy, a coalition member or an officer, could intervene and educate the target regarding the negative consequences associated with underage drinking and provide specific information regarding the state of underage drinking within the community. Alternatively, the decision could also be made to allow the transaction to proceed and then arrest the target for the illegal supply of alcohol to minors.

The Goal of Shoulder Tap Operations

The goals of shoulder tap operations are to:

1. Reduce underage consumption of, and access to, alcohol to youth by deterring adults from furnishing to them outside of licensed premises;
2. Expand the involvement of local law enforcement in enforcing underage drinking laws; and
3. Raise public awareness about the problem and change the community norms regarding such behavior.¹

Why Shoulder Tap Operations are Important to Communities

Approximately 53% of high school seniors report drinking alcohol.² Third party transactions are a common way in which youth gain access to alcohol.³ In fact, in a recent survey, 13% of Illinois 12th graders that identified as drinkers indicated that they had paid a stranger money to illegally purchase alcohol for them.⁴ There is substantial evidence that availability and easy access increase consumption of alcohol and alcohol-related problems.⁵ There is significant evidence that limiting such physical availability of alcohol to youth can serve to reduce drinking-related problems for youth.⁶ The Surgeon General identified “Shoulder Tap Operations” as a best practice strategy in a comprehensive approach to reduce underage drinking.⁷

Considerations for Shoulder Tap Operations

While shoulder tap enforcement programs have been effective in some areas, the use of underage volunteers in this manner is not permitted in many jurisdictions. It is imperative that local officials and the law enforcement agency work with local prosecutors, judges, and district attorneys thoroughly, to build support for shoulder taps, before initiating this type of program. The adult providers who are charged with purchasing for the youth often raise entrapment as defense to the crime. The defense of entrapment requires specific elements and prosecutors, as well as the courts, can establish specific operational guidelines ahead of time to ensure the program is conducted in such a manner as to eliminate the defense of entrapment.

Shoulder tap operations should be one part of a community's overall comprehensive strategy to reduce underage drinking and not its sole strategy. In addition, shoulder tap operations should not be undertaken without prior extensive training of officers and youth volunteers who will be participating in the operation. Shoulder tap operations involve an element of risk to both the youth decoy(s) and the officer(s); therefore, an agency considering undertaking shoulder tap operations must take steps to safeguard those involved in the operation. Clear policies and safety measures should be outlined to ensure the safety of both the youth volunteers and the law enforcement officers involved in the operation. Also, it is critical youth decoys be instructed not to approach a person they do not feel comfortable with.

Helpful Tips and Suggestions

When recruiting and training youth decoys for shoulder tap operations, you should use the same guidelines and protocols that are used for compliance check operations. Due to the sensitive nature and the public perception surrounding these operations, it is extremely important that the coalition, local official, and law enforcement agency engage in vigorous education of the public regarding the issues surrounding underage drinking and highlight the problems that can arise when adults are illegally providing alcohol to underage youth.

Police departments should notify the community ahead of conducting shoulder tap operations. Not only does notification inform the public on what shoulder tap operations are, notification educates adults on the consequences of providing alcohol to minors, and makes it clear the laws are being enforced. Notification to the community is often provided through community newspapers, radio stations, Facebook, twitter, etc.

This strategy should be reserved for locations that have been clearly identified through complaints or other data as locations that engage in problematic sales of alcohol to underage youth.

Resources and Tools

[Strategies for Reducing Third-Party Transactions of Alcohol to Underage Youth](#)

References

1. Strategies for Reducing Third-Party Transactions of Alcohol to Underage Youth. PIRE in support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws program 2004, 2012
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