

The Goal

Alcohol compliance checks are a tool law enforcement can use to reduce the availability of alcohol to underage youth from commercial sources such as bars, restaurants, liquor stores, grocery stores and convenience stores. By preventing youth access from commercial sources, communities can reduce the negative consequences associated with underage drinking, thereby creating a safer, healthier environment for their youth.

How They Work

Law enforcement agencies use underage buyers as volunteers to test retailers' compliance with laws regarding the sale of alcohol to minors.¹ Youth, under the supervision of law enforcement, are sent into retail locations to determine if the employee will properly decline to sell to the underage buyer. In the event the employee fails the compliance check, by selling or providing alcohol to the underage buyer, the law enforcement officer would intervene and take appropriate action to address the illegal sale.

The potential sanctions can range from a fine against the seller/server, as well as fines and suspensions against the business for the failure of their employee to decline the sale. Alcohol compliance check investigations are authorized by Illinois State Statute ILCS 235 5/6-16.1.

Why Alcohol Compliance Checks are Beneficial to Communities

While voluntary retailer compliance is the primary goal of retail compliance investigations, many communities realize other significant benefits from conducting the investigations:

- Media exposure from retail compliance investigations allows the agency to change or reinforce community norms, stressing that underage drinking and the sale of alcohol to underage persons are not acceptable behaviors.²
- Retail compliance investigations work as part of a broader, comprehensive strategy for preventing alcohol-related tragedies.³
- Investigations allow the agency to measure and monitor the level of underage alcohol sales in the community. This raises community awareness among parents and community leaders, especially when coupled with media advocacy.⁴
- Compliance investigations can be used to measure the effectiveness of this enforcement program and other enforcement strategies.⁵
- Over time, compliance investigations will reduce the amount of resources law enforcement must invest in the problem.⁶

Considerations for Alcohol Compliance Checks

While compliance checks are an effective enforcement strategy, that does not mean they will be easy to implement. There may be strong opposition from the retail industry, law enforcement agencies, politicians and the community at large because they are not familiar with the purpose and protocols of the program. It is important to build a strong foundation for the use of compliance checks in your community using supportive local data. Building support for alcohol compliance checks often begins with educating constituents about the science behind alcohol compliance checks and how they can reduce underage drinking. In addition, utilizing best practice protocols ensures compliance checks are conducted legally, thereby allowing prosecutors and regulatory agencies to take appropriate action against violators.

Tips and Suggestions

In order to ensure the success of your program it is imperative that you thoroughly address the following issues before engaging in compliance checks:

- Work with community leaders to ensure they are on board with the proposed program and that they understand the research that supports this means to reduce youth access to alcohol.
- Work with prosecutors, courts and regulatory agencies to ensure all statutory guidelines are followed.
- Work with industry/retailers to train employees on their legal responsibilities/obligations to verify age when selling age-restricted products (e.g., tobacco and alcohol).
- Follow best practice procedures/protocols for conducting investigations to include, but not limited to, selecting, documenting and training appropriate volunteers, and randomly selecting locations to check.
- Engage in ongoing, rigorous and thorough data collection and evaluation.
- Work with the media to enhance and reinforce community norms and expectations.

How the Alcohol Policy Resource Center Can Help

The APRC website has resources available that provide detailed explanations of appropriate protocols for conducting compliance check investigations, as well as how to recruit and train youth volunteers. In addition, the APRC may be able to provide in-person training on alcohol compliance check investigations for your coalitions and law enforcement communities. Visit the APRC at prevention.org to learn more about services provided.

Additional Law Enforcement Strategies

The APRC website has information on additional strategies law enforcement can use to reduce underage drinking and alcohol overconsumption in communities. The following fact sheets introduce the strategies and provide an overview of how each strategy can be implemented.

- [Cops in Shops](#)
- [Shoulder Tap Operations](#)
- [Sobriety Checkpoints](#)

Resources and Tools

- [Reducing Alcohol Sales to Underage Purchasers – A Practical Guide to Compliance Investigations – Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation – In support of OJJDP – Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program.](#)
- [Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board – Model Policy and Guidelines for Alcohol and Tobacco Compliance Checks by Law Enforcement Officers.](#)
- [Illinois State Statute ILCS 235 5/6-16.1](#)
- [Illinois Liquor Control Commission](#)

References

1. Reducing Alcohol Sales to Underage Purchasers – A Practical Guide to Compliance Investigations – 2010 Revision - Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation – In support of OJJDP – Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program.
2. Ibid, 6.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.