

Although “Cops in Shops” has been around for over 25 years, recently there has been confusion about the program’s purpose and what “Cops in Shops” involves. Often “Cops in Shops” can be confused with community-oriented policing initiatives meant to foster positive relationships between law enforcement and community members. Events like “donuts with a cop” or “coffee with a cop” are gaining in popularity in many communities, but they are vastly different in their mission than “Cops in Shops.” While “Cops in Shops” is not an evidence-based law enforcement strategy to reduce underage drinking in a community, it is important to know some basic information about the goals of “Cops and Shops,” what it can potentially accomplish in a community, and how it differs from community policing initiatives.

Overview of “Cops in Shops”

“Cops in Shops” is a trademarked term of the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility, an alcohol industry-funded organization that lobbies at the national and local level for alcohol policies. Funding for the foundation is provided from various distillers including Bacardi USA, Brown-Forman, and Diageo, to name a few. The “Cops in Shops” program was established in 1992 in an effort to stop underage youth from purchasing or obtaining alcoholic beverages from off-premise retail liquor outlets such as convenience stores and liquor stores. In some communities the program has been expanded to on-premise locations as well. The program is a voluntary program between the retailer and local law enforcement. The program places undercover officers in retail establishments posing as clerks or store employees. Law enforcement works with the retail employee and assists with checking identification. When youth attempt to purchase alcoholic beverages using fraudulent identification, officers intervene and take enforcement action. Law enforcement also addresses issues with adults who legally purchase and then illegally provide alcohol to minors. Law enforcement may issue summonses and/or place violators under custodial arrest for charges such as attempt to illegally purchase, use of fraudulent identification, or illegal furnishing of alcoholic beverages to underage youth.

The Goal of “Cops in Shops”

The goal of “Cops in Shops” is to prevent underage youth from purchasing alcoholic beverages from licensed liquor establishments using fraudulent identification and to prevent adults from illegally providing alcoholic beverages to underage youth.

Why “Cops in Shops” May Be Beneficial to Communities

Utilizing a “Cops in Shops” program may assist a community in identifying the level of youth access locally and can potentially identify retailers who need additional training regarding alcohol-related laws and appropriate service practices. Additionally, some communities have reported that after the implementation of a “Cops in Shops” program they have seen an improvement in the relationship between the retail community and the police department. Also, if the program is accompanied by a vibrant media campaign, the community may experience a deterrent effect. Underage youth, who might otherwise attempt to illegally purchase, and adults who might otherwise engage in the illegal

furnishing of alcoholic beverages, may change their behavior based on the possibility of prosecution and community norms that don't support underage drinking.

Considerations for “Cops in Shops”

It should be noted that while this strategy has anecdotally been cited as beneficial in some communities, very little research exists to establish its level of effectiveness in reducing youth access to alcohol. It has not been identified as a “best practice” strategy. Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility recommends that due to the lack of research on the program's effectiveness, “Cops in Shops” programs should be used only to supplement compliance check enforcement against retailers, not to displace it.”¹ Due to the lack of any substantial evidence of effectiveness, many grant funding agencies choose not to fund “Cops in Shops” programs. Law enforcement may need to fund these details through their regular budget or seek additional funding. Additionally, this is a voluntary program and retailers cannot be forced to participate in the program.

Helpful Tips and Suggestions

Law enforcement agencies that wish to engage in this strategy will need to establish strict protocols for participation in the program and for the safety of officers participating. The community must review all existing policies and laws to ensure that any violations can be successfully prosecuted or administratively adjudicated. For example, law enforcement should work with prosecutors and licensing agencies to determine what information is needed to establish the underlying crime and/or the administrative requirements necessary to sanction the offending parties.

Law enforcement must enter into a written agreement with participating retailers which clearly identifies the responsibilities of all parties. The agreement should include the following items, at minimum.

- Collection of evidence. In many communities, to establish the underlying criminal offense, it may be necessary to seize the product the youth attempted to purchase. If this is necessary, it can create cost and inventory issues for participating establishments. Protocols for how these issues would be handled needs to be established ahead of enforcement operations
- Role of retail establishment employees. It should be the responsibility of the employee to conduct the initial identification check for those attempting to purchase the alcohol product
- Role of undercover officers. Law enforcement are not hired security guards for the evening; they are there to support employees when they have a question regarding an identification.
- Confidentiality of the program. Employees must not warn potential customers/friends of law enforcements' presence in the establishment.
- Selection of locations, timing, and duration of operations. Social media may be used to alert the community that law enforcement is present in the store and this may impact the length of time spent at the location.
- Number of officers assigned to the detail. At minimum, for the safety of all involved, there should be a minimum of two law enforcement officers assigned to every detail.

Resources and Tools

[“Cops in Shops” program guide and sample materials at www.responsibility.org.](http://www.responsibility.org)

References

1. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004). Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility. Committee on Developing a Strategy to Reduce and Prevent Underage Drinking, Richard J. Bonnie and Mary Ellen O’Connell, Editors. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington DC: The National Academies Press. P.181