

# Issue Brief 2: Use of Social Norms Campaigns

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## **Purpose:**

The Barnstable County Department of Human Services is producing a series of issue briefs for the Regional Substance Abuse Council that will present information on an array of topics related to substance use. This issue brief explores the strategy of developing and employing a social norms media and information campaign directed at substance use prevention.

## **Social Norms:**

A social norm is a common understanding of “acceptable group conduct” which represents basic knowledge about what others do and therefore what a person should do in a particular situation or context.<sup>1</sup> Social norms often cause people to alter their own behavior in order to conform or fit in to their particular group. Given this, those seeking to change the behavior of individuals can sometimes look to changing the social norm(s) which effect that behavior.

Social norms can be both positive and negative. Norms such as courtesy while driving or saying please and thank you are positive examples of expected social behavior. An example of a negative social norm is the perception among teens that “all teenagers drink alcohol”, suggesting that it’s therefore normal for them to do so. The social norms approach to behavior change attempts to break a cycle of misperception like this by presenting accurate information about the social environment and by using positive group messages to affect widespread behavior change.<sup>2</sup>

## **Use in Prevention:**

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<sup>1</sup> Cialdini, R. D. (2003) "Crafting normative messages to protect the environment". *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12(4), 105–109.

<sup>2</sup> Perkins, HW & Craig, DA (2003A). The Hobart and William Smith Colleges Experiment: A Synergistic Social Norms Approach Using Print, Electronic Media and Curriculum Infusion to Reduce Collegiate Problem Drinking. Chapter 3 in HW Perkins (Ed). *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, Clinicians*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Prior to the introduction of the social norms approach, prevention efforts relied heavily on strategies that required a problem behavior to already exist before action was taken<sup>3</sup>. These strategies would attempt to address an already occurring problem by reducing its prevalence. According to the National Social Norms Resource Center in a social norms campaign “the intervention works to correct misperceptions and reduce the *initiation* of participation in the unhealthy behavior...with continued exposure to positive, data-driven messages the misperceptions that create and/or sustain the problem behavior are reduced.”<sup>4</sup>

Social norms campaigns are best viewed as overall culture change; often taking more than a year to realize behavioral change effects.<sup>5</sup>

The social norms approach was initially used to impact and reduce student drinking on college campuses by revealing the misperceptions students had about the norms of alcohol use among their peers.<sup>6</sup> These misperceptions were not unique to college students, but also existed in high school students, and statewide youth populations.<sup>7</sup> Research has also shown that all individuals who hold the misperception contribute to the occurrence of the problem behavior even if they themselves do not engage in the behavior.<sup>8</sup> This is why Social Norms campaigns are often directed at the community as a whole.

### **Effectiveness:**

While research shows that the social norms approach is an appropriate and effective strategy for targeting a wide range of substance use behaviors in middle and high school students,<sup>9</sup> this type of campaign differs from a general awareness campaign, and must be strategically crafted and placed to create long term behavioral change.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael P. Haines, H. W. (2005). *A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities*. National Social Norms Resource Center

<sup>4</sup> National Social Norms Resource Center

<sup>5</sup> National Social Norms Institute at the University of Virginia

<sup>6</sup> Perkins, H. W. and Berkowitz, A.D. "Perceiving the community norms of alcohol use among students: some research implications for campus alcohol education programming." *International Journal of the Addictions*, 1986, 21, 961-976.

<sup>7</sup> Berkowitz, A. "The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research, and Annotated Bibliography." January 2003. Available at: [http://www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/social\\_norms.pdf](http://www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/social_norms.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Perkins, HW (1997) College Student Misperceptions of Alcohol and Other Drug Use Norms Among Peers. In: *Designing Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Programs in Higher Education: Bringing Theory Into Practice*, (P. 177-206). Newton, MA: The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention.

<sup>9</sup> Perkins, H. W. and Craig, D. *A Multifaceted Approach to Reduce High-Risk Drinking*. Newton, MA: The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, Education Development Center, Inc, 2002

<sup>10</sup> Center for Health & Safety Culture: The Social Norms Toolbox

Social norms campaigns are meant to focus on positive messages surrounding healthy behaviors and attitudes. They may also involve public education, social marketing, media advocacy, and media literacy; all of which can be used to influence the cultural norms in the community. By affecting change in community norms an individual behavioral change strategy may become more effective.

The effectiveness of a social norms campaign may be hindered by a variety of individual or environmental factors. For instance “if the overall environment supports and promotes the problem behavior, or if the strategy is aimed at a group that the target audience does not identify with, the campaign may be ineffective.”<sup>11</sup>

### Examples of Success

One of the earliest examples of a social norms campaign directed at alcohol use took place at Northern Illinois University, where researchers applied standard marketing techniques to present factual data to students and faculty. The intervention produced a reduction in heavy drinking (45% to 25%) and an increase in those that abstained from drinking (9% to 19%) over a ten year period. This type of intervention has been duplicated across the country at both the collegiate and high school levels, often resulting in reductions in heavy drinking of 20% or more within two years.<sup>12</sup>

While many social norms campaigns target alcohol use most studies link alcohol with other substance use and see reductions in both problem behaviors.<sup>13</sup> This generalizability is due to the idea that a “social norms approach is used to prevent unhealthy behaviors.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, “other programs have demonstrated the effectiveness of social norms interventions in reducing cigarette smoking and changing attitudes associated with rape proclivity in men.”<sup>15</sup>

Currently, social norms campaigns are being used by the United States Department of Education, the Department of Justice, the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state health departments, private foundations, and by several large outcome studies funded by the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA).

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Haines, MP, Barker, GP & Rice, R. (2003). Using Social Norms to Reduce Alcohol and Tobacco Use in Two Midwestern High Schools. Chapter 14 in HW Perkins (Ed). *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, Clinicians*, San Francisco, JosseyBass

<sup>13</sup> Linkenback, J. (1999). Imaginary peers and the reign of error. *Prevention Connection*, 3, 1-5.

<sup>14</sup> The Hazeldon Betty Ford Foundation. *FCD Prevention Works*, 2015

<sup>15</sup> Berkowitz, A. "The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research, and Annotated Bibliography." January 2003

Some local examples of ongoing Social Norms campaigns target at underage drinking include:

- [“Majority Rules”](#): Allston-Brighton, MA
- [“Strength of Cambridge Teens”](#): Cambridge, MA
- [“Fun things to do”](#): Dukes County ( Martha Vineyard)
- [“81% Don’t”](#): Somerville, MA

**Conclusion:**

It is important to note that social norms campaigns designed to address alcohol use in high school students should only communicate norms of non-use. Messages that communicate moderate and safe use that are often used on university campuses are not appropriate for a middle-school or high-school audience meant to abstain from alcohol.<sup>16</sup>

Research has shown that the social norms approach to prevention is effective in achieving large-scale positive results. By correcting negative misperceptions and promoting healthy, protective, and fact-based messages, a Social Norms campaign can deliver lasting cultural change and prevent the problem of substance misuse.

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<sup>16</sup> National Social Norms Resource Center