

Alcopops: Alcoholic beverage and soda pop

Flavored malt beverages (FMBs) are alcoholic beverages derived from a malt base to which flavoring, often containing distilled spirits, is added. Popular for years in Europe, FMBs are often referred to as “alcopops,” a name combining “alcoholic beverage” and “soda pop.”

FMBs first appeared in this country in Boston on April Fools’ Day in 1999 when a Canadian firm launched the sale of Mike’s Hard Lemonade®.

By 2001, other beverage companies began flooding the market with FMBs to address what one business writer has referred to as the “long-standing business challenge for the beer industry...(how) to court non-beer fans mainly women, and new, young drinkers...”¹

For underage drinking advocates, alcopops raise several concerns including access, binge drinking, and marketing appeal. In 2007, 78.6% of Arkansas 12th graders thought that alcoholic beverages were “sort of easy to get” or “very easy to get.” Under current Arkansas law, alcopops, which have alcohol content similar to that of beer at about 5%, are sold in easily accessible retail outlets such as convenience and grocery stores.

With sweet flavorings camouflaging alcohol content, there is concern that youth may intentionally, or otherwise, over-consume alcopops, thus increasing the risk of binge drinking. This concern is particularly germane for Arkansas youth: 19.3% of 10th graders and 26% of 12th graders reported binge drinking in the past two weeks in the 2007 APNA survey.² While the industry denies marketing efforts targeted at underage drinkers, teenagers

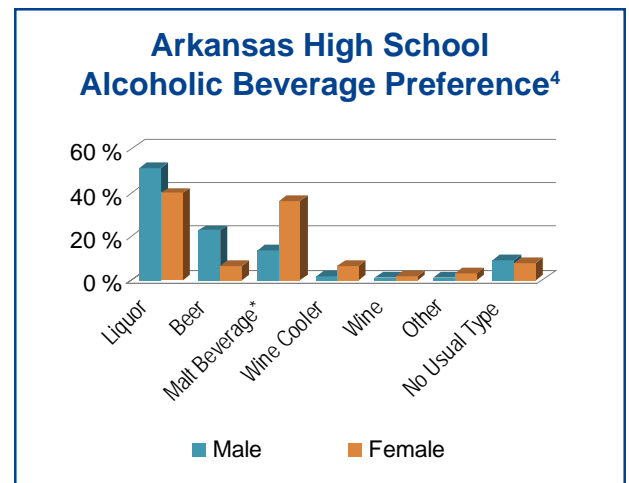


report seeing commercials for a range of FMBs at much higher rates than do adults.³

In 2005, based on a CDC survey, Arkansas high school students indicated that FMBs were second only to liquor in the type of alcohol usually consumed. A clear difference in preference existed by gender (see figure). 51.2% of high school males preferred liquor, 22.4% preferred beer, and 13.4% preferred FMBs. In contrast, high school females preferred liquor and FMBs at comparable rates, 39.5% and 35.7% respectively, compared to 6.2% who preferred beer.⁴

One strategy to make FMBs less accessible to youth is the demand to require that these beverages be treated as distilled spirits rather than traditional malt beverages. In 2005, the Department of the Treasury’s Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) required that 51% of the alcohol content of FMBs must be a product of brewing.

At the state level, numerous states are pursuing other strategies to limit the impact of FMBs on underage drinking. In 2008, Utah banned the sale of FMBs at convenience and grocery stores while California began taxing FMBs at the distilled spirit rate of \$3.30 per gallon rather than the beer rate of 20 cents per gallon. In Arkansas, members of the Task Force on Substance Abuse Prevention recently recommended to legislators that FMBs be taxed as distilled spirits and sold only in liquor stores.



*Identified as “like Smirnoff Ice®, Bacardi Silver®, and hard lemonade”

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Footnotes:

¹ Mucha, Thomas (2004), *Alcopops Lose Their Fizz: the decline of the flavored malt beverage segment offers consumer marketers a lesson in overindulgence*. Business 2.0 Magazine; http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2004/06/01/370451/index.htm.

² Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment (APNA) Survey, State Report 2007; <http://www.arkansas.pridesurveys.com>.

³ Global Strategy Group, *Survey Research Data on “Alcopops”*; <http://www.cspinet.org>.

⁴ MMWR Weekly Report, July 27, 2007, *Types of Alcoholic Beverages Usually Consumed by Students in 9th-12th Grades—Four States—2005*; <http://www.cdc.gov>.