

VENTURA COUNTY SOCIAL HOST ORDINANCE IMPACT EVALUATION: PHASE I FINDINGS

It is well known that binge drinking among youth is a serious problem not only in Ventura County, but across the country. Numerous studies indicate that there are significant consequences associated with binge drinking, including threats to long-term cognitive and physical development, increased risk of traffic crashes, sexual assault, other types of violence, and even death. These problems affect entire communities as well as individual young people.

“The high fines seem to make an impact.”

In 2004, Ventura County was one of 13 counties in California selected for a three-year State Incentive Grant (SIG) based on its ability to effectively

plan and use science-based, environmental strategies to attain measurable outcomes related to binge drinking prevention. Specifically, California’s SIG program was intended to use evidence-based, environmental prevention strategies to reduce binge drinking and related problems among 12–25 year olds.



A significant accomplishment of the Ventura County SIG initiative was the passage and implementation of a Countywide Social Host Ordinance (SHO) and ordinances within each of the 10 municipalities comprising Ventura County. Additionally, a formal resolution was added to the Countywide Ordinance to permit enforcement of the SHO on federal land housed within the west end of Ventura County. Since September 2007, Ventura County has had essentially seamless coverage and enforcement of the ordinance, with some variation in local provisions, amount of fines, and intensity of use.

This publication is one in a series from Ventura County Behavioral Health Alcohol & Drug Programs – Prevention Services. For more information please contact Dan Hicks at (805) 981-9292.

Overview

In 2009, Ventura County Behavioral Health (VCBH) Department collaborated with EVALCORP to design and conduct a Social Host Ordinance impact evaluation to expand on previous process and outcome evaluation studies that had focused on the policy design and implementation processes. VCBH was interested in learning about the longer-term impacts of the ordinances. Also, repeated inquiries from other cities and counties within and outside of California about outcomes had created a strong need for further evaluation (i.e., to document the differences that the ordinances were making now that they had been in place for a couple of years).

The current Issue Briefing summarizes findings from Phase I of a two-part impact evaluation. The purpose of Phase I was to begin collecting evidence about the impact that the SHOs have made in three jurisdictions in Ventura County. Data used to inform Phase I of the evaluation consisted primarily of existing quantitative datasets, and as such, there were some limitations in conclusions that could be drawn (e.g., missing time periods for certain jurisdictions and limited generalizability). To supplement the quantitative indicators chosen for the study, a survey was conducted with law enforcement charged with enforcement of the ordinance and interviews were conducted with persons involved in collection of related fines. Phase II of the evaluation, anticipated to begin in 2010, will include the perspective of additional stakeholder groups such as youth and parents.

Target Jurisdictions

Three jurisdictions were examined as part of the evaluation: Camarillo, Thousand Oaks, and San Buenaventura (Ventura). These cities were identified based on the following criteria: (1) level of fine associated with the ordinances, (2) geographic location within Ventura County, (3) total population, and (4) median household income. The level of the SHO fines varied across the cities; that is, Camarillo has the lowest fine (\$500), Thousand Oaks has the highest (\$2,500), and the fine for violation of the SHO in Ventura is mid-range (\$1,000).

Regarding geographic location, although all three cities are residential areas alongside Highway 101, Thousand

“The underage parties appear more controlled and not as large.”

Oaks is located on the east side of Ventura County, Camarillo is located more centrally, and Ventura is the farthest west. Total population among the three cities was as follows: Thousand Oaks (126,849); Ventura (103,119); and Camarillo (61,068). Median household income also varied across the target cities with the wealthiest city being Thousand Oaks (\$93,695), followed by Camarillo (\$78,677) and then Ventura (\$63,147).

Data Collection Strategies and Tools

Data collection methods and tools used in the evaluation included:

- The development of a logic model to frame the evaluation process.
- A comparison of ordinances and their specific provisions across the three jurisdictions.
- An assessment of enforcement data from Ventura County Sheriff’s Department and Ventura Police Department (i.e., number of SHO violations, number of party attendees, number and age of hosts).
- An analysis of impact data indicators such as:
 - (a) law enforcement party disturbance calls for service;
 - (b) California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data regarding student alcohol use, involvement in drinking and driving, and perceived difficulty obtaining alcohol;
 - (c) Ventura County Medical Center (VCMC) alcohol-related emergency room visits including Blood Alcohol Concentrations (BAC); and
 - (d) Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS) data on collisions, injuries, and deaths involving underage persons driving under the influence.
- Surveys administered to 91 law enforcement officers with authority to issue citations for violations of SHOs within the three target jurisdictions.
- Key informant interviews with city officials regarding SHO fine and appeal processes in each jurisdiction.

What Are the Results of the Social Host Efforts in Ventura County So Far?



Promising Findings and Impacts

Numerous positive findings were revealed during the first Phase of Ventura County's SHO Impact Evaluation. Examples of some of the most promising findings from the three target jurisdictions thus far are listed below.

- 3 out of 4 law enforcement officers surveyed agree that the SHO is an effective tool for reducing underage drinking parties, reported no problems/obstacles when trying to enforce the ordinance, and said that they would not change anything about the ordinance.
- About one quarter of all law enforcement officers surveyed report fewer calls for service for underage drinking parties since the ordinances passed – 71% said there were no change in calls, 27% said there were fewer calls, and 2% said there were more calls for service for these types of parties.
- More than 90% of law enforcement officers surveyed report that there have been no negative impacts resulting from the SHOs in their respective jurisdictions.
- 4 out of 5 law enforcement officers believed the SHO penalty is appropriate for their respective jurisdictions.
- Since passage of the ordinances, a total of 129 SHO violations have been issued across the three jurisdictions. This represents approximately half of the 242 SHO citations issued in Ventura County to date.
- The size of underage drinking parties appear to have decreased since the passage of the ordinance. Some enforcement data indicated decreases in the percentage of hosts who received citations for parties with 51–100 attendees and several law enforcement officers noted decreased size of underage drinking parties.
- CHKS data demonstrated decreases in the ease of obtaining alcohol since the implementation of the ordinance for 9th and 11th graders for instances that data were available.
- The majority of persons who received a Social Host violation have done so only once. That is, only 4% of violators across the three jurisdictions were repeat offenders.



“The message is getting out. When the citation is issued, reality sets in. I have not been to the same house twice.”

What are the Next Steps for Ventura County in Continuing This Effort?

The following are suggested next steps for VCBH Alcohol and Drug Programs and their community partners as they move forward with continued efforts in deterring the provision of alcohol to underage persons in home party settings.

Continue building awareness about the existence of and consequences associated with Social Host Ordinances. As suggested by the survey findings, if one of the main reasons the ordinance is effective is because it acts as a deterrent for hosting underage drinking parties, it is especially important to continue providing broad-based community education about the intent of the ordinance and its associated consequences. Sharing information about the ordinances through schools (e.g., to incoming students and their parents at orientation or student/teacher night) could be particularly effective in targeting “new cohorts” of youth and parents who may not be aware of the consequences of hosting underage drinking parties.

Consider changes suggested by patrol officers regarding Social Host Ordinance enforcement procedures. Although the current study focused on three jurisdictions, it is important to consider how the findings relate to other areas of Ventura County. For example, VCBH and their partners should discuss and reflect on the benefits of implementing some of the recommendations related to Social Host enforcement protocols, not only in Camarillo, Thousand Oaks, and Ventura but how such changes countywide might positively or negatively impact the long-term outcomes of the ordinances. For example, some suggestions involve reducing the number of underage drinkers that officers must prove are present at the party, or perhaps removing requirements for

sergeant/supervisor approval of Social Host citations in certain jurisdictions.

Investigate methods to increase the collection of Social Host Ordinance fines. It is clear from the key informant interviews that collecting SHO related fines in Camarillo, Thousand Oaks, and Ventura has been a challenging process. Given the consistency of this finding across jurisdictions, it is likely that other cities are struggling with the same issue. In part, the ordinances were developed to hold hosts accountable for underage drinking; however if people do not pay their fines, there is no meaningful consequence for their actions and thus the accountability component is lost. One suggestion involved attaching fines to property taxes or city bills such as trash or water.

Consider additional training or materials for law enforcement. Given that at least 40% of the patrol officers across jurisdictions reported interest in additional training or information about Social Host Ordinances, VCBH could assist in determining officers’ specific training needs and then working with law enforcement to respond.

Continue monitoring the impacts of the Social Host Ordinances over time. It is important for VCBH and their partners to continue to track both enforcement and resulting outcomes associated with the ordinances long-term. This information is not only invaluable to the continued improvement and sustainability of VCBH’s ongoing efforts to reduce underage drinking parties and related problems, but also to inform Social Host policy adoption and enforcement in other areas of the country. Given longstanding norms pertaining to underage drinking it is expected that continued prevention and enforcement will produce positive outcomes and achieve all of the objectives inherent within Social Host Ordinances as an environmental prevention strategy. However, it is important to remember that this type of large scale change is a process that requires sustained implementation and evaluation efforts.

Note: This Issue Briefing is based on the “Ventura County Social Host Ordinance Impact Evaluation: Phase I Findings Report,” September 2009. All quotes are from surveys administered to law enforcement. A copy of the full report is available through www.venturacountylimits.org.