



## State of the Field: Online Interventions for Mandated Youth Scott T. Walters, Ph.D.

Despite minimum-age drinking laws, adolescents and young adults regularly consume alcohol. In a typical month, 13.2 million underage persons have something to drink. Underage consumption is also costly. A recent estimate places the societal cost at \$61.9 billion dollars a year--roughly \$3 for every drink consumed by underage drinkers.<sup>1</sup> In light of this substantial cost burden, there has been increasing interest in how new technologies can improve judicial services for underage drinkers. Computer and web-based interventions have already been used successfully with many other problem behaviors, including smoking, weight loss, HIV medication adherence, and diabetes self-monitoring, and they appear to hold promise in early trials of alcohol consumption as well.<sup>2-7</sup>

This interest in new approaches is partially in response to the disappointing results of the most widely used formats for treating mandated youth. In the past, a typical intervention for underage drinkers has involved several hours of group lecture, films, and discussion. The logic for delivering treatment in this way was partially based on the success of groups in other contexts and partially based on the desire to keep referral costs low.

### *Limitations of a Group Format*

Despite the appeal of the educational group, there is little research to support the effectiveness of this format at reducing underage drinking or subsequent offenses. In fact, there are a number of examples that suggest that aggregating young drinkers into a group may actually have a detrimental effect on participants.<sup>10</sup> In one large study of high-risk youth, the *Adolescent Transitions Program*, a group intervention increased delinquency over three years, as compared to a control group that did not receive any intervention.<sup>8</sup> **In another large study, the *Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study*, placement in two consecutive summer camps for high-risk youth led to negative effects for *thirty years* following the placement.<sup>9</sup> Though some cognitive behavioral groups have produced positive outcomes,<sup>10</sup> educational groups appear to be a particular problem.** Psychologists explain these findings through the phenomena of “deviancy training” where high-risk youth support and encourage negative peer behavior. These research findings mirror the experience of many group facilitators, who report that the most important interactions occur before and after the group or during smoke breaks, and have less to do with the formal group content.

### *Limitations of an Educational Approach*

In addition to the difficulties inherent in high-risk groups, there are additional problems with a group content that mainly consists of lectures, films, and discussion. In the largest alcohol treatment review to date, Miller and colleagues identified 381 published treatment trials for alcohol abuse and dependence. Of the 47 treatment categories, an educational approach had, by far, the most evidence of *ineffectiveness*. It ranked in the bottom tier with other approaches such as videotaped self-confrontation, relaxation training, and confrontational approaches.<sup>11</sup> A recent task force assembled by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism drew essentially the same conclusion. After reviewing the literature on young adult drinking interventions, the task force placed information-oriented approaches into the bottom tier of approaches where there was “clear evidence of ineffectiveness.”<sup>12</sup>

### *The Appeal of Online Interventions*

Reviews have also identified a number of approaches with good research support, including motivational interviewing, community reinforcement, family interventions, and vocational/skills training.<sup>10, 11, 13</sup> However, these kinds of individual and multimodal interventions can be more expensive than group interventions, especially for first-time offenders. An increasingly popular alternative is to consider online interventions that integrate features from the best individual approaches. Indeed, there appear to be a number of advantages to delivering interventions online, including a structured, consistent, and individual format.<sup>4, 14, 15</sup> There are also recent studies that suggest that online interventions can effectively reduce drinking and drinking-related problems. For instance, in one controlled study, adult drinkers who received an online intervention reduced their drinking and alcohol-related problems by 50%, and maintained these reductions through a 12-month follow-up.<sup>7</sup> In other studies of high-risk college drinkers, drinking reductions have been seen at up to six-months following treatment.<sup>16</sup>

Until we have high-quality studies that directly compare the in-person and online formats, what can we say about the kind of online interventions that are likely to reduce rates of drinking and recidivism? Based on a reading of the literature, effective interventions should:

- Be interactive, rather than relying on static text. Material that is engaging and interactive will be more persuasive than static text.<sup>15, 17</sup>
- Draw from evidence-based approaches such as motivational interviewing, skills training, and personalized feedback.<sup>11, 12</sup>
- Include components such as personalized feedback on drinking, empathic language, advice and suggestions for avoiding alcohol, and a strong emphasis on personal responsibility.<sup>18, 19</sup>

- Be a part of a continuum of services that addresses risk factors such as impulse control, peer and family groups, and other criminal behavior. Higher-risk or repeat offenders should be linked to additional services such as individual or family counseling.<sup>20</sup>
- Include the ability to verify participation and monitor changes in offender drinking after completing the program.

This summary does not mean that online interventions are always as effective as the best face-to-face clinical approaches. At this time, there is not enough evidence to directly compare the best online interventions against the best face-to-face interventions. Indeed, there are likely some unique benefits to individual or family counseling that may warrant the additional cost, especially for higher risk or repeat offenders. However, at this time online interventions seem to provide an attractive and low-cost alternative to the educational group for first-time offenders.

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