

Sugary drink advertising to youth: *Continued barrier to public health progress*

June 2020

Sugary drink consumption by children and teens is a significant public health concern, with teens and young adults consuming more sugary drinks than other age groups.¹ Consumption is also higher among low-income and Black non-Hispanic and Mexican-American youth, raising additional concerns about health disparities affecting low-income and communities of color. In recent years, youth consumption of regular soda and sugary drinks in total have declined, but sports drink and energy drink consumption has increased.^{2,3} Beverage companies have pledged to reduce beverage calories and increase demand for lower-calorie drinks.⁴ This study examines whether companies have changed their advertising of sugary drinks in response to public health concerns.

The research

Rudd Center researchers assessed the nutrition content and advertising of sugary drinks — regular soda, sports drinks, iced tea, fruit drinks, flavored water, and energy drinks — including advertising targeted to teens and Hispanic and Black youth. Analyses also compared sugary drink advertising to advertising for diet soda and diet drinks in the same categories and assessed changes from 2010 and 2013. Children’s drinks that were previously reported in [Children’s Drink FACTS](#) were excluded.⁵

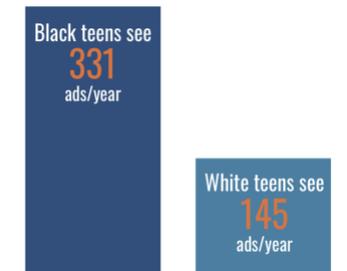
Utilizing the same methods as previous FACTS reports, researchers collected data on the nutrition quality of 48 sugary drink brands (those with \$100,000 or more in 2018 advertising spending). Using Nielsen syndicated market research data, we report total advertising spending (including TV, magazines, and digital); TV advertising exposure by preschoolers (2-5 years), children (6-11 years), and teens (12-17 years); advertising spending and Hispanic youth exposure on Spanish-language TV; and differences in TV ad exposure by Black and White preschoolers, children, and teens. Advertising results are reported by drink category, company, and brand. All energy drinks and shots, including those without added sugar, are included in the sugary drink numbers.

Findings

In 2018, beverage companies spent over \$1 billion to advertise sugary drinks—a 26% increase from 2013.

- More than one-half of the \$1.04 billion in sugary drink ad expenditures promoted regular soda and soda brands (\$586 million), a 41% increase over 2013.





In 2018, Black teens saw **2.3 times as many TV ads** for sugary drinks. Disparities in exposure were highest for sports drinks, regular soda, and energy drinks.

“Our findings demonstrate that beverage companies continue to target their advertising to Black and Hispanic communities, which exacerbates ongoing health disparities affecting those communities” said Jennifer L. Harris, PhD, MBA, lead study author and senior research advisor at the Rudd Center.

- Sports drink advertising increased by 24%, totaling \$159 million in 2018, and advertising for sweetened iced tea almost tripled, from \$38 million in 2013 to \$111 million in 2018.
- In contrast, total advertising spending for diet and unsweetened drink categories (including plain water and 100% juice) totaled \$573 million in 2018 – less than the amount spent to advertise regular soda and soda brands alone.

The added sugar in the majority of single-serve drink containers exceeded 25 grams – the recommended maximum daily sugar limit for children and teens.⁶

- A 12-ounce regular soda contained a median of 37 grams of sugar, and a 16-ounce energy drink contained 43.5 grams. In addition, 88% of sugar-sweetened energy drinks also contained zero-calorie sweeteners and a median of 159 milligrams of caffeine.
- Median sugar content in a single-serving container of other categories of drinks ranged from 21 grams for sports drinks to 27 grams for flavored water.

Companies continue to target Black and Hispanic youth with TV ads for sugary drinks.

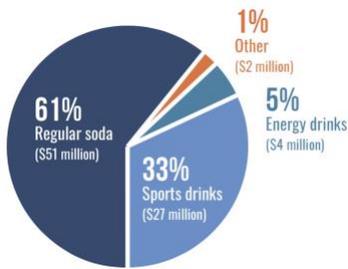
- In 2018, companies spent \$84 million to advertise sugary drinks on Spanish-language TV, an increase of 8% versus 2013, and 80% versus 2010. Regular soda/soda brands represented 61% of Spanish-language sugary drink ad spending, followed by sports drinks (33%), and energy drinks (5%).
- Sports drink brands disproportionately advertised on Spanish-language TV, dedicating 21% of their TV advertising budgets to Spanish-language TV, compared to 10% on average for all sugary drinks. From 2013 to 2018, sports drink advertising spending increased 745% and Hispanic youth exposure to these ads increased 10-fold or more.
- Compared to White children and teens, Black children saw 2.1 times as many sugary drink ads and Black teens saw 2.3 times as many, totaling 256 and 331 ads viewed in 2018, respectively.
- Sports drinks had the highest targeted ratios, with Black teens seeing 2.7 times as many ads as White teens.

Teens remain a primary target audience for sugary drink advertising.

- From 2013 to 2018, teens’ exposure to TV advertising increased for regular soda/soda brands (+1%) and iced tea (+68%), despite a 52% decline in time spent watching TV during the same time.
- Energy drinks and sports drinks targeted their TV advertising directly to teens, as evidenced by disproportionately high ratios of ads viewed by teens versus adults.

Preschoolers’ and children’s exposure to sugary drink TV advertising is increasing

- Preschoolers and children saw 139 and 135 TV ads, respectively for these sugary drink categories – more than three times as many ads than they saw for sugary children’s drinks (38 and 45 ads, respectively).
- Preschoolers’ saw 26% more TV ads for sugary drinks in 2018 than in 2013, and children’s ad exposure increased by 8%. These increases occurred despite a 35% decline



Companies spent **\$84 million** to advertise sugary drinks on Spanish-language TV in 2018, an **increase of 80%** vs. 2010.

in average TV viewing times for preschoolers and a 42% decline for children during the same period.

- Increases in ads viewed were highest for regular soda/soda brands, which increased by 78% for preschoolers and 55% for children, and iced tea, which increased by more than two-and-a-half times for both age groups

Sugary drink advertising was primarily driven by PepsiCo and Coca-Cola brands.

- PepsiCo was responsible for 38% of all sugary drink advertising spending and sugary drink TV ads viewed by children, and 41% of TV ads viewed by teens in 2018. PepsiCo sugary drink advertising spending increased by 28% from 2013 to 2018.
- Coca-Cola was responsible for 31% of sugary drink advertising spending, 23% of TV ads viewed by children, and 21% TV ads viewed by teens. From 2013 to 2018, Coca-Cola sugary drink advertising increased by 81%.
- Four brands each spent more than \$100 million to advertise sugary drinks in 2018: Coke, Pepsi, Gatorade, and Mtn Dew.

Recommendations

Key stakeholders must support public health efforts to reduce consumption of sugary drinks, especially among youth and in communities of color:

Industry leaders

- Current industry self-regulatory initiatives-including the American Beverage Association's Guidelines on Marketing to Children and the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative-should expand their pledges to restrict sugary drink advertising to children up to at least age 14.
- Media companies that own programming with large audiences of teens, as well as Black and/or Hispanic youth, should reduce sugary drink advertising during targeted programming.
- All corporate responsibility initiatives to promote nutrition and/or health and wellness should also address targeted marketing of sugary drinks to communities of color. These initiatives are even more urgent now given the disproportionate effects of COVID- 19 on Black and Latino communities.⁷

Policy makers

- States and localities should enact excise taxes on sugary drinks and invest the resulting revenue in community-defined programs and services to reduce health and socioeconomic disparities.
- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should establish regulations to address unclear labeling practices, such as requiring disclosures of added sugars, low-calorie sweeteners, juice, and caffeine content on the front of product packages.
- States and local municipalities should prohibit the sales of energy drinks and shots to children under age 18 and require they be placed in low-visibility locations (such as behind counters).

"Beverage companies have promised to take action to reduce the amount of beverage calories people consume, but at the same time they dramatically increased advertising for their full-calorie sugary drinks," said Fran Fleming-Milici, PhD, a co-author and director of marketing initiatives at the Rudd Center.

Advocates and healthcare providers

- Grassroots and other advocacy groups should develop campaigns to highlight excessive advertising of sugary drinks, especially advertising that disproportionately targets teens and communities of color. Advocates should also work with young people to create counter-marketing campaigns to expose predatory sugary drink marketing practices.
- Healthcare professional organizations should develop campaigns aimed at children and teens to raise awareness about these harms, especially for sugary drinks that are perceived to be healthier than soda (e.g., sports drinks, iced tea, and flavored waters) and energy drinks.

References

- ¹ Marriott, B.P., Hunt, K.J., Malek, A.M., Newman, J.C. (2019). Trends in Intake of Energy and Total Sugar from Sugar-Sweetened Beverages in the United States among Children and Adults, NHANES 2003–2016. *Nutrients*, 11(9).
- ² Bleich SN, Vercammen KA, Koma JW, Li Z (2018). Trends in beverage consumption among children and adults, 2003-2014. *Obesity*, 26(2), 432-441.
- ³ Vercammen KA, Koma JW, Bleich SN (2019). Trends in energy drink consumption among U.S. adolescents and adults, 2003-2016. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 56(6), 827-833.
- ⁴ American Beverage Association. Cutting Sugar in the American Diet. <https://www.balanceus.org/industry-efforts/cutting-sugar-american-diet/>
- ⁵ Harris JL, Romo-Palafox M, Choi YY, Kibwana A. (2019). Children’s Drink FACTS: Sales, nutrition, and marketing of children’s drinks. <http://sugarydrinkfacts.org/resources/FACTS2019.pdf>
- ⁶ Vos MB, Kaar J, Welsh, et al. (2017). Added sugars and cardiovascular disease risk in children: A scientific statement from the American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 135(19), e1017-e1034.
- ⁷ APM Research Lab. COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S. <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

For the full report, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org/sugarydrinkfacts

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy.

Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.