

Media Statement

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A Solution to South Africa's Public Health Crisis: Ban Alcohol Advertising

South Africa is in the grip of an alcohol crisis that few want to face head-on. From bloodied hospital wards and fatal road crashes to classrooms where children start drinking before their teenage years, alcohol has become a national public health emergency.

Yet the alcohol industry continues to market its products as if they were harmless lifestyle accessories, glamorous, aspirational, and central to success. Behind every billboard, sponsorship, and social media post lies a calculated effort to shape the behaviour of children, hook them early, and secure lifelong profits at society's expense.

Children Are Being Groomed

New data from the University of Cape Town's Planet Youth 2025 survey, which surveyed nearly 49,000 Grade 8 and 9 learners across 123 schools, lays bare the extent of the problem:

- 40% of learners had already tried alcohol.
- 22% drank in the past month.
- 23% started before the age of 13.
- 26% have been drunk at least once, with 15% drunk in the past month.
- Alcohol is most often sourced from shops (53%), friends (43%) and even family members (34%).

Drinking spikes during holidays, after exams, and at friends' home is proof that alcohol is deeply embedded in South African youth culture.

This is no accident. Research from the South African National HIV Survey shows that children exposed to alcohol adverts are far more likely to drink than their peers. The International Alcohol Control study confirms a direct link between adolescents' drinking and how much they like alcohol adverts. In other words: advertising works exactly as the industry intends.

"Alcohol advertising is grooming the next generation of drinkers," says Nomcebo Dlamini, Campaign Director at the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA SA). "This is not harmless branding; it is now predatory marketing. The results are drinking amongst minors affecting their brain development and academic performance, devastating violence in our homes and in relationships between men and women, and between men, blood on our roads, and trauma admissions in our hospitals."

The evidence shows that advertising influences early experimentation and the amount of alcohol young people drink in any drinking occasion.

The True Cost of Alcohol

The alcohol industry argues that advertising bans will kill jobs. But they never talk about the jobs, lives, and futures destroyed daily by alcohol harm. Alcohol is linked to over half of violent injuries in South Africa.

It contributes to 27% of road deaths.

Drunk driving alone costs the economy R18.2 billion every year, while the total cost of road crashes exceeded R205 billion in 2023.

60% of reported GBV cases are alcohol linked.

These costs dwarf any short-term financial benefits the industry claims to protect.

What Works: Lessons from Abroad

South Africa is not alone in facing this crisis and global evidence is clear about what works.

Lithuania banned alcohol advertising and saw dramatic reductions in youth exposure and heavy drinking.

Ireland introduced strict advertising curbs during hours when children are likely to watch TV or sports, cutting harmful exposure.

The World Health Organization (WHO) ranks banning alcohol advertising as one of its top “best buy” interventions, cheap to implement yet lifesaving in impact.

As Prof Charles Parry of the SAMRC argues: “The burden from alcohol use in South Africa warrants drastic action. Relying on industry self-regulation has failed government must legislate a full ban.”

A Call to Government

- SAAPA SA, through its True Cost of Alcohol campaign, is calling for urgent measures:
- A total ban on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion across media, sport, billboards, and digital platforms.
- An end to industry self-regulation by replacing voluntary codes with enforceable law.
- Establishment of an independent statutory advertising authority
- Strong protections for children, with zero tolerance for exposure near schools or online.
- Public investment in safe, alcohol-free spaces and opportunities for youth.
- Independent systems to monitor children’s real exposure to alcohol marketing.

Why This Cannot Wait

Every day of delay means more children exposed to predatory marketing, more families torn apart by violence, and more lives lost on our roads. The evidence is clear. The victims are our children. The costs are being carried by every South African taxpayer.

Together with our coalition partners, The National House of Traditional and Khoisan leaders (NHTKL), South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), National Treasury, Planet Youth (University of Cape Town), PRICELESS SA (WITS Public School of Health), South African Hindu Community, Congress of Business and Economics (CBE), South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Central Drug Authority (CDA): The only solution that will truly protect the next generation is simple: ban alcohol advertising now.



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