

# Prevention of Underage Drinking in the U.S.

Although the legal drinking age in the U.S. is 21, one quarter of people aged 12 to 20 currently drink alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Underage drinking is a problem shared by all communities: small metropolitan areas, large metropolitan areas, and nonmetropolitan areas have similar rates of underage alcohol use.<sup>2</sup> Excessive drinking is part of the issue: among people aged 12 to 20 who drink alcohol, an estimated 6 million people participated in binge drinking at least once in the last 30 days, consuming five or more drinks in one sitting, and nearly 2 million are classified as heavy drinkers, binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past 30 days.<sup>3\*</sup>

Underage alcohol use can have serious consequences for both young people's health and the well-being of the community. The good news is that **underage drinking can be prevented.**



The majority of **underage drinkers** report that their last use of alcohol in the past month occurred either in **someone else's home or their own home.**<sup>4</sup>

## 10 MILLION

In a given year, nearly 10 million people aged 12 to 20 reported **drinking alcohol in the past month.**<sup>5</sup>

## 5,000

people

Each year, 5,000 people under age 21 die from **homicides, suicides, car crashes and drowning**, all related to drinking alcohol.<sup>6</sup>



22 percent of drivers aged 15 to 20 who were **involved in fatal motor vehicle crashes were drinking.**<sup>7</sup>

**Alcohol use can result in short-term, long-term, and even fatal consequences for underage drinkers. It also poses a threat to the safety and well-being of other community members. Underage drinking causes or contributes to:**

### **Serious physical consequences.**

Alcohol can cause hangovers, vomiting, loss of consciousness, and death resulting from alcohol poisoning or asphyxiation.<sup>8,9</sup>

### **Adverse effects on young people's developing bodies and brains.**

Research suggests the brain continues to develop through adolescence until approximately age 25.<sup>10</sup>

The adolescent brain is vulnerable to the damaging effects of alcohol; consumption during critical periods of brain development may cause impairments to brain functions, such as learning and memory, which last into adulthood.<sup>11</sup>

### **Negative behaviors.**

Underage alcohol use is associated with academic failure, illicit drug use, and tobacco use.<sup>12</sup>

\* SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) defines "binge drinking" as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days. NSDUH defines "heavy drinking" as binge drinking on at least 5 days in the past 30 days.<sup>13</sup>

## Situations that put others at risk.

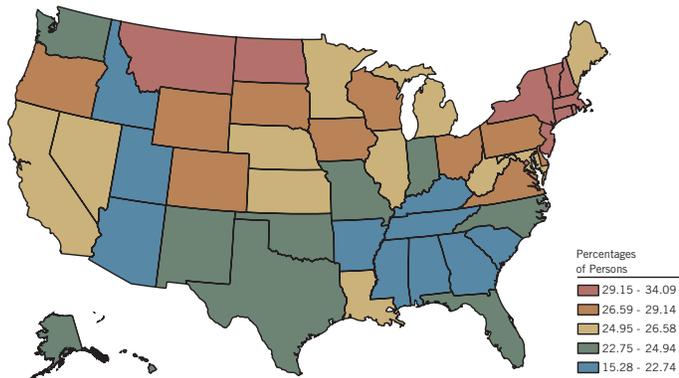
Loud and unruly behavior, property destruction, unintentional injuries, fights and violence, and even death due to underage drinking can affect anyone. Drinking and driving is one example: about 45 percent of people who die in crashes involving a drinking driver under the age of 21 are people other than the driver.<sup>14</sup> Because these 'secondary' effects can impact community

members at random, **preventing underage alcohol use is everybody's business.**

## Problems that can continue into adulthood.

Adults who first use alcohol before age 21 are more likely to be classified with alcohol dependence or abuse than those who had their first drink at or after age 21.<sup>15</sup>

## Alcohol Use in the Past Month Among People Aged 12 to 20, by State: 2010 to 2011



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, NSDUH, 2010 (Revised March 2012) and 2011. (<http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11State/NSDUHsaemaps2011.htm>)

## A National Perspective

Underage alcohol use occurs across the United States, but some states and communities face higher rates of underage drinking than others. See below to find out steps you and others can take to address underage drinking in your community.

## What Communities Can Do

### Parents and Families

Many young people identify parents as the leading influence in their decision to drink or not to drink,<sup>16</sup> making it important for parents and caregivers to take an active role in preventing underage alcohol use.

Monitor your children or other young family members for signs that may indicate involvement in underage drinking. It's important to remember that these behaviors could also point to other problems.

Some signs that may point to involvement in underage drinking are:<sup>17</sup>

- School problems;
- Rebelling against family rules;
- Switching friends, along with a reluctance to let you get to know the new friend;

- A lack of involvement in former interests;
- Mood changes, defensiveness, or a "nothing matters" attitude;
- Memory lapses;
- Blood-shot eyes;
- Lack of coordination; and
- Slurred speech.

### Educators and School Administrators

Educators and school administrators have an opportunity to discuss the risks of drinking alcohol with their students. You can help prevent underage drinking by:<sup>18</sup>

- Encouraging student involvement in school, a proven factor in reducing underage drinking.
- Creating an environment that helps students explore their talents and follow their passions.

- Being a caring adult and a mentor.
- Relaying information to parents about school policies and the dangers of underage drinking.
- Enforcing strict policies against alcohol use on school property and at school events.
- Equipping students with knowledge, skills, and motivation to resist pressures to drink.
- Putting policies and a mechanism in place for referring students to the appropriate health care providers or other personnel if they need services or treatment.

### Community Organizations

When discussing or proposing a prevention effort, remember that effective community prevention interventions require a mix of program components and policy strategies. These might include:<sup>19</sup>

- Media campaigns, speeding and drunk driving awareness days, and promotion of telephone help lines;
- Peer-led education activities in high schools, programs for college students, and the establishment of Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) chapters;
- Information for retail alcohol outlets about underage drinking, health risks, and legal consequences;
- Responsible beverage service training programs and the restricted sale of alcohol at public events;
- Support for social host liability laws, sobriety and traffic safety checkpoints, and graduated driver licensing laws; and
- Enforcement of underage drinking laws.

Learn more about national efforts in the **National Prevention Strategy**, available at <http://www.healthcare.gov/prevention/nphpphc/strategy/report.pdf>.

### Alcohol Retailers<sup>20</sup>

Alcohol retailers are legally responsible for preventing the selling or serving of alcoholic beverages to young people under age 21. Retailers can also engage in other prevention strategies:

- Create and maintain sales and service policies that every staffer should follow, and train staff and management on the alcohol sales policies. Monitor staff conduct, and keep records of trainings, compliance checks, and disciplinary actions.
- Provide tools to assist employees with ID verification (e.g., guidebook that shows valid ID formats for all U.S. states and territories, ID scanners, calendar showing birthdates eligible to buy alcohol).
- Post signs about ID-checking policies at the entrance and near registers.
- Establish working relationships with local law enforcement, and get involved in industry associations and the community to express a commitment to prevent underage sales and use.
- Don't display youth-oriented alcohol advertising or place alcohol near items youth are likely to buy, like sodas, snack foods or energy drinks. Don't advertise alcohol products in college or high school publications, or outdoors near schools or playgrounds.

### Everyone

- Find out about underage drinking issues in your community, what your community is already doing to address the problem, and what actions are still needed.<sup>21</sup>
- Educate neighbors and community, local, state and federal leaders about underage drinking issues in your community. Urge them to support policies that combat underage alcohol use.<sup>22</sup>

## Helpful Resources

- **Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth: A Practitioner's Guide**, available at <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Practitioner/YouthGuide/YouthGuide.pdf>, is a guide provided by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) that serves as a tool for identifying youth at risk for alcohol-related problems.
- The **Too Smart To Start** website, <http://www.toosmarttostart.samhsa.gov>, helps youth, families, educators and communities prevent underage alcohol use and its related problems.

- **UnderageDrinking.SAMHSA.gov**, available at <http://underagedrinking.samhsa.gov>, is a public education website supported by the Surgeon General's Call to Action on underage drinking and communicates to parents how they can help reduce their child's risk of becoming involved with alcohol.
- **The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking**, available at <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>, is a resource from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) providing information on underage drinking.
- **Safe Schools, Healthy Students** is an initiative of HHS, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice, designed to prevent violence and substance abuse among our nation's youth, schools and communities, available at <http://www.sshs.samhsa.gov>.
- The **Stop Underage Drinking** website, <http://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov>, is a collaboration among SAMHSA and other Federal agencies, and provides a wealth of information on underage drinking, such as data and statistics; resources for parents, youth, educators, community organizations and businesses; and more.

**If you are concerned that you or someone you know may be consuming alcohol underage, help is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year through SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD). The Helpline provides free and confidential information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish.**

---

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings*. NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved November 19, 2012, from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11Results/NSDUHresults2011.htm>
- <sup>2-5</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings*. NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved November 19, 2012, from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11Results/NSDUHresults2011.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2004). Hingson and Kenkel 2004; Levy et al. 1999; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) 2003; Smith et al. 1999. As cited in Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2009). *Start Talking Before They Start Drinking*. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from [http://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov/media/Underage\\_Brochure\\_508final.pdf](http://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov/media/Underage_Brochure_508final.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). (2008). *Traffic Safety Facts: Young Drivers*. National Center for Statistics and Analysis, Retrieved December 18, 2012 from <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811169.PDF>
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General). Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> College Drinking Prevention. Facts About Alcohol Poisoning. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/factsAboutAlcoholPoisoning.aspx>
- <sup>10</sup> Winters, K, et al. (2008). The Developing Brain, Adolescence and Vulnerability to Drug Abuse. *For Society for Prevention Research 18th Annual Meeting, Denver, CO*. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.mentorfoundation.org/uploads/SPR-Denver/Teen%20Brain%20Poster.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Hiller-Sturmhöfel, S., and Swartzwelder, H.S. (2004/2005). Alcohol's effects on the adolescent brain: What can be learned from animal models. *Alcohol Research & Health* 28(4), 213–221. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arih284/213-221.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General). Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings*. NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved November 19, 2012, from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11Results/NSDUHresults2011.htm>
- <sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation Fatality Analysis Reporting System. (2004). As cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General). Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2012). *Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings*. NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved November 19, 2012, from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11Results/NSDUHresults2011.htm>

- <sup>16</sup> The Century Council. (2009). Underage Drinking Research and Teen Drinking Facts. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.centurycouncil.org/learn-the-facts/underage-drinking-research> (Original source: GfK Roper Youth Report.)
- <sup>17</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Too Smart to Start: Signs of Underage Alcohol Use. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.toosmarttostart.samhsa.gov/educators/signs/default.aspx>
- <sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General). Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Holder, Harold D. Community Prevention of Young Adult Drinking and Associated Problems. *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Publications*. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh284/245-248.htm>
- <sup>20</sup> Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Protection. (n.d.). Alcohol Retailers Can Help Reduce Teen Drinking. Retrieved on December 10, 2012, from <http://business.ftc.gov/documents/alcohol-retailers-can-help-reduce-teen-drinking>
- <sup>21,22</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. (2006). (Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, Brochure SA1036). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Retrieved December 20, 2011, from <http://www.macleavinghouse.com/ALCH/SA1036.html>

