

Frequently Asked Questions about Youth Alcohol Use

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How big of a problem is youth alcohol use?

Although all 50 states enacted a minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) of 21 in the 1980s, alcohol continues to be consumed by a substantial proportion of the nation's youth. The 2008 national Monitoring the Future study indicated that 16% of 8th graders, 29% of 10th graders, and 43% of 12th graders reported any alcohol use in the past 30 days. In these grades, 8%, 16% and 25% of youth report having 5 or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past two weeks (Johnston et al., 2009).

The annual social cost of underage drinking in the U.S. was conservatively estimated to be \$61.9 billion in 2001 (Miller et al., 2006). Heavy alcohol use and related problems, especially drinking and driving, are also prevalent among young adults and college students. Hingson et al. (2009) estimated that among college students, alcohol-related deaths increased from 1,440 in 1998 to 1,825 in 2005, a 27% increase. The majority of deaths resulted from drinking and driving. The prevalence of past-30-day heavy or binge drinking among college students increased from 42% in 1999 to 45% in 2005, while the prevalence of past-year drinking and driving increased from 26% to 29% in the same period. Thus, reducing underage alcohol use in general, and heavy drinking in particular, are both stated as Healthy People 2010 Objectives (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2005).

What social factors contribute to underage drinking?

A variety of social factors are likely to influence alcohol consumption and related problems among young people. For example, the availability of alcohol from commercial and social sources is related to underage drinking, with family (or home) and friends being the most commonly used sources (Paschall et al., 2007; Wagenaar et al., 1996). Not surprisingly, the source of alcohol varies by age. Children and young adolescents are more likely to obtain alcohol at home or from family members, whereas older adolescents are more likely to obtain alcohol from older friends, at unsupervised parties, and from commercial sources (Paschall et al., 2007; Wagenaar et al., 1996). The proportion of adults in a particular area who drink is also related to alcohol use and heavy drinking among youth (Nelson et al., 2005). It appears that when young people perceive that alcohol use is normal and acceptable, they are more likely to drink themselves.

What is being done to reduce underage drinking and related problems?

Alcohol control policies have been implemented to varying degrees by states and local communities to reduce the availability of alcohol to youth and increase the certainty, severity and swiftness of legal consequences for purchasing, possessing and drinking alcoholic beverages (Fell et al., 2008). The most prominent of these policies is the minimum legal drinking age of 21, which was enacted by all 50 states in the 1980s. Numerous studies have demonstrated associations between raising the drinking age to 21 and reductions in underage alcohol

consumption, youthful traffic fatalities and other harm (e.g., Ponicki, LaScala, & Gruenewald, 2007; Shults et al., 2001; Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002; Voas et al., 2003).

Policies related to the drinking age include prohibition of underage youth purchasing, possessing, and consuming alcohol in public and private locations, beer keg registration, zero tolerance laws for alcohol use and driving, and a graduated driver's licensing program (Fell et al., 2008). Recent studies indicate that these laws are associated with reductions in both hazardous alcohol use and drink-driving fatalities among young people (Fell et al., 2008, 2009; Nelson et al., 2005).

A recent multi-national study showed that more comprehensive and stringent alcohol control policies, particularly those that reduce alcohol availability, were associated with lower levels of youth alcohol consumption and heavy drinking (Paschall et al., in press). These studies provide further support for the idea that using policies to change the social mechanisms by which young people obtain and consume alcohol can be effective. Alcohol control policies and enforcement activities may also affect youth perceptions regarding the acceptability of drinking and likelihood of legal consequences for purchasing, possessing and consuming alcoholic beverages. Further research to explore how these factors relate to alcohol policies and enforcement is needed.

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