

Social host laws tied to less underage drinking

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PISCATAWAY, NJ – Teenagers who live in communities with strict “social host” laws are less likely to spend their weekends drinking at parties, according to a study in the November issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Many U.S. states and local communities have passed social host laws, which hold adults responsible when underage drinkers imbibe on their property. The details of the laws vary, however, and research has been mixed as to whether they actually keep kids from drinking.

In the new study, investigators focused on 50 communities in California, half of which had social host laws. (The state has no law on the books, but local governments are free to devise their own.) The researchers found that teenagers were less likely to report drinking at parties when they lived in communities with particularly strong social host laws.

However, the findings indicate a correlation and not necessarily a direct effect of the laws, said lead researcher Mallie J. Paschall, Ph.D., a senior research scientist at the Prevention Research Center in Oakland, California.

“These findings are preliminary. We can’t say that social host laws definitely prevent kids from drinking at parties,” Paschall said.

Still, the results are encouraging, according to Paschall. “Most kids get alcohol from social sources, not commercial ones,” he pointed out. So, in theory, laws aimed at those social sources--in this case, parents or other adults of legal drinking age--should help reduce underage drinking.

“It does look like there is less-frequent drinking among teenagers in cities with stringent social host laws, even when other city and youth characteristics that are related to underage drinking are controlled for” Paschall said. “So these laws might be an effective strategy for reducing hazardous drinking.”

“Strong” social host laws have some key provisions, according to Paschall: They specifically target underage drinking; there is a civil penalty (such as a hefty fine) that’s swiftly

administered; and property owners are held responsible, even if they claim they didn't know about the underage drinking.

Those types of laws are controversial, Paschall acknowledged. And in some communities, police do not enforce them--sometimes because there is little support for the policies from the public or the local prosecutor's office.

But enforcement is necessary for the laws to work, Paschall noted--as is public knowledge. If adults don't know they could be held responsible for underage drinking, the policies won't be much of a deterrent, he said.

In future studies, the researchers plan to look at rates of teen drinking before and after the passage of social host laws to get a better idea of whether the policies themselves have an impact.

Paschall said it will also be important to see whether the laws reduce problems related to teen drinking, including drunk driving.

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Paschall, M. J., Lipperman-Kreda, S., Grube, J. W., & Thomas, S. (November 2014). Relationships Between Social Host Laws and Underage Drinking: Findings From a Study of 50 California Cities. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 75(6), 901–907.

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