



FACTS ON UNDERAGE DRINKING

Underage Alcohol Use Overview

Alcohol continues to be the most widely used substance of abuse among American youth, and a higher proportion use alcohol than use tobacco or other drugs.(4)

Underage drinking often begins at an early age. In 2013, the average age at which someone under age 21 began drinking was about age 16.(5) Almost one-fifth of those who drink underage begin using alcohol before they are 13 years old.(6)

Underage drinking is common and often excessive. In 2014, about 9 million 12- to 20-year-olds (or 23 percent of this age group) reported current alcohol use, 5 million reported binge alcohol use, and 1 million reported heavy alcohol use. These figures mean that, among youth who drank, about 3 in 5 engaged in binge drinking and 1 in 7 engaged in heavy drinking.* (1)

Alcohol can be easy for youth to obtain. In 2014, nearly 28 percent of youth reported paying for their own alcohol on their most recent drinking occasion, either buying it themselves (8 percent) or having someone else purchase it for them (19 percent).(7)

In 2014, 70 percent of youth reported that they obtained alcohol for free on their most recent drinking occasion. Most commonly reported sources were an unrelated person over age 21 (26 percent); parents, guardians, or other family members (20 percent); or another person under age 21 (13 percent). Seven percent reported taking the alcohol from their own home or the home of someone else.(7)

Alcohol use by youth is correlated with adult drinking practices. For example, children of parents who binge drink are twice as likely to engage in binge drinking and to meet alcohol-dependence criteria.(4)

Underage drinking is associated with other substance use. Among 12- to 17-year-olds who engaged in current heavy drinking, 62 percent also reported illicit drug use and 58 percent reported marijuana use during the past 30 days. Comparative figures for their nondrinking peers were 5 percent for current illicit drug use and 3.3 percent for current marijuana use.(5)

Underage Drinking by Adolescents

More than 2 million 12- to 17-year-olds reported drinking alcohol for the first time during the past year, which averages to approximately 6,400 adolescents/day who began alcohol use.(8)

About 3 million 12- to 17-year-olds reported current drinking. About 1.5 million engaged in binge drinking and 257,000 engaged in heavy drinking.(1)

Ten percent of 8th graders reported drinking during the past 30 days, with 3 percent reporting having been drunk. Among 10th graders, 22 percent reported past 30-day use, with 10 percent reporting having been drunk. Among 12th graders, 35 percent reported past 30-day use, with 21 percent reporting having been drunk.(2)

Six percent of 12th graders reported consuming 10+ drinks in a row, and 4 percent consumed 15+ drinks in a row within the previous 2 weeks.(2)

The majority of students in grades 8–12 reported that it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain alcohol. This perception was most common among 12th graders, with 87 percent reporting easy access. This percentage, however, represents a decline from a high of 95 percent reported in 1999.(2)

* Current drinking = past 30-day use; binge drinking = five drinks or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days; and heavy alcohol use = five or more drinks on the same occasion on 5 or more days in the past 30 days.

PREVENTION WORKS!

Underage drinking and its consequences can be prevented, as shown by the progress being made. Between 2002 and 2014, current, binge, and heavy drinking by 12- to 20-year-olds all declined, from 29 to 23 percent, 19 to 14 percent, and 6 to 3 percent, respectively.(1) In 2015, alcohol use and drunkenness among 8th to 12th graders reached the lowest levels recorded since 1975.(2) Age 21 minimum legal drinking laws have reduced alcohol-related traffic fatalities by 13 percent and, as of 2012, have saved an estimated 29,292 lives since 1975.(3) Further progress can be achieved through strong, continuing prevention efforts.

Underage Drinking by Young Adults

In 2014, 60 percent of full-time college students ages 18–22 reported current drinking, 38 percent reported binge drinking, and 12 percent reported heavy drinking. Among individuals not enrolled full time in college, the percentages were 52 percent, 34 percent, and 10 percent, respectively.(7)

In 2013, 34 percent of 20-year-olds reported binge drinking during the past 30 days, which substantially increases the risk of injury or death. More than 1 in ten 20-year-olds had engaged in binge drinking at least five times during that time period.(4)

Underage Drinking by Gender and Racial/Ethnic Group

In 2014, 12- to 20-year-old males reported current alcohol use, binge use, and heavy use of 23 percent, 15 percent, and 4 percent, respectively. Comparative figures for 12- to 20-year-old females were 23 percent, 12 percent, and 3 percent, respectively.(7)

Among high school girls, 38 percent reported current alcohol use and 20 percent reported binge drinking in 2011. These figures mean that more than half of high school girls who used alcohol engaged in binge drinking.(9)

Among 12- to 20-year-olds, Asians (at 14 percent) had the lowest reported current alcohol use and Whites (at 26 percent) had the highest. Among other groups, 22 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives, 21 percent of Hispanics or Latinos, 21 percent of those of two or more races, and 17 percent of Blacks reported current use.(7)

Among 12- to 20-year-olds, Blacks and Asians had the lowest reported percentages of binge drinking (9 percent and 7 percent,

respectively), while Whites had the highest reported percentage (16 percent). Among other groups, 14 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives, 13 percent of Hispanics or Latinos, and 12 percent of those of two or more races reported binge drinking.(7)

Overall Health and Safety Risks

Underage drinking contributes to a wide range of costly health and social problems, including injury and death from motor vehicle crashes, interpersonal violence (such as homicides, assaults, and rapes), unintentional injuries (such as burns, falls, and drowning), brain impairment, alcohol dependence, risky sexual activity, academic problems, and alcohol and drug poisoning.(4)

Adults age 21 or older who first used alcohol at age 14 or younger were more than seven times as likely to be classified with alcohol dependence or abuse as adults who had their first drink at age 21 or older (15 vs. 2 percent).(5)

On average, alcohol is a factor in the deaths of approximately 4,358 people under 21 in the United States per year, shortening their lives by an average of 60 years.(10)

In 2013, more than one-fifth (22 percent) of high school students reported riding in a car driven by someone who had been drinking.(6)

In 2013, 17 percent of 16- to 20-year-old drivers involved in fatal crashes had a blood alcohol content of .08 or higher.(11)

For more information on underage drinking and its prevention, visit:
<https://www.StopAlcoholAbuse.gov>

Access the latest *Report to Congress on the Prevention and Reduction of Underage Drinking*, with information on current federal and state policies and programs.

Sources

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