

Reducing Underage Drinking—A Collective Responsibility
Fact Sheet

- Alcohol is the number one drug of choice for America's young people. More than 10 million youth, ages 12 to 20, report drinking alcohol in the past month. The American Medical Association considers this an epidemic worth investing resources to now, to prevent the costly social and physical consequences in the future.

On September 9, 2003, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine released *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility*, a comprehensive review of existing alcohol prevention efforts. The report exposes the largely invisible public health epidemic of underage drinking, analyzes the most recent data on underage drinking and addresses the best strategies for preventing youth from using and abusing alcohol. *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility* takes the first step in creating a comprehensive, national plan to combat underage drinking.

History and methodology

- Congress provided \$500,000 in 2002 for the NAS and IOM to create a strategy to reduce underage drinking rates and prevent teens from abusing alcohol.
- Bipartisan legislation called for a review of existing federal and state programs focused on alcohol prevention in order to establish a more effective campaign on reducing underage drinking to be housed in the Department of Health and Human Services.
(Source: Institute of Medicine, *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility*, September 2003)

Key findings from “Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility”

- Patterns and consequences of underage drinking are closely related to the overall extent and patterns of drinking in society and are affected by the same factors that affect adult consumption.
- Underage drinking cannot be successfully addressed by focusing on youth alone. Efforts to reduce and prevent underage drinking need to focus on parents and other adults and include strategies that engage the society at large.
- Alcoholic beverages are far cheaper today than they were in the 1960s and 1970s.
(Source: Institute of Medicine, *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility*, September 2003)

Key recommendations from “Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility”

- Multiple components must be implemented that include science-based programs, research and evaluation.
- Congress and state legislators should raise alcohol taxes. Top priority should be given to raising beer taxes, and excise taxes on all alcoholic beverages should be indexed to the consumer price index to keep pace with inflation.
- Public and private funders should support community mobilization to reduce underage drinking. Community leaders should assess their local underage drinking problem and consider effective approaches such as community organizing, coalition building and strategic use of mass media.
- States and communities should implement a system requiring registration of beer kegs that records information on purchaser's identity.
- Residential colleges and universities should adopt comprehensive prevention approaches including environmental changes that limit underage access to alcohol.
- Local police, working with community leaders should adopt and announce policies for deterring and terminating underage drinking parties.
- States and communities should implement enforcement programs to deter adults from purchasing alcohol for minors.
(Source: Institute of Medicine, *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility*, September 2003)

General statistics on underage drinking

- 10.7 million underage youth drink, 7.2 million of whom are binge drinkers.
(Source: *Summary of Findings from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003)
- Illegal alcohol consumption by underage youth account for up to \$22 billion a year in sales.
(Source: *Alcohol Consumption and Expenditures for Underage Drinking and Adult Excessive Drinking*, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University, published in JAMA, 2003)
- In a survey of Americans age 12-17, the average person took their first drink before age 13.
(Source: *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main Findings 1996*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998)
- Youth who use alcohol before 15 are four times more likely to be alcohol dependent than adults whose first drink is at the legal age of 21.
(Source: Grant & Dawson. *Age at Onset of Alcohol Use and its Association with DSM-IV Alcohol Abuse and Dependence*, Journal of Substance Abuse, Volume 9, pages 103-110, 1997)
- The consequences of underage drinking are a tremendous expense to the U.S. economy and total more than \$53 billion per year, by far the most costly of all drug problems.
(Source: Institute of Medicine, *Reducing Underage Drinking - A Collective Responsibility*, September 2003)

Effects of underage drinking on health and safety

- Alcohol plays a key role in accidents, homicides and suicides, the leading causes of death among youth.
(Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, information related to planning and promoting October 1998 Child Health Month, May 1998)
- Alcohol kills six times more young people than all illicit drugs combined.
(Source: *Healthy Kentuckians 2010*, Cabinet for Health Services)
- Alcohol is linked to as many as two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens and college students.
(Source: *Youth and Alcohol: Dangerous and Deadly Consequences*, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 1992.)
- Studies reveal that alcohol consumption by adolescents results in brain damage — possibly permanent — and impairs intellectual development.
(Source: *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (Volume 24, Number 2), National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, February 2000)

The power of advertising

- The alcohol industry spends approximately \$4.8 billion every year on advertising, a powerful medium that has proven extremely persuasive to young people.
- A study of 12 year-olds found that children who were more aware of beer advertising held more favorable views on drinking and expressed an intention to drink more often as adults than did children who were less knowledgeable about the ads.
(Source: Grube, J.W. (1995). "Television alcohol portrayals, alcohol advertising and alcohol expectancies among children and adolescents." *Effects of the Mass Media on the Use and Abuse of Alcohol*. S.E. Martin and P. Mail. Bethesda: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 105-121.)
- A 1996 study of children ages nine to eleven found that children were more familiar with Budweiser's television frogs than Kellogg's Tony the Tiger, the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, or Smokey the Bear.
(Source: Leiber, L. Commercial and character slogan recall by children aged 9 to 11 years: Budweiser frogs versus Bugs Bunny. Berkeley: Center on Alcohol Advertising, 1996.)
- A federally-funded study of 1,000 young people found that exposure to and liking of alcohol advertisements affects whether young people will drink alcohol.
(Source: Grube, J. *Alcohol advertising—a study of children and adolescents: preliminary results.*)

What has the alcohol industry's role been towards preventing underage drinking?

- The alcohol industry is a major obstacle to ending the epidemic of underage drinking. Prior to the release of the new report, the National Beer Wholesalers Association assailed it as a misuse of taxpayer dollars and lobbied Congress to undermine its importance.
- The Association also lobbied extensively to exclude alcohol messages from the government's billion dollar "Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign," the largest taxpayer campaign to reduce youth substance abuse, despite the fact that alcohol is the number one drug of choice for youth.

What has the government done thus far to prevent underage drinking?

- The U.S. Surgeon General has never conducted a single workshop or report on underage drinking. Federal efforts to date to prevent and reduce underage drinking have been poorly funded, coordinated and promoted.
- The government is heavily lobbied by the alcohol industry, which donated more than \$11.7 million to the national Democratic and Republican parties and their candidates in the 2000 election cycle, making it one of the most generous funders among major industries.

(Source: *Partner or Foe: The Alcohol Industry, Youth Alcohol Problems, and Alcohol Policy Strategies* policy briefing paper, American Medical Association, 2002)

Changing the social environment

- The alcohol industry has co-opted prevention efforts with their self-serving messages of moderation and personal responsibility.
- Traditional public health efforts to reduce underage drinking focus on youth education and prevention techniques, but research shows that this has had only limited success.
- Public health experts endorse expanding approaches that focus on how social environments actually encourage and enable alcohol abuse among youth. Environmental factors such as illegal alcohol sales to minors, alcohol distribution and pricing practices, cultural norms, marketing, promotions and advertising all create a culture where drinking is seen as sexy, cool, fun, cheap and easy to buy but also without consequence.

(Source: *Partner or Foe: The Alcohol Industry, Youth Alcohol Problems, and Alcohol Policy Strategies* policy briefing paper, American Medical Association, 2002)

Recommended proven steps that can reduce underage drinking

- Increased excise taxes on alcoholic beverages
- Keg registration to track when alcohol is provided to minors
- Strict penalties for parents and other adults who purchase alcohol for underage youth
- A clear, sustained counter-marketing campaign that broadly reaches youth with more realistic messages about drinking and its consequences
- Increased law enforcement measures and enforcement
- Targeting youth of color to combat alcohol abuse in a culturally competent and effective manner.