



Underage Drinking in the United States: A Status Report, 2004

February 2005

The Center on
Alcohol Marketing and *Youth*

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Preface

This report on underage drinking in the United States by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University:

- brings together data that are now reported piecemeal,
- focuses and advances our current understanding of underage drinking, and
- seeks to prompt action by putting a spotlight on whether the nation is making progress in protecting our children by reducing underage drinking.

The landmark September 2003 study by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (NRC/IOM), *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, called for an “annual report” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To date, no such report has been forthcoming. An “annual report” by HHS as recommended by the NRC/IOM would go beyond the scope of this report; the NRC/IOM called for the annual reporting of:

- funding levels for preventing underage drinking,
- activities supported by the funds,
- results from funded activities,
- data that measure progress in reducing underage drinking,
- data on brands drunk by youth and where alcohol was obtained,
- data on the reach of alcohol advertising to the underage population and entertainment portrayals of alcohol use, and
- future activities and any changes in strategy.¹

While funding levels, activities funded, and results achieved are beyond the scope of this report, and while data on brand preferences and sources of alcohol are still not collected and therefore not reportable, this report offers a template on how to bring existing data together to focus attention and prompt action to protect our children.

Executive Summary

By 1988, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had prohibited the sale of alcohol to anyone under the age of 21.² Yet alcohol is still the most commonly used drug by children and adolescents in the United States.³ The rates of underage drinking today remain too high, and the consequences too severe.

The nation made little progress, if any at all, in 2004 in its efforts to reduce underage drinking. Two major national public health surveys track underage drinking annually, and the results reported in 2004 from both surveys showed the nation at a standstill:

- Monitoring the Future (MTF) reported that in 2004 nearly one in five eighth-graders had a drink in the past month, as well as more than one in three 10th-graders and nearly one in two 12th-graders.⁴
- The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that in 2003 approximately 10.9 million underage youth, ages 12 to 20, used alcohol in the month prior to the survey. Nearly 7.2 million underage youth also reported binge drinking, i.e., drinking five or more drinks on a single occasion at least once in the past 30 days.⁵

Other significant epidemiological findings about underage drinking that were reported in 2004 include:

- According to a September 2004 analysis by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 7,000 young people under 16 have their first drink of alcohol every day.⁶
- In May 2004, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released survey data from 2003 showing that the gender gap among younger drinkers has closed, although other federal surveys show that the gap widens again by 12th grade.⁷ According to the CDC, more ninth- and 10th-grade girls currently drink than ninth- and 10th-grade boys. Ninth-grade girls are more likely than their male peers to binge drink as well.⁸
- According to MTF, 55.8% of high school seniors reported using “alcopops” in 2004, a level that is virtually unchanged from 2003. Among current drinkers, 78.5% of eighth-graders, 71.3% of 10th-graders, and 64.8% of 12th-graders reported drinking “alcopops” in the past month.⁹

Research findings on underage drinking reported in 2004 contributed to a new appreciation of the “developmental” impact of underage drinking and the critical need to reduce and prevent underage drinking:

- In November 2004, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) concluded that alcohol abuse and dependence are “developmental disorders.”¹⁰
- An analysis published in the November 15, 2004 issue of *Biological Psychiatry* stated that the onset of alcohol dependence peaks by 18 years of age.¹¹

The consequences of underage drinking can be both immediate, as in accidental injury or death, and long-term, as in the impact on adolescent brain development. Research findings reported in 2004 gave new insights in both areas.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released in September 2004 a new annual estimate on the number of underage deaths due to excessive alcohol use: 4,554.¹²
- Brain researchers, using brain scanning technology, have identified how they believe alcohol use may cause loss of memory and other skills in adolescents.¹³

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