

In our opinion: In new study, Utah continues to experience fewer alcohol deaths than peers

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According to a recent report, Utah kids who use alcohol are much more likely to binge drink than kids in other states. Nationally, about half the kids who admit to recent alcohol use admit to binge drinking, or consuming five or more drinks in a row. In Utah, 72 percent of those high school seniors who say they've recently had a drink admit to binge behavior.

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A report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, together with the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, showed that [Utah has the lowest rate of alcohol-related deaths](#) among 11 states surveyed. While the overall trend sends a positive message, it still highlights the costs to society, and state, in the lives negatively affected by alcohol.

In the five-year period ending in 2011, Utah averaged 513 deaths per year from excessive drinking, according to the report. That translates into an annual rate of 22.4 deaths per 100,000 residents. Only slightly higher was Virginia, with 23 deaths per 100,000 residents, and Nebraska, with 24 per 100,000 residents.

Brent Kelsey, assistant director of the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, [told the Deseret News](#) that despite a low per-capita rate, more than 500 deaths a year still represents a serious public health problem.

One important component of the effort to ensure that fatality rates decline is to focus attention on the problem of underage drinking. Individuals who begin drinking in teenage years are more at risk of alcohol abuse in their adult years.

Another study, the biennial Student Health and Risk Prevention report from 2013, found that Utah enjoys a low rate of underage drinking overall, but that 25 percent of Utah kids who drank liquor the previous year obtained it from their homes and with their parents' permission. More than 40 percent of teenagers who drank at home said they had parental approval.

That statistic speaks to a troubling phenomenon. Some parents apparently think it's appropriate to allow children to engage in behavior the law restricts to those over 21. That is unfortunate and needs to change in order to dissuade underage drinking.

"The more normalized alcohol is, the more integrated it is into the life around the young people, the more likely they will be to drink," said David Jernigan, the director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, in [an interview](#) with the Deseret News.

Utah's current laws and policies help ensure a low rate of deaths due from alcohol abuse. We must continue to maintain a culture where [alcohol consumption by teenagers](#) remains unacceptable.