



Underage drinking in Pennsylvania greater than national average among high school seniors



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Email the author | [Follow on Twitter](#) on May 15, 2015 at 9:30 AM, updated May 15, 2015 at 3:50 PM

The [recent citing of 45 underage drinkers following a party in York on Saturday](#) may have surprised some, but to people who work with the issue of underage drinking, the only surprise is how many people were actually cited.

"I'm not surprised it's happening," said Felicity Erni, state coordinator for Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD).

Erni said this state has a larger problem than most states regarding the issue of underage drinking, where the average age of first consumption is about 12 or 13 for most early drinkers. She pointed to [a 2013 Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency report](#) that found 13.3 percent of sixth-graders self-reported using alcohol.

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The percentage of self-reported alcohol users more than doubled for eighth-graders to 35.1 percent. Alcohol use increased significantly among 10th-graders, reporting 61.5 percent had consumed a drink. Finally, 74.2 percent of Pennsylvania high school seniors reported consuming alcohol; the national average is 68 percent.

In total 46.9 percent of sixth-, eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders surveyed self-reported using alcohol, which is much higher compared to reported to marijuana use at 18.9 percent and tobacco use at 17.6.

Following one of the biggest citations of underage drinkers at a York party on Saturday, Erni said that's one of the most successful citations she's ever seen. She said officers typically don't cite that many illegal drinkers at once, because the first responsibility when dealing with intoxicated teens is safety. It's one of the largest busts she can remember in the state in more than a decade in the field.

Erni said SADD and other organizations recommend parents and children have an honest dialogue about underage drinking, alcohol abuse and keeping alcohol out of teens hands. She pointed to scientific studies showing the potential issues brought on by drinking before the brain is fully developed.

The earlier people begin drinking, the higher the potential for cognitive and acute brain issues begin, said David Jernigan, [director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth](#). Human brains develop until about the age of 24, meaning early drinking, which damages the parts of the brain that develop last, can have lasting harmful effects, Jernigan said.

That part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, is responsible for judgment and problem solving, so damaging it or preventing it from fully developing leaves people without the faculties to make sound decisions, n said.

As a result, Jernigan said, it's important to delay drinking as much as possible to prevent long-term health issues and keep people from increasing the risk for alcoholism, bingeing and other risks associated with alcohol abuse.

Jernigan directly attacked the notion that people who don't drink until they are of age will have problems with alcohol because they are more inexperienced drinkers is false. He said data shows that people who start earlier are the most likely population to heavily drink.

"I can't make up the numbers," Jernigan said. "It's better for young people the later they start to drink."

He noted the likelihood increases by at least four times for someone who begins drinking at 15 to have an alcohol problem, be more addicted or be in a fight or vehicle accident while intoxicated.

Citing a study he co-authored, Jernigan [pointed to statistics showing that two-thirds of youth drinkers binge when they consume alcohol](#). He added that marketing for alcohol and "drinking responsibly" is incredibly misleading.

Pointing to dietary recommendations, Jernigan said most people are unaware that the advised maximum intake based on average body size is about two drinks a day for men and one for women.

"Parents are really up against a marketing environment that continues to make alcohol look like an incredibly cool and wonderful behavior without consequences," Jernigan said, noting the large number of alcohol ads in media.

Erni said there are many programs in place to quell underage drinking, but she because of the large number of rural communities and a lack of things to do, adults need to keep youth engaged. She said such actions are imperative so that kids don't turn to alcohol after special events like graduations or proms, but also on a normal weekend.

Parents who provide alcohol to teens, she said, risk all the work done to prevent early alcoholism in addition to risking heavy fines and personal discipline for providing the alcohol to minors. Additionally, Erni said, its impossible to always monitor kids, and providing them with alcohol and starting that behavior is extremely dangerous, even with parental supervision that kids will not always seek.

"It's too risky of a situation," Erni said. "Drinking and consuming is an adult behavior."