



Underage drinking remains key problem in El Paso

Aaron Martinez , El Paso Times

El Paso ninth graders are drinking alcohol at an alarming rate, according to a study released Thursday by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation.

The new information comes despite a decrease in recent years in the number of reported underage drinkers.

The [Underage Drinking in El Paso: A Status Report](#), which was [commissioned by the foundation](#) and led by John Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health associate professor David Jernigan, showed that more than 28 percent of El Paso area ninth graders reported drinking alcohol in the past 30 days.

Binge drinking was also a common trait among the ninth graders with 16.6 percent claiming to have had five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion, the report states. Binge drinking in El Paso ranged for 7.5 percent of seventh graders participating to 34.3 percent of high school seniors.

“El Paso is slightly above the national average,” Jernigan said. “The larger picture is that underage drinking has been falling in recent years and that is a big public health and safety success, but at the same time we are very concerned that this is still the leading drug problem among young people including here in El Paso.”

The national average is about 22 percent of ninth graders saying they drank in the last 30 days with about 10 percent saying they binge drink, Jernigan said.

According to the report, in 2011 nearly 24 percent of El Paso ninth graders reported binge drinking.

Ninth graders are usually between the ages of 14 and 15 years old. The data issued in the report were collected by gathering all known studies related to underage drinking including a 2012 survey of about 4,500 middle and high school students in El Paso and the 2015 El Paso Youth Health Behavior Survey of 2,500 ninth graders.

The report revealed that 55 percent of ninth graders who reported drinking in the past 30 days were binge drinkers, among which more than 83 percent said they had started drinking at the age of 14 years old or younger.



Dr. David Jernigan talks with Sophia Ornelas, left, and Brenna Bandstra about the finding of his study on underage drinking in El Paso. (Photo: MARK LAMBIE / EL PASO TIMES)

“Kids in El Paso were nearly twice as likely to use alcohol as they were to use tobacco or any illicit drug,” Jernigan said. “Young people who drink here in El Paso are much more likely to report to have ridden with a driver who had been drinking and also one in four ninth graders in El Paso who drank said they had actually driven after drinking.”

Underage drinkers are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence, six time more likely to be in a physical fight and be in a motor vehicle accident involving alcohol, said Jana Renner, associate program officer for the foundation.

“It did come out above (the national) average and it is important to understand that, but it is also important to understand that it is not just the underage drinking we are concerned about,” Renner said. “We are concerned about the associated harms that come with underage drinking. Kids who drink are more likely to drink heavily, more likely to experience sexual assault, more likely to get into car accidents and unintentionally hurt themselves.”

She added, “So there are a range of consequences that are not good for our young people when they are drinking and especially drinking heavily.”

Underage drinking mostly takes place at house parties, Jernigan said.

“The most common way kids get access to it (alcohol) here in El Paso is in home and residential parties,” Jernigan said. “The common thing is adults saying ‘we’ll host the party here and the kids will be safer.’ In the first place, they are not safer. In the second place, you’re making decisions for somebody else’s kids.”

The Paso del Norte Health Foundation, along with other anti-underage drinking advocacy groups, are hoping to get the City of El Paso to pass a “civil social host” ordinance.

The ordinance would fine any property owner who allowed underage drinking at their homes.

“The national solution for that has been something called the civil host ordinance,” Jernigan said. “This is basically a speed ticket for loud and unruly parties. It has been used in a lot of other cities around the country. What we have found is that when we put this in place, there are fewer kids who get alcohol at parties.”

He added, “It is an immediate and swift consequence. It is mostly not to raise money; it is to deter these kind of large gathering from happening to make it a little harder for kids to get alcohol.”

The El Paso City Council [approved in April](#) to have the city’s legal department begin researching how to implement a social host ordinance in an effort to reduce underage drinking, the El Paso Times reported.

No time table was set for when the legal department will present their findings to the city council.

Jernigan said if El Paso were to approve the ordinance they would be the first city in Texas to implement it.

Jernigan also stressed the vital role parents need to play in order to prevent their children from drinking.

“It’s important first of all to talk about this,” Jernigan said. “Parents need to set clear policies in the home. No, we are not going to throw these parties and we are going to respect the community-wide standards, which is much safer and better for kids if they don’t drink until they are 21 years of age.”

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