



Underage Drinking in the United States: A Status Report, 2005

March 2006

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:

- summarizes the most recent data and other relevant research on underage drinking, with special focus on findings published in 2005;
- focuses and advances our current understanding of underage drinking; and
- seeks to prompt action to protect our children from underage drinking and its tragic consequences.

Specifically, this report examines:

- the scope and consequences of underage drinking in the United States;
- how youth get access to alcohol, and how this can be prevented;
- how alcohol appeals to youth, including the extent to which youth are exposed to, aware of and influenced by alcohol advertising;
- promising approaches to protect our youth.

Executive Summary

Alcohol use among young people under 21 is the leading drug problem in the United States.

- More youth in the United States drink alcohol than smoke tobacco or marijuana, making it the drug most used by American young people.¹
- Every day, 5,400 young people under 16 take their first drink of alcohol.²
- In 2005, one out of six eighth-graders, one in three tenth-graders, and nearly one out of two twelfth-graders were current drinkers.³
- More than 7 million underage youth, ages 12 to 20, reported binge drinking – having five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days – in 2004, according to data released in September 2005.⁴

Girls are binge drinking more.

- Girls are binge drinking more, according to all three federal surveys, while boys are bingeing less or increasing their bingeing at a slower rate than their female peers.⁵
- At the same time, twelfth-grade female drinkers and binge drinkers are now more likely to drink distilled spirits than beer.⁶
- The new “alcopops” are particularly attractive to girls, and most popular with the youngest drinkers.⁷

Underage drinking has serious consequences.

- Every day, three teens die from drinking and driving.⁸
- At least six more youth under 21 die each day of non-driving alcohol-related causes, such as homicide, suicide, and drowning.⁹
- More than 70,000 college students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape each year.¹⁰
- Recent studies have found that heavy exposure of the adolescent brain to alcohol may interfere with brain development, causing loss of memory and other skills.¹¹

Underage youth continue to find alcohol easily accessible.

- According to a national study released in 2005, more than 60% of eighth graders and over 80% of tenth graders said it was fairly easy or very easy to obtain alcohol.¹²
- A 2005 study conducted for the American Medical Association found that nearly half of all teens surveyed said they in fact had obtained alcohol.¹³

Youth exposure to alcohol advertising is substantial.

- For instance, on television from 2001 to 2004, the average number of alcohol ads seen by young people ages 12 to 20 per capita in the course of the year grew from 209 to 276, an increase of 32%.¹⁴
- The 15 television shows in 2004 with the largest audiences of teens aged 12 to 17 all had alcohol ads.¹⁵

Long-term studies have shown that youth who see, hear, and read more alcohol ads are more likely to drink and drink more heavily than their peers.¹⁶

- The first national long-term study of youth throughout the United States, funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, found that for underage youth, exposure to an additional alcohol ad was correlated with a 1% increase in drinking, and that youth drank 3% more for every additional dollar per capita spent on alcohol advertising in a local market.¹⁷
- This study comes on the heels of two other long-term federally-funded studies as well as a variety of studies from other countries that, taken together, present an increasingly compelling picture that alcohol marketing has an effect on young people’s drinking.¹⁸

Much more needs to be done.

- Despite the widespread use of alcohol among underage youth and its devastating consequences, efforts to limit easy access and widespread appeal of alcohol products to youth remain underfunded and limited.
- Stronger policies, increased federal and state actions and resources, and more industry responsibility and accountability are needed if we are to reduce and prevent the tragic consequences of underage drinking.

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