

Adults largely responsible for underage drinking

According to a nationwide report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), more than 40 percent of the nation's estimated 10.8 million underage current drinkers (persons ages 12 to 20 who drank in the past 30 days) were provided free alcohol by adults 21 or older.

The study also indicates that one in 16 underage drinkers (6.4 percent or 650,000) was given alcoholic beverages by their parents in the past month.

"In far too many instances, parents directly enable their children's underage drinking — in essence encouraging them to risk their health and well being," said Acting Surgeon General Steven K. Galson, a rear admiral in the U.S. Public Health Service.

"Proper parental guidance alone may not be the complete solution to this devastating public health problem," he said, "but it is a critical part."

The report is based on a nationwide study which, for the first time, asked detailed questions about the behavior and social situations involved in underage drinking — a problem responsible for the deaths of more than 5,000 people under the age of 21 every year in the United States.

The survey asked persons ages 12 to 20 about the nature and scope of their drinking behavior as well as the social conditions under which they drank.

Among the report's more notable findings:

- * More than half (53.9) of all people ages 12 to 20 engaged in underage drinking in their lifetime, ranging from 11.0 percent of 12-year-olds to 85.5 percent of 20-year-olds.
- * An average of 3.5 million people ages 12 to 20 each year (9.4 percent) meet the diagnostic criteria for having an alcohol use disorder (dependence or abuse).
- * About one in five people in this age group (7.2 million people) have engaged in binge drinking, consuming five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past month.
- * The vast majority of current underage drinkers (80.9 percent) reported being with two or more people the last time they drank. Those who were with two or more people consumed an average of 4.9 drinks on that occasion, compared with 3.1 drinks for those who were with one other person, and 2.9 drinks for those who were alone.
- * Among youths ages 12 to 14, the rate of current drinking was higher for females (7.7 percent) than males (6.3 percent), about equal for females and males among those ages 15 to 17 (27.6 and 27.3 percent, respectively), and lower for females than males among those ages 18 to 20 (47.9 vs. 54.4 percent).

* More than half (53.4 percent) of underage current alcohol users were at someone else's home when they had their last drink, and 30.3 percent were in their own home; 9.4 percent were at a restaurant, bar or club.

* Rates of binge drinking are significantly higher among young people living with a parent who engaged in binge drinking within the past year.

These findings are part of the Underage Drinking Prevention campaign, an ongoing public outreach effort by SAMHSA, encouraging parents to speak with their children early and often about the negative effects of underage drinking. The campaign provides parents with valuable information about the problem, as well as how to talk to their children about it. For more info go to www.toosmartostart.samhsa.gov/