

Equivocation

Dithering on Drinking Puts Youth at Risk

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



The start of a new year often brings with it a resolve to try something new, fix something old, or tackle a problem too long left unsolved. Imagine what the start of a new decade could offer.

A specific problem that has long suffered from vast national equivocation has been one that involves the health and safety of young people: underage drinking.

Curious given a concerted federal effort to curb underage drinking. The Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD), which is chaired by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, supports a range of programs.

That effort, among others, seems to have made some progress. But progress may be slowing – meaning it's time to revisit the issue and the role all adults play (or don't play) in realizing the goals set out in a report from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (*Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*) – a critical research-based book and call to action that got the ball rolling.

According to new Monitoring the Future data from the University of Michigan, a long-term gradual decline in alcohol use among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders has leveled off, with the trend continuing for only the 8th graders.

Similar results were found for binge drinking, defined as the consumption of five (for men, four for women) or more drinks in a row at least once in the previous two weeks.

Not encouraging news given what we know about youth and alcohol.

For example, the Academies estimate the annual cost of underage drinking at \$53 billion in losses from traffic deaths, violent crime and other destructive behavior. When it comes to older adolescents, *Teens Today* research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) reveals that by 12th grade more than 3 in 4 teens are drinking.

The Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR) notes that 85 percent of 17-year-old drinkers get drunk at least once in a typical month.

And then there's college.

In February 2009, a survey of 6,608 students at the University of Wisconsin revealed:

- 33 percent of respondents reported that they have missed classes due to alcohol,
- 24 percent of respondents reported they had unprotected sex due to alcohol, and
- 49 percent of respondents reported doing something while drinking alcohol that they later regretted.

So pervasive is college drinking that teens in SADD-related focus groups cite preparing for it as a primary reason for drinking in high school.

Ralph Hingson of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism points out some of the same as well as other alcohol-related consequences for college students:

Death: 1,700 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicle crashes.

Injury: 599,000 are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol.

Assault: More than 696,000 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.

Sexual Abuse: More than 97,000 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape.

Unsafe Sex: 400,000 have unprotected sex and more than 100,000 report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to having sex.

Academic Problems: About 25 percent of students report academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.

Drunk Driving: 2.1 million drive under the influence of alcohol each year.

And yet the problem of alcohol use on or around college campuses continues to be a polarizing issue, with some in higher education advocating for lowering the minimum legal drinking age (poof ... the “problem” then disappears) while prevention experts insist that the law saves lives and

serves as an effective deterrent (SADD research points to the 21-year-old minimum legal drinking age as the number one reason those younger *don't* drink).

Similarly, researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine credit the current law for a decline in binge drinking among 12- to 20-year-old males (females are not doing as well), although they found that college students of both genders are binge drinking more.

Knowing the scale and the cost of the problem, all Americans can begin the new decade with a renewed sense of urgency to pursue proven effective strategies to reduce underage drinking at college ... and before. A good start, as with other problems, is acknowledging that one exists. Many colleges that *have* cite declines in underage and high-risk drinking among students.

The time to equivocate ran out when the ball dropped at midnight on December 31.

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