



The Hidden Costs of Childhood Drinking

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America Confronts Disturbing Facts About Alcohol Use by Children Ages 9 to 15

Leaders in education, government, public health, law enforcement, and prevention tell us that the problem of drinking in childhood—beverage alcohol use by 9- to 15-year-olds—is serious in the U.S. and growing worse. The following key statistics were revealed by the nationwide opinion leader poll entitled “The Hidden Costs of Childhood Drinking:”

- 78% of respondents said drinking by children is a “very serious” problem in the U.S.;
- 74% of those polled responded that more children are drinking alcohol at an earlier age compared to 10 years ago; and
- 85% agreed that it was either “very easy” or “somewhat easy” for children ages 9 to 15 to get access to alcohol.

Self-Reporting by America’s Children Makes the Facts Even More Disturbing

For years now, scientific organizations have been researching and reporting on the depth and breadth of childhood drinking—and they have done it by asking children directly. What America’s young people say should give opinion leaders even more cause for concern:

- 71% of 8th graders and 88% of 10th graders believe alcohol is readily available to them;¹
- 41% of 9th graders reported drinking in the past month;²
- 32% of students had their first drink before age 13;² and
- 23% of 8th graders have been drunk; 51% of 8th graders reported having consumed alcohol in their lifetime.¹

What Are the Consequences to Our Society from Childhood Drinking?

In the poll of opinion leaders, there was widespread agreement about the negative impacts drinking by the young have on our society. Participants found the following to be “very significant” harms:

- 87% said childhood drinking may create lifelong problems with alcohol;
- 81% indicated that it can cause serious health and emotional problems for children;
- 77% agreed drinking causes children to do poorly in school;
- 74% held that drinking causes disruptive and anti-social behavior;
- 73% stated that drinking by children contributes to their becoming sexually active at a younger age; and
- 64% responded that childhood drinking leads to long-term increases in healthcare costs.

Research Again Bears Out the Concerns

The consequences of underage drinking have been amply demonstrated through research. These are some key findings in the past several years:

- The total costs of underage drinking (under age 21) in the United States are estimated to be more than \$58 billion per year;³
- Among 8th graders, higher truancy rates were associated with greater rates of alcohol use in the past month;⁴
- More than 40% of people who start drinking before age 13 will develop alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence at some point in their lives;⁵ and
- 28% of suicides by those aged 9 to 15 could be attributed directly to alcohol.⁶

Opinion Leaders Pinpoint Key Strategies to Overcoming the Problem

Just as they were in surprising unanimity about the scope and seriousness of alcohol use by children, so were opinion leaders united on the best remedies, such as:

- 81% called for a greater financial commitment to prevention and treatment;
- 72% said that alcohol advertising that reaches children should be limited;
- 69% favored strengthening penalties for adults who provide alcohol to children; and
- 60% called for increased funding for public education campaigns.

These and other suggested methods for curbing childhood drinking can be found in the full poll results, which appear at www.alcoholfreechildren.org.

About the Leadership: The *Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free* is an initiative spearheaded by more than 30 Governors' spouses to prevent the use of alcohol by children ages 9 to 15. The *Leadership's* goal is to educate the American public about the dangers of early alcohol use and to mobilize action to prevent it. The initiative was founded in 1999 with support from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and receives additional support from several other Federal agencies. It is advised by representatives from 28 public and private organizations with shared interests in children's well-being and is the only national coalition that focuses on the prevention of alcohol use in this young age group.

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References

¹Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG. Monitoring the Future national results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2001. Rockville, MD. National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2002.

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 1999. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: CDC Surveillance Summaries 49(No.SS-5):1-94, 2000.

³Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. Costs of Underage Drinking. Prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention National Leadership Conference, July 11-14, 1999, Reston, VA

⁴O'Malley PM, et al. Alcohol use among adolescents. *Alcohol Health & Research World* 22(2):85-93, 1998.

⁵Grant BF, Dawson DA. Age at onset of alcohol use and association with DSM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence: Results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey. *Journal of Substance Abuse* 9:103-110, 1997.

⁶Unpublished data extrapolated by NIAAA from State Trends in Alcohol Mortality, 1979-1992. U.S. Alcohol Epidemiologic Data Reference Manual, Volume 5. Rockville, MD: NIAAA, 1996.