

The Hidden Costs of Childhood Drinking

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NATIONWIDE POLL REVEALS DRINKING BY 9- TO 15-YEAR-OLDS IS A VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM

Opinion Leaders Cite Anti-Social Behavior and Early Sexual Activity as Significant Consequences

Washington, D.C. — A nationwide poll released today by the *Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free* reveals that educators, law enforcement personnel, prevention experts, public health officials, and federal and state officials throughout the country are alarmed at the worsening problem of drinking by children ages 9 to 15 a problem whose costs to public health, according to respondents, are often hidden from public view. Conducted by the opinion research firm of Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, and funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, results from the poll of opinion leaders in urban, suburban, and rural areas indicate that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed responded that more children are drinking alcohol at an earlier age compared to 10 years ago.

Given that those interviewed were geographically and professionally diverse, the degree of consensus on certain aspects of childhood drinking is surprising. Nearly 80 percent said that drinking by children is a very serious problem in the United States. And 85 percent of respondents were in agreement that it was either very easy or somewhat easy for children ages 9 to 15 to get access to alcohol.

It is the consequences of this access that are most worrisome to those surveyed. Opinion leaders assert that the harm caused by childhood drinking carries hidden economic, social, and cultural costs, many of which don't reveal themselves until years later. Surprising unanimity again resulted among opinion leaders when asked what harms were caused by childhood drinking. 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.

(more)

These findings are unsettling — both from the standpoint of drinking affecting our children's health and development, and from an academic standpoint. Its implications are severe and demand immediate attention, said Dr. Edward Hill, Chair of the American Medical Association Board of Trustees and former president of his local school board. We constantly read and hear about college kids binge drinking and that is a serious problem, of course but few people have wanted to face this issue of young kids and alcohol. I hope that's going to change now.

Dr. Hill's worried but hopeful attitude is mirrored by the organization that commissioned the poll. The eye-opening findings from this poll underscore the need to protect our children and take on the prevention of childhood drinking as a national priority, said Mary Easley, First Lady of North Carolina and member of the *Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free*. Alcohol is the number one drug used by children and underage drinking has long been viewed wrongly as a rite of passage. Not only does this perception contribute to an early pattern of alcohol abuse, but the findings of the poll show the many other hidden consequences that underage drinking has on our families.

Increased Prevention Funding, Rigorous Law Enforcement Seen as Key Remedies

Leading the recommendations for prevention and treatment measures, the following were strongly supported by respondents:

- 81% strongly supported increased funding for prevention and treatment activities;
- 69% favored strengthening penalties for adults who provide alcohol to children;
- 63% advocated stronger enforcement of underage drinking laws; and
- 60% called for increased funding for public education campaigns.

Recognizing the role the media play in influencing young people's decisions, leaders polled strongly supported measures to reduce drinking by children. 72 percent called for limiting alcohol advertising that reaches children, while 64 percent emphasized the need to provide resources for advertisements to prevent drinking by children. Furthermore, 72 percent said the entertainment industry must be encouraged to promote positive messages to children about not drinking alcohol.

We have to face the fact that there is no magic bullet for this problem not in a society that both glamorizes drinking and too often leaves young children unsupervised, said Dr. J. Michael McGinnis, Senior Vice President of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It's going to take a multifaceted effort from parents, educators, law enforcement personnel, and policymakers to get the job done. And we've put off getting started for too long.

Full results of the poll findings, including policy recommendations by poll respondents, will be available at www.alcohol-freechildren.org after September 19, 2002.

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Methodology: Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates conducted 250 telephone interviews among opinion leaders in various industry sectors relating to alcohol and underage drinking including educators, law enforcement personnel, prevention experts, public health personnel, and federal and state officials. All interviews took place between May 31 and June 7, 2002. The overall margin of error for this study is +/- 6.2% at the 95th confidence interval. The margin of error for certain subgroups may be slightly larger.

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.