



Making the Link

Underage Drinking and Access to Alcohol

Communities need to do more to reduce the availability of alcohol to youth.

Research shows that controlling alcohol availability is effective in preventing alcohol-related problems.¹

These facts on alcohol availability show the challenge communities face:²

- Where access to alcohol is greater, consumption is greater. When consumption rates are high, problems related to alcohol increase dramatically.
- Local communities have the power to control alcohol availability, but most do not make full use of their power and resources.

Questions the community should address to help develop policies.³

What are the problems related to underage drinking in the community?

- What is the extent of underage drinking? Which groups of young people are using alcohol?
- When and where does underage drinking take place?
- When adults serve alcohol in their homes to other adults, are nonalcoholic alternatives also offered? Are underage youth typically served alcohol in private homes?
- How is alcohol marketed in the community? Are young people the target of any of this marketing?

What are the law enforcement issues?

- How many establishments that sell alcohol are within walking distance in a typical neighborhood?
- Is the 21-year-old legal drinking age strictly enforced in the community?
- Do members of the community support the police in their efforts to enforce the drinking age?
- What happens to vendors who habitually sell alcohol to minors?
- What happens to minors who purchase alcohol? Is the infraction taken seriously?

Actions communities can take to prevent underage access to alcohol.

The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention found that six approaches show the most promise for effective prevention.⁴

- Prevent underage youth from obtaining alcohol.
- Establish laws and policies to govern alcohol distribution methods, “happy-hour” policies, minimum legal purchase age, alcohol taxes, and licensing of alcohol outlets.
- Promote and enforce responsible beverage service.
- Change the conditions of availability—for example, regulate outlet density, create restrictions on alcohol sales, and develop regulations for alcohol at special events and locations.
- Limit the hours and days of alcohol sales.
- Use a community-based approach—involve concerned citizens and community groups, law enforcement and public officials, in an effort to recognize the need to change local laws, regulations, and policies.

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Prevention Enhancement Protocols System (PEPS). Preventing Problems Related to Alcohol Availability: Environmental Approaches, Parent and Community Guide. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1999.

² Ibid.

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Underage Drinking Prevention Action Guide and Planner. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Prevention Enhancement Protocols System (PEPS).

Initiative Partners

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIH)

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Office of Research on Women's Health (NIH)

National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIH)

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DOJ)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (DHHS)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (DOT)