

Teen drinking, an ‘epidemic’

One-third binge drink at least once a month

By Janelle Carter

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Washington – Nearly a third of high school students say they binge drink at least once a month, according to a new report by an advocacy group. The government estimates underage drinkers account for 11.4 percent of all alcohol consumed in the United States.

“Underage drinking has reached epidemic proportions in America,” said Joseph Califano Jr., president of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, which issued the report Tuesday.

Some of the report’s findings:

- Eighty-seven percent of adults who drink had their first drink before age 21.
- The gender gap for drinking is disappearing. Female ninth-graders are just as likely to be drinkers as male ninth-graders.
- Eighty-one percent of high school students have consumed alcohol, compared with 70 percent who have smoked cigarettes and 47 percent who have used marijuana.
- Most teens who experiment with alcohol continue using it. Among high school seniors who had tried alcohol, 91.3 percent still were drinking in the 12th grade.

A Wright State University survey of local high school seniors in 2000 found similar levels of teen drinking. The Dayton Area Drug Survey showed 82 percent had consumed alcohol, compared to 67 who had smoked and 52 percent who used marijuana.

The national center’s report, which analyzes two years’ research, “is a clarion call for national mobilization to curb underage drinking,” said Califano, a former U.S. Secretary of Health Education and Welfare.

Local high school students asked about underage drinking in the Miami Valley said that alcohol consumption is common among high school students.

Mike Bogan, 18, and Robin Whitefield, 15 of Springboro High School said they personally don't drink, but they are aware that social gatherings involving their friends include alcohol.

"I'd say it's at about 75 percent of the parties that go on," Bogan said.

"I would say it's closer to 80 or 85 percent," Whitefield said.

One girl who declined to give her name said alcohol is easy to come by because the parents of high school students giving parties often supply the beer.

Califano's group also asserted that young people between the ages of 12 and 20 accounted for 25 percent of all alcoholic beverages consumed in the United States.

That contention prompted the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services administration, the government agency that conducted the 1998 survey cited by Califano's group, to issue a statement saying underage drinkers account for 11.4 percent of U.S. alcohol consumption.

"Regardless of any discrepancies...any alcohol use before age 21 is unacceptable and against the law," said the agency, an arm of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Citing the government figures, the alcoholic beverage industry accused Califano's group of falsifying its numbers.

"It looks like Mr. Califano and CASA have adopted Enron's accounting practices," said Phil Lynch, a spokesman for Brown-Forman Corp., whose products include Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey.

Frank Coleman, a spokesman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, called Califano "a serial abuser of statistics for sensational purposes."

Both the government and CASA percentages were based on a 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse in which 25,500 people, including 9,759 between the ages of 12 and 20 were questioned in their homes.

While the 12-20 age group represented 38 percent of those surveyed, they account for about only 13 percent of the total U.S. population, according to 2000 Census Bureau figures. The government says it weighted its survey results to account for the age discrepancy between its survey sample and the total population.

Califano, in an interview Tuesday, defended his group's decision not to make that adjustment.

“The household survey is taken by going into a home and asking parents if you can talk to their children. If parents are in the living room and you (the surveyor and the teen) are in the kitchen, the odds of getting a really solid answer are slim. So there’s a tremendous underestimate in reporting,” Califano said.

The percentage of teens who drink in binges– 31 percent among high school students– as obtained by using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, published in 2000.

Binge drinking often is described as four consecutive drinks for a woman or five drinks for a man. According to an American Medical Association survey last year, binge drinking is among parents’ top worries. Around 44 percent of college students admit to binge drinking, and nearly a fourth pf those binge frequently.

In Wright State’s survey, 34 percent of high school seniors had consumed five drinks at a sitting within two weeks of being asked. The figure does not directly compare to the national percentage, which includes all high school ages, a four-week window and a different definition of four drinks for females.

Adults in the Miami Valley have far higher binge and chronic drinking rates than national norms, Wright State’s Center for Urban and Public Affairs learned from a nine county 2000 survey. The 34.4 percent binge drinking rate compares to 27.6 percent nationally, and the 6.8 percent of local residents having 60 or more drinks in a month is more than double the 3.0 percent nationally.

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