

UNDERAGE DRINKING AND THE DAMAGING CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUTH

An Important Message from the Becker County Attorney's Office.

The use of alcohol by young adults and adolescents continues to negatively affect young people, their communities, and Minnesota. Alcohol is one of the most commonly used mood altering substances among young adults and adolescents. This problem is not limited to older teenagers. One study indicates that half of young adults who use alcohol began between the ages of 10 years old and 13 years old. Young adults and adolescents continue to obtain alcohol from a variety of sources including their parents, friends, siblings, coworkers, and even strangers.

While young people chose to drink alcohol for a variety of reasons, the negative effects of underage drinking are fairly consistent. There is a strong relationship between the underage consumption of alcohol and the presence of social, mental, and behavioral problems. Use of alcohol by a young adult or adolescent is also a strong indicator of problems with alcohol addiction later in life. Furthermore, the use of alcohol by a youth increases the risk of suicide, dropping out of school, and being the victim of sexual assault.

In 2011, 846 young drivers in the U.S. between the ages of 16 and 20 were killed in traffic accidents with blood alcohol concentrations over .08. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, teenagers "are at far greater risk of death in an alcohol-related crash than the overall population, despite being below the minimum drinking age in every state."

Additionally, the consumption of alcohol damages the development of the adolescent brain. One study noted that alcohol reduces the amount of "white matter" in an adolescent's brain. Compromised white matter means it is more difficult for the brain to perform cognitive processing, resulting in poorer memory, attention, and decision making. Also, other studies show that the brains of adolescent drinkers are generally 10 percent smaller than the brains of nondrinking teens.

However, the problem of underage drinking is not unavoidable. Parents and local communities continue to hold the key to reducing the use of alcohol by young adults. Local educational programs continue to educate our youth on the risks associated with drinking alcohol. According to the latest finding in the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an increase in the percentage of adolescents who recognized the risks associated with binge drinking complemented a similar decrease in the percentage of adolescents who participated in binge drinking.

Furthermore, the most important factor in preventing alcohol use by adolescents is the adolescent's parents. In fact, the positive impacts of good parenting are not limited to their own teenager, but spread through their teenager's social network. Per a study published in Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, proper parenting that "balances warmth and communication with appropriate

control and supervision – is not only associated with reduced substance abuse in [their] own home’s children, but it is also associated with reduced substance abuse in [their] own children’s friends.”

We can all help prevent underage drinking, but the support and involvement of every member of our community is needed to prevent the tragedies and destructive consequences of underage drinking. If you are aware of someone who is supplying alcohol or hosting a party that permits adolescents to consume alcohol, please report it to law enforcement. Remember, because the mere consumption of alcohol by adolescents has negative consequences, there is no such thing as responsible underage drinking. With the combined efforts of law enforcement, our community, and parents, we can prevent underage drinking.