



CURBING

Underage Drinking & Substance Abuse in Connecticut

Fostering Healthy Choices and Changing Norms

Underage drinking and substance abuse continue to be a major threat to youth in Connecticut. For some, drinking alcohol is seen as an inevitable rite of passage into adulthood. But doing so at an early age is far from harmless. Underage drinking has been associated with serious health and safety consequences.

At the most extreme, it has been implicated as a leading contributor of death from injuries among the nation's youth. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that 5,000 people under age 21 die each year from alcohol-related car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning and other injuries such as falls, burns and drownings. It can also play a role in risky sexual behavior and acts of physical or sexual assault (for example, alcohol-related rape or serious intentional or unintentional injury). Although alcohol remains the most popular drug of choice, young people in Connecticut also use other substances including tobacco, illicit drugs and prescription medications that were not prescribed to them (most often sedatives, stimulants and pain relievers).

For more than a decade, **The Governor's Prevention Partnership** has been helping communities across the state curb underage drinking and substance abuse. The Partnership has also been instrumental in raising awareness of the associated dangers. The goal is to keep our youth safe, successful and drug free (CSHS, 2011).

As with all of its prevention programs, The Partnership takes a comprehensive, collaborative and community-based approach. As a result, it reaches and engages key stakeholders to implement sustainable and proven prevention strategies. The Partnership also advocates for effective policies and enforcement at the state and local levels (ex. raising sales tax on alcohol), as well as customized technical assistance and tools to help protect CT's youth and encourage communities to take action. In addition, the organization gives students the tools and knowledge they need to resist peer pressure and educate others that they are not alone in their choice to say "no" to alcohol or other substances.

All told, underage drinking is a factor in more than two million harmful events each year; not only including car crashes and alcohol poisonings, but also violence, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and property damage (PIRE, 2006).

The Governor's Prevention Partnership is helping communities across Connecticut curb underage drinking and substance abuse to keep our youth safe, successful and drug free.

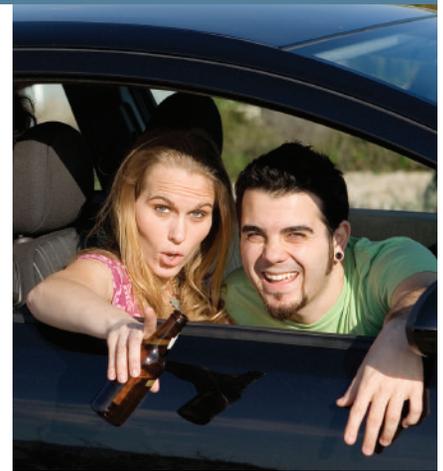


The Problem — At a Glance

Despite the 21-year-old minimum drinking age and zero-tolerance laws that make it illegal to drive after having any amount of alcohol, teens continue to engage in this behavior. In fact, teens turn to alcohol more often than tobacco or other drugs. Alarmingly, these days many start drinking for the first time around 13 years of age. This is particularly concerning because those who start drinking before 15 years of age are reportedly five times more likely to develop alcohol dependence or abuse at some point in their lives compared to those who begin drinking at age 21 or later (Hingson RW, Heeren T, Winter MR, 2006). Also disturbing is that fact that teens tend to consume more drinks in one sitting than adult drinkers (Bonnie and O’Connell, 2004). While the rate of underage drinking nationally had declined recently, this trend seems to be reversing, underscoring the need for greater prevention efforts and awareness.

In Connecticut, the picture is particularly grim. Youth in our state drink at higher rates than their peers nationally. And kids who drink are also more likely than those who abstain from alcohol to experiment with or abuse other substances like marijuana, prescription drugs such as pain relievers, stimulants and sedatives, and even dabble in synthetic products to get high (for

example, bath salts, synthetic cannabinoids like K2 and Spice, etc.). Recent data shows that one in four teens has misused or abused a prescription drug at least once in their lifetime — a 33 percent increase since 2008 (PATs, 2012). Many falsely believe these medications are safe — but they can be very harmful, even deadly, when taken by the wrong person and at the wrong dose.



The Governor’s Prevention Partnership is a go-to resource for information and tried-and-true prevention strategies to help lower the rates of drinking and substance abuse among tweens and teens in Connecticut. **The Partnership supports a comprehensive, evidence-based prevention approach to promote healthy and successful youth development, while reducing underage drinking and substance abuse overall.**

Consequences of Underage Drinking

Pre-teens and teens who drink alcohol are more likely to have or report:

- Problems at school (for example, frequent absences, poor or falling grades)
- Fights with peers
- Withdrawal from or not taking part in youth activities/team sports
- Health issues such as hangovers, illnesses, memory problems or disruption of normal growth and sexual development
- Unwanted, unplanned, and unprotected sexual activity
- Alcohol-related car crashes and other unintentional injuries, such as burns, falls, and drowning
- Physical or sexual assault
- Legal issues (being arrested for driving or physically hurting someone while drunk)
- Future alcohol dependence and abuse of other drugs

Drinking at a young age also results in higher than expected visits to the emergency department, an increased likelihood of suicide and other risky behaviors and premature death. Evolving research also suggests that excessive drinking can spark changes in brain development that may have life-long effects.

(DHHS, 2007; Bonnie and O’Connell, 2004)

A Snapshot of Underage Alcohol & Substance Abuse In Connecticut

- Drinking rates among Connecticut high school students are 26-28 percent higher than their peers nationally and 15 percent say they drank alcohol (more than a few sips) for the first time before they turned 13 years old
- 2 in 5 high school students report using marijuana one or more times in their life
- 1 out of 4 students has been offered, sold or given an illegal drug on school property in the past year
- 1 out of 10 teens admit to having taken a prescription drug that was not intended for them in order to get high
- New synthetic drugs are of increasing concern and are illegally sold in some gas stations (Scooby Snax) and on the streets (2C-P, and Molly)

(CSHS, 2011; Johnston et al, 2013)

The Problem

To set the record straight — and contrary to what many people might think — most teenagers do not engage in underage drinking. That's the good news. But those who do can place themselves and others in jeopardy.

A recent survey of high school students revealed that in the previous month (Eaton et al, 2012):

- Two out of five (39 percent) drank some amount of alcohol
- One in five (22 percent) binge drank (defined as drinking five or more alcoholic drinks on one occasion)
- One in four (24 percent) rode in a car with someone who had been drinking

Changing the perception that “everyone is doing it” is an important piece of the prevention puzzle. According to the NIH Initiative on Underage Drinking Research, there are several factors that can influence whether a teenager decides to use or abuse alcohol (NIAAA, 2013).

- Normal maturational changes that all adolescents experience
- Genetic, psychological, and social factors specific to each adolescent and
- Various social and cultural environments that surround adolescents, including their families, schools, and communities

Drinking before age 21 is also associated with illicit drug use. While prevention of underage drinking often starts at home, it also requires coordinated community support, youth engagement, enforcement and cultural shifts. That's where The Partnership comes in.

Prevention Works — The Role of the Governor's Prevention Partnership

The Governor's Prevention Partnership has been a steady force in helping to reduce underage drinking and substance abuse. Its efforts are grounded in and guided by an overall philosophy that promotes comprehensive prevention strategies to keep kids safe, successful and drug free.

Reducing underage drinking requires a combination of community-based programs and shared accountability, parent and teen education, enforcement of minimum legal drinking age laws, alcohol excise taxes, and other coordinated approaches.



Building Community Capacity to Make a Difference

The Partnership collaborates with and mobilizes Regional Action Councils (RACs) and Local Prevention Councils (LPCs) to implement proven community-level prevention strategies. In this way, communities can identify needs and develop innovative solutions to address underage drinking and substance abuse.

Driving Alcohol Compliance Checks — Targeting a Key Source

Compliance checks have been an important strategy to help curb underage drinking in Connecticut by reducing illegal retail access to alcohol. Because of this program, more merchants are refusing to serve teens than ever before.

Through this coordinated program, law enforcement can determine whether package stores, grocery stores, bars, restaurants and any other establishments with a liquor license are selling alcohol to minors. The Partnership has been instrumental in facilitating alcohol compliance checks across the state by working in collaboration with the Department of Consumer Protection’s Liquor Control Division and local police officers and by training minors to conduct regular “sting” operations to try to purchase alcohol from various businesses. It has also helped inform communities about which places have been noncompliant, illegally serving minors.

The Partnership educates local community groups to take action to reduce the use of:

- Underage drinking
- Marijuana
- Prescription drugs
- Synthetic drugs

Compliance checks have had a major impact. When the program was initiated in 2003, a surprising number of establishments in the state illegally served minors. A decade later, data reveal a dramatic shift with some towns reporting full compliance.

The program had been funded by the Office of Policy and Management. Alternate sources of funding are urgently needed to continue this program (see chart below).

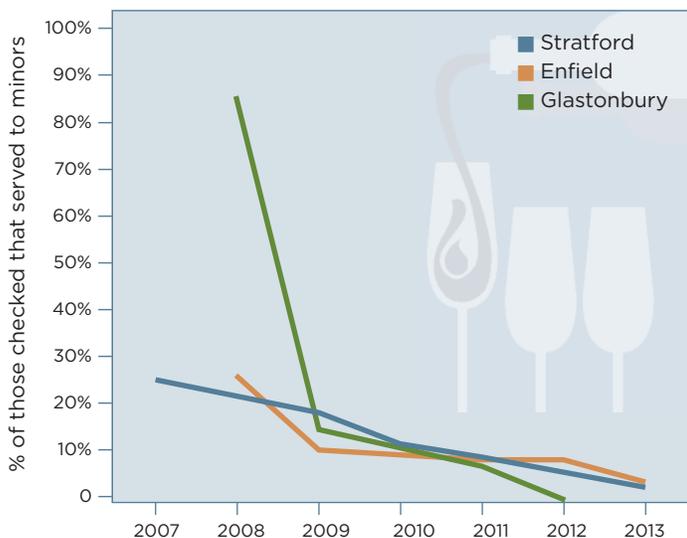
Building Youth Leadership

The Partnership serves as the statewide coordinator for Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) — a



national peer-to-peer education, prevention, and activism organization dedicated to preventing destructive decisions, particularly underage drinking, other drug use, risky and impaired driving, teen violence, and teen suicide. This has provided an effective way to engage teens and communicate prevention messages. There are 70 active chapters in schools across the state. Awareness programming reaches over 55,000 students and many more teachers, parents and community members. The Partnership also connects chapters with vital community resources and tailors prevention messages to their particular school environment. Projects may include peer-led classes and themed forums, teen workshops, conferences and rallies, prevention education and leadership training and other activities and legislative work. The Partnership also provides education directly to teens and schools. Interactive presentations also teach refusal skills and provide pointers for having difficult conversations.

Compliance Checks Make a Difference



Equipping Communities and Youth-Directed Organizations with Proven Prevention Strategies

The Partnership provides ongoing assistance to 33 state and federally funded community coalitions across the state, under the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) Best Practice Initiative. It also helps to enhance the capacity and skills building for established and new CT-based coalitions and community stakeholders. Partnership staff attend coalition meetings to serve as a resource, offer guidance and assist in implementing best practices and program evaluation. Efforts focus on sustainability and to help organizations find funding opportunities to continue drug free programming.

As the state affiliate of The Partnership at Drugfree.org, The Partnership also offers PACT360, a customizable community education program to raise awareness about the signs of drug and alcohol use and how to take action. Connecticut is one of three states nationally to pilot this new program.

Educating Parents and Concerned Adults

Too often, parents think their child isn't drinking or using other substances. The trouble is no matter how mature or well-adjusted a teenager seems, or how often he or she has made wise choices in the past, the pressures to drink are very real. Teens are also more likely to drink as they advance through high school, and particularly during the transition to college.



Moreover, research shows that all teens are missing an important trait — a fully developed brain. The level of brain development needed to make sound judgments, especially related to risk taking, impulse control and anticipating consequences, doesn't mature until our mid-20s. So, this issue should be a concern for all parents and all communities.

The Partnership has several programs to educate parents about underage alcohol and drug use. Its published handbook, *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Underage Drinking*, presents up-to-date information, helps dispel myths and maps out prevention strategies and how to support open communication and expectations with teens.

Even well-intentioned kids may not have the maturity to do the safe thing all of the time, especially when they are in environments that seem to invite risky behavior. But when parents talk with their kids about the dangers of substance abuse, they are up to half as likely to use drugs and alcohol.

The Partnership educates parents and offers useful tips to make the tough conversations easier (Drugfree.org).



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“Our association with The Partnership is a key component to the work we do to keep kids safe in our community.”

— West Hartford Substance Abuse Prevention Commission

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Staying In the Know

Law enforcement, parents, school officials and other community leaders often struggle to keep up with and address the availability of new synthetic drugs in their communities. The Partnership's drug abuse prevention experts monitor the latest research and trends, putting themselves ahead of the action. Information from this ongoing surveillance of and response to emerging trends (for example, bath salts, hand sanitizer misuse, explaining the impact of marijuana laws, synthetic drugs, and salvia) is presented through highly anticipated and informative reports and trainings. These trainings also include hands-on demonstrations of products and use video depictions of actual use. The Partnership also stays on top of the latest legislative activity, often developing fact sheets and other notices to inform coalitions, SADD Chapters and other partners about hearings and state campaigns. Our legislative advocacy toolkit provides step-by-step instructions and insider information about the process, so that student groups and community coalitions can participate in the law-making process.

Building Momentum

The Partnership is often seen as the first responder to emerging trends related to underage drinking and substance abuse in Connecticut. New threats are ever-changing. To keep pace with changing behaviors and substances abused, The Partnership closely monitors teen activity through online resources, news media reports and other surveillance tools.

Through its extensive network of partners, collaborative spirit and related prevention programming, The Partnership has been able to promote healthy youth development. Youth empowerment is critical to this success — engaging teens to be part of the solution and equip their peers with refusal skills and safe alternatives. Knowing first-hand the value of providing youth leadership opportunities, The Partnership is committed to expanding its youth empowerment programs and addressing other behaviors that relate to underage drinking and substance abuse (for example, mental health, teen safe driving and youth wellness in general). Of course all of these efforts are dependent on available funding. For more information, or to lend your support and help curb underage drinking and substance abuse in Connecticut, please visit www.preventionworksct.org.

“Our goal is to provide communities, parents and educators with the best resources to reduce the impact of substance abuse, empower young people to live successful lives, and encourage communities to reflect positive lifestyles.” — The Governor's Prevention Partnership

The Governor's Prevention Partnership is a vital resource to help reduce underage drinking and substance abuse. It also helps communities stay ahead of the curve by reporting emerging trends that may threaten teen health.

The Governor’s Prevention Partnership believes in a collaborative, multi-tiered approach to substance abuse prevention. Much of its work in this area advances key recommendations set forth by the National Institutes of Health and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which identifies the following six goals for reducing underage drinking:

1. Foster changes in society that facilitate healthy adolescent development and that help prevent and reduce underage drinking.
2. Engage parents, schools, communities, all levels of government, all social systems that interface with youth, and youth themselves in a coordinated national effort to prevent and reduce underage drinking and its consequences.
3. Promote an understanding of underage alcohol consumption in the context of human development and maturation that takes into account individual adolescent characteristics as well as environmental, ethnic, cultural, and gender differences.
4. Conduct additional research on adolescent alcohol use and its relationship to development.
5. Work to improve public health surveillance on underage drinking and on population-based risk factors for this behavior.
6. Work to ensure that policies at all levels are consistent with the national goal of preventing and reducing underage alcohol consumption.

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About The Governor's Prevention Partnership

With a focus on Connecticut's youth, The Governor's Prevention Partnership is a statewide public-private alliance, building a strong, healthy future workforce through leadership in mentoring and prevention of violence, underage drinking, alcohol and drug abuse.



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