

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**YOUTH AND ALCOHOL:
DANGEROUS AND DEADLY CONSEQUENCES**



**Richard P. Kusserow
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

APRIL 1992

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This report was prepared under the direction of Kaye D. Kidwell, Regional Inspector General, and Paul A. Gottlober, Deputy Regional Inspector General, Office of Evaluation and Inspections, Region IX. Participating in this project were:

Region IX

Elizabeth Bell
Brad Rollin

Headquarters

Maruta Zitans

Department of Health and Human Services

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OEI-09-92-00261

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to describe the dangerous and often unrecognized consequences of underage drinking.

BACKGROUND

As part of her campaign against underage drinking, the Surgeon General requested that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) provide information on some of the negative consequences of youth alcohol use. This concern mirrors one of the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary's goals which is to reduce the prevalence of alcohol problems among children and youth. As part of his strategy to meet this goal, the Secretary sponsored "Healthy People/Healthy Environments: The Secretary's National Conference on Alcohol-Related Injuries" on March 23-25, 1992. This conference served as a call-to-action and a forum for health professionals to help advance the alcohol and injury-related objectives of Healthy People 2000. This study is one in a series conducted by the OIG related to youth and alcohol. A related report, "Youth and Alcohol: Drinking and Crime" (OEI-09-92-00260), describes the association between alcohol and youth crime.

Although extensive research exists related to the negative consequences of adult alcohol use, few national studies have attempted to assess the relationship between underage drinking and rape, sexual assault, suicide, and other harmful incidents. Researchers who attempt to link youth alcohol use with injuries and other problems face legal and scientific barriers. For example, one survey found that emergency room physicians rarely will administer blood alcohol tests unless an injury was automobile-related or the test is vital to a patient's treatment.

Most studies and data related to the negative consequences of underage drinking focus on traffic fatalities. For instance, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that 34.8 percent of drivers ages 18 to 20 and 18.9 percent of drivers ages 15 to 17 who were involved in fatal automobile crashes in 1989 had alcohol in their system. Although few national data concerning other problems exist, researchers focusing on local populations have uncovered startling data concerning alcohol use among youth who experience serious injuries or unintentional death.

METHODOLOGY

Using several University of California on-line database services, we conducted a review of medical, legal, psychological, and other social research studies and surveys related to the negative consequences of youth alcohol use. We also referred to articles and data obtained during our previous youth and alcohol studies.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

CRIME

The Department of Justice (DOJ) and other researchers at times have attempted to determine the extent to which underage drinking is associated with criminal activity. These researchers have found a strong association between alcohol use and crimes of aggression, such as murder and rape.

- ▶ According to a DOJ survey, 31.9 percent of youth under 18 in long-term, State-operated juvenile institutions in 1987 were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offense.(46)
- ▶ A DOJ 11-city survey found that from 4 to 32 percent of male juvenile arrestees admitted using alcohol in the 72 hours prior to their arrest.(47)
- ▶ A 1974 survey of youth under 21 in State adult correctional facilities found that approximately 36.4 to 38.6 percent reported drinking at the time of the offense.(9)
- ▶ One researcher reported that almost 50 percent of German juvenile offenders surveyed in 1971 were intoxicated when they committed criminal offenses. For crimes of aggression--such as murder, robbery, rape, and assault--the rates were "rather higher."(17)

VICTIMS OF CRIME

Studies of various populations have shown that many victims of violent crime are intoxicated at the time of the incident. While this problem is most frequently noted in rape victims, victims of other crimes exhibit similar high levels of intoxication.

- ▶ In a national survey of college students, almost 50 percent who said they had been victims of crime admitted that they had used drugs or alcohol before the crime occurred.(12)
- ▶ A study of homicide victims in Atlanta, Georgia, found that 51 percent had blood alcohol levels of .10 percent or greater.(4)
- ▶ One social science researcher observed that minors who drink may provoke assailants or otherwise catch the attention of criminals by handling money openly, acting vulnerable, or failing to take normal precautions in public.(38)

* For further information, see the OIG report "Youth and Alcohol: Drinking and Crime."

RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Researchers estimate that alcohol use is implicated in one- to two-thirds of sexual assault and acquaintance or "date" rape cases among teens and college students.

- ▶ In a survey of students at a southwestern university, 55 percent of sexual assault perpetrators and 53 percent of sexual assault victims admitted to being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault.(23)
- ▶ According to a school administrator, 100 percent of sexual assault cases at the University of Colorado involve alcohol.(1)
- ▶ A study of college women nationally found that alcohol use is one of the strongest predictors of a college woman's rape.(2)
- ▶ A survey of high school students found that 18 percent of females and 39 percent of males say it is acceptable for a boy to force sex if the girl is stoned or drunk.(23)

RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Alcohol use is associated with the early onset of sexual activity and with risky sexual behavior.

- ▶ A study of ninth grade students from four urban high schools showed that the best predictor of risky sexual behavior was alcohol and/or drug use.(40)
- ▶ Other studies of adolescents have shown that the use of substances, including alcohol and tobacco, are associated with early sexual debut and an inadequate use of contraceptives.(40)
- ▶ A 1990 survey of Massachusetts 16- to 19-year-olds found that 49 percent were more likely to have sex if they and their partner had been drinking. In addition, 17 percent used condoms less often after drinking.(42)
- ▶ The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that substance use and sexual activity are more closely linked for white youth than they are for minority youth.(14)

SUICIDE

According to one researcher, "Suicide among American teenagers is increasing at an alarming though underestimated rate." Alcohol acts as a contributing factor in the timing and seriousness of youth suicide attempts. Although youth may use alcohol in an attempt to reduce stress and pressure, this frequently results in additional self-destructive behavior.

- ▶ In a detailed analysis of youth suicide, one researcher found that drug and alcohol abuse is the most common characteristic of youth who attempt suicide. Seventy percent of youth suicide attempters were frequent drug and/or alcohol users. In addition, he noted a high incidence of drug and alcohol abuse among youth suicide attempters' parents.(11)
- ▶ Based on rising youth suicide rates, three researchers conducted a study on 10- to 19-year-old suicide victims in Allegheny County (PA). They found "a striking association. . . between the ingestion of alcohol and the use of firearms as a method of suicide." They conclude that "the epidemic increase in the suicide rate among youth may be associated with an increase in the prevalence of alcohol abuse."(3)

WATER-RELATED INJURIES AND DROWNING

Although swimming, boating, and diving are popular activities among youth, they can be deadly, especially when the participants consume alcohol before or during these water activities. According to national data, drowning is the second leading cause of injury-related death among adolescents and young adults. One researcher named alcohol and/or drug use as the primary factor contributing to adolescent swimming, boating, and diving drownings.

- ▶ Two studies that have attempted to link youth alcohol use and drowning found that from 40 to 50 percent of young males who drown used alcohol prior to drowning.(33)(51)
- ▶ According to national data, the ratio of young males who drown after boating incidents outnumbers females 12 to 1. Alcohol particularly may affect a youth's balance, resulting in the boat capsizing or the youth falling overboard.(33)
- ▶ A detailed study of the factors contributing to youth drowning indicated that alcohol may severely affect a young swimmer's coordination and judgment. Peer pressure may cause youth to attempt to swim beyond their ability. On a dare, a youth might experience overconfidence if under the influence of alcohol. At the same time, the youth might underestimate the length of swim or the water's currents.(33)
- ▶ Researchers have documented that 40 to 50 percent of all diving injury victims consumed alcoholic beverages. Again, alcohol may impair judgment, resulting in a youth underestimating the challenge.(34)

CAMPUS-RELATED PROBLEMS

A researcher who reviewed studies on college drinking found that missing classes, missing work, and not studying were the most frequently noted alcohol-related problems. Other researchers have linked alcohol use with more serious campus problems.

- ▶ In a national survey, college administrators estimated that student alcohol use leads to 69 percent of damage to residence halls, 34 percent of academic problems, and 25 percent of dropouts.(7)
- ▶ A Towson State (MD) University study found that alcohol was a factor in 98 percent of student conduct violation cases.(22)

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