

Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America

APPENDIX: EXPERT INTERVIEWS



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Appendix: Expert Interviews 2010

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Expert Interviews

This report is prepared to provide summaries of the interviews conducted with numerous professionals with in-depth knowledge about teens and alcohol. As one of the core methodologies implemented as part of the Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America research project, a series of Expert Interviews was designed to complement the range of other sources of information used for the research. Specifically, this aspect of the research was designed to learn from those who had significant expertise with a national perspective.

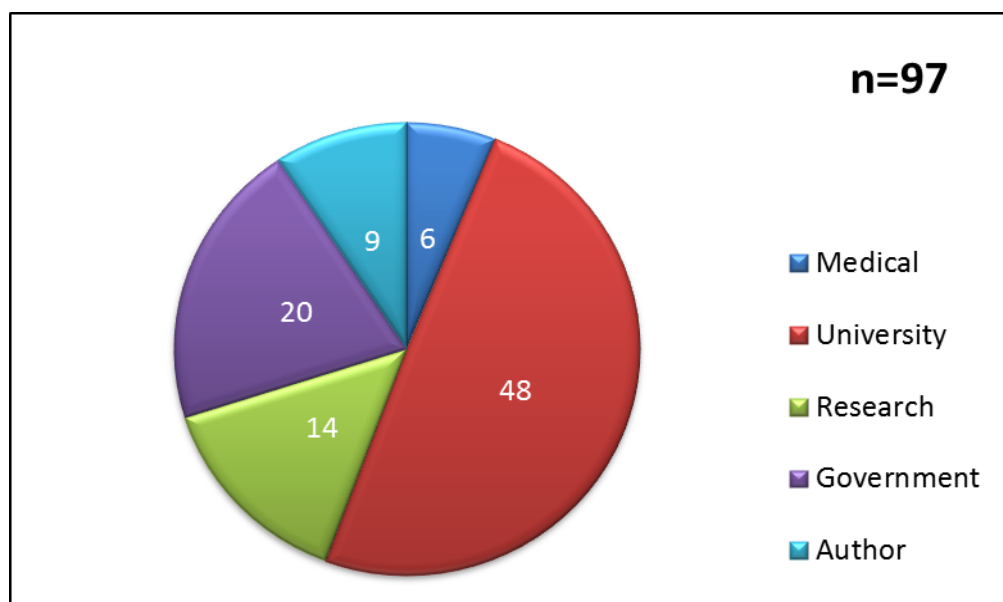
SECTION 1: **METHODOLOGY**

The design of this portion of the research was to gain the rich perspectives held by a variety of professionals who had detailed knowledge about youth and alcohol. These individuals were classified as an “expert” if they had conducted research on teens or alcohol, or had a national or international perspective. Individuals from research institutions, government agencies, non-profit organizations, or other similar settings were identified. These individuals had a national reputation in their field of study, and included backgrounds in Public Policy, Sociology, Psychology, and Public Health. Many of the experts are affiliated with universities throughout the country, with some experts identified from the Literature Review conducted at the onset of this research.

The research faculty at George Mason University’s Center for the Advancement of Public Health (GMU’s CAPH) contacted identified individuals to schedule telephone interviews. Research questions were developed by the project faculty members, reviewed by the Advisory Panel, and approved by GMU’s Human Subjects Review Board. Each interviewee was asked the same questions [included at the end of this report], and the majority of interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

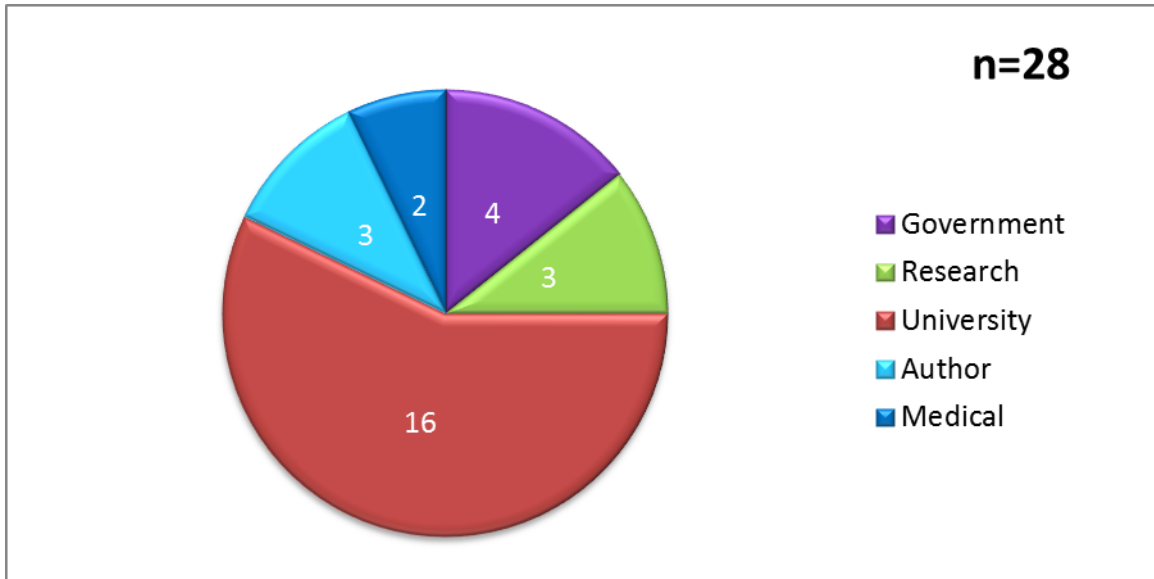
Nearly one hundred professionals were identified to be included with this research. Each of these individuals was contacted using the best available e-mail or telephone contact information. If a response was not received from the initial contact, additional contact was made to encourage participation in the research. Figure 1 illustrates the number of experts identified for each of the five major categories of professional role, illustrating the diversity of professional settings selected.

Figure 1: Expert Contact List by Category



Every effort was made to reach each of these professionals; a total of twenty-eight of these individuals were reached and agreed to be interviewed. Many of the individuals contacted did not return telephone calls or e-mail contacts; others reported that they did not have the time available to be interviewed, and one even stated that he did not consider himself an expert on this issue. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of those experts who participated in an interview, based on their professional setting.

Figure 2: Expert Interview List by Category



Reviewing the professional roles of these experts, and the response patterns, the rate of response was the same for three of the areas (university, author and medical), yet lower for two (research and government). These response rates are summarized in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Response Rates for Expert Interviews

Professional Role	Responses	Total Number Identified	Response Rate
University	16	48	33%
Author	3	9	33%
Medical	2	6	33%
Research	3	14	21%
Government	4	20	20%

This report of the Expert Interviews reviews the interviewees’ responses to the range of questions asked. In this report, the themes and general observations of these professionals are

highlighted. Further, the report illustrates these themes with a variety of quotes from these individuals. In accordance with the protocols established and approved by Mason's Human Subjects Review Board, and communicated to the interviewees, names or other identifying information are not provided with these specific comments.

For this Expert Interviews Report, the responses are organized into general clusters that are helpful for understanding the various observations, viewpoints and recommendations held by the interviewees. These are organized within the following areas:

- Understanding Teen Alcohol Consumption
- Protective Factors For Teens' Alcohol Consumption
- Assessment of Current Efforts
- Suggestions for Future Initiatives on Teen Drinking
- Leadership on Teen Drinking Prevention
- Summary

SECTION 2: **UNDERSTANDING TEEN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

One of the key elements sought during the interviews with these professionals was to gain a better understanding of teens and their alcohol consumption. These individuals were asked about their understanding of teens' decisions about alcohol consumption, and what led to teens' decisions to drink or to abstain. They were also asked about what they viewed as key motivators underlying teens' decisions about alcohol.

Four main points were identified as central to the decision to consume alcohol: to be grown up, peers, fun, and social context. The first addresses the desire by teens to be like adults, and to be grown up. The second focuses on the role of peers, peer groups, and the commonly-cited 'peer pressure.' Third, a reason cited by experts was the fun reported to be associated with the experience of drinking. Finally, the overall social context is a major factor cited by experts. Each of these will be reviewed in turn, with illustrative quotes provided to document the experts' views.

According to the experts, a primary factor for teen alcohol consumption is the teen's desire to be more grown-up, and to be more of an adult. Many of the experts related how youth find the line between adolescence and adulthood vague in the current culture of the United States, and suggest that teens view the consumption of alcohol as symbolizing the passage to adulthood and as an indicator of growing up. One expert said "Teens drink in order to feel and be perceived as grown up, specifically with adults. If they can have a drink or two at family or adult functions, they feel as though they are portraying adult behaviors." Another expert reported this motivator as "The main challenge for youth is their state of development in trying on adult roles. Adult roles include alcohol, which is viewed as a way to sample the joys of adulthood and serves as part of the teen and young adult mating ritual for dating, sex and marriage." A third expert said: "Primary is that it is a mark of adulthood, part of the identity process, it symbolizes the entry into adulthood for them. Since they do not do other adult behaviors (paying rent, etc.) they can take on consumer use patterns that resemble adults." In a related way, the reasons for consuming alcohol in a heavy manner parallel these adult-seeking patterns: "Many students think they cannot have a good time unless they are drunk. For them, it is normal to think that parties have to include alcohol; this is a cultural thing because it happens with adults as well."

Generally, the experts state that teens find it difficult and confusing to define when a person becomes an adult, as different criteria exist to mark adulthood in this country; these include standards for joining the military, voting and getting married. One expert said that teens' decisions about alcohol is part of the teens' passage to adulthood, and is based on "teens' beliefs about what it [alcohol] will do physically, socially, and psychologically. It is seen as a recreational activity. Teens don't realize the risks, and do not see it as problematic." Alcohol consumption is a popular behavior because "it is a behavior that is accepted for adults in our society and, although it is illegal for children, it is not illegal for adults. Young people, as they are growing up, see that as a behavior that maybe symbolizes adulthood." Some experts view this decision to drink alcohol as a type of developmental activity, where its consumption is seen as one of the rites of passage into adulthood.

The second factor cited by experts is the role of peers and peer groups. The experts noted that a teen's involvement with peers is a major factor for their lives; being accepted and incorporated within a peer group is important. However, experts do observe that the often-cited emphasis upon peers as being a major influence on teens' alcohol decisions is not really correct; they observe that this priority given to peers about teens and alcohol is not what is really happening when teens make alcohol decisions; the real factor is the influence of parents. That is, as will be illustrated in the next section of this report on Protective Factors, the major influence upon positive teen decisions about alcohol is based on parents. Looking at the role of peers, one expert states "When they are younger, parents pick their [son/daughter's] peers; it is only when they get older that teens pick their own peers - those with similar values."

The role of peers in affecting alcohol decisions is, according to several experts who commented on this, less related to "peer pressure" and more relevant to "peer influence." According to this view, teens are not pressured into making decisions regarding alcohol, but rather choose peers who have similar views as theirs. This has more to do with individual choice by the teen regarding behavior, rather than being persuaded by those peers outside of their peer network. This viewpoint reflects the need to promote healthy alternatives with other youth for fun, and the importance of "having peers that don't use, even if they have peers who do use." One researcher commented specifically about the correlation between a teen's alcohol consumption behaviors and those of his/her peers. Another expert stated the following as illustrative of the difference between peer pressure and peer influence:

"It is due to peer influence, but it is largely due to peer selection. That is, friends pick friends who use alcohol. This is as much a determinative of that association as is the phenomenon of and probably more than is the phenomenon of kids starting to drink because of the influence of their friends. So I'm not saying that peer influence isn't influential I'm just saying that it's totally over emphasized. My guess is most people would say: "Well, kids drink because of the influence of their friends." The matter is that the profound, the really profound influence on adolescents at a later age is the influence of the family."

Another expert, when citing the role of athletics in assisting teens with making positive alcohol decisions, stated that "kids select teams and members to be on teams based largely on

their similarity so although you might find an association there, my guess is there is a strong selection mechanism as well.”

Third, experts noted the important role that “fun” has in the decision by teens to drink alcohol. Alcohol and its consumption are not seen as problematic by many teens. As will be highlighted in the other sections, decisions about drinking alcohol are viewed by teens as “no big deal” and with few negative consequences. In fact, one of the key elements with experts’ perspectives on teen alcohol consumption is that teens view it as enjoyable and, in fact, fun. As one expert stated,

“Certainly it sounds like it should be fun and so they want to try it and there’s a lot of opportunity and availability even if stores don’t sell alcohol because people get it from older brothers, friends and from their liquor cabinet at home because there is a wide-spread availability of alcohol. So I think that people do it because it sounds like it is fun and because it is an indicator of growing up. And because in many communities the norms are that it is not such a big deal that young people drink, because adults drank when they were kids and many say ‘I didn’t have any bad experiences or no long term bad consequences so what’s the big deal that kids drink a little.’”

Typically noted is the theme that teens observe that the consumption of alcohol appears to be fun among adults, and also among their peers. As one expert said, “Some adults tend to overlook the fun factor in youth risk taking as a main motivator.” The experts state that teens seem to be bored and report having few avenues for social interaction. Alcohol is viewed as a social lubricant and many of the privileged youth today have access, opportunity and the financial resources to consume alcohol. Teens perceive that the social benefits to drink outweigh the consequences. “The pleasure-seeking motivation far outweighs any potential or previous alcohol related consequences.” One expert stated this clearly: “I go by the basic utilitarian theoretical framework that is really quite simple and that is they do it because they expect more favorable consequences than they expect that way more negatively. And all other explanations link to that kind of framework.”

Another interviewee stated this point, with reference to what is believed to be important when planning future strategies to address teen drinking: “I think that what is done poorly would be anything that doesn’t recognize the positive consequences that teens perceive to be associated with alcohol consumption. If you look at all of these programs like MADD, for example, that

focus entirely upon negative consequences or start on the wrong foot because they are dealing with an audience that realizes the positive consequences of alcohol use.”

One individual who has been researching teens and alcohol for decades said:

“A lot of young people today drink until they get really get high and they think ‘if I drink more I will get higher’ but they don’t understand about the biphasic effects of alcohol and it makes them feel good at first and you start to feel more kind of positive and if you keep drinking it makes you feel more depressed. So people think ‘if I keep drinking more I will get higher and I will feel happier’ and that doesn’t really have those effects. But I think the culture of young people today is often oriented that way; young people say ‘I’m going to get really high’ and I think that is a cultural manifestation of how people, young people, drink in this country today and I think it is very clear that a lot of young people are drinking in European countries this way as well.”

The last area for consideration has to do with the overall societal context within which drinking occurs. This is different from the first area of wanting to be more grown-up or adult. This incorporates various considerations, according to the experts. One expert talked about the role of stress in the lives of young people, citing that youth are under a lot of pressure and stress. Another expert talked about the academic pressure that continues to rise, where “parents want their children to be well educated and successful when they are on their own, get good jobs” thus resulting in the need to do well academically. The belief held by many experts is that the consumption of alcohol within the American society is normal; it is legal for adults, and its presence is widely found. One expert stated “Alcohol use is normal in our culture; it is highly advertised which makes it appear to be even more normal; it is very inexpensive and easily available.” Coupled with the emphasis cited by experts that teens want to be more adult or grown-up, the normalization of drinking alcohol appears to be a factor for teens. Another expert stated the following to summarize the overall societal context about teens’ decisions to consume alcohol:

“I think that what we have to understand is that there are a lot of incentives to drink in our society, there are a lot of things that are pulling you to want to drink. You see a lot, of adults who drink, it seems like it is fun, and people do it for the fun of it. So the question is ‘what is the incentive to not drink if you are a young person, why wouldn’t I do that if it is fun and if I can gain access to alcohol and my friends are doing it?’ So I really think we need to talk about what are the incentives for not drinking and we haven’t really focused on what do you get if you don’t drink, if you decide to not drink until you are 21, where would that get you? “Why would I give up all the ‘fun?’?” So, I don’t

think we focus enough on trying to provide incentives for not drinking to young people, reasons not to drink that they would say: ‘Yeah, that makes sense to me.’ ”

This societal context links to the fun factor often cited by experts. According to the experts, “youth don’t have any place to go and have fun at night, and are often really bored.” Thus, parties for youth tend to include alcohol. Drinking is seen as a cultural thing. “Teens are surrounded by drinking rituals, as there is so much drinking in the culture.” Consuming alcohol in a social situation is something most teens witness with adults; however, “teens expect more favorable consequences than negative.” Teens growing up in the United States see alcohol modeled by both adults and the media as part of socializing. Teens view alcohol consumption as part of social functioning.

Overall, experts reflect that teens drink alcohol for many of the same reasons as adults. Teens view alcohol as an adult behavior, and once they enter high school they are in the adult trajectory. In this transition to adulthood for teens, alcohol is viewed as one of the main components. The societal context, the role of the influence of their peers, and the fact that alcohol consumption is viewed as fun all contribute to the decision by many teens to drink alcohol. These were considerations incorporated in what experts viewed as reasons why many teens decide to consume alcohol; the next section highlights what experts viewed as protective factors, reducing the desire to drink and keeping many teens engaging in lower risk behaviors regarding alcohol.

SECTION 3: **PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR TEENS’** **ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

Experts interviewed were asked to specify what they felt were the most significant factors that help keep teens from consuming alcohol. Typically called protective factors, these were identified as those considerations that help youth decide to abstain from any consumption of alcohol, or in making responsible choices overall.

By far the greatest protective factor cited by experts was parents. Parents are described as “extraordinarily important” and “profound” in helping their sons and daughters make healthy decisions about alcohol. The consistency and strength of the experts’ views about the important role of parents was quite notable. According to the experts, the important factors of parenting include good parent child communication, monitoring their children, neither restrictive nor authoritative parenting styles, and role-modeling responsible alcohol decisions. One expert stated that “teens need a sense of belonging” and that “family influence goes a long way.”

The role of the parent is such that positive decisions and negative decisions about consuming alcohol are highly influenced by the parents. Much of this comes from the role-modeling by parents, with other influences being healthy parenting skills affecting their children. As one expert stated, “Parents are a lot more influential than they realize, they are a constant model for morality, but they don’t realize it.” Another expert stated, “For parents who teach children to drink responsibly, the children usually do. The attraction to getting wasted is not as great among those students; alcohol is not seen as a forbidden fruit. [Because of our laws and culture], the only message we have for teens is “don’t drink” and abstinence is a joke to teens.” One overriding theme cited by experts is that “parents who model good alcohol behavior are more likely to have children who don’t abuse alcohol.” Two experts interviewed said:

“Parents are the number one reason teens are drinking. They are critically important and many underestimate what their child is drinking and many find it inevitable – ‘my teen will drink no matter what I say or do.’ They don’t seem to realize they can do a lot of things to prevent their child from drinking underage.”

“We speak to parent groups and they don’t seem to have a scope of the problem. They are in a make-believe world rather than the real world. You need to educate parents that kids are making tough decisions.”

A central part of the parental role is the overall relationship the parents have with their sons and daughters. The importance of parents establishing a good relationship from the beginning is cited by the experts. Experts cite research that has shown that effective parent-child communication helps youth make good decisions. One expert cited the strong research on parents, stating “if we can increase positive parenting strategies it will decrease problem behaviors; this means increasing parental monitoring and communication strategies.” Another

expert stated that “monitoring in a positive way is important - knowing what they are doing, not being restrictive or authoritarian, knowing who they hang out with.” Experts’ recommendations for parents include “educating parents about their roles as parents,” and increasing “parent involvement and expectations of child’s drinking.” Overall, experts felt that it is important to work with “adults to trickle down to youth,” by increasing positive parenting strategies to decrease problem behavior. They recommend effective prevention programs to “influence family to relate to their adolescent in ways to reduce alcohol use.” In addition to this type of communication, experts state that it is important to show interest in the teens’ activities, such as “interest in getting into a good college, engagement in sports or other activities.”

Parental role-modeling can be problematic, however. One expert stated “Sometimes parents do not provide good social support because they are dysfunctional.” Another expert stated, “A lot of alcohol use among youth is linked to alcohol abuse in the family or even sexual abuse they have experienced. Alcohol use can become a coping mechanism for some youth.”

While most of the attention about the important role of parents emphasized their engagement early, as well as during the teen years, later involvement of parents with their sons and daughters was cited. As two experts stated:

“Parents do influence kids the most early - but do influence up through college even though they are not the only influencer or the most important then.”

“A misguided phenomenon is the idea that family influence goes away during adolescence or diminishes substantially related to the peer influence. All of the research I have seen on it is that it doesn’t go away (the family influence does not go away).”

One additional aspect about parental involvement parallels the observation that parents are not fully cognizant of the important role that they can play. This is highlighted in the following quote from one expert, who illustrated that parents were not sure what to do: “Parents are looking for answers. Whenever we do a parent group or training, and open it up to questions and answers, they could say and ask questions for hours.” Another expert reinforced this need for quality parent education: “Parents are more the problem than the kids; they need to make sure that their kids are well educated and provide guidance when needed.”

A supportive environment is another protective factor for teen drinking. This includes a strong bond between teens and family, the community and the schools. The environment best suited as a protective factor would include a safe environment “for teens to talk about questions and issues”; it would provide outlets for teens without alcohol, such as “healthy risks.” This supportive environment will “help them learn the skills necessary to successfully transition into adulthood.” This environment also needs to include bonds with schools and the community, and informal mentors. Developmental psychology often discusses risk taking as normal adolescent exploration that is an important part of the learning process of a young person. Experts recommend that teens partake in risks that do not threaten their current and future health. Thus, the family can create an environment in which “negative consequences can be emphasized relative to positive.” A safe environment is defined by the experts as the family, local community and schools functioning collectively to provide resources for youth to create a nurturing atmosphere to promote youth development.

Two other protective factors were cited, albeit to a much less extent than was the parents. One was the role that siblings can play in affecting alcohol decisions by teens. While experts acknowledged that siblings can be role models, either in a positive or a negative way; they can play an important role in affecting positive decisions by the teens. The other important protective factor was the role of other adults in the lives of teens. These individuals can serve as mentors or as positive influences with the teens. Informal mentors within the community are cited by experts as important especially for youth in high-risk areas or those without strong family connections. Experts stressed that “kids need to get encouragement or help from somewhere.” One expert made the following statement:

“We have found an important protective factor is a young person having informal mentors – people young people can identify with, and parent communication. In fact, we have found that some young people are mentors to their younger siblings.”

In summary, experts identified several core protective factors for reducing teen drinking. These include support from the family, the community, schools, other peers, and mentors to help teens make responsible decisions. These support systems need to work in a united manner to create a safe environment for teens, and to encourage healthy youth development.

SECTION 4: **ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT EFFORTS**

The experts interviewed from various settings were asked about their review of current efforts designed to help youth make responsible decisions about alcohol. Overall, the experts had two major areas of emphasis with their remarks about current efforts. One area was focused on policy and legal approaches for addressing teen drinking, with particular attention to the minimum age of 21 for purchasing alcohol; the other major area of attention focused on current educational strategies.

Overall, the experts interviewed supported the age of 21 as helpful and appropriate. While some experts felt that this age was not desirable, the overwhelming majority supported the minimum age of purchase and identified research demonstrating that this law was helpful in saving lives. One expert stated it succinctly: “As long as the drinking age of 21 is maintained, this would be the most important thing to do, to keep it; reducing the drinking age would be disastrous.” Those who were critical cited factors such as other adulthood standards in the country, such as voting, military service, and driving. One expert said that the drinking age should be lowered; while not advocating that teens should drink, this expert supported lowering the drinking age “to help change the way that alcohol is seen so that it is not seen as something tempting, it is a normal part of life; getting drunk is the problem and engaging in other risk behaviors is the problem. We need to stress responsibility in youth.”

Those experts who focused on the law felt there was a need to keep the drinking age at 21 and implement better enforcement of the existing laws. Enhanced enforcement should include “increased consequences for stores that are selling alcohol to minors” as well as for teens who consume alcohol underage. One expert expressed that “the minimum legal drinking age was a good policy decision, but we need to address system problems mostly; we need to get judges on-board.” The majority of the experts did favor the zero tolerance laws and the loss of a driver’s license, but expressed a need to increase enforcement to those providing alcohol to youth.

The second thrust of the experts’ comments focused on the educational strategies. The vast majority of comments and concerns were quite critical, citing how most of the current efforts were not sufficient to address teen drinking in this country. They noted that most of the

efforts take place in the school setting, and that, overall, these are not viewed as particularly effective. Their views were quite consistently supportive of the need for quality initiatives to address teen drinking; however, they had few positive things to say about what is currently being done to assist with the problems associated with teen drinking.

The experts noted that most of the education-based efforts around teen drinking are based in the school setting. This is convenient for communities since, in this setting, teens are a ‘captive audience.’ One expert was positive regarding the school-based efforts, saying “The availability of substance abuse prevention programs in schools is good. They are increasingly doing better with that. Need them more widely distributed.” However, the vast majority were critical of current efforts; some illustrative quotes are helpful:

“Not much has been done. Youth are usually told to just say ‘no.’ The youth are all drinking for different reasons. We need targeted programs for different groups of youth. The problem is the risks they engage in while drinking, not the actual drinking.”

“Schools write off some kids. That is where kids spend many hours of their day so it is a huge lost opportunity not to help them. They need to keep kids engaged, complement them for doing well, keep them involved and feeling respected. The schools should not push kids aside. Educating them should encourage them to think about their behaviors.”

“High schools can’t do anything, can only give the message of “don’t drink” it is a Catch-22. The schools risk legal problems if they say anything other than abstinence - this is a real problem area.”

“The ‘Just Say No’ campaigns are a total joke. Teaching about the perils of drinking and driving is a good idea. Using a context of worst case scenarios if you choose to drink could get through to a teen.”

“Schools are not a healthy place for youth. We need school reform so that young people will have a sense of hope in their future.”

“The DARE program is a disaster, it is popular and ineffective, in fact some of the alcohol education is counter-productive. We need to value alcohol education, and teach teens how to be happy without alcohol. Less ideology on how we deal with alcohol and more problematic – look outside the box and be open-minded, try all sorts of approaches, drop what doesn’t work and explore other options.”

“One of the major problems in the alcohol use in that age group is that historically alcohol prevention programs for adolescents have focused almost exclusively on school

based prevention programs. That makes a lot of sense because there is a captive audience; it's OK because if you are interested in universal types of prevention programs, and you want to have impacts on prevalence, you want and need to focus on the general population. Whether they are high risk or low risk, that is fine because they are relatively easy to study and they are relatively easy to corral for school based curricula. But these programs ignore in the process some of the most and strongest influences on teen alcohol use. For example, family influences. Because families generally don't have a whole lot to do with schools; [current curriculum] orients everything toward the adolescent, ignoring the powerful impact of families."

"We've certainly put a tremendous amount of time, effort, money and energy into alcohol education. For the young people that I interact with who are older and at a college level, I'm struck by the fact that the education we've given them as they were younger, in elementary school or high school, is about the knowledge about a variety of alcohol specific things, but it hasn't been personalized to them. For example, if I say to a group or class of young people in college "how do you plan your evenings that you're going to drink, if you by chance are going to drink?" We all have to be careful that we don't imply that they're going to be breaking the law. They say "we don't, it just happens." Well, you know what, it doesn't just happen. We have the fact that they don't think about what they're doing, they don't plan ahead. If they haven't done that they haven't thought how much they could drink, have they eaten. They haven't done the kind of things that makes sense in terms of them not having problems with their consumption. It also gives them permission to drink as much as possible because they haven't thought about it. I think the education we're doing is good. I think it just misses the mark in many cases because it hasn't...perhaps we can't, we're not supposed to, talk about young people consuming alcohol, so our teachers are in a very difficult situation. Personalizing something when you are kind of making pretend that it's not really happening, or you're pretending that you don't know that it's happening is difficult because you can't make it as real as you ought to."

One expert made the link between the laws that do exist, and the nature and effectiveness of public awareness strategies about these laws. This statement illustrates a gap:

"We use laws and legal strategies to prevent or keep a handle on teen drinking. We have driving under the influence laws, also to keep a handle on adult drinking. I would say every state in the United States has two different levels of DWI laws and they're related to age. Very few people know about them which boggles the mind because we passed them to keep young people from not drinking. Those laws throughout the United States were passed as a deterrent. If our young people don't know about them how can they deter anything? I think we might have been on the right track, because we certainly don't want our young people to drink and drive, and we need and have to tell them that they'll lose their license if they're arrested and convicted of DWI at very, very low levels. If we don't tell them they may think they can get away from it."

The experts interviewed did offer a variety of suggestions about how to do better with the education of young people. One of the key elements cited was that it is important that teen drinking education efforts be community-wide. Similar to this is the theme that efforts within a community should be consistent; as one expert said, “Teens get mixed messages from all segments of society. Everyone needs to be on the same page; we as a society are doing a disservice to our youth.” There appeared to be general unanimity that education about teen drinking be focused in the school setting, as part of the overall community-wide initiative. One expert said: “Schools are in the trenches and have an innate sense of responsibility and opportunity. And the same is for the community.”

Some suggestions for the school-based and community-based efforts are found in the following statements from experts.

“I think also that a lot of times we’ve just done things that we’ve thought would make sense but we haven’t subjected them to rigorous trials to see if it really makes a difference. When you look at what has made a difference, I don’t think we are doing a very good job of generalizing those to society using what has been tested and shown to be effective broadly. So, I think community wide approaches work in which we really try to create opportunities for skills recognition for kids, and bond those kids, and then have clear standards of what is OK and not OK. I think that school curriculum that really focuses on teaching kids skills to resist alcoholic beverages, that teaches them about social influences and how to resist those social influences. Also, help them be able making a decision for their future and be able to learn skills for relaxation and other ways of dealing with the stress of adolescence other than turning to alcohol.”

“All important is the need to make sure the schools provide an excellent education and that youth are engaged in school; the school should create the norm that it is not acceptable to drink. Policies on drinking should be enforced in schools. What the schools are teaching/methods they are using for alcohol education should be evidence-based. Schools should provide opportunities for a safe place for teens to hang out with other teens.”

“People don’t necessarily recognize this connection between social bonding and standards for behaviors and so a lot of times people don’t attempt to really ensure that young people are developing a strong bond to school and to family and to positive aspects of life. To ensure their kids aren’t going to want to jeopardize that strong bond, because if you have that strong bond, then if you say it again, like “you should wait to drink until you are more mature, until you have a greater physical and social and emotional maturity, and until is legal”; then kids are more likely to listen to that kind of a

message if they feel more bonded to you. I don't think we have consistently really focused on the whole aspect of social development in our prevention efforts in this country. We have been more inclined to just say "no," make alcohol difficult for kids to get, make sure they are going to get punished if they use it, and hope that this will do it. And I don't think that is necessarily accurate or sufficient."

"Schools can give high risk kids opportunities to do things other than drink - involving them in clubs and activities can help to improve their bond to the school."

"In communities, similar to schools, there should be opportunities available to them. It should be a positive place for kids to make good decisions and be supportive."

Efforts need to be implemented that complement the traditional educational strategies found in the school setting. That is, experts believe that efforts should incorporate audiences other than just the teens.

"Some of the same factors that provide risk can also provide protection. Peers, siblings, and parents all can serve protective roles, depending on their behaviors, attitudes and beliefs surrounding alcohol. For parents, their alcohol-related behaviors, and the quality of the parent-child relationship, serve as protective factors."

"Traditional preventive practices such as using fear tactics do not work. There needs to be more of a focus on harm reduction techniques that identify how teens can navigate their development towards adulthood safely. Teens need to be included in this process, instead of dictated to, which can cause further rebellion and risk-taking."

"In the community, young people do not have any place to go and have fun at night. The only places they have to go have alcohol or you have to pay to get into. We need more coffee shops where kids can go and be loud! The problem is that some old nasty people do a NIMBY [not in my backyard]. Older people have a fear/hate for younger people. There is a neoliberal meanness that has invaded our country. There is a strong sense of adults against youth. Also, teens are often really bored."

"What we are engaged in our society with young people needs to be an effort to create strong bonds between young people and pro-social aspects of society and their families or schools, community and neighborhoods. We think that can be accomplished when adults who interact with young people provide them developmentally appropriate opportunities to be actively involved and engaged with other people and other social activities, and when they provide them with the skills that they need, cognitively as well as socially and emotionally, and when they provide recognition and reinforcement for effort, improvement and achievement."

“Youth look up. Junior high kids look at high schoolers; high schoolers look to college students. College students are still observing their parents and other adult’s that are important in their lives. If we can create more responsibility starting with the adults in our country through more policy changes and more environmental strategies that have a greater impact on community norms, and combine that with the influence the parents have over the teens, there can be more responsibility and understanding with the youth.”

SECTION 5: **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INITIATIVES** **ON TEEN DRINKING**

As efforts to addressing teen drinking are formulated, a vital element often cited by experts was to focus the efforts through processes that actively engage the teens themselves. The teens’ involvement in identifying needs, planning efforts, and implementing the strategies was viewed as a central factor for their potential success. Other policy-oriented suggestions were made, and the need to think in more innovative ways was stressed.

The most dominant theme for future initiatives is to engage the teens in the process of addressing teen drinking. As one expert said, “We do not do a good job of engaging youth themselves in the prevention process. Collaborative relationships with youth will help them protect themselves from harm.” Other experts summarized the importance of this process with the following statements:

“The best way to get information out is peer to peer. Teens will not listen to adults and especially the kids who do get in trouble will not listen to them. One of the best/most effective activities is to have students form into groups to explore the dangers of drinking. Each group reads either “21” or “Smashed” and does a presentation. It definitely makes them come away with an understanding of the dangers of alcohol.”

“For a long time we have involved youth but not in a meaningful way. We have given them meaningful ideas but have restricted their involvement by not trusting them to do the good work they can do. They are capable of doing a lot more than we allow them to do.”

“I would like to see more youth involved as leaders in prevention. Actively engaging youth in a meaningful way at the coalition levels would really make an impact as well as building up their policy advocacy skills. Social host ordinances at the community level

could change drastically if we could bring the youth into it. This would create awareness in their communities and in the communities around them.”

The experts offered various observations that identified elements helpful for inclusion in whatever is done to address teens and alcohol.

“Protective factors against teen alcohol use are anything that would provoke the expectations for negative consequences and that which fits of course into that utilitarian scheme. One of the reasons we focus primarily on adult family member influences is because they can create an environment in which negative consequences can be emphasized relative to positive.”

“We need to change the culture through peer pressure, just as MADD changed attitudes about drunk driving. We are capable of bring about behavior change, it can be done. Social norms changes perception.”

“What I’m talking about is just to try to provide an incentive for giving up something that other people think is fun. I think from talking to parents or his friends during that time, the next few years they would say “hey I see this one doesn’t drink,” “how come this one doesn’t drink?” And they were interested in that and it was because he had this incentive not to drink and he could say to his friends, “look I made this deal with my Dad, I don’t want to be dishonest with him, I don’t want to jeopardize my thousand dollars a year so I’m not going to drink.” So, I think by focusing on providing recognitions/recognition reinforcement for doing what we want young people to do - not taking risks with their health - may be an important thing that we have to put into the culture.”

“Teens are trying to find out who they are independent of their parents and background. Other cultures do not have the same kind of rebellion issues with teens. Any efforts from the community will be pushed back by the teens.”

“I think we have to help our young people understand what happens to the body, their body, when they have and they have consumed a certain amount of alcohol.”

“I think it’s our obligation to have a national campaign or a state by state campaign that tells people about [the laws that already exist]. That’s one area that’s kind of not lived up to its potential for sure.”

Several experts cited issues with the overall American culture, with their observations about the role of technology having a negative influence on teens’ decision-making, and how teens are spending too much time on social networking sites such as Facebook, as well as time surfing the Internet. One expert said that it was important for teens to “Get out of the dream

world they are in (using video in a virtual world to control their future).” It is time for a re-evaluation of the balance that they find themselves in. Other experts talked about the influence of the media on the values and lives of teens; one expert called the media “weapons of mass persuasion” which has strong influences on teens.

From a program planning perspective, experts called for the need for both innovation and sound practice. As noted earlier, many experts believe that what has been done programmatically is not very helpful. They believe in the importance in knowing that the approaches chosen to address teen drinking be based on evidence and documentation that the effort is worthwhile. However, many experts commented that many of teens’ decisions about alcohol and life for teens are not much different from the past.

“There needs to be a greater reliance on evidence-based practices. The federal government has poured funding into a few prevention programs that have been deemed proven, but these are not used by many in the field. Barriers to their use include the culture in education that educators are not trained on research-based approaches and their necessity. Also, people tend to choose programs they like and that serve other purposes (e.g., DARE) that have not been proven to be effective, or even have been proven to be ineffective. Using evidence-based programs also requires a greater investment and alcohol topics are not considered core curriculum material.”

“Our social systems need to be responsive to the needs of many different kinds of youth. Activities at school and faith based activities, etc. can help however many youth are turned off to these settings because they don’t fit their emotional or developmental needs.”

“There are some great programs- providing normative feedback- to help kids understand that not everyone is doing these things. Skills training is important. Motivational interviewing has been successful. Making programs a more collaborative experience is important - in past years, programming has been somewhat disrespectful but now there is a different philosophy that is more collaborative with the youth and more non-judgmental. Youth are used to being told what to do. Someone listening to them and not judging them is powerful.”

“Provide them with a safe environment to talk about questions and issues. Give them skills to make healthy choices and to know that some forms of alcohol use are not normal. This should be continued throughout the development of the child.”

“Many times, teens do not understand the outcomes of their actions, they don’t believe that bad things will happen to them. One reason is that their decision-making capabilities are not fully formed.”

“Risk behaviors are no different from issues in the past. Because they are not aware of the fact they are at risk or because they know they are being risky and that is desirable. To be an adult. Not thinking of the consequences. Has been the same for a long time. Part of the issue is biological- brains not well developed. And there are social factors as well.”

“I don’t think that there are many hazing situations going on but I do believe that teens feel the social benefit of fitting in and being cool.”

Changes in the overall culture are needed, according to the experts. They acknowledge this is a gradual process. Again relying upon the evidence from the change of the legal minimum age for purchase of alcohol to 21, other societal changes from a policy level would be helpful. A few of the experts discussed the need to change the excise taxes on alcohol, and others talked about the need to look at other policy changes that could be enacted to help modify the culture around teen drinking.

“We need to gradually change the culture. Drinking should not be the focus of celebratory events in the same way it is now. In advertising and films drinking is shown as what people do when things are really bad and also when they are really good. Those messages need to be toned down.”

“Research is very clear that it is dangerous for young people to drink. We need to create a culture where it is not normal for teens to drink - policies at the state and the community level need to create the norm that it is not acceptable.”

“The minimum legal drinking age was good policy decision. Policy makers need to figure out what else they can do. Access to alcohol needs to be reduced. Consequences need to be increased for teen drinking (relative to things that are important to them). Zero tolerance laws, loss of drivers license. Things that they don’t want to lose. Opportunities need to be provided to kids for other things to do besides drink.”

“Instead of what are protective factors against teen alcohol use, the question should be why some teens choose not to drink to excess. It is no good to tell them not to drink. Abstinence only messages do not work. Why they drink past the point of pleasant intoxication is the question. The reasons vary. One reason is because that is the only way of drinking that some teens know. They don’t comprehend drinking to not get trashed. That is part of the cultural understanding of alcohol.”

SECTION 6: **LEADERSHIP ON TEEN DRINKING PREVENTION**

Final queries asked of the experts focused on the issue of leadership around teen drinking prevention and related issues, as well as their sources of information. The overall response to the question of leadership was that no national leader was found. Whether focused on individuals or groups, the general consensus among experts was that there was no national leader or national voice on the issue of teen drinking and teen drinking prevention. This perspective is well-illustrated by the following quote from one expert:

It's hard to answer who is leading the field, that must mean there is no great leadership! The federal agency that should be headlining these efforts, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) has low visibility. They need greater attention, and probably more funding.

In addressing teen drinking, the consensus from the experts was that prevention and education are very important strategies for informing teens about alcohol. However, the emphasis of current strategies and campaigns was criticized, with much of this disapproval centering on the role of the Federal Government in prevention. One expert said “the Federal Government has poured money into prevention that does not work.” Focusing on future leadership, another expert stated, “We need to raise interest in the Federal Government, and provide funding to figure it out.” Prevention needs to be well funded and executed, including additional funding for “treatment, education, training and evaluation of interventions.”

However, one organization that was cited several times was noted due to the results achieved with the minimum drinking age of 21. The organization was Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD); MADD was noted as a leader over 20 years ago with bringing attention to the issue of young people drinking and driving, and resulting in the national age of purchase. Another source of leadership was the State Incentive Grants (SIGs), emanating from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The overall sources of information cited by the experts interviewed included professional journals as well as teen-focused media. The primary journal cited was the Journal of Studies on Alcohol. Teen media included teen magazines as well as the web, with sites such as YouTube

and MySpace. One expert stated “We don’t really have good resources for learning about teen culture.”

SECTION 7: **SUMMARY**

Overall, the experts provided helpful information and rich insights about teen drinking and ways of addressing it. Regardless of their professional orientation, whether serving as a researcher, national organization leader, or other, they had generally consistent insights regarding the culture of teen drinking, and ways of addressing it. The focus of the interviews with individual experts provided the researchers with a perspective of those identified with a special skill or knowledge concerning youth and alcohol. The important factors related to adolescence and teen drinking reiterate many of the key findings in the Literature Review compiled for the research overall. The information presented by this identified group of experts provided the possibility of defining a perspective from those whose experience with youth and alcohol has led them to become known as having notable expertise in this subject area.

The experts interviewed were asked questions in relation to understanding the cultures of teen drinking to provide insights regarding the nature of the problem, the causes of the problem, the roles of individual and groups in addressing the issue, and specific strategies to better address the issue. While the solution to the problem seemed overwhelming to many of those interviewed, they responded with strategies and solutions that they believe will be helpful in leading to a change in teen drinking among American youth.

As highlighted in this Expert Interviews Report, the dominant factor affecting teen decisions about alcohol revolves around their desire to be more adult or grown-up. The factor associated with peer influence, and the desire to be having fun in their lives, was a central point. Finally, the influence of the overall societal context was highlighted as important.

The major protective factor with teens and their decisions about alcohol consumption or non-consumption was clearly the parents. While siblings and other adults surrounding a teen can be influential, the overwhelming consensus was that parents play a vitally important role in influencing teens’ decisions about drinking. This can come from role-modeling as well as from

the support and understanding the parent provides from the individuals earliest childhood days. While parents are cited as not fully realizing the extent to which they can influence their teens, and that this influence lasts well through and beyond the teen years.

While some disagreement existed, experts overall supported the value of the minimum drinking age of 21; they cited the need for greater enforcement of the law, however. They believed that access to alcohol needs to be reduced. They were quite consistent with their criticism of current educational approaches, primarily based in the school setting.

The consensus of the experts was to change strategies of what is currently being done at the prevention level. Experts believe that prevention and education are the main components of how to change the current culture of teen drinking; they cited the need to change the focus in order to be successful. This change needs to include more funding and commitment from the Federal Government, the elimination of current prevention programs that are not working, involving youth in the process, and targeting prevention not just to youth but the youth's family; these should be provided particularly at transition periods for youth. The experts also believe that strategies must provide youth-empowered messages that encourage youth (rather than discourage them), are non-judgmental, and are developed for different types of youth and families.

The clear message from the experts was that the issue of teen drinking was an important one. They believe change is needed regarding how the American culture deals with teen drinking. What is needed is more of an emphasis on education and prevention, rather than on enforcement.

Expert Interview Questions

1. What is your background in studying youth issues? Specifically, please address.....
 - a. The ages of youth for your specialty
 - b. Gender, race/ethnicity, SES, regional specialties
 - c. Topic areas - - - alcohol, drugs, violence, etc.
 - d. Any specific publications or resources that you have published?
2. What are the key issues and needs you find with youth?
 - a. How do these issues and needs vary based on region of the country?
 - b. How do these vary based on gender?
 - c. How do these vary based on age?
 - d. In what ways are the needs of minority youth different from youth in general?
3. When you think about teen drinking behavior, what are the key factors or considerations?
 - a. What do you see in terms of quantity, frequency, setting, types of alcohol?
 - b. What are the key motivators for alcohol use? What influences alcohol use behavior? That is, why do youth drink, and why do some youth drink excessively or problematically?
 - c. What are protective factors for youth alcohol use, including why some youth choose to not drink, or to drink in a less risky manner?
4. When you think about youth overall, what do you see as the priority areas for youth? What is a priority for them, and what is a priority for others?
5. When you think about what's been done to address teen drinking in the country, particularly in the last few years, what is your assessment about what has been done? What do you think has been done particularly well? What has not been done well?
6. In the current efforts to address teen drinking cultures and youth needs overall, who are the leaders (individuals and organizations) around this now? Who else should be involved? How could these new individuals/groups be engaged?
7. How would you describe the roles of each of the following in helping shape a teen's decisions, from an overall perspective?
 - a. Parents
 - b. Siblings and other family members
 - c. Schools – teachers, counselors, principal, school environment
 - d. Community factors – e.g.,
 - e. Athletics
 - f. Other

8. What would you like to see regarding teen alcohol decisions and the teen culture?
 - a. If you could describe the ideal culture surrounding alcohol for teens in this country, what would it look like?
 - b. What would you like to see in 2020?
 - c. If you could do one thing to improve the youth drinking cultures in the next two years, what would it be?
9. What strategies should state/federal organizations/agencies do to create a positive environment for teen alcohol decisions?
10. What publications or resources are most appropriate for you, as a professional, to stay connected with youth?
11. What resources or articles do you believe are the most insightful . . . ?
 - a. regarding youth overall
 - b. regarding youth and alcohol
 - c. regarding youth cultures