

Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America

APPENDIX: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS



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Appendix: Key Informant Interviews 2010

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Funded by a grant from The Century Council

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Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America

Key Informant Interviews

This report complements the research regarding experts on teen drinking, and emphasizes those who work directly with teens in their various professional roles. The key informant Interviews Report was based on results from a core methodology of the Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America research project. This approach was identified because it represented the insights from those whose primary professional responsibilities involve youth and the local or grass roots level. These interviews were prepared to learn from those who had significant expertise with youth locally, and whose responsibilities would afford them the opportunity to share their views about teens and the lives of teens. Typically, these professionals' job responsibilities did not focus entirely on alcohol or drug issues, but included experience with and observations about teen alcohol consumption.

SECTION 1: **METHODOLOGY**

Interviews were conducted with individuals who have direct contact with youth; these include those who serve as intermediaries and/or those involved with deterrent type approaches. Each of those interviewed were asked questions developed by the project research faculty at [George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Public Health (GMU's CAPH)], and approved by the Human Subjects Board at George Mason University. See attached listing of questions at the end of this report. The majority of these interviews were conducted by telephone; all interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The goal of the research staff at GMU's CAPH was to interview a representative group of key informants within the local communities where teen and parent focus groups were conducted.

A list of those interviewed in the role of key informant follows:

High School Personnel (13). These included Principals, Teachers, Guidance Counselors, and School Resource Officers.

Law Enforcement Personnel (8). These included Juvenile and Circuit Court Judges, Probation Officers, Police Officers and Sheriffs.

Medical Personnel (5). These included Physicians in private practice an Emergency Room Physician, School Nurses and an Emergency Room Trauma Specialist.

Prevention Specialists (6). These individuals provided prevention programs within the community regarding alcohol issues.

Adolescent Treatment (5). These individuals worked within an in-patient or out-patient residential program treating substance abuse.

Religious Organizations (3). These individuals worked in a faith based-community setting, doing counseling or education with youth.

Parent-Teacher Associations (4). These individuals included Presidents of the High School PTA or other members of a local PTA.

Recreation Specialists and Social Workers (4). These participants worked as recreational professionals or social workers with the teenage population within the community.

Public Health (4). These professionals worked within the public health field.

Teens (3). These Individuals, between the ages of 13 and 17, were identified as peer mentors.

Key Informant Interviews		
SCHOOL	18	Principals, Teachers, Guidance Counselors, School Resource Officers
LAW	8	Judges, Probation Officers, Police, Sheriffs
PUBLIC HEALTH	25	Doctors, Nurses, Trauma Specialist, Prevention Specialists, Treatment Specialists, Ministers
COMMUNITY	7	Parent-Teacher Association, Teens

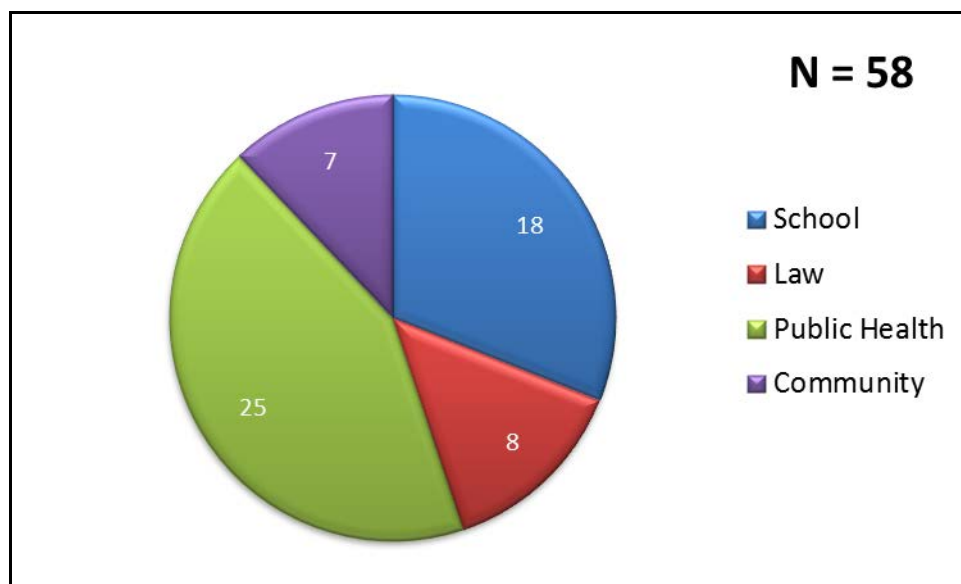


Figure 1 - Key Informant Interviews by Category

Those interviewed as key informants were selected based on their current experience working directly with youth. Primarily professionals these individuals had close associations with youth and an awareness of current teen alcohol consumption within their communities. Although they fit a specific role within the community, the majority were aware of what was going on with youth today through their personal contact with youth. The vast majority of the information shared by the key informants provided not only an overall picture of the current culture of teen drinking, but also supplemented other methodologies of the research.

The key informants interviewed focused more on what was not currently being done to combat teen drinking rather than focusing on what needed to be done. Those individuals provided a foundation of the problem of teen drinking and an overview of the risk factors affecting teens and alcohol. When questioning key informants on the roles of individuals or systems that impact teen drinking, the majority of responses dealt with the significant role of a teen's family. Although other factors played a role in the root causes of teen drinking, key informants emphasized the parent's role in a teen's life, and minimally discussed other influencing factors.

In analyzing fifty-eight completed interviews, the following themes were identified:

- The Reality of the Problem of Teen Alcohol Use
- An Assessment of Youth Today
- Parents as the Problem
- Parents as the Solution
- Outside Influences

SECTION 2: **THE REALITY OF TEEN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

The key informants interviewed are well aware of alcohol consumption by teens today. These individuals seem overwhelmed by what they are experiencing within their individual fields working with youth. They have a clear understanding of how youth today consume alcohol, and “see it as a social problem.”

Key informants report that obtaining alcohol is easy for youth today, as teens have multiple avenues available to procure both alcohol and marijuana. One individual described alcohol to teens “as almost calling their name.” Not only is alcohol easy to obtain for teens, key informants described American as “awash in alcohol”, and a culture of “self-medication.” Teens are using alcohol to become very intoxicated, and “drink whatever they can lay their hands on and they drink it quickly as they can to get drunk.” The amount of alcohol that teens are consuming causes concern for key informants and they are recently disturbed about increasing female consumption. Although in the past it was common for males to consume more alcohol than females, many expressed alarm that “both boys and girls are drinking equally.” The consensus of these individuals is that girls are drinking for many of the same reasons as boys, and many to “escape their problems.”

According to the key informants, there are two primary reasons why teens are consuming large quantities of alcohol. First, they report that it was part of the teen’s social life, and teens drink because it is fun. Second, teens drink to relieve stress. For some teens, “it is a way of life, a way to let off steam.” Although teens use alcohol to have fun and relieve stress, key

informants noted that teens were oblivious of the consequences of extreme alcohol consumption. “They are unaware of their limits, or that they could really kill themselves.” However, it wasn’t just teens who did not understand the dangers of extreme alcohol consumption, according to the key informants, adults were also not informed: “Adults were unaware of the amount of drinking and drugs that teens are doing “

Overall, key informants’ main concern about alcohol consumption by teens was that if teens have a way to get alcohol, they drink, and when teens drink, it is to the extreme. Further, they cite that teens are using alcohol at younger and younger ages, that males and females are using alcohol equally, and that additional risk behavior is displayed when alcohol is involved.

These additional risk behaviors associated with teen alcohol consumption is distressing for key informants interviewed. Their apprehension reflects alcohol’s accessibility for teens, how much alcohol teens are consuming and that younger teens and females are increasing alcohol consumption. Major concerns expressed include how alcohol consumption “goes along with sexual promiscuity”, and that “binging is starting to become the predominate pattern by which young people are drinking.”

A member of an underage drinking coalition goes on to say, when asked about what worries them the most about teen drinking, said: “It is an epidemic and alcohol is a factor in the three leading causes of death among young people in the age group 15-24. It really has the potential to devastate lives. It has the potential to change the entire course of their lives, it can be life threatening. There is such casualness to putting themselves at risk. Many of the young people I talk to have some type of regret that they have felt following a drinking binge. A lot has to do with the effects alcohol has on their judgment, ambitions, increased aggressiveness...it’s not just drinking and driving...it’s poor sexual decisions and the repercussions, aggressive behavior and violence, depression and possible risk of suicide, unintentional injuries and on and on. All of the above.”

When discussing current prevention strategies to address teen drinking, key informants stress that current programs do not appear to be working. One Prevention Specialist interviewed shared: “I think the continued reliance on intervention strategies that don’t work is the biggest problem. the second which is almost a tie is the fact that how to properly engage young people

that are already drinking to get them to reduce or limit their drinking is something that not a lot of folks are paying attention to ...and there is a huge, huge chunk of young people in the middle that are getting just sucked into a black hole of traditional prevention strategies that are just not working for them...but no one is willing to recognize the problematic risky behaviors kids are getting into when they are under the influence and take it more seriously, I suppose.”

In addition, another individual states: “Society spends \$1.00 on alcohol prevention and the Industry is spending \$100.00 to promote it, more money is needed for prevention ... people don’t realize the damage alcohol does to society.” Finally, a Juvenile Judge interviewed says: “We as a society really don’t care, we talk about it, but we don’t do anything about it. It is nothing but lip service—worse than nothing, we really do not care. We talk a good game; everyone has to look at themselves.”

SECTION 3: **AN ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH TODAY**

How do key informants describe youth today? Many state that kids today want to grow up a little faster, and that they have a need for instant gratification. Additionally, youth today have more disposable income and many teens look older than they are.

According to these interviewees, one of the major concerns about youth today is how alcohol consumption has become part of the “social behavior of teens.” Key informants describe youth as socially awkward and having difficulty relating to one another. One key informant described today’s youth as “not easily relating to each other, they have a lack of identity and are very competitive with one another.” These impaired social skills are due to use of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and teens’ total engagement in technology, such as “the iPod, TV, DVD, Social Network Sites, 24/7, they are bombarded by the media.”

Teens’ conversations with key informants suggest that life for them is stressful and it is difficult for them to juggle all of the responsibilities. Many teens express concerns about family problems. One key informant reported that, based on survey data completed in their community “73% of the teens surveyed said they used alcohol because of stress and depression.” However,

another key informant interviewed highlight that teens today “control their parents” and that many teens “are searching for an easy way out.” Key informants state that teens “don’t understand the consequence of drinking” both in the short term or the long term, and in trying to be grown-up, they witness adults drinking alcohol. Informants describe teens today as more immature and taking longer to get to adulthood; in fact, “they are not taking responsibility as fast as earlier generations.” Finally, one key informant interviewed summed it up by saying: “We as a society don’t care about our youth.”

Similar to the opinion of the experts interviewed, key informants find the association of alcohol attached to adult behavior and teens are in a hurry to be adults. Teens are described as stressed out and technology savvy. This has led them to be socially awkward with their peers and to use alcohol to assist in social interactions. Overall, key informants describe today’s teens as more immature, with more family dysfunction, and a lack of general knowledge about the health risks of alcohol. In fact, “even when given the facts about the risk factors for alcohol, they don’t really listen, they don’t care.” Youth are different today from previous generations and those key informants interviewed report that they have not yet figured out a way to get a message to teens about the health risks of teen drinking.

SECTION 4: **PARENTS AS THE PROBLEM**

Many of the key informants reported using two perspectives when being interviewed. One perspective was from their role as a professional, and the other one was as a parent. Thus, heavy emphasis in their remarks was on the role parents contribute to teen drinking. Overall, parents proved to be one of the key influencers to teen drinking.

Key informants expressed criticism of parenting skills in relation to underage drinking. Most of those interviewed cited parental alcohol consumption as “the number one risk factor.” Parental indifference, combined with parents’ lack of knowledge about underage drinking and lack of awareness of the laws, led to the conclusion that parents “don’t take it seriously.” One individual went on to say: “I think a lot of parents are supplying the alcohol to students. When there is a level of permissiveness of like ‘oh well you can do it at my house if we take away the keys,’ I think that is introducing a whole level of problems. I think parents think they are helping, but I really don’t think they are at all; I think they are making it a lot worse. I wish parents were not so permissive, a lot more awake, parents having more conversations with their kids.”

According to the professionals interviewed, parents don’t see their impact, and there are parental attitudes that are condoning alcohol consumption. Today’s parents underestimate the impact they have on their children, and respond to pressure from their children rather than step up and provide “better guidelines.” Key informants stress the lack of parent involvement and cite that teen drinking is one aspect of the spectrum. The overwhelming consensus about the role of parents was “parents need to parent.” “I think that the parents are forgetting we are the parents, we are not the friends. Moreover, it is a very, very thin line between one and the other. Yes I want to get access to my daughter or my son, but I’m the parent and I have to set the rules.”

However, key informants also point out that there is confusion among parents of their role. You have the “over protective parents and you have the over relaxed parents.” On the other hand, as one school principal stated when describing the role parents play in their child’s life: “You have those parents who over stress about everything, who quantify activities without worrying about the heart and soul of the child. Are we trying to bring up a generation of perfect students? We’re forgetting that coming home to a well-rounded meal is the best way to do it.”

Another person reiterated this message: “A lot of the times parents just aren’t on the same page. You’ve got one parent who thinks that kids drinking is just the way it is, and you’ve got another parent who feels another way, mixed message...what do you do?” One person summed up this confusion by citing three types of parents, “First, their kids don’t drink. Second, alcohol is not a big deal; and third, there are those who stay up to date on the web and talk to their kids.”

Because many parents have different viewpoints when it comes to teens and alcohol, key informants stress that it is difficult to put together an effective parenting program to educate parents about teens’ use of alcohol. “A lot of parents feel, and I’ve had this discussion with many of my neighbors, they don’t want anyone on the outside telling them how to do it. They feel that, just because I don’t show up to this meeting, doesn’t mean that I don’t know how to do my job. I know what to do. I don’t need to come to a meeting to have someone tell me how to work my kids, because my kids as all kids are different than others, and some progress faster than others, and with some you have to wait, depending on the child themselves.”

Yet when discussing some of the programs provided in the community to educate parents on teen risk behaviors, key informants expressed frustration. “We provide great parent programs, but it’s hard to get parents there...’it doesn’t affect my kid’.” Overall, interviewees express dissatisfaction in reaching parents and “getting parents involved.” However, many of the key informants are split on why there is a lack of parent participation involving issues with teens. Some responded that parents don’t seem that concerned or that parents “don’t want to take one hour after work to spend building their relationship with their child. It’s not just alcohol; it’s all these mental issues going on at the same time.” Others responded how many parents do not have the tools or information to be effective in “changing their child’s patters of behaviors,” and more than anything just not knowing what to do. However, they reiterated that when providing opportunities for parents to attend informational workshops or presentations about communicating with teens about drugs and alcohol, attendance by parents is usually minimal.

Finally, key informants noted that most youth have been introduced to drinking alcohol at family celebrations or family functions, yet they don’t parent. The communities need to provide positive role models for youth. One key informant summed it up by stating, “Parents need to be parents and not rely on someone else in the community teaching their child right from wrong.”

SECTION 5: **PARENTS AS THE SOLUTION**

Although the key informants interviewed were critical of the role parents play in teens' decisions to use alcohol, they also provided strategies on how parents could provide guidance to teens on risky behaviors including alcohol consumption. Their recommendations included encouraging parents in setting limits for their teens, educating and communicating with their teens about alcohol, and empowering and educating parents in their roles as parents.

The key informants recommend that parents “set clear limits and be consistent, and having clear values that your kids really understand, and that you’re not sending them ambiguous messages about what you think about drugs and alcohol.” Solutions include establishing rules, and letting kids know the outcome of their behavior, “so you make a plan.” They recommend that parents have clear expectations, so if their child “knows what happens, kids really behave better.” When parents have consequences and stand firm on these consequences, and do not waiver, parents have a lot of influence on their kids. However “if a parent decides to punish a kid, and the next day they forget about it, the kid is going to continue that behavior.” Thus, the overall recommendation from key informants is parents “need to set limits and follow through on consequences.” One key informant summed up recommendations by stating “Sad to say, I really think the enforcement issue and the parents are going to change it more than trying to change kids’ attitudes.” Clear, consistent message with established guidelines are invaluable tools in dealing with teen drinking according to those key informants interviewed.

Many of the key informants stressed that open communication between parents and child is a key element of parenting. “I think parents that talk to their teens about alcohol makes a difference, not just about the stuff in school; they need to make it a life-long effort.” Another person suggested, “Try not to preach too much, but to tell a story. They are going to make their own decision. Give them the facts and the consequences, but do not preach.” Key informants emphasize that communication is an on-going process, and that parents need to open the lines of communication with their child early in life. “Communication...this isn’t something that you can do overnight, but you can set it up during the entire childhood. Create a relationship where

the kid knows they can always come to you, and they know that you are interested in who they are, and that you express a lot of love and care and affection.

Educating parents on communication skills is crucial to encourage effective parent –child communication. “Parents don’t know how to communicate with the kids because the kids get rebellious and they start screaming and yelling and parents eventually give in.” Communication between parent and child should not be preaching about alcohol, but rather “it’s about the relationship.” One person summed up how setting clear boundaries and open communication not only deals with the parent-child relationship, but also applies to relationships with other adults: “I think parents need to be empowered to know that because you walk a fine line you’re trying very hard to not alienate your kids so that they don’t communicate with you. You are trying to leave lines of communication open while setting clear boundaries. And it is very difficult to walk that very fine line. Very fine line between ensuring you keep lines of communication open and setting clear boundaries. And sometimes you feel just parents are no different than kids. You want to kind of go along with your peer group very often. And if you feel that your peer group is allowing kids to drink its more difficult for you as a parent to say no I’m not going to do it. Whereas if I knew all of the parents that my kids were hanging out with had the same clear boundaries that I did I would feel much more empowered in the message to my children ... absolutely no, and I think parents feel like they’re the only ones who are willing to say ‘no’ very often.”

The consensus of the key informants was that the most influential factor relating to teen alcohol consumption is the role of parents. Although those interviewed conveyed a multitude of responses of what parents are not doing appropriately in changing the culture of teen drinking, they also provided suggestions on how the parental role in teens’ alcohol consumption must be addressed to overcome the problems associated with teen drinking. The overall majority felt that educating parents was equally important as educating youth about the dangers of alcohol consumption; however, they expressed concern about parents inability to cope with the problem and lack of involvement in any types of educational programming provided. “The thing that would help the most is for parents to get involved.”

SECTION 6: **AN ASSESSMENT OF OUTSIDE INFLUENCES**

What influences youth to use alcohol before the age of twenty-one? Although the number one influence was parental attitudes and communication, other major forms of influence reported by key informants to be prevalent in teens' lives. Key informants defined other influences outside of the teen's family including the media and peers.

Key informants describe the media as a formative influence regarding alcohol messages directed to teens. "Movies and music tell teens if you want to be a grown up drink alcohol." The media is reported to glamorize alcohol, and the Media sends a pro-drinking message," are common among comments made by key informants interviewed. When discussing the media, key informants discussed not only movies and television, but music, advertisements and magazines as well. One person went on to say, "If it is advertised, it pervades the culture." The overall message expressed in the media about alcohol, according to the key informants, is that it is "cool, fun, sexy", and that the media "glorifies alcohol, showing no consequences, in fact the ads show happy times associated with its use." They recommend that the media downplay the positive message sent to teens regarding alcohol.

Many of the key informants also mentioned peers as an important factor in the decision for teens' alcohol consumption. However, the term 'peer pressures' was replaced with the term "peer influence." Rather than being pressured to use alcohol by other teens, it was defined by the key informants as more of a need to be included as part of a group "teens want to fit in, thus "peers are important because teens want to be accepted and alcohol is part of the social behavior of teens." One key informant went on to explain how he defines this 'peer influence': "I don't want to say pressure, it's not like anyone is forcing a bottle into your hand. But it's that they want to be like everyone else and so there is a normative culture around drinking at this level. So I think a fair amount of them are doing it because that's what everyone else is doing."

According to the key informants, peers are instrumental in a teen's decision to use alcohol because "all of their peers are doing it," and peers are the "strongest influence" during these years. Friends have an impact on whether teens are going to drink or not and many times it has to do with fitting in with your peers.

Key informants stressed that one could not ignore that drinking alcohol in social functions by adults has been modeled to teens. “You know it’s a culture where alcohol is the norm. And we have this arbitrary age, and let’s say you have a 19 year old, it’s a little harder. I mean you know you can say it’s against the law. But it’s a culture norm and that makes it a little harder to address than other substances, a lot harder. Also, I think that because parents drink too, they don’t feel comfortable telling their kids not to do something they see them do all the time. I think that’s part of it too.”

Although the key informants interviewed discussed both peers and the media as having major influential roles in a teen’s life, they also addressed stress and pressure, and noted the mental health issues in society today such as depression and dysfunctional families. Rather than influencing teen drinking decisions, key informants report that teens’ stress and pressure reinforces why some teens are drinking alcohol or drinking in excess.

Although the major influence for teen drinking is the role of parents, key informants also discussed the role of media and peers in influencing teen alcohol consumption. Although these were not major considerations, it was the combination of alcohol consumption at all levels of teen’s lives, within their homes, amongst their friends and their personal entertainment venues. As quoted by one of the physicians, “alcohol drinking is ‘multi-generational’, grandparents drank, parents drink and you expect the teens not to drink?” Because alcohol pervades the life of teens, key informants recommend that all members of the community work together to combat the problem of teen drinking. These recommendations include increased education regarding alcohol consumption to parents and teens, not just from the school system, but include support from community members including medical, faith, judicial and enforcement. They suggest that these members of the community combine their collective resources to combat teen drinking. However, key informants add that these programs need to involve youth. They suggest “in order to be successful, you need to involve youth. Listen to youth and have them come up with the answers.” “It is a combination of we are all in this together. The media, the distillers, everybody has to be part of this, just like everybody was part of tobacco.”

SECTION 7: **SUMMARY**

The variety of individuals interviewed as key informants provided a rich understanding of teens, their challenges, and the role of alcohol in their lives. Further, these professionals offered their perspectives about ways of addressing many of the issues in teens' lives, so that alcohol-related problems become much less of a factor in the lives of these young people. These key informants were ever mindful of the important role that communities play in the lives of teens, whether from the perspective of the curriculum and out-of-classroom activities by schools. While it was common to acknowledge that schools are often identified as the primary vehicle for implementing approaches about alcohol with teens, they also stressed the important role of other organizations and agencies within the community. Further, these key informants highlighted the importance of preparing parents more effectively for their vital role in addressing teen alcohol issues. Central to their observations is for the community, including parents, schools and other sectors, to acknowledge the role that alcohol currently plays in the lives of its teens. They stressed the importance of raising the priority of this issue so that many of the influences of the larger society, and resulting negative consequences, can be modified.

Key Informant Interview Questions

CURRENT DESCRIPTION

1. Describe your involvement with teens and current teen issues?
2. How would you describe teen alcohol use? What are they drinking, how much, where are they drinking and with whom? How are they getting the alcohol, and from whom?
3. Do you think teen drinking is different for boys vs. girls, different cultures, social classes or age?
4. What most worries you about teen drinking?
5. Can there be such a thing as safe teen drinking? Why?
6. How do teens make decisions concerning alcohol and who or what influences these decisions in either a positive or negative way?

REASONS/INFLUENCES

7. What motivates teens to partake in risky drinking behavior? What motivates teens not to drink or partake in risky drinking behavior? What motivates teens to partake in low-risk alcohol behavior?
8. Why do some teens become involved in risky drinking behavior?
9. How do Parents affect teen's alcohol decisions? Peers? Schools? Community? Other?
10. Are you aware of any efforts to address youth and/or parents about teen drinking behaviors and if so how have they made an impact?
11. In your capacity working with teens how do you (or your organization) shape or not shape a teen's alcohol decision-making?

FUTURE

12. Are you aware of any current trends in teen's alcohol related decision making? What strategies would be helpful to assure teen's ability to make safe decisions for themselves and others?
13. How could you or your organization help create an environment for positive teen alcohol decisions?
14. Where do you get your information about teen drinking? Do you feel you have enough information?
15. Would you advocate any change in the current laws for teen drinking? What and why?