

# Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America

## APPENDIX: PARENT FOCUS GROUPS



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## Appendix: Parent Focus Groups 2010

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# **Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America Parent Focus Groups**

An important aspect of this research was gathering the perspectives and insights of parents. The aim with these focus groups was to gather parents' perspectives on the lives of their sons and daughters, the friends of their children, and the teen children of friends, neighbors, and others in their community. Questions were designed to gather their views on the current culture surrounding teen alcohol consumption and non-consumption, their perspectives about why teens make the choices they do, and what can be done to promote a healthier and safer environment regarding teens' behavior.

## **SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY**

Focus groups with parents were held in Lorton and Springfield, Virginia; in Orlando, Florida (3); in Bucks County, Pennsylvania; in Santa Fe, New Mexico; and in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There were 54 participants in all, of whom eight were male. Three participants were African-American, while the rest were overwhelmingly white. The questions asked were based on the parent focus group questions approved by Mason's Human Subjects Review Board, with follow-on questions asked where appropriate. Each focus group was conducted by one or more members of the "Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures" staff. Each group meeting was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Since the project staff did far more focus groups with teens than with parents, the findings from parent focus groups may not be as robust as the findings from the teen focus groups. This is especially the case since there was an obvious (and hard-to-avoid) recruitment bias to the parent groups. This can partly be accounted for by the relative availability of mothers over fathers for such an activity and by the characteristics of the kinds of parents who are likely to volunteer to spend an hour or more discussing teen drinking. The sample is skewed toward mothers, toward middle class parents, and toward parents who consider teen drinking to be an

important issue for discussion. Underrepresented are fathers, working class and minority parents, and parents who do not give much thought to teen drinking.

## **SECTION 2:** **UNDERSTANDING TEEN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

Parents were asked where they thought teens acquired alcohol. Comparing parents' and teens' responses to this question, these parents had a good idea where kids get alcohol, but from a distance rather than in detail. While teens in focus groups often enjoy recounting the devious ways in which they procure alcohol in some detail, parents tended to give terse responses when asked where teens get their alcohol: "they steal it," "fake IDs," "from parents" etc. The only source of alcohol parents tended to describe in detail was their own liquor cabinets, often recounting how they came to realize that their vodka had been watered down and so on. "My husband and I were sipping a vodka and we were noticing that it was very watery." Many were aware that alcohol in their own homes was a temptation to teens: "It's so accessible. If you open my fridge, I have beer in the fridge and wine in the basement, and I'm not there all the time." Many thought that teens were being given alcohol by their own parents or even by others' parents, but more listed older siblings and friends as a source. Older siblings home from college for a holiday were a particular concern. One parent mentioned babysitters as a source of illicit alcohol.

Several parents mentioned that kids can get fake IDs, though none volunteered details about how teens would acquire them. Several parents said that teens will sometimes steal alcohol. One had learned at a workshop that teens will steal from the open garages of neighbors: "kids garage shop, and a garage that is open and has a refrigerator in it, they will take alcohol out of there. So as a parent you should be constantly monitoring what is in supply and make sure it is what it is." Some also mentioned that teens will sometimes stand outside liquor stores and ask strangers to buy alcohol for them. One found that her daughter had been getting alcohol from a local Seven-Eleven with the help of others.

Many parents were aware that, as teens get older, they work and thus have money with which to buy alcohol – even if they are not old enough to buy it legally.

When asked how many teens consume alcohol, the parents' answers ranged from 50% to 80%, with most responses in the 70-80% range. Asked what teens drink, parents were aware that "they drink whatever they can find," but particularly beer and spirits. They were often aware that, for purposes of deception, teens like to drink clear spirits that can pass for water, that boys are more likely to drink beer, and that girls prefer fruity drinks.

Regarding the question about the age at which teens start drinking, parents' answers were all over the place: anywhere from 10 to junior/senior year, with all the years in between. It seems that parents have a better idea what teens drink and how they get it than when they start. One parent could have spoken for many in saying "why are they drinking younger and younger when the age limit is getting higher and higher?"

Regarding where teens drink, parents were quick to respond. This may be because they repeatedly stressed their vigilance inside their own homes. They may thus have been much more likely to identify places outside their own home than inside as places teens would drink, notwithstanding such discovered traces of drinking within their homes as beer bottles in sock drawers, watered-down vodka, and so on. These parents associate teen drinking with other people's houses, especially their basements, and especially if there is to be a party or a sleepover. "For me a sleepover is a red flag," said one parent. "I knew every time she was going to go drinking because she slept over. Sleepover meant drinking," said another. When one parent said "sleepovers are recipes for absolute disaster," another parent responded: "But if you don't let him go, he says that you're not letting him have a life...*I have no friends because of you...you ruin my friendships*. So there is constant pressure coming at you from the kid." "I wouldn't let my kids go to their houses, but they could come to ours," said another parent.

Some parents also see sporting events as places or catalysts for drinking. One group of parents worried about what went on during ski trips. Among the many reasons to worry about teens in cars is that a teen with a car is mobile and can "go anywhere a parent isn't around," using the car as a way of seeking out spaces outside adult supervision.

In general, these parents were concerned to find out where teens were drinking and then to restrict their access to these places, preventing their teens from doing sleepovers in particular homes, for example. One mother found her daughter was meeting other kids at the pool and drinking, so she cancelled her pool membership. While such measures presumably have some effect, one presumes that a teen determined to drink but denied access to one location where they can do so will simply find another.

### **SECTION 3:** **HOW PARENTS FIND OUT ABOUT TEEN DRINKING**

There are three main ways parents learn about teen drinking, including the drinking of their own teens: (1) from other parents; (2) from teens themselves, especially but not necessarily from their own teen; (3) from physical evidence. While such evidence is often stumbled across accidentally, in some cases, parents mount surveillance campaigns aimed at accumulating such evidence.

First, other parents was the least often mentioned as a source of information, and the picture that emerges is that adults in networks of friends and neighbors know a lot more about each other's teens' drinking than they share with one another. They cited a common ethic, in suburbia especially, of minding your own business and of not saying things to people's faces about their children that might cause awkwardness or embarrassment. However, "if a party gets busted, everybody in the school knows whose house it was, and whose mom called, and all the kids that were there." Parents are well aware that different parents have different rules about drinking and are not sure how their revelations might be received. Some parents report telling other parents about their teens' behavior and not being believed or being met with coldness. "What I learned is that some parents absolutely do not want to know what their kids do. So me and my husband now go to the parents of any kids who are participating in behavior that threatens the health of their kids. And what we've learned is that some parents are appreciative, but about 40% of parents were in denial." Others report their own kids becoming angry with them if they break a confidence by telling another teen's parent. Some parents are forced by



their own teens to agree not to share a confidence as a condition of hearing it. One parent even reported being told by another parent what her teen was doing, but being told she was not allowed to tell her own teen that she knew anything about it. (Thus parents get sucked into the cabals of teenagers). One parent said, “I want to put out a press release saying *please call me if you know if my child is using drugs or alcohol. I won’t be mad at you. I’ll be grateful, because you can save somebody’s life by doing that.* Many parents think they have a perfect and beautiful child. I know my child is not perfect.”

The second source of information was from the teens themselves. To a surprising degree, parents find out about teen drinking directly from their sons and daughters, and from other teens. Sometimes a teen, feeling conflicted, will confess to a parent what they have been up to. One parent said, in regard to asking about a daughter’s friends’ behavior, “You have to ask; they’re not going to tell you.” Another said, “Sometimes I’ll ask my daughter about a party after a party. And then I state things that I think happened as if I thought they were facts, and she’ll tell me. I trip her up a lot.” These conversations seemed mainly to be between mothers and daughters.

Some parents have learned to rely on their teens’ friends for information. “Sometimes you ask the friends questions and they might tell you. The friends are more likely to tell you than they are to tell their own parents.” Another mother said, “If I’m driving a group in the car, and I will drive them and their friends around and they will forget that I’m there and then you’ll hear something.”

The third source of information is physical evidence. Many parents reported finding evidence of drinking on their kids’ Facebook pages or in text messages on their kids’ cellphones. Many parents also have stories of evidence stumbled across in their homes. “I found beer bottles in the drawers of clothing where they store their laundry.” “We discovered the tequila bottle was filled to the very top, and what they don’t realize is that there is always a little gap in between the top and the gap. And my husband noticed that the color was lighter so we locked the cabinet.” “I’ve had like two or three of my friends’ sons sleeping over and a friend of mine stopped by and I went downstairs to get my friend a soda and the fridge was filled with beers, and he [a visiting teen] just brought them in a backpack and I just figured he had like a toothbrush and sleeping stuff in there. Even those of us who think we’re on top of it get fooled.”

Linked to the source of physical evidence is that of surveillance. One parent said that, with parents working more than they did in previous generations, “parents aren’t around nearly as much as they used to be.” This creates a situation where teens can get together unsupervised more easily and, thus, a temptation for parents to engage in various strategies of surveillance, some of which are enabled by new digital technologies and some of which are quite primitive. In such a situation a sort of arms race can emerge between strategies of detection and evasion, with the kids as the enemy to be spied upon. (An example: teens learn that their parents can smell alcohol on their breath, so they chew gum. In turn, parents have learned to treat gum-chewing as a suspicious sign).

Examples of relatively simple ways of checking up on kids in their own homes include using a razor blade to mark the level of alcohol in a bottle (though teens can backfill the bottle with water to get around this), and counting the beers left in the fridge.

A number of parents said they use technology of one sort or another to monitor their kids. “I know some people might not think this is right, but we keep a baby monitor in the ceiling right above where they hang out so we know whenever something's going on.” One family had a security system that beeped every time anyone opened a door, and they used this to keep track of kids going outside, possibly to escape surveillance within the home and sneak a drink.

It is common for parents to use cellphones to check up on the whereabouts of their kids when they are out, but some parents go further. One mother reads her daughter’s email and text messages. She rationalizes, “she has to know because she actually chooses to save these conversations. So she knows that they're on there and she knows that I could read them if I wanted to.” The husband of another mother who reads their daughter’s email says “it’s invasive, but it’s a non-invasive way of protecting your child.”

Several parents said they monitor their own teen and other teens on Facebook. “I have a Facebook [page] and part of it was to be able to see other Facebook [page]s. It was very fascinating to see that a lot of kids drink to create an identity for themselves. Come Monday morning, there are pictures floating around that are cool and talked about, and now they have a cool identity, not a dorky one.”

However, some teens develop strategies to which, in turn, the parents take their own countermeasures: “They get very smart very fast. They say you can look at their Facebook page and they start a second Facebook page. So then THIS is their real Facebook page... You learn very quickly that you don’t know all their email accounts. They get very sophisticated. There is software you can use. There’s a keystroke software that lets you recreate every key stroke that was done and you can basically recreate their emails, their Facebook chats, everything.”

Parents are particularly concerned about teen parties; these present a big opportunity for dangerous drinking, and parents are concerned that teens are most likely to drive drunk after a party. One group of parents mounted a type of police action at one party: “I just went through a New Year's Eve party, and the way the mom handled it, and it was a very good idea, was that there were six parents, and every kid that came in, they would say ‘coats and bags in that room, and kids downstairs.’ They had to dump everything. The parents had checked the basement to make sure it was clear of any of these items. So the kids all went down in about half an hour later, and a boy comes and gets his coat. The mom says, why are you getting your coat? The boy responded, ‘it's a little cold downstairs.’ So he went down, and she followed him. She gets to the bottom of the steps and she says, it's not cold down here and she takes the coat from them. She brought the coat upstairs and opened it and there was a water bottle full of some sort of booze.”

Some parents deal with the danger of drinking and driving after a party by taking away everyone’s car key when they arrive for the party. However, one parent at a focus group responded that some kids will hide a spare key in their sock so they can drive anyway. One person reported that once one of their neighbors realized their son’s parties involved drinking, “they would, every time someone leaves their house, use a breathalyzer to make sure that they’re not driving.” (This provoked an animated discussion in the group, with some condemning them for implicitly ratifying underage drinking as long as it did not involve driving as well).

A few parents directly counter the culture of suburbia by appealing to other parents to directly help in the project of surveillance. “I sent an email out to everyone that I know, saying that if they ever saw my teen drinking at all, I wanted to know. I described what her car looked like and everything.” Another mother reported, “I had called a couple moms and said let's go out, around the holidays, and there were so many parties, I just feel like we need to band together

and deal with this and you know it takes a village to raise these kids and we all need to watch over everybody's kids. So it started out with four of us and then it got to eight, then 12 and my daughter comes home from school and says 'Mom what are you doing?' I said 'What do you mean?' She told me 'There are, like, 12 of you moms who are going out and discussing us.'"

It is in the nature of suburbia that teens are usually much more tightly networked than parents, and can use their tight networking (through text messaging, playground conversations and so on) to identify spaces without surveillance where they can drink. Given this, tightening their networks with other parents and inviting them to collaborate in the project of surveillance is an obvious countermeasure.

## **SECTION 4:** **WHY TEENS DRINK**

When asked why teens drink, parents most often refer to peer pressure as an explanation. "What I see as the overwhelming problem is peer pressure... We've been really lucky that our daughters focus on the straight and narrow, but if peers talk about alcohol, and it's available at parties, whether or not parents provide it, the temptation is there, and when the peer pressure is on, that's when they cave in." "I think part of it is a badge of honor within a group of friends, something to brag about, something to fit in."

"My daughter shared with me that she went to a party as a teenager, to the point where the girl was pouring it down her throat to get her to drink. But people tell you not to put a cup down at a party because people will get you to drink something that might have a drug added to it. I get maybe there's a mindset that if you're not one of us, we're gonna make you one."

Part of the problem here is the ubiquity of alcohol in teen life. One mother recounts that her son was at a party where he was not drinking but most other kids were. "The cops showed up. They captured everyone at the party and ran them to the police station, and he had this conversation with them, and they tested him, and he hadn't been drinking. They told him that he needed to not be around people who drink. And he said, are you expecting me to sit in my room by myself for the next two years?"

At least one mother thought boys were more susceptible to peer pressure: “Guys are sensation seeking creatures and overwhelmed by hormones, and really maybe more susceptible to peer pressure than girls.” One boy told his parents he wanted a keg at his graduation party and, when they refused, was in despair that no-one would come if there was no keg.

Parents often also saw stress as a source of teenage alcohol use. “I think there’s a lot of pressure and stress and depression there that drives kids to drink.” Some of this stress is academic, especially in high-achieving suburban communities. A mother in said: “I have a senior this year, and I can’t tell you how many parents ask me what school they’re going to. And if they aren’t going to Tech, or UVA, or William and Mary, they are frowned upon.” Another said, “we also put a lot more requirements on kids these days. When my daughter says she’s doing community service, I’m thinking okay....so she’s trying to get into college. She’s got to be in sports, and orchestra, and she’s thinking about building this resume, and she’s got dyslexia, and I’m thinking, when is she gonna have time to read. And now she’s gotta compete with out of state college students who are wanted because they have to pay more money to the school.”

Others saw adolescence itself as a source of stress. In the words of one parent: “If they try it early and it gives them some relief from the tension they’re feeling just because they’re in adolescence and they think everybody hates them, and they hate their family, and they hate their life. They drink and they feel a little bit better and they can socialize better. The earlier that happens that becomes a coping mechanism and they go back to it again and again.”

Boredom is also cited by parents as a cause of teen drinking. Lots of clubs do not allow teens under age 18, or even under age 21, while many teens dislike afterschool programs because they are too tightly structured. Meanwhile schools are closed to those not in formal after-school programs, partly because of liability issues. Especially in suburbia, teens may have little to do, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. “The boredom in this culture in general is massive, you know, kids have nothing to do,” said one parent. In this context teens may engage in thrill-seeking behavior, including drinking. “Their whole world is so thrill-seeking. It used to be that downhill skiing was good, but now you need a half-pipe that puts you six feet up in the air. There’s that thrill-seeking, over-the-top mentality in everything in their life. What’s the most edgy thing out there?” Some parents thought “risk-takers” were the most likely kids to drink.

Many parents also blamed TV for glamorizing alcohol, saying that messages drummed into their kids' heads on TV were hard for responsible parents to counteract. "How are we supposed to deal in a society that promotes this but doesn't tell us how to manage it?" asked one parent. Said another: "I like to watch Brett Michaels, and all the charm school. And all these ladies are drinking their asses off...they're drunk as can be, and these are the shows that the teens are watching. And if you put on MTV, and my daughter watches it every day when she comes home, there's alcohol on all these shows." Another parent adds: "The ads on TV they don't show kids throwing up and getting hung over. It's humorized and glorified." Parents particularly singled out beer ads for criticism: "The Super Bowl's coming up and everybody looks forward to the Bud light commercials. The frogs, they're not made for adults, they're made for kids." "You don't see a lot of liquor ads in America. You do see the beer ads."

Although parents blame the commercial culture around them for inciting teen drinking, some are also attuned to the ways in which teens imitate behavior they see modeled at home. "A lot of kids tell me that they drink to loosen up in a social setting because their parents do. They model what they see," said one parent, while another said, "if every time you have people over you have alcohol, they are going to associate getting together with alcohol, so why wouldn't they raise themselves to be that way?" A few parents indicated that they had cut out, or cut down, on their drinking in front of their kids in order to minimize this modeling effect. "My husband and I drink hot tea around the house so my boys don't get to see us drink alcohol."

The parents in our focus groups often felt that other teens drink because their parents do not supervise them closely enough. Some indicated their perception that the worst parenting, especially in regard to alcohol, comes from divorced parents, particularly the fathers. "The worst kind of family structure for our kids to have friends with are divorced dads that are parenting, because a lot of times divorced dads that are parenting are also dating, and busy and disengaged. If they have a son at home that they are parenting, that son is usually not parented very well. For us that's a real red flag... You're not always sure that the parent is there or that checked-in." Another parent says she allows her son who wants to have sleepovers with one particular friend to stay over at his mother's house but not his father's house. Another said "My son has two fathers who are workaholics. They don't do anything with him but take him to the movies."

## **SECTION 5:** **WHY SOME TEENS DON'T DRINK**

Parents had relatively little to say on this subject. The reason most often given for teens eschewing alcohol is that they were determined to achieve a goal which underage drinking would obstruct. “I’ve got one son who is a senior this year who wants to become a Fairfax County Police Officer, that’s all he has ever wanted to do. So for that reason, he’s always prepared for his polygraph because he wants to say that he’s never drank. He’s invited to every party because he’s the designated driver. That’s his motivation. He’s very different. So I wonder, if he didn’t have that as a goal, I wonder if he would drink.” One mother asked her daughter why she didn’t drink. “She said she wants to be a teacher, and she said if she gets arrested she won’t be able to be a teacher.” Another told this story: “My daughter had this girlfriend, who was crazy about getting into college, and now she’s going to Dartmouth...and they make fun of her. At sleepovers, she’ll sleep in another room and get a good night’s sleep so that she can get up at 6 or 6:30 in the morning and study.”

Another reason given for certain teens not drinking is that they have witnessed all too painfully the damage that alcohol can do. “My son has friends who have died from drinking and driving, and he has learned from them. He had a friend who he wasn’t particularly close with who died choking to death on his own vomit from drinking too much. It was like an epiphany.”

And some parents perceive certain kids as having an inner maturity and self-confidence that enable them to resist peer pressure and march to their own drummer: “And I think the ones who don’t drink at all are more self-confident, they don’t care what the other kids are thinking; they don’t want to do it. I have a kid who is straight edge and... I watched the social challenges that he’s experienced and how his groups of friends got smaller and smaller and smaller as he got disgusted with the behaviors that were going on at parties and the fact that he had to put all the fires out when he got there and take care of all the drunk people and I think it took a lot of confidence on his part to still stand his ground for not using and that’s a challenging thing for somebody that age.” A few parents also reported that some peer groups stigmatize drinking. You can hope your kid ends up in such a peer group.

## **SECTION 6:** **WHAT PARENTS FEAR**

Parents' number one fear is that their child will be killed by a drunk driver or will engage in drunk driving. "My fear is someone killing my kids, or my son killing someone else." They worry that, once their judgment is impaired by alcohol, kids will forget all the messages about not drinking and driving that have been drummed into them at school and at home. "I think the kids talk the talk, but I'm sure they might get into situations where they have the opportunity to drive, they'll change like that." Said another: "We went to a coalition presentation at the high school, and they had seniors on the panel and they almost all said that making the curfew was much more important than driving drunk. If they had a curfew at home, they'd rather go with the driver who's been drinking rather than miss their curfew. And they think they're safe." "I fear their judgment will be impaired. We tell our kids to call us if they're out with someone who is drinking, and we'll pick them up. That's what my dad did for me."

While the problem of drinking and driving is usually only discussed from the perspective of drinking, a few parents remarked that they would not have to worry about it so much if there were better public transportation, or if the driving age were higher. One father said he wished the driving age was 18 so he didn't have to worry about drinking and driving.

Many parents also articulated a fear that their children would grow up to become alcoholics, or that alcohol could be a gateway drug to other forms of drug addiction. This fear was most pronounced among parents who mentioned problems with alcoholism in their families. "Alcoholism is a disease, and once you start you cannot stop. I told my one daughter that it's in our family and she shouldn't start." "My fear is children becoming addicted because of my family history." Some parents have heard that, the younger a child is when he or she starts drinking, the more likely they are to become a problem drinker later in life, and they are trying to at least delay the onset of drinking even if they cannot prevent it altogether.

Parents are also worried that drinking can be associated with lowered sexual inhibitions, and are worried about their teens contracting sexual diseases or becoming drunk. One parent said, "I did hear a story about a girl who wandered out of the house party, and she was trying to



get a cell phone signal, and she went outside to make a phone call and she was so drunk that she walked into the neighbor's house not realizing that she was in the wrong house and fell asleep in the living room of a stranger's house.”

Parents tempted to follow a strategy of harm reduction rather than outright prohibition are worried about the legal consequences they might incur. In some parts of the country (including Bucks County, where we did a focus group), adults can be subject to hefty fines if teens are discovered to have consumed alcohol in their homes. “We're hearing stories about kids having parties and the parents take the keys, but then kids go out and wander around and when they get picked up by the police the parents get in trouble.” Lawsuits are also on their minds. One parent in Santa Fe said “We're now at a point nationally where you could sue someone. If Pete and John and Birch are at a party, and they leave that party, and they hit a car and kill someone, you can sue the ass off of the parent of the kid who threw the party.” One mother tells of her son who wanted a New Year's Party with alcohol at her home: “I told him, ‘you don't know the danger you put me in. I'm the one that's going to get sued because it's at my house and I let this happen.’”

On a final note, parents are also concerned about a negative alcohol situation, and particularly with a violation in the school or community. They are afraid that an infraction or an incident on a child's record could prevent them from getting into the best college.

## **SECTION 7:** **ALCOHOL AND SCHOOLS**

Parents are aware that teen drinking is not only facilitated by teen networks that are centered on their schools, but that alcohol is sometimes used in school. Some parents say they have smelled alcohol at school. Parents also report stories of kids hiding alcohol in water bottles, and even of teachers drinking on the job. “The kids know who is messed up in class, my daughter knows who's messed up in class, and the teacher will just ignore it,” complained one parent.

Some parents complained that schools pretend the problem doesn't exist, give a free pass to athletes, and generally shirk their responsibilities in this area. "They say that if the kids are more than 10 feet off school grounds they can't do anything. And I've seen what the kids are doing, smoking marijuana and drinking," complained one parent. "I've watched good headmasters not muster up the courage necessary to say, 'you're out, you're out because this is the line as long as I'm the administrator'; and we just saw the head of our local high school who did carry a tough line on student behavior across a very broad brush of events...he's out. They put another guy in." Of course, public schools are more limited than private school with their ability to expel students. And, in the case referenced above, another parent in the group responded that, if the problem is that kids are drinking because they are "underparented, I feel this problem isn't being solved by kicking kids out of school." Other parents, acknowledging the difficult situation of school administrators, also mentioned cases where parents whose kids were suspended from school for drinking then filed suits against the school district

Another parent told this story, worth quoting at length. "I have a personal example with my daughter at high school, some kids are selling liquor at school, and she got some vodka, and she drank it in class at school, and she got alcohol poisoning, but the clinic nurse wasn't sure who was drinking because there were a lot of kids in there and the whole room smelled like alcohol. It was a Friday, so I got my daughter, and when I got her to the car, I realized she was drunk. So my husband met us at home and together we brought her back to the school and we did the breathalyzer test to scare her. And we later found out who the kid was through her cell phone messaging.... this kid who was selling her the alcohol, the school didn't want me to contact him because they were going to do an investigation, and from what my daughter said, he graduated on time, he didn't get suspended, but my daughter did. She had to go through all the punishments at the school, which I was okay with, because I wanted her to feel the consequences. But he was even able to walk his sister out at homecoming this year, and he got all these cheers from the crowd... Although there were some counselors who were supportive, I felt very let down by the system for that.... She was kicked off of the cheerleading team and she had to go to a program and go into periodic testing, and that was all appropriate, and we got her a Christian counselor." Incidentally, the high school counselor told the mother that it was wise to

bring her daughter to school and not to the police “because she would have gotten arrested and I might have gotten arrested because I couldn’t prove that I didn’t give her the alcohol.”

Parents were aware, or assumed, that schools do some alcohol education. Some mentioned DARE programs approvingly, and a group of parents was impressed by a school exercise that simulated a drunk driving accident to the extent that a crashed car was installed in the school grounds, certain students were designated as dead and eulogies were said for them. Another Bucks County parent said, “They used to show this video to kids when they were learning to drive that showed horrible accidents with people who had seat belts and people who didn't, and kids respond to that blood and gore, kids are all about that.” Parents also seemed aware of the limits of such programs however. “Just like sex education, schools can teach the facts about drinking, but it’s up to us to teach the morality of it.” “Whatever standards you choose to have as a parent, you have to follow through. You can’t expect the schools to be teaching your kids.”

## **SECTION 8:** **HOW TO PUNISH TEEN DRINKING**

The most common punishment for a teen caught drinking is grounding. Some parents reduce computer privileges as well or instead. “When she came in and kissed me goodnight, I smelled it. And so the next day, which was July 4, and my husband says we have to deal with this. So I said that's fine, so we let them go all day, and they were talking about this party that they were going to how excited they were and then at dinner we said, guess what? We know you were drinking last night. They gave us all these excuses and we told them to stop. You aren't going out tonight; you're allowed to watch the fireworks from right here from in front of the house. For the next two weeks you are not allowed to leave this area.” Some parents also ban other teens who they have caught bringing alcohol to their house.

A dilemma presents itself when a teen drinks, but is then responsible enough to call a parent and ask to be taken home rather than keep drinking or drink and drive. Do you punish the drinking or reward the reaching out? “I’ve said no matter what, call,” said one parent. A mother

said, “I’ve always said to her, “you know how I’ve feel about drinking and I don’t want you to do drugs. But if you are ever in a bad situation I want you to know you can call me no matter how bad a shape you’re in.” She called me once, and said “mommy, can you pick me up? I have a really bad headache.” So I came and got her and she reeked. And I said to her, after about two minutes, “I got to tell you, honey, you smell like alcohol really bad”... The next day I said to her, “I’m not grounding you... I’m not saying you’re going to get away with this. But I’m just glad you called me and I want you to know that you can.”

A different kind of dilemma is experienced by parents of teens whose drinking (usually combined with drug use, stealing and pathological lying) gets consistently out of control. One mother reported sending her daughter to “a program in California that is for alcoholics and drug addicts” in California for 4 months. “It’s tough love and she thanks me to this day for doing it.” Another had a 15 year-old nephew sent to boot camp. “It’s 40 days in the wilderness, and they get away from the caffeine, the junk food, the endless Xbox games.”

## **SECTION 9:** **RELATING TO OTHER PARENTS**

Discussions between parents are impaled on the horns of three dilemmas. First, different parents have quite different attitudes toward teen drinking, and it can be difficult to reach agreement as to how it should be treated if, for example, one parent is a teetotaler and another child’s parent is a social drinker who thinks the drinking age makes no sense. In the words of one parent, “Even the kids that I caught doing things, I’m on the fence whether or not I should call the parents. Some of them I don’t even know, and I don’t know what their expectations are and what they allow in their house and what they don’t.” One woman said she belonged to “a church group, and there were about 25 parents, and it was split 50/50. Half would say it’s illegal therefore my children are not to participate, and the other half would say that they’re going to do it, so we let them do it at home, and we check the kids that come to our house and don’t let them drive if they’ve done it, and they monitor it and manage it.” Second, because teen drinking is illegal and those who permit it in their homes are accessories to crimes, it is difficult – and might

even be dangerous – for some parents to try to discuss this with others. Third, for those who accept that teen drinking is a fact of life, there is the fundamental dilemma that one is less liable if teen drinking happens in another family's home, but one can be less sure that one's teen is safe if this is the case.

These dilemmas, and the differences of opinion underlying them, became apparent in some focus groups. In some groups the discussion turned most animated and sharp-edged when these issues were discussed. Where parents generally listened to one another's stories and opinions with polite attentiveness, participants were most likely to cut one another off or make strong declarative judgments when it came to discussing parents who allowed teens to drink in their homes.

Such differences of opinion can manifest within families as well as between them. One woman says of her son: 'He's 14, and his stepfather and his father, both of them have given him alcohol, in the sixth and seventh grade, just to taste...which made me furious... I found a bottle in his room and a flask, a little bottle of whiskey, and my husband gave him the flask... And then we caught him with a bottle of vodka trying to go to a sleepover. I was out of town, and I told him he could not go on the sleepover. My husband took the bottle of vodka and then let him go to the sleep over.'

Many of the parents in our focus groups told stories of other parents oblivious to the dangers of teen drinking. "I called the mother of the sleep over and I warned her that there was some plan afoot. And she said *my child would never do something like that*. Well guess what! They all got drunk, my boy threw up and reported it to me the next day, and the mother of the sleep over still doesn't know that they raided her liquor cabinet." Another complained, "'the parents of the sleepover were both in the house and had no idea that the boys were there or that they were drinking.'" Said another: "I think there are a lot of clueless parents, who just turn their head the other way and say to themselves 'my daughter doesn't do that'."

In a situation where it is hard for adults who may not know one another well to discuss rules and expectations, it may get them a reputation as either a lawbreaker or an unrealistic disciplinarian. Adults then rely on stereotypes (religious, ethnic, or class) to help make decisions about whose home their teen can stay in overnight. But stereotypes may not be accurate. "We

have found there are other people that we thought we were so glad that our kid's at so-and-so's house because they're church people and we trust them and we found out later the reason our kids like to be there so much is because they let them drink." In such a situation, adults may look for more detailed knowledge about other families. "The best defense is the best offense, and get to know the parents of your kids' friends." Some parents mobilize gossip networks to get better information, or call another family directly to ask about their rules: "At Homecoming last year I really embarrassed my son. He was going over to a house that I didn't know with his date, and so I called his date's parents to see if they knew about the house they were going to, and they didn't know. So I followed up and called the house where they were going to be at to make sure there wasn't going to be any alcohol."

But even such direct questioning may still leave the questioner in the dark: "we can know what parties they're going to, and have that background about the family of the kids that are throwing the parties... There is this one family, routinely I can say, if they have a party the parent won't talk to me. She'll answer my questions if I call her on the phone but speaking to her face-to-face is uncomfortable. I have a feeling that she's allowing the drinking, so over the years I have not allowed her [daughter] to spend the night."

The thought process of those who do allow teen drinking in their homes is captured by one parent who said "I have the rule in my house that, yes, temptation happens. I won't question you but don't drink and drive; do not get behind the wheel. I just do not understand how parents in our community who let children come into the home and drink and then drive." "I do think that most parents think that it's okay as long as they don't drink and drive," said another. A father said that he allowed 6 or 7 (and no more) of his daughter's friends to sleep over on a Saturday night, made sure they would not be driving anywhere and that they only drank in moderation, then made them all pancakes the next day.

However, the strongly contested nature of such judgments can be seen in the reaction of one mother to the story told by another in their focus group of the time her son "actually asked me for a permission slip for him to be able to drink. The parents of the party asked for permission slips from children so they could drink." The other mother immediately responded that she should report those parents for prosecution. Another parent agreed, saying "I really

think that's a message we should send. Because it's against the law...but not only the kids have to be punished, but the community needs to see the parents punished... I know kids are good at finding loopholes, but if parents were accountable, it would make a difference. .. As kids get older, they know whose parents are the ones who host the parties, and if the community was seeing parents getting busted for having underage drinking at parties and sleepovers, it would make a difference." In what may become a more common occurrence, one group of parents discussed a local neighborhood where parents were asking each other to sign a "parent pledge" saying they would not serve teens alcohol or allow alcohol at teen parties at their houses.

The difficulty of reaching agreement on these issues is nowhere better captured than in this story told by a mother who caught a group of teens drinking at a party and decided to talk to the other teen's parents to see if they could agree on a common punishment: "Some people thought this wasn't a big deal; others were going to ground their kids for three months. We thought one or two weeks was good for us. It came down to everybody did different things. My daughter, I felt that negative punishment wasn't so effective because I had seen kids come off the ground and go right back and do the same thing again. So I made her do community service... So I required her to earn back a privilege which was going to a dance that they all wanted to go to. She had to get in so many hours before she could go to the dance. Now, one of the kids who was severely grounded went to the dance and got arrested for drinking again... One kid told me he was doing hard labor around the house. He was like schlepin' wood and mowing the grass, and he got off the ground and got arrested for drinking."

## **SECTION 10:** **ACCEPTABILITY OF TEEN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

Parents were asked about how they felt about whether or not teens should be allowed to consume alcohol. One parent said, "It's bad. It's against the law, and they're too young to handle it. Their judgment is impaired without alcohol, so why add anything to that?" Another agreed: "Kids make stupid decisions. They are not capable of making those decisions so they can't have that right." Still, many parents allow their kids to drink on occasion. Some talk about

“a taste” – sometimes given to younger kids so they screw up their faces and say “ugh!” – which parents seem to distinguish from “a drink.” “A taste is different; it’s harmless,” said one parent.

One parent spoke for many in saying “if you forbid it, then your kid is gonna be the one who’s doing it the most,” and parents worried about being so successful at preventing their kids from drinking in high school that they would arrive in the much less supervised and dangerous environs of college completely naïve in regard to alcohol.

Some parents reserve the privilege of underage alcohol use for special occasions. One family allowed underage drinking on camping trips: “We would do it together; we’d take their car keys, have sleeping bags in a field, and a fire; it was beer mostly...doesn’t make it right, but it’s one of those times...we didn’t host parties with a bunch of kids letting them go drive.” Another parent said: “We let our kids drink with rituals. We’re Jewish, and we drink on Shabbat, and they hate it. From the time they were 13 they were allowed to do that.”

A number of others followed a practice that they often explicitly marked as “European” of allowing their teens to drink some wine with dinner. “A glass of wine... I spent some time in Sweden and it’s not a big deal. So it’s a very different philosophy. They’re not getting drunk with their parents; they’re having a glass of wine as part of dinner, which I think is extremely different than taking a shot of tequila.” Some parents saw a glass of wine with dinner as a way of teaching teens to appreciate the form of alcohol that has the highest cultural prestige, teaching their teens to drink in moderation (one glass of wine or less), and teaching them to drink with food, which slows the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream. They were also teaching their teens that alcohol can be used as an accompaniment to the main course rather than as itself the central focus of consumption. However, although none of the parents in the focus groups seemed to realize this, they were also offering their teens the one form of alcohol that teen focus groups revealed they most despise, and they were offering practice in a form of drinking quite different from that engaged in by teens once they are away from adults.

Parents who allow some alcohol use in their homes follow a logic of harm reduction – it is unrealistic to expect teens not to drink, so better they do it relatively openly, so it can be monitored – analogous to the logic of those who would provide condoms to teens although they would prefer they abstain from sex. One parent cast this in terms of an ethic of moderation: “I’ve



taught her moderation since she was five. You're gonna come across everything in life, whether you drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, you don't want to do anything in excess. Whether it be eating healthier or eating junk. You don't eat five candy bars in an hour you're gonna be sick. You don't drink five beers in an hour, you drink two and over six hours.”

Many parents are well aware that the drinking age is lower in other countries, especially European countries. Some commented not only that teen drinking was allowed in other countries but, especially with reference to Scandinavia, that there was a much stronger social norm against drinking and driving amounting to a “zero tolerance” ethic. For those who have lived in other countries, where there teens were allowed to drink, the disjuncture between the laws abroad and at home could pose a special problem: “I have a son who spent last semester in Europe, and he has been able to have a glass of wine and have a beer, but he knows as soon as he flies back in on Monday, that our laws will say that’s it, and we as a family have to say, that’s it.” “I’m really struggling with my son who is 19 who is coming home on Monday and he loves a glass of wine with his pasta, and in Europe that was just fine. How do I manage this?” “I lived in Germany for three years, and I remember on Easter Sunday, and all the kids would get a little bit of wine watered down with 7-up, and I was teaching my daughter that this is how you learned about alcohol. So they get to taste a little bit when you’re at the table. Now that we’re back from there, we don’t do that. But I wonder if I were still in Germany, would I still let them drink at the table. Probably, I would. Because it’s part of the culture there.”

Just as some families allow drinking at home on religious holidays or other special occasions, so others seem to treat holidays abroad (especially in Mexico) as carnivalesque moments of time where the usual rules are suspended. One father said of his 17 year-old daughter, “when we’re down in Mexico for Spring Break, drinking beer on the beach, it’s a good time and they seem to have fun with it and not go too far.” Another told a more extreme story: “in our school district, which is fairly affluent, it is an absolute ritual that everybody takes their kids to Mexico for spring break and they all go to the same place and the kids drink the whole week. They’re just wasted. I’m talking hundreds. You get the whole pressure from your kid. We couldn’t do anything for our kid for his senior year because everybody that he knew was

going to be down in Mexico. Our next door neighbors on both sides of us, nice people, high achieving kids. What's that all about? We were the only people who said we will not go."

Some parents reflected on the different drinking age in other countries and decided that the U.S. was out of step with reality. "In Europe it's a different culture than America, and they are allowed to drink at a younger age, but it's also more of a responsible thing... It's a cultural thing in the US, and I think that impacts our children where they have to abide by these laws that are punitive... A law isn't gonna stop people from doing certain things. I say change it back" (to 18).

In discussing the drinking age, parents struggled with their dual awareness that teens lack maturity and that their tendency to make ill-considered decisions will only be exacerbated by alcohol use on the one hand versus an awareness that the law has not failed to prevent an epidemic of teenage drinking and that it is odd to tell 18 year-olds that they can vote and fight for their country but not have a beer. One mother said, "But we're talking at 18, they can go to war, they can smoke, they can vote, and everything else." Another said, "I wouldn't mind 18, because in some ways 18 would make it real. One mother said they had created a private legal space inside their own home, where the drinking age for their son was eighteen. Since, at eighteen "he could go to war, he could vote," they decided he could have a glass of wine with dinner. "Sometimes he would, sometimes he wouldn't, but the deal was he wasn't going anywhere that night. No driving, no friends coming over, and absolutely never, never could he have a friend at our house drinking."

Another parent made a similar comment that is intriguing albeit a little hard to envision in the details: "We have discussed the alcohol laws, and it's not an either or. I think there is a middle ground that needs to be set up, so you perhaps have your own liquor license, so if you do anything that shows that you can't manage that, then you have it taken away. I think we're putting people in a tough position to say that it's prohibited completely."

## **SECTION 11:** **SUMMARY**

The insights gathered from parents with these focus groups illustrate many of the dilemmas associated with understanding teen drinking cultures. The parents gather information from multiple sources, whether through observation or discussion with teens themselves. They don't have many opportunities to have open and honest dialog with community leaders, whether about the nature of teen drinking or how to address it. Further, they are often not talking about teen drinking behavior with other parents or school personnel. Many parents' views are polarized, without a clear understanding of what surrounds teen drinking and the cultures of this behavior. They have genuine concerns about potential negative consequences that can be associated with teen drinking; they also know they have a tremendous opportunity to shape the lives of teens in a positive way. Perhaps the best hope for the future lies in promoting greater awareness, open dialog, and inventive approaches for finding a middle ground with appropriate strategies.

## **Parent Focus Group Questions**

### **CURRENT DESCRIPTION**

1. How many children do you have (that you are the primary caretaker for) and what are their ages? Are you married?
2. What is your view on alcohol in general? What is your attitude towards adult drinking? How knowledgeable are you about teen drinking?
3. How common do you think teen drinking is? What are teens drinking? With whom? How often? How much? How do teens get access to alcohol and what are obstacles may they encounter?
4. At what age do you think most people have had a drink? Has this changed since you were growing up? What age is acceptable for drinking?
5. Under what conditions is teen drinking acceptable (if any)? Is it acceptable for parents to provide “safe” drinking options for teens? Why or why not?
6. Where do parents get information about teen drinking? Whose information is trustworthy? How do parents pass on teen drinking information to their children?
7. Have you ever disciplined your child or one of your child’s friends for alcohol-related behaviors? What were the circumstances and what was the outcome?
8. Do you feel safe if your teenage goes to a party at another parent’s house? What do you think about parents who allow teenagers to drink in their home?

### **REASONS/INFLUENCES**

9. What influences a teen to drink heavily compared to those who drink occasionally, or to not drink alcohol at all?
10. What alcohol-related behavior concerns you most? Why?
11. What roles do parents play in teens’ decisions to drink or not drink? Do parental discipline, communication with and education of children make a difference when it comes to teen alcohol-related behaviors?
12. How do siblings and other family members shape a teen’s decision making when it comes to alcohol?
13. Do schools, communities and after-school involvement make a difference in teen drinking? What about local and national laws and their enforcement?

### **FUTURE**

14. Would you change anything about your community teen drinking policies? What would be your goal if you did make changes?
15. If you could describe the ideal culture surrounding alcohol for teens in this country, what would it look like? What changes would you like to see by the time your children are adults? How could state/federal organizations/agencies assist in making these changes?
16. Do you believe punishing parents for underage drinking will change the teen drinking culture? Whose responsibility is it when teens drink, and how should the laws be changed or enforced?