

Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America

APPENDIX: TEEN FOCUS GROUPS



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Appendix: Teen Focus Groups 2010

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Appendix: Teen Focus Groups

1. Background
2. Current Description
3. Patterns of Alcohol Consumption
4. Reasons Youth Drink Alcohol
5. Consequences of Alcohol Consumption
6. Parents
7. Messages
8. The Future
9. Additional Considerations
10. Summary

B-1 to B-24

- B-1
- B-3
- B-5
- B-7
- B-13
- B-15
- B-17
- B-18
- B-22
- B-23

Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America Teen Focus Groups

The teen focus groups were designed to garner insight into the minds and lives of teens, from their perspective. This was important because the insights anticipated would expand the sources of data for the overall research project. Further, based on the literature review conducted, no prior published studies involved information gathered from conversations and interactions directly with youth. This was deemed vitally important for hearing about teen drinking experiences and perspectives from their viewpoint, and to capture these insights in their own words.

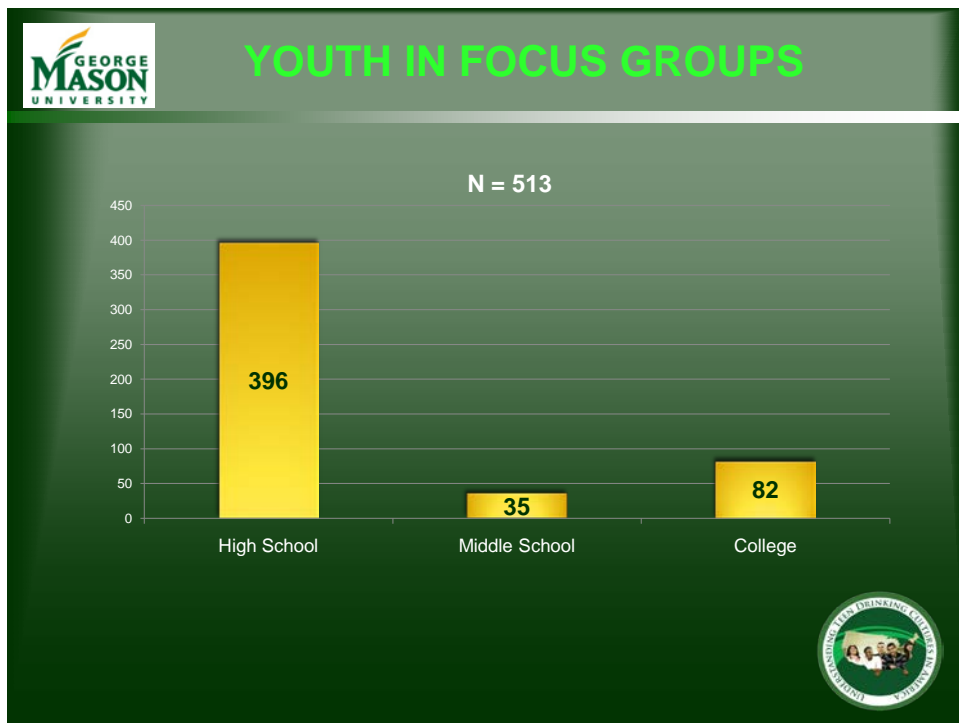
With these focus groups, attention was provided to their lives as teens, their experiences with alcohol consumption, their perceptions of others' use, the messages they heard from peers and adults, and suggestions for addressing this in the future. Data was collected to focus on drinking patterns, consequences, the role of parents, and their overall perspectives on alcohol.

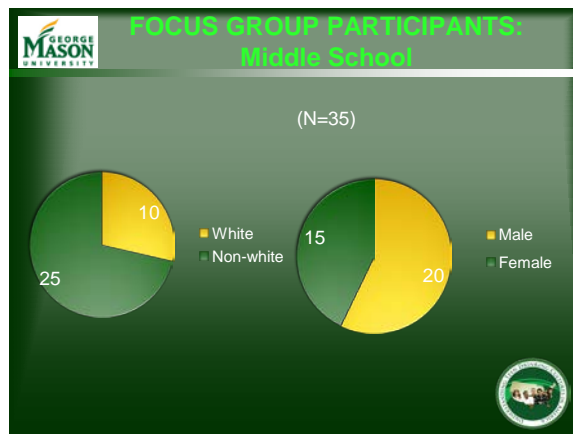
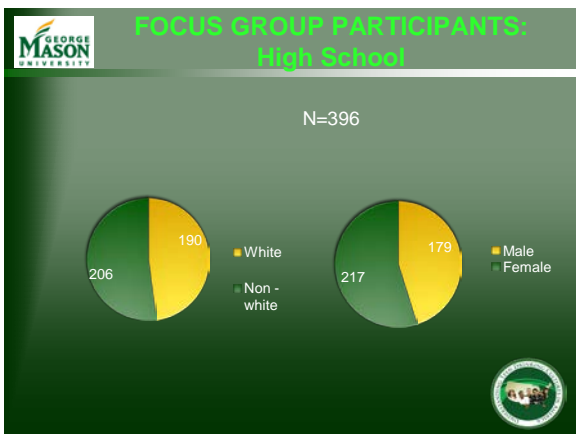
SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

Focus groups with teens were held in seven locations during the data collection phase of this research. The questions asked of these youth participants were based on the Teen Focus Group Questions identified at the start of the project, and approved by Mason's Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix). Follow-on questions were asked for clarity or further explanation, as appropriate. For each participant, a Parental Consent Form and a Youth Assent Form were collected (see Appendix). Participants received a \$5 gift card as a small incentive for participation; in addition, one participant in each focus group received a \$25 gift card, selected through a random drawing. Each focus group was conducted by one or two professional staff members at Mason, and each group was tape-recorded and transcribed.

These focus groups involved a total of 513 teens, with a primary emphasis upon high school age youth. With every focus group, the aim was to have youth with similar ages; that is, those in early high school were interviewed separate from those in later high school. The demographics of these focus groups involve the following:

High School	47
Middle School	6
Early College	6
Males	179 high school, 15 middle school
Females	217 high school, 20 middle school
White	190 high school, 10 middle school
Non-White	206 high school, 25 middle school





This summary of these 63 youth focus groups is organized based on the content of the questions and discussions that followed. While different age youth were interviewed, the overall results obtained were approximately the same across groups. Where noteworthy differences existed based on age of participants, this is noted. Quotes from youth participants are provided to illustrate key findings and insights offered by the youth.

Overall, the interview results are summarized as a whole. Based on the sample of 513 youth total from 63 focus groups, as well as the anonymity of participants, differences based on gender or race/ethnicity were not found. Further, data from these seven locations illustrates that the results are approximately the same from one setting to another. That is, youth from a Southern suburban location had very similar responses to those from a Midwestern urban location as well as to those from Northeastern urban and suburban locations.

SECTION 2: **CURRENT DESCRIPTION**

Focus group participants were asked to describe themselves, their friends, and what they do for fun. General responses demonstrate that they like to hang out and have fun. This may include sleepovers and others' homes, talking on the phone, studying together, going to movies, playing sports, and sitting in cars in parking lots. As one high school senior said, "we pretty

much do anything.” Another youth, a high school freshman, said “we just kind of hang around, and don’t do a whole lot.”

Participants were asked what they know about teen drinking behaviors. Middle school youth reported not knowing too much about this; however, high school youth revealed that they do know quite a bit about alcohol use. Teens reported what they know about other teens’ alcohol use. Typically, this description was based on the teens in their own school; if the teens were in a community with several schools, their frame of reference was their own school. Teens also reported about their perceptions regarding other teens’ alcohol use. In these descriptions, teens were asked how many of their peers drank alcohol, and how many did not drink alcohol. In this description teens were asked to differentiate between teens in the upper grades of high school (11th and 12th) versus the lower high school grades (9th and 10th).

Respondents noted that, typically, they know of a lot of youth who drink. While some reported “nearly everyone does it”, others were more deliberate with their responses, such as citing that half to three-quarters of youth drink alcohol. One respondent stated “I don’t know a lot of people who don’t [drink].” Their responses were often quite definitive; that is, 75% drink, or 65% drink. From these focus groups, it was clear that the teens had no specific source for their information; this was based on their general observations of peers.

Youth interviewed report that alcohol use starts at around the eighth grade. They say that teens start to drink then “because it is cool.” Some respondents reported that youth use more as they get older in high school. “Freshmen don’t really have jobs where you are in contact with older people, or they can’t drive so they can’t lie to their parents or whatever, you don’t really have freedom.” Other respondents noted that the younger youth drink more often. Some respondents reported that, following bad experiences as inexperienced drinkers, older youth may drink less dangerously. The influence of older siblings is noteworthy, as cited by one youth: “If they have a brother or sisters that is recognized for that [alcohol use], they feel like they want to carry that reputation.” Older siblings may be a conduit through which alcohol is obtained or a source of moderating advice.

SECTION 3:

PATTERNS OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Youth were asked what youth drank, how they obtained it, where they drink, and with whom they drink. Overall, the preferred alcohol cited by youth for teen consumption was vodka; beer was noted by some youth as also popular, but wine was rarely consumed by teens. Teens tend to choose liquor, particularly vodka, because it can be mixed with juice, and because it has its effect more quickly; in the words of one high school youth, “Liquor is strong; it hits you, booom!” Teens report preferring vodka “because people think they get drunk faster” and “it’s easier to go down.” Due to its concentrated form, vodka is also more portable than beer. Beer is generally not preferred because it “has a nasty taste”; if beer is consumed, it is reportedly typically consumed by boys. Wine is rarely, if ever, reportedly consumed by teens, as the focus group participants said it is “for use by older people.” Many teens said they do not like the taste of wine.

What is normal teen drinking? It appears that two types of patterns exist among teens who consume alcohol. One type is a casual, occasional drinker, and the other is a more frequent and heavier drinker. In some settings, teens reported that the ‘normal’ teen alcohol consumption behavior is heavy drinking. Casual, social, and minimal consumption patterns of alcohol were rarely cited as behaviors among these young people. What is too much alcohol for youth? A typical response was that teens that do drink alcohol tend to drink a lot.

The general pattern found among the youth participants in these focus groups was that middle school youth reported, overall, not drinking alcohol. They stated that they knew of too many negative consequences, whether from family members or friends, or from what they learned during school. They demonstrated that they had planned to never drink alcohol, saying “I always told myself I was never going to do it.” There’s a transition that occurs. One young person said: “I was young when I first started drinking because I saw my friends doing it. I was looking at the way they were acting, and you know, how crazy they were acting. It really didn’t occur to me that this was the wrong way, that it was the wrong thing, and they shouldn’t be

doing that. So I just said I would take a little sip. Once I took that sip, the whole cup was gone.”

Youth report that alcohol is consumed primarily at parties; these parties are held in the homes of friends or acquaintances, typically in the basement or lower level. Such parties often take place at homes where the parents are out of town, though teens do also negotiate agreements with adults who are at home that they will not come into the basement where the teens are congregated. Said one boy, “The under control parties are usually when the parents are around, but when the parents go out that’s when more people come and people get rambunctious and out of hand.” But, as one high school girl put it, sometimes teens drink in the basement while parents are home and “the parents are just clueless about it.” When parents are out of town, parties can grow large and unruly as text messages spread the word beyond an immediate peer group. At such parties it’s not uncommon for a teen to drink 4 or 5 shots in less than an hour. Alcohol consumption may be increased by drinking games such as beer pong, Kings (more of a girl’s game) and flip cup. In such a situation, sometimes a good friend abstains and looks out after those who are drinking to excess – what one teen called a “mother of the night” role.

Sometimes youth report drinking in school, whether in the school bathrooms or drinking alcohol during the school day “because they put it in water bottles.” They almost always drink with friends and peers; rarely is drinking alone reported by teens. Teens who drink at school are looked down upon by their peers as problem drinkers. Occasionally, youth reported that others drink with family members, in the presence of parents.

Teens report that alcohol is very easy to obtain. The primary source is older youth. These include older siblings, as well as others who are older. Youth report obtaining alcohol primarily from older friends, older brothers and sisters. On many occasions, youth report using their parents’ alcohol supplies, typically replacing clear alcohol with water. In some locations, garaging – stealing from refrigerators in neighbors’ garages -- is a source; “it’s not the main source, but if it comes down to the wire and you need some alcohol you just hop into the garage, and open the fridge.” One high school girl said, “you steal it from your parents, when you are in middle school and you are like “hey let’s drink”, but now you get it from older people, friends, friends in college.”

In some locations, teens report that they can easily obtain alcohol from stores or alcohol-serving establishments. In some locations, it is easy to get alcohol without an ID card, simply by knowing the person selling the alcohol, ‘looking the age’, or being female. Youth in one location cited that they flashed an ID to the cashier, so that the surveillance camera would observe that the clerk had “checked for the ID.” Another way of getting alcohol is to use an illegal ID card. This can be done in several ways, one of which is to have an ID card (this can be an older person’s ID card, such as an older sibling or friend who looks similar. It can also be a fabricated ID card, obtained from a government-issuing agency by providing appropriate documents (such as a water bill and tax record) from someone else, and then obtaining a “replacement” ID card. However, the use of fake IDs is rarely cited by youth; the teens interviewed reported that this is more often a behavior that occurs during college, since it’s hard to get fake IDs because it’s so secure now.”

A few teens also reported stealing alcohol from supermarkets and other stores. This can be done by putting alcohol in a shopping cart and walking out very confidently, as if it’s paid for. Self-checkout lines in stores also offer opportunities for obtaining alcohol despite being underage.

SECTION 4: **REASONS YOUTH DRINK ALCOHOL**

Focus group respondents reported a variety of reasons underlying why teens drink. Typically, it appears to be “the thing to do.” Many youth also report that drinking is “fun” – not an accompaniment to other leisure activities but itself the focus and point of getting together with peers. The youth report that they and their friends drink because it helps to get a buzz, it helps to cope with their feelings, and it’s part of a teen’s life. Other teens reported that their personal insecurity about life is a reason for drinking alcohol. Some focus group participants reported that teens drink because of their own ignorance. Responses such as “there is no limit”, and “drinking until your feelings go away” served as standard reasons. Further, some youth report that teens don’t need a reason; “I know kids that drink for no reason at all.”

A theme emerging from the focus groups is that teens feel a lot of pressure in their lives. They feel stress, ambiguity, and an overall lack of groundedness. Speaking about drinkers, one high school freshman said “They have a lot of pressure from their parents and school; they might drink to feel better about it, so they are not as stressed.” This pressure, according to youth, is to get good grades, to be a good athlete, and “all the work you have to do, all the expectations.”

Regarding the stress, teens throughout the focus groups reported, overwhelmingly, that stress is a major part of teen alcohol consumption. One teen, early in the high school experience, said: “Part of drinking is partying, and part of drinking is drinking your troubles away.”

Occasionally, however, some teens reported that stress was not as strong as cited by other teens. One teen said “I think that teenagers aren’t under as much stress as they think they are. I know there’s a lot of homework and stuff, but it could be a lot worse. Of course, since we’re teenagers, we over dramatize everything. That’s why people have parties, to forget about all the things that are wrong. And one of the things that are wrong is the fact that they have to drink in order to do that.”

Teens, just learning to interact without adult mediation, also often report that alcohol helps them to be talkative if they are feeling shy.

What influences teens to drink the way they do? “It makes them feel better about themselves; people like them more if they are drinking. When people say they drink, that’s cool; I’ll be friends with them.”

One youth said that teens drink since “it’s illegal and forbidden, so they think they’re ‘bad’”, and another teen said “People just drink because it’s not allowed, and that makes it more exciting.” “People want to be excited about drinking because it’s illegal; the ‘bad boy’ routine.” It’s more of the male culture to be into drinking; smoking and drinking is the bad boy image.”

The transition to high school is cited as a major factor, with the stresses associated with high school life. Further, as one high school student said, “high school can make you real lonely.” Another youth said “most people are out there trying to fit in; you better have some friends that are going to the same school or you are going to be by yourself.” Another youth reported that teens drink “because they feel out of place in high school; you’re not in college and you’re not an adult, and you’re not a little kid.” Some youth stated that they see alcohol

consumption in their family, and that it is associated with being grown up; “that is what they grow up to do.” The novelty of drinking alcohol is a motivator; as one young person said, “Oh, wow, this is something I’ve never tried, so why not?” Another person said that the message taught was that “drinking is such a bad thing and it’s only for adults. So when I finally got the chance to try it, it was like, I’m gonna go all out.” This individual also reported that if there had been prior access to alcohol, then the loss of control wouldn’t have happened because the alcohol consumption would have been paced.

The junior year is cited by some teens as a significant transition time; this is due to the fact that they are driving, and “they don’t depend on their parents anymore, and it’s easier to go places.” Many teens report that they got into having alcohol at parties by showing up at a party where alcohol was served, and then having one, two or more drinks there. In these situations, they didn’t intend to drink, nor did they go to the party so that they could drink alcohol; they just arrived and saw that others were drinking, and they decided to drink alcohol.

This is not to suggest that all youth drink, or that all youth get drunk if they do drink. The strong sentiment throughout the focus groups was that it was very common for youth to drink, that a lot of youth do drink, and that the overall purpose in drinking alcohol among many young people is to get drunk. Many teens report that getting drunk, at a party, is something that some people find fun.

Further, many youth choose not to drink, for whatever reasons they may have. In the words of one youth, “I know a lot of the non-drinkers have a moral value thing, their family. Or they are afraid of being caught and things like that. But a lot of it is ‘I am in this group of friends and this group does not drink, so I’m not going to drink. I’m in this group of friends and they do drink, so I’m gonna drink.’” As one high school freshman said, “It’s their choice. If they want to do it, go ahead, go do stupid stuff like drinking and driving. There is no real point to getting drunk. You don’t really get anything out of it; you lose most of your skills and make poor decisions, so I don’t really see a point to it.” Reasons for not drinking include wanting to behave in a responsible way, because of what they have seen others do; as one person said, “my older sister completely changes [when she drinks] and I think it is so annoying and I can’t hardly stand it, so I don’t want to be like that and I don’t want someone to have to deal with me like that, so

that kind of holds me back.” Another young person said “I have much more fun when we don’t drink. It’s just stupid. I don’t drink cause I’m the oldest and I don’t want my brothers and sisters to look up to me and think she drinks, I can drink too, cause I don’t want them to do it.” A few abstainers reported the bad experiences of parents or other adults in their families with drinking problems as a reason to avoid alcohol.

Peer pressure was a factor discussed in the focus groups. When asked more detail about this, most respondents stated emphatically that they make their own decisions, and that they did not feel peer pressure. They often stated that teens encouraged others to drink, and might exclude them from their ‘circle’ or ‘clique’ if they did not drink. Some youth did report that they did feel pressure, but that they made their own decisions. However, other teens reported that they were clear in their own decisions to not use alcohol; some of them felt ‘pressure’ to drink, but stated they had no desire to do so, and thus did not drink. A few said they had learned to put soda into a beer cup at a party so it looked as if they were drinking, even if they were not. Most youth report that they do not feel pressured to drink. What happens if a teen says ‘no’ to a peer who wants them to drink? The general response is that nothing happens; “my good friends just accept me for me.” “I have seen people where people antagonize people that don’t drink for not drinking, but for the most part I think people respect them, they respect their choice to not drink.” One teen said that “adults put too much emphasis on peer pressure. There isn’t a lot of it; if you want to drink, you drink, and if not, you don’t.” In a similar vein, youth reported that they make their own decisions: “You go to a party knowing there’s gonna be alcohol there. You know ahead of time if you’re gonna get wasted. You choose.” Thus, the pressure is not so much peer pressure, “it’s pressure on yourself.” The overall assessment of this is that there is a perception of peer pressure among youth, but that real ‘pressure’ (such as forcing someone else to drink, or ostracizing them from social groups for not drinking) is not occurring.

Part of the peer pressure is to not get wasted. “People don’t want to take care of you; that is the main thing.” “You feel really embarrassed to be that kid [who was so wasted].” “Everyone talks about [you] at school the next day; ‘dude, you were like out of control and you don’t want that.’” Particularly humiliating is the prospect of pictures of oneself “wasted” being posted on Facebook or MySpace. There is also a danger that such pictures might be seen by

adults, including one's parents. Girls fear a sexual indiscretion while drunk that might be photographed or become grist for the gossip mill in their peer group. There appears to be a line between fun and too much fun. "You need to find your limits. If people continually do it and continually get wasted, that's not cool. It's stupid; that's when people start getting mad, when it happens over and over again." "People actually feel bad for you when it happens once, but twice or three times then people start forgetting about you and not caring about you."

A question among youth was what would happen if they chose to not drink alcohol? That is, what would become of their friends in situations when they said that they did not want to drink? Reactions varied across individuals. Some individuals stated that nothing would happen; their friends would still be their friends, and the friends would respect an individual's decision to not use alcohol. Some teens who do drink said the same about other teens who do not drink. This type of reaction is illustrated by "If they are your friends, they should respect you for who you are." Other individuals reported that they would have to find some new friends. This perspective was typified by the response of "You probably won't be invited to many places if they know you are not going to go along with what they want to do." Similarly, another youth said "I think that if you don't drink with this group who drinks in high school, you are never going to fit in with them."

Youth were asked what differences they see between teens who drink and teens who do not drink alcohol. A typical response is that "some teens who do drink think they're better." One high school respondent said that "the ones that don't drink are healthier than the teens that do drink." Another person said that "the person that doesn't drink is making good decisions, coming out successful, more mature; the person who drinks is getting in trouble, making the wrong decisions, making the wrong friends." This person added "the ones who don't drink usually have more positive relationships with the people around them and more positive people; people who don't drink have places they want to go, like college and a good career, and people who do drink don't really care." Teens report that they believe that it's fine for teens to make personal decisions about not drinking alcohol; they make comments such as "That's fine", "That's their choice", and "It's good for them."

Are differences reported by teens about consumption based on gender? Differences by gender in the kind of alcohol consumed were reported above, with girls preferring fruity drinks that concentrate alcohol more than the beer boys often drink. “When it’s a bunch of guys it’s usually just beer, but when the girls come into play it’s flavored vodka or whatever.” Overall, teens report that boys drink more alcohol than do girls. Teens report that males are “able to hold themselves up better than girls” since “their bodies function better when they are drunk.” The increased rate of drinking among girls may be particularly dangerous when combined with their eating patterns: “the girls don’t eat on top of it. A guy is like let’s go have cheese steaks and then go drinking but girls don’t really eat or have a salad but don’t fill themselves.” Females are reported to be drinking more heavily than in former years, with influences from the males. As reported by youth, the boys “figure if you get more drunk, you are more vulnerable; you are more easy, and a lot more likely to give it up.” Another behavior found with females is that girls may act like they are drunk and fall over, when in fact they are not drunk; “they do this to get attention from guys.” Some girls have been warned by their mothers not to let their drink get out of their sight then drink from it again, in case it has been laced with a date rape drug like rohypnol.

The role of the media with teens’ decisions was mixed. Although teens inhabit a media-saturated world, it is hard to get them to reflect on media influences on their actions. Overall, media influence was not brought up very often by youth. When they did bring this up, the response was that the media makes alcohol use seem attractive. They cite movies, television shows, celebrities, and commercials. One teen says “you never see TV shows portraying drinking in a bad way; you always see people drinking at a party and having fun. So it seems like ‘let’s go party and drink with our friends.’” Another teen said teens drink because with “TV and movies, you see people drinking.” Teens were uniformly cynical about celebrity public service ads warning of the dangers of drinking, saying the celebrities were just saying what they were paid to say.

SECTION 5: **CONSEQUENCES OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

When asked about any consequences or repercussions among teens who drink alcohol, the overall reaction among teens in focus groups was that there were few negative consequences of teens' alcohol consumption. That is, most teens were aware of the high quantity of alcohol consumption by other teens. They reported that a major consequence would be one of 'getting caught'; however, teens overwhelmingly believed that they and their friends would personally not be the ones who would get caught, and for whom negative consequences would happen.

The main consequence of getting caught, as cited by the teens, was the disappointment that parents would feel. "Your parents lose their faith in you." Occasionally, teens reported that they would lose respect by other teens; one person said "people might not like you as much depending on how you act drunk; it's harder to find a girlfriend or a boyfriend." They also report that they may lose their own self-respect if they drink too much alcohol. "I think you can get away from the law and the school easier than the parents. You see your parents every time you do it." "I feel like there isn't a hard enough punishment for underage drinking; when some parents find out, they say not to do it again, and to be careful." Another person said "I have heard of parties where the police came in and some people got caught, but there's not a stiff punishment." (Part of the issue here is that youths, as minors, do not acquire a permanent criminal record).

Youth reported outcomes from drinking such as "it is risky", "it can mess up your life", "they don't act like themselves when they are drinking or drunk" or "people don't act themselves and they act immature like they're younger." Teens acknowledged that those who drink would often make stupid decisions, such as getting sick or making a fool of him/herself. One teen said "you will not function right" and another teen said "you will lose your common-sense." Teens are aware that alcohol consumption can "harm you physically and socially." The response of younger teens, including middle school and early high school, was that drinking alcohol would "screw up your body", including liver failure. One high school student illustrated her perspective by saying that "You will not function right", and another said "You will lose your

common sense.” Older teens did not cite physical reactions to alcohol consumption; rather, they said that the consequence would be from getting caught from drinking alcohol, and reactions would be that “your family disowns you” and “you have to go to AA and stuff.” When asked how many of them have seen teens throwing up and passing out, the general responses were “I have a lot” and “Tons.” In fact, focus groups often became most animated when teens recounted “war stories” of themselves or others passing out, throwing up, or getting in other extreme situations.

Consequences with school and the legal system were noted; however, teens viewed this type of consequence as minimal, since they believed that they and their friends would not get caught. Typically, consequences in school were for drinking on school property, or coming to school intoxicated; it was pretty clear among teens that the consequences for this behavior would be suspension or expulsion from school. However, if the alcohol-related offense (whether drinking and driving infraction, underage drinking offense, or purchasing alcohol) occurred in the community, there would not be a school consequence generally, except for student-athletes whose coach may introduce specific consequences. One high school freshman said, “I know for sports, you sign some stuff, some contracts, that if you get caught drinking or are suspected of drinking, you get in trouble and get suspended. I know that’s one thing athletes have to do. But some still do it and don’t get caught, but if they do, I don’t know that they get in trouble.” Further, students report that teachers and school personnel, overall, do not know whether a student is intoxicated while in school.

Most teens assume that the consequences of being drunk or caught with alcohol at school are less than the consequences of being caught with marijuana – suspension versus expulsion (often with criminal charges). Regardless of how they might actually behave in the heat of a moment when the situation gets the better of them, most teens were well aware of the dangers of drinking and driving. They might not know what specific blood alcohol level crosses the legal limit, but they know that it is dangerous to drink a lot and drive.

SECTION 6: **PARENTS**

Focus group participants were asked about the role of parents in teens' decisions to consume or not consume alcohol. Overall, parents had a significant role in youths' decisions about alcohol. For many youth, the parental involvement was such that the youth decided to not drink alcohol. For other youth, parental involvement helped them to limit alcohol consumption. For youth who drank more regularly or heavily, while parental involvement had not deterred their behavior, the youths were concerned about letting down or disappointing their parent if they were to get caught.

Many youth said that parents were most likely to stress the danger of drinking and driving. Not atypical was the teen who reported, "My parents always said you can call me. I'd rather that you call me than get in a car or do something stupid."

Youth interviewed reported that parents are not aware of the nature and extent of youths' consumption of alcohol. Focus group participants stated that parents generally did not know that their son or daughter had been drinking alcohol. For those youth whose parents were aware of their drinking, the parents were not aware of the circumstances or extent of alcohol consumption, either in terms of quantity or frequency.

A range of responses were found regarding whether parents had discussed alcohol with the teens; some reported no discussion, and others reported discussions with very strict overtones. From an overall perspective, the vast majority of teens reported that no conversation about alcohol had occurred with teens over the years. Some parents are reported to ignore youths' alcohol consumption, and some don't know what to do. As one youth said about parents, "they know it's happening, but they just don't want to see it or hear about it." Another youth responded by saying "The parents just aren't smart." Another teen said "I feel parents are oblivious; sometimes parents know and just don't even care, which is stupid."

Teens often report that parents don't do anything about it, particularly once the teen becomes 18 years old. Why is this true? "Because once we're 18, we're free to go, we can

pretty much do what we want, and we're pretty much indestructible. And it's not all true but that's the mentality. Teens think they are an adult and can make their own decisions."

Some teens say that the parental message is very strong to not drink alcohol. What would parents do if they caught their son or daughter drinking? They would call the police, or "they would 'kill me'; they would go to drastic measures to make sure it wouldn't happen again."

Grounding is a common punishment.

"If parents set a good example for their kids and talk to them about this, then I think their kids will make a good decision, but parents also have to know when to step back and let them choose for themselves." "If parents don't set a good example, then their kid is probably going to drink. And just set a good example and then talk about it, and they will probably remember what their parents told them."

When parents do have conversations with teens, messages typically include those of not consuming alcohol. Messages say "Don't do it", "Be smart", "Don't give into peer pressure", "Know that if you're in a bad situation, you can call" and "Never get into a car with someone who's drinking." Teens generally ask for more adult involvement; "I think parents do know, and that they should take the initiative to talk to their kids about it." Parents should "talk to them about all aspects of alcohol, not just 'don't do it.'" Parents should start these conversations prior to high school.

Discussions in many focus groups occurred about parties and how these occurred. The party locations were often at the home of one of the teens, and were most likely to occur if the parents were out of town. However, some parties were held in the teen's home while the parent was present. The rationale for this, as reported by the teen, was that "If the teens are at their house, they can get in less trouble" because these parents believe they are protecting their kids. Teens report that parents "think that teens are going to do it anyway, so they may as well see them do it." Some parents are anxious that their teens will drink and drive and would rather they drank at home, where the parents can impound car keys, than elsewhere with unknown oversight. Teens are ambivalent about this, wanting both to be treated like adults and to be parented: "a lot of them [parents] over-trust their kids. I think they know of the consequences

but just don't feel their party is going to get out of hand, [think] their kid is more responsible than they really are.”

Many focus group participants were asked what they thought a parent should do. The dilemma is between parents who are ‘understanding’ and ‘tolerant’, and those who are totally unaware of what is happening among their teens. One teen said “that there needs to be “that middle [ground] where your parents are there for you. But you need them to be like ‘you should not do this as much, like, I understand you’re gonna party, but just don’t do anything stupid.’”

SECTION 7: **MESSAGES**

Focus group participants talked about the messages they had heard from various sources about teen alcohol consumption. While youth were fairly evenly split between those who had conversations with parents and those who had not, virtually every youth participant acknowledged that the topic of drinking alcohol had been covered in school. The overwhelming sentiment from youth was that the information was covered in school, but that it was relatively boring, sometimes exaggerated, and out of date. Youths reported having alcohol discussed in middle school or early in high school; focus group participants who were in upper levels of high school did not recall any formal coursework on this topic during their later high school years. All-too-often, the information about alcohol that was shared in school focused on not drinking and driving. Educational programs in middle school often exaggerated the dangers of alcohol so much that, when students finally tried alcohol, they became skeptical about everything they had been told about it. Students reported that educational programs in school focused on body toxicity issues such as liver damage and the effect alcohol has on the developing brain, but not on such long term health issues as the relation between alcohol and blood pressure and heart disease. Nor do educational programs get into the reasons adults want to drink, according to teens.

One senior illustrated the classroom experience this way: “I remember we learned about it, but I don’t remember any specifics at all. It was just something we had to do.” Another

person said “They gave you reasons, so it made it more important like you shouldn’t drink because it’s bad for your growing brain; I remember something weird like that. It actually gave you reasons that made sense, so I said ‘yeah, why make yourself stupider?’” And another teen said “we talk about it in health class; they tell us everything bad about it, but there isn’t much the school can do but encourage you to not drink because it’s done outside the school usually; I just think they can’t do a whole lot.” One high school girls said “they tell you about your health, your body, and where this liquor is going – straight to your liver.”

The lack of influence of these classes on behavior is widely perceived by youth. One high school freshman said “The information is nice to know, but I don’t know how effective it is to stop people from drinking or turning someone off from it.” One high school girl said “a lot of people go to those classes and they still drink.” Another high school student said “the school just puts the drug out there and explains it; it doesn’t really prevent anything, it just tells you what it does.” “They show you how it progresses; in middle school they tell you about it informationally, and then in high school they try and scare you.”

Teens tend to disregard the information they have been given. Why? “Because they’ve been doing it for so long, and getting away with it for so long. Until something happens to them, or until they get caught by the police. And even then, kids are like, no more, no more, and then they do it again. It’s hard.”

SECTION 8: **THE FUTURE**

A segment of the focus group discussions emphasized what teens thought would change teen drinking behavior. Fairly standard responses to this query were that “teens will always drink alcohol” and “there’s nothing you can do to change it.” Sample remarks included: “I don’t think anything could change it”; “I think it’s a way of life, almost, it’s part”; and “I think teens think it is what to do now.” Others say things like “I could care less about it.”

However, virtually all teens said that something should be done to try to change it. The overall sense from teens was that efforts might be successful in changing some of the extreme

alcohol abusing behavior, but that everyone's alcohol consumption won't be changed. One teen said that "for most of the guys out here, if you tell them to stop drinking, they look at you crazy like 'who are you supposed to be?'" However, that same teen said "if you sit down and get to know them, you gotta start vibing with them, they're probably not going to stop drinking, but some of them will slow down. They will take it slower."

Teens reported other sentiments regarding the future, such as the following:

- "Nothing can be done because peer pressure is the biggest issue. I think it is maybe if they get real stories of how it messes up your life, not just yours but other people around you"
- "I really don't think there is anything you can change; people are going to drink, regardless. I think a lot of people just do it because they are curious to see whether they are going to like it or not, because it's really up to them. I mean, you could put harder penalties on, but kids are still going to find a way to do it."
- "I think it's worth trying. It helps. There are always going to be people who stop and change their minds about it. Trying to is always a good thing."

Specific suggestions by teens included the following punishments; however, reactions were not consistent on this approach, as illustrated by these divergent points: "I think if we made stronger punishments, people would not do it as much." "I think harsher punishments would definitely be the wrong way to go, because the kids would still do it."

Another perspective was for greater interaction with others. "I think the media and our parents being more involved in our lives and stuff." This was complemented by views such as "You have got to have some other role models outside your family."

The skepticism about whether anything can be done is well illustrated by the following statement: "I think regardless of what is done, teens are going to find a way around it." "I think if we have authority with higher restrictions, they are just going to find worse things to do. I kinda think that there is not really anything we can do."

As part of the teens' discussions about what could be done in the future, a focus was on what would be appropriate messages for communication with teens. That is, if the aim was to reduce teen alcohol consumption and teen alcohol abuse, what messages might best resonate with the teen audience? Some of the responses follow:

- "Don't drink, don't be stupid. Don't cause a death and take a life. Don't ruin your life. Go and research what could happen. If you want to be successful, don't drink."

- “You don’t need to have alcohol to have fun at a party; a party is a party. You will still have fun. All of the parties my friends go to are all drinking and drugs; that’s what they call a party. I went to one of those parties once, like for two seconds, and I was, like, ‘are you serious?’ If I came to one of these parties to stay, I would be so bored out of my mind. I do not do drugs, never tried them, never will. The drinking at these parties is just so unattractive you don’t want to be there.”
- “Just don’t be stupid. If you’re going to do it, just be smarter.”

To change teen drinking, one teen said “I think grownups should stop being so hypocritical, because that’s what they were doing [when they were our age].” Another teen stated “They should accept it more, and just put some rules on it. These rules may be like not being able to drive during sleepovers, or put a limit on [quantity].” And another youth reported “My parents would make sure we wouldn’t reach that limit [of throwing up] or get out of hand.”

Teen focus group participants were also asked about the types of initiatives that would be most helpful in preventing and reducing teen drinking. Overwhelmingly, youth reported that programs, whether in the school or the community as a whole, need to connect with teens emotionally for them to be effective. Some teens talked about involvement with a youth-based awareness program “where we come up with plans to give back to our communities, and stuff which prevents situations and educates the community. It is fun, too, and you learn.” “I think they need to be involved with other teens and stuff. If they get other teens to join and do a project with them and stuff, they can actually prevent this.”

Teens reported wanting information and guidance from someone they would respect and trust; this includes parents, siblings and teachers. Their engagement in the focus groups illustrated that they did have some basic knowledge about alcohol and its effects, but were lacking in a larger contextual understanding. However, they also demonstrated that they lacked a respected and trusted source of information about alcohol, its effects, and consequences associated with alcohol consumption. Where do youth get their information? “The computer, Google, and parents.” “I saw a poster at school, and it was talking about drinking. It said that 71% or 78% of teens that die is because of alcohol. Aw! That it was due to alcohol.” Finally, youth often cited the strategy for addressing teen drinking was to “be like other European countries, where they don’t have a drinking age” because there “kids don’t want it as much.”

Regarding specific content to be included in educational and informational initiatives, a range of insights were offered:

- “How much more can they drill it into our heads? I feel like in high school, there isn’t any ‘no drinking’ message. In elementary school, there is a lot, when you don’t even understand it. In middle school it’s there. In high school, it just stops. There’s no more of those assemblies about not drinking and not doing drugs, but it just stops.”
- “There’s a lot of stuff about drunk driving, but not drinking particularly. I think they expect the drinking to happen, and they don’t want the negative after-effect.”
- “And they don’t teach about alcohol poisoning.”
- “Make a slide show of all the pictures to show, look, this is what you did.”
- “Make it personal.”
- “What it does to your body is what caught my attention.”
- “I saw one where this kid had to have his stomach pumped, and that was drastic. But to be honest, it needs to be more graphic. Because they didn’t show any of the things that will actually happen. If you see the disgusting image, it will keep you from doing that, because you will not want to be like that.”
- “I think if we realized what actually happened, like dying, we would be affected more by that.”
- “Actually hearing about it.”

Teens report that it is important to address alcohol issues in a timely way. This is most relevant during times of transition. For example, the transition from middle school to high school is reported to be a particularly stressful time, and one when a teen is thrust into a new environment and faces alcohol more directly than when in middle school. One teen says “When you leave middle school for high school, because it’s so out there, people are always talking about what they are going to do, go out and get drunk. You have to be prepared, like ‘no thanks, I know what that does to you.’” Youth suggest that initiatives that address this transition, and ways of responding to the pressures and availability of alcohol, would be helpful. In a similar way, the transition from high school to college is an important one, particularly as this affects the behavior of youth in high school itself. One youth summed up how this works with high school drinking behavior: “I think it’s important to learn about it before you go to college so you don’t get yourself in trouble.”

SECTION 9: **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Through the focus groups with teens, it was quite apparent that the youth were highly engaged in the conversation. That is, the teens felt ‘hungry’ for this type of open conversation about alcohol, and about how alcohol affects their lives and the lives of those around them. The youth participants were eager to share, and asked if they could have conversations like this more often, and on other topics. They reported that they were honest, and their behavior appeared that they were forthcoming in their responses. Not uncommon were discussions among youth, who knew each other from school or the community, where statements were made about behavior or attitudes that had not previously been heard by others.

Youth were quite forthcoming about their ability to access alcohol. They cited some of the games and manipulation that they and others used to obtain alcohol, when they wanted it. For example, one youth reported that she pretended to be a parent in a situation where another parent was checking on their daughter; she reported “I’ve been in situations where I have been to parties where I pretended to be the parent, like I would say ‘Oh yeah, your daughter is here, she is fine.’ I have probably done it a few times.”

Another situation revolves around spending the night at a friend’s home. Youth report that “‘sleeping over’ is a code term for drinking. As one teen said, “‘Hey mom, I am sleeping over at this person’s house’ so I can go to a party get drunk, and sleep over.”

Teens report how easy it is to get ID cards, so they can then purchase alcohol more easily. They can borrow or take one from an older sibling or from an older friend who looks similar. They also reported taking paperwork to the department of motor vehicles and having an ID card made with their picture and someone else’s information (such as mailing address and birthdate). They cite numerous instances of obtaining alcohol in an establishment where the person checking the ID cards does not really check closely; this could be because the ID checker knows the teen or finds the teen attractive. This can also be done in a situation where the teen flashes the ID card in a way so that the security camera monitoring the store sees that the store

clerk “checked the ID” but in fact no review of the ID card was actually made (thus helping the clerk to justify that the store’s procedures were followed).

SECTION 10: **SUMMARY**

The focus groups with teens provided the anticipated helpful insights into the world of teens in high school. The perspectives and viewpoints of the variety of young people who participated in these focus groups were quite revealing. Their experiences genuinely brought to life much of what had been discerned with the data and conclusions found in the literature review as well as with interviews with key informants and experts. The timing of the focus groups was such that provided an opportunity to follow up on some of the response gathered with the telephone interviews.

As highlighted in this report, teens drink alcohol for a variety of reasons, the primary one being a social one. They have their own culture and expectations regarding alcohol consumption, and are well aware of the consequences associated with drinking alcohol. Many of their experiences are learning through trial and error, with guidance and leadership, whether helpful or not so helpful, coming from older teens. The participants in the focus groups appeared genuinely forthcoming, and desirous of talking about an issue that was very much a part of their lives. They sought information and facts about alcohol and how it works on the body. They also welcomed the fact that they were listened to and respected during the process of participating in the focus groups.

The findings gathered through this process complemented those gathered in other methodologies of this research. The specific comments, many of which were provided as illustrative quotes in this report, provide insight into their lives and ways in which alcohol is and is not a part of their culture and that of their peers.

Teen Focus Group Questions

CURRENT DESCRIPTION

1. How would you describe you and your friends? What do you do for fun? How do you spend your time?
2. What do you know about teen drinking behaviors? Do you think teens drink today as much as they did 10 years ago?
3. What are differences about teens that drink and don't drink?
4. What is the most common alcohol to drink by teens? Where are they drinking? Who are they drinking with?
5. How many people at your school are drinking? What percentage? What percentage is drinking beer? Wine coolers? Liquor?
6. Where are teens getting their alcohol? Is it difficult to buy alcohol? If you wanted to get alcohol, who could you count on to help get it?
7. What do your parents think about teen drinking? How have they talked to you about drinking?
8. What have you heard about teen drinking?
9. What do you think is normal drinking for a person your age? What is too much? What makes it too much?
10. Who offered you your first alcoholic drink, and where were you?
11. Have you or your friends ever been caught drinking? If yes, what happened?
12. How popular are drinking games? Can you describe the most popular?
13. What is the most extreme thing you have seen a teen do while drinking?

REASONS/INFLUENCES

14. What is the reason you think teens drink alcohol? What influences them to begin drinking?
15. At what age did you or your friends start drinking? If you did, what influences if you start to drink and how much you do drink?
16. What happens when you are encouraged to drink and you say "no"? How is the decision to not drink viewed by other teens? How do you view teens that do and do not drink?
17. Have you ever been allowed to drink any alcohol with your parents? Friend's parents? Relatives?
18. What role do parents play in the decision to drink or not drink?
19. Does your school have alcohol education programs? If so, what have you learned?
20. When should youth be introduced to alcohol education?
21. What other things influence teen's alcohol behavior?

FUTURE

22. What happens if you drink a lot? What are the consequences?
23. What are the punishments associated with underage drinking? Parents? Law? School?
24. What could change teen drinking behavior?