

STARTING A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON UNDERAGE DRINKING



This document was written to help community members learn the facts about underage drinking and how to start a conversation on underage drinking. Information is also included on taking action, using data to contribute to and support the community conversation, and expanding and keeping the conversation going. It is important to remember when it comes to substance abuse prevention, local people solve local problems best...especially when they know how and where to start!

KNOWING THE FACTS

Underage drinking is a serious public health problem in the United States. Alcohol is the most widely used substance of abuse among America's youth, and drinking by young people poses enormous health and safety risks.¹ Youth report that alcohol is not hard to get and youth often get alcohol, either directly or indirectly, from adults.

According to the 2018 Illinois Youth Survey, in the past 30 days 23% of Illinois 10th graders and 40% of Illinois 12th graders used alcohol.² In addition, 49% of Illinois 10th graders and 63% of Illinois 12th graders reported it would be "sort of easy" or "very easy" to get beer, wine, or hard liquor.² Youth are also drinking a lot when they drink. On average, underage drinkers consume more drinks per drinking occasion than adult drinkers.³ The 2018 Illinois Youth Survey reports 20% of Illinois 12th graders had five or more drinks at one occasion in the past two weeks.²

Whether young people drink and how much people drink depends to a large extent on community norms and expectations about drinking.

The consequences of underage drinking can affect everyone. We all feel the effects of the aggressive behavior, property damage, injuries, violence, and deaths that can result from underage drinking.¹ Underage drinking is not simply a problem for families, or youth, it is a concern for communities throughout Illinois.

TAKING ACTION

When it comes to tackling public health problems, knowledge is power. When people have the facts and the right tools, they can take action.⁴

Whether young people drink and how much young people drink depends to a large extent on community norms and expectations about drinking. These norms and expectations emerge from and reflect the community alcohol landscape.⁵

Often, communities consider their alcohol landscape as established and unchangeable. But communities can create, change, or strengthen their own alcohol landscape by developing local alcohol policies to reduce underage drinking.

GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

Town Hall Meetings can be opportunities to educate your community and hold a community dialogue that builds awareness and support around underage drinking and high-risk drinking.

Town Hall Meetings can be used to present information on evidence-based alcohol policies that can reduce underage drinking at the local level. Also, Town Hall Meetings can help galvanize local communities and spark critical discussions between parents and children about underage drinking.⁶

Open and honest community conversations about underage drinking are critical to reducing underage drinking. When the conversation begins at the community level, it is imperative to gain the perspective of all community sectors. Each community sector is vital to the success of community-level prevention efforts. Sectors that are essential to a community conversation about underage drinking include:

- Youth
- Parents
- Businesses
- Media
- Local Government
- Law Enforcement
- Schools

Beyond scheduled events like a Town Hall Meeting, look for opportunities that already exist to talk with community members about underage drinking, such as service clubs, parent-teacher organizations, and neighborhood groups. Opportunities to share data and have rich discussions are all an important part of changing community norms, practices, and policies.

HOW DATA CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Part of initiating a community conversation about underage drinking involves being able to understand the extent of underage drinking occurring in your community. Being able to use data, such as the Illinois Youth Survey, helps identify how serious of an issue underage drinking is. The Illinois Youth Survey is a self-report survey that gathers health and social indicator data from 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students throughout Illinois. The survey is administered biennially (2016, 2018, 2020) in school settings and can help identify substance use patterns and attitudes of Illinois youth. The Illinois Youth Survey provides both local data and state sample data.

Data can provide information on consumption patterns, consequences, and contributing factors of underage drinking. Consumption patterns help identify how big of a problem underage drinking is for a community. These data are best collected through self-report surveys, such as the Illinois Youth Survey. Common consumption indicators include:

- Past 30-day use (The best indication of current/regular use)
- Past-year use (experimental use)
- Age of first use
- Heavy consumption/binge drinking

Once the community understands the consumption patterns of alcohol by youth, it's time to dig a little deeper. Consequence data provides information on the negative effects associated with alcohol use among youth. Consequence data is most often found through the collection of archival data. Archival data refer to information that already exists and is collected and stored at public agencies. Communities interested in identifying what happens to youth when they drink alcohol might find it beneficial to look at archival data from schools, health departments, emergency rooms, law enforcement agencies, and treatment facilities. Some indicators of consequences of alcohol use among youth are:

- Number of fatal crashes where driver was under 21 and had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.01 or greater
- Number of emergency room visits due to alcohol poisoning
- Number of zero tolerance violations/BAC greater than .00 for drivers under 21
- Number of arrests for possession of alcohol by a minor
- Number of alcohol-related deaths (not including motor vehicle crashes)
- Percent of treatment admissions where alcohol was the primary substance of abuse
- Number of alcohol-related school suspensions

Data about contributing factors help explain the “why here” and “why now” questions regarding local underage drinking issues. Contributing factors are variables that have been identified as being strongly related to – and influential in – the occurrence and magnitude of substance use problems. The following contributing factors represent measurable factors that are most related to local teen substance use, problems, and consequences.

- Retail access – the physical accessibility of alcohol by underage persons from retail/commercial sources. Access is gained through buying or stealing substances from the retail source.
- Social access – the accessibility of alcohol through social sources, like friends, family, relatives, and other non-retail sources. Access is gained through receiving, stealing, or buying alcohol from those sources.
- Permissive social norms – expectations, standards, behaviors, attitudes, or values that convey the acceptance of alcohol within the family, community, or peer domains.
- Low perceived risk – the perception among youth that there is little/no risk of physical harm and/or legal or social consequences of using alcohol.

When a community understands the extent to which alcohol is being used by youth and the related consequences, as well as the factors contributing to the problem, evidence-based interventions can be selected that are most likely to be effective.

CONTINUING AND EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION

Whether teens would admit it or not, parents influence their decisions. Parents play a key role in preventing alcohol use by their teen-aged children. In fact, research has shown that kids who have conversations with their parents and learn a lot about the dangers of alcohol and drug use are 50% less likely to use alcohol and drugs than those that don't have such conversations.⁷ Helping parents talk to their children about alcohol is an important part of the conversation.

Providing resources and talking points to parents about alcohol use can help set parents up for success as they guide their teen-aged children. Helping parents know how to talk with

their teens about alcohol, how to set rules around alcohol and consequences for use, how to monitor alcohol in the home, and how to keep in touch with other parents are important tools for success.

Although we often assume everyone in the community is aware of the minimum drinking age and alcohol-related laws that apply to adults and parents, it is important to continuously provide information on issues such as:

- The consequences of being under the age of 21 and using alcohol
- Zero tolerance laws (Under Illinois' Zero tolerance law, a driver under age 21 caught with any trace of alcohol in his/her system will lose his/her driving privileges.)
- Social hosting laws (Illinois State law specifies it is against the law to knowingly allow underage drinking at parties at a residence which he or she occupies or any other private property, public place, or premises under his or her control where any one or more persons is under 21 years of age.)

Community conversations are a chance for community members to hear from each other and plan to create safer and healthier communities. By talking and listening to each other, communities can start to build safer and healthier communities. Dialogue-to-change efforts begin when communities discuss underage drinking, but commit to doing more than just discussing underage drinking. The community conversation is the place to start, but ultimately communities must commit to working towards evidence-based programs and strategies to reduce underage drinking.

Community coalitions focused on substance abuse prevention can be powerful allies in the fight against underage drinking. If there isn't a community coalition focused on substance abuse prevention currently in your community, consider developing a coalition. Community coalitions reflect the community they serve and coalition members can provide an avenue and a voice to bring about long-lasting change that can affect an entire community.

RESOURCES

[Illinois Youth Survey](#)

[The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking](#)

[SAMHSA Town Hall Meeting Resources](#)

REFERENCES

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