



# FACTS on Underage Drinking

MARCH 2021

## PREVENTION WORKS!

- The facts tell the story. **Prevention of underage drinking and its consequences is possible.**
- Between 2002 and 2019, current drinking by 12- to 20-year-olds **declined from 29 percent to 19 percent**. From 2015 to 2018, binge drinking and heavy alcohol use **declined from 13 percent to 11 percent and 3 percent to 2 percent**, respectively.<sup>1\*</sup>
- The number of 12th graders who reported using alcohol at least once in their lives declined from 82 percent in 1997 to 59 percent in 2019, a **28 percent drop**.<sup>2</sup>
- **Minimum legal drinking age laws are estimated to have saved 31,959 lives since 1975**. Further progress can be achieved through strong, continuing prevention efforts.<sup>3</sup>

\*Current drinking = past 30-day use or past month use. Binge drinking = five or more drinks for males and four or more drinks for females on the same occasion on at least one day in the past 30 days. Heavy alcohol use = binge drinking on five or more days in the past 30 days.

All data are from 2019 unless otherwise indicated.

**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

## UNDERAGE DRINKING STARTS EARLY

Alcohol continues to be the most widely used substance of abuse among American youth, and a higher proportion use alcohol than tobacco, marijuana, or other drugs.<sup>4</sup>

Underage drinking often begins at an early age. Of those who drink underage, 15 percent began using alcohol before they were 13 years old.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 2.3 million 12- to 17-year-olds used alcohol for the first time in 2019, which averages to approximately 6,200 adolescents who began using alcohol each day.<sup>6</sup>

Underage drinking is common and often excessive. In 2019, over 7 million 12- to 20-year-olds reported past month alcohol use, over 4 million reported past month binge drinking, and nearly 1 million reported past month heavy alcohol use.<sup>7</sup>

On their most recent drinking occasion, 72 percent of youth reported that they obtained alcohol for free. Most got their alcohol from a non-relative who was older than 21 (22 percent) or person under 21 (12 percent).<sup>8</sup> Half of them drank the alcohol at someone else's home.<sup>9</sup>

## PREVALENCE OF ALCOHOL USE BY ADOLESCENTS VARIES BY AGE

Among adolescents, 46 percent of 16- to 17-year-olds, 25 percent of 14- to 15-year-olds, and 9 percent of 12- to 13-year-olds reported using alcohol at least once in their lives.<sup>10</sup> Among adolescents ages 12 to 17, 2.3 million reported using alcohol in the past month and 29,000 reported using alcohol daily.<sup>11,12</sup>

By grade, 29 percent of 12th graders, 18 percent of 10th graders, and 8 percent of 8th graders reported current drinking.<sup>13</sup> By 8th grade, 24 percent of students had used alcohol and by the end of high school 59 percent of students had done so.<sup>14</sup>

Past month binge drinking was reported by 11 percent of 16- to 17-year-olds and 3 percent of 14- to 15-year-olds.<sup>15</sup> Among 12th graders, 5 percent reported drinking 10 or more drinks in a row and 3 percent drank 15 or more drinks in a row.<sup>16</sup>

Adolescents find it easy to obtain alcohol. The majority of students in 10th and 12th grade reported that it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" to obtain alcohol. This perception was most common among 12th graders, with 84 percent reporting easy access. This percentage, however, represents a decline from a high of 95 percent reported in 1999.<sup>17</sup>

## 690,000 YOUNG ADULTS USE ALCOHOL EVERY DAY

Among young adults ages 18 to 20, 36 percent reported drinking each month, 23 percent reported binge drinking, and 5 percent reported engaging in heavy drinking.<sup>18</sup> Each year since 2002, more than half of those ages 18 to 25 reported past month alcohol use.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 690,000 young adults in this age group reported using alcohol daily.<sup>20</sup>

## GENDER TRENDS IN UNDERAGE DRINKING REVERSE

From 2002 to 2013, rates of current drinking by underage males exceeded that of underage females, but that trend reversed over time. From 2014 to 2017, underage females began drinking at rates similar to underage males. By 2019, of individuals who reported drinking in the last 30 days, rates of drinking by underage females exceeded that of underage males. During that 30-day period, 20 percent of underage females reported drinking compared to 17 percent of underage males.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, 10 percent of 12- to 17-year-old females were current alcohol users, compared to 9 percent of males that age.<sup>22</sup> In 8th grade, 8 percent of females reported using alcohol each month, compared to 7 percent of males.<sup>23</sup>

Past month rates of binge drinking among females now exceeds that of males, 12 percent compared to 10 percent. Rates of heavy drinking by underage males and females have converged at 2 percent.<sup>24</sup>

## UNDERAGE DRINKING HIGHEST AMONG WHITE YOUTH

Underage Blacks/African Americans and Asians reported low rates of alcohol use at 12 percent for both groups. White underage youth continued to report the highest rates of alcohol use at 22 percent. Among other groups, 17 percent of Hispanics or Latinos and 15 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives reported current use.<sup>25</sup>

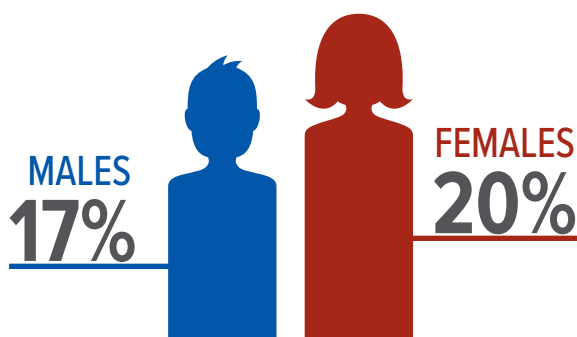
Rates of underage binge drinking reflect a similar pattern, with underage African Americans reporting the lowest rates of binge drinking at 6 percent, and whites reporting the highest rates at 14 percent. Among other groups, 12 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives, 9 percent of Hispanics or Latinos, and 7 percent of Asians reported binge drinking.<sup>26</sup>

## SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

Underage drinking contributes to a wide range of costly health and social problems, including suicide, death from motor vehicle crashes, interpersonal violence (such as homicides, assaults, and rapes), unintentional injuries (such as burns, falls, and drownings), brain impairment, alcohol dependence, risky sexual activity, academic problems, and alcohol and drug poisoning.<sup>27</sup>

In 2017, 17 percent of high school students reported riding in a car driven by someone who had been drinking.<sup>28</sup> In the same year, 1,844 young drivers ages 15-20 years were killed. Of those, 440 of the young drivers had alcohol in their systems, and 362 had a blood alcohol content above the legal limit for those legally allowed to drink alcohol.<sup>29</sup>

### UNDERAGE DRINKING BY GENDER, 2019



Data from 2019 show that underage females drink more than underage males.



**4,300**  
DEATHS PER YEAR

Early onset alcohol use is a risk factor for future problems, including heavier use of alcohol and drugs during adolescence and alcohol dependence in adulthood. On average, alcohol is a factor in the deaths of approximately 4,300 people under 21 in the United States per year, shortening their lives by an average of 60 years.<sup>30</sup>

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For more information about underage drinking prevention, visit [www.StopAlcoholAbuse.gov](http://www.StopAlcoholAbuse.gov), the web portal of the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking.

Visit the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's CollegeAIM website ([www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/CollegeAIM/Default.aspx](http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/CollegeAIM/Default.aspx)) for a matrix-based decision tool that organizes what is known about college drinking interventions by factors such as the strength of the research evidence and ease of implementation.

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