



FACTS on Underage Drinking

PREVENTION WORKS!

- The facts tell the story. Underage drinking and its consequences can be prevented.
- Between 2002 and 2017, current drinking by 12- to 20-year-olds declined from 29 percent to 20 percent. From 2015 to 2017, binge drinking and heavy alcohol use declined from 19 percent to 12 percent and 6 percent to 3 percent, respectively.^{1*}
- In 2017, alcohol use among 10th and 11th graders reached the lowest levels recorded since 1991.²
- Age 21 minimum legal drinking laws are estimated to have saved 31,417 lives since 1975.³ Further progress can be achieved through strong, continuing prevention efforts.

*Current drinking = past-30-day use. Binge drinking = five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women 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.

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

UNDERAGE ALCOHOL USE OVERVIEW

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

Underage drinking often begins at an early age. In 2017, 2 million 12- to 17-year-olds used alcohol for the first time, which averages to approximately 6,400 adolescents who began using alcohol each day.⁵ Almost 16 percent of those who drink underage begin using alcohol before they are 13 years old.⁶

Underage drinking is common and often excessive. In 2017, about 7 million 12- to 20-year-olds reported current alcohol use in the past month, 5 million reported binge drinking, and nearly 1 million reported heavy alcohol use. These figures mean that, among youth who drank, about 3 in 8 were drinking heavily.⁷

Alcohol can be easy for youth to obtain. In 2017, 71 percent of youth reported that they obtained alcohol for free on their most recent drinking occasion. Most commonly reported sources were an unrelated person over age 21 (24 percent) or another person under age 21 (13 percent). From 2014 to 2017, there was a reduction in the number of youth reporting that they obtained alcohol from parents, guardians, or other family members—from 20 percent to 10 percent.⁸

Underage drinking is associated with other substance use. Among 12- to 17-year-olds who reported drinking in the previous month, 32 percent also reported illicit drug use and 30 percent also reported marijuana use. Additionally, nearly 3 percent reported misusing opioids.⁹

UNDERAGE DRINKING BY ADOLESCENTS

Eight percent of 8th graders reported drinking during the past 30 days, with 6 percent reporting having been drunk. Among 10th graders, 20 percent reported past-30-day use, with 21 percent reporting having been drunk. Among 12th graders, 33 percent reported past-30-day use, with 36 percent reporting having been drunk.¹⁰

Six percent of 12th graders reported consuming 10 or more drinks in a row, and 3 percent consumed 15 or more drinks in a row within the previous two weeks.¹¹

In 2017, the majority of students in grades 8 through 12 reported that it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain alcohol. This perception was most common among 12th graders, with 87 percent reporting easy access. This percentage, however, represents a decline from a high of 95 percent reported in 1999.^{12,13}

ALCOHOL USE BY YOUNG ADULTS

In 2017, 54 percent of full-time college students ages 18 to 22 reported current drinking, 35 percent reported binge drinking, and 10 percent reported heavy drinking. Although individuals not enrolled full time in college do not drink as much as college students, the drinking rates are still high. Among individuals not enrolled full time in college, the percentages were 50 percent, 32 percent, and 8 percent, respectively.¹⁴

In 2017, 29 percent of 20-year-olds reported binge drinking during the past 30 days, and 7 percent engaged in heavy drinking, increasing their risk of injury or death.¹⁵

UNDERAGE DRINKING BY GENDER AND RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP

In 2017, 20 percent of 12- to 20-year-old males reported current alcohol use, 12 percent reported binge use, and 3 percent reported heavy use. Comparative figures for 12- to 20-year-old females were 20 percent, 12 percent, and 2 percent, respectively.¹⁶

Six percent of males in grades 9 through 12 reported having 10 or more drinks in a row, compared to 3 percent of females.¹⁷

Among 12- to 20-year-olds, African Americans (13 percent) had the lowest reported current alcohol use and whites (24 percent) had the highest. Among other groups, 21 percent of those of two or more races, 17 percent of Hispanics or Latinos, 15 percent of Asians, and 13 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives reported current use.¹⁸

Among 12- to 20-year-olds, African Americans and Asians had the lowest reported percentages of binge drinking (7 percent each), while whites had the highest reported percentage (15 percent). Among other groups, 11 percent of those of two or more races, 10 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives, and 10 percent of Hispanics or Latinos reported binge drinking.¹⁹

OVERALL HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS

Underage drinking contributes to a wide range of costly health and social problems, including injury and death from motor vehicle crashes, interpersonal violence (such as homicides, assaults, and rapes), unintentional injuries (such as burns, falls, and drowning), brain impairment, alcohol dependence, risky sexual activity, academic problems, and alcohol and drug poisoning.²⁰

Adults age 21 or older who first used alcohol at age 14 or younger were more than seven times as likely to be classified as having alcohol dependence or abuse as adults who had their first drink at age 21 or older (15 percent vs. 2 percent).²¹

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.²²

In 2017, 17 percent of high school students reported riding in a car driven by someone who had been drinking.²³

In 2016, 82 percent of 15- to 20-year-old drivers who were killed in crashes had a blood alcohol content of .08 or higher, past the legal limit for those legally permitted to consume alcohol.²⁴

For more information about underage drinking and prevention, visit www.StopAlcoholAbuse.gov.

This site includes access to the latest *Report to Congress on the Prevention and Reduction of Underage Drinking*, with information on current federal and state policies and programs.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 2.50B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ² Miech, R. A., Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., Schulenberg, J. E., & Patrick, M. E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975–2017: Volume I, Secondary school students*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Retrieved from http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1_2017.pdf
- ³ U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2018). Young drivers. *Traffic Safety Facts: 2016 Data* (DOT HS 812 498). Retrieved from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/#/PublicationList/82>
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). *Report to Congress on the Prevention and Reduction of Underage Drinking*. Retrieved from www.stopalcoholabuse.gov
- ⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. (HHS Publication No. SMA 18-5068, NSDUH Series H-53). Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/nsduh/reports-detailed-tables-2017-NSDUH>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 6.64B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ⁹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 6.27B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ¹⁰ Miech, R. A., Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., Schulenberg, J. E., & Patrick, M. E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975–2017: Volume I, Secondary school students*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Retrieved from http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1_2017.pdf
- ¹¹ Johnston, L. D., Miech, R. A., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., Schulenberg, J. E., & Patrick, M. E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use: 1975–2017: Overview, key findings on adolescent drug use*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-overview2017.pdf>
- ¹² Miech, R. A., Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., Schulenberg, J. E., & Patrick, M. E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975–2017: Volume I, Secondary school students*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Retrieved from http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1_2017.pdf
- ¹³ Johnston, L. D., Miech, R. A., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., Schulenberg, J. E., & Patrick, M. E. (2018). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use: 1975–2017: Overview, key findings on adolescent drug use*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-overview2017.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 6.76B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ¹⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 6.79B and 6.80B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ¹⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 2.50B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2017. Surveillance Summaries. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 67. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/2017/ss6708.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables* (Table 2.50B). Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017/NSDUHDetailedTabs2017.htm>
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). *Report to Congress on the Prevention and Reduction of Underage Drinking*. Retrieved from www.stopalcoholabuse.gov
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2017. Surveillance Summaries. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 67. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/2017/ss6708.pdf>
- ²⁴ U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2018). Young drivers. *Traffic Safety Facts: 2016 Data* (DOT HS 812 498). Retrieved from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/#/PublicationList/82>