

# Complexity of teen drinking cultures decoded

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Many factors lead teens to abuse alcohol, but culture plays the biggest role. That is the finding of researchers at George Mason University who recently completed a study of adolescent drinking in the United States. The goal of the study "*Understanding Teen Drinking Cultures in America*" is to help parents, community leaders and schools develop strategies that will effectively reduce the rate of teen alcohol consumption.

Researchers David Anderson, professor of education and human development and director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Health, and Hugh Gusterson, professor of anthropology and sociology, used focus groups of [teens](#) and adults across the United States; telephone surveys of more than 1,600 teens and their parents; and interviews with experts who work directly with teen alcohol issues to assess how and why teens drink.

The research found that teens typically begin drinking in high school and view the experience as an important rite of passage to adulthood. While teens themselves admitted that relieving stress was one of the leading reasons they drink, they put much less emphasis on [peer pressure](#). Getting alcohol from older youths, most notably older siblings, teens reported consuming the most alcohol at parties, very often with the intention of drinking to get drunk. Especially alarming is that teens view the act of drinking as the focal point of most social gatherings and usually do it without the knowledge of adults.

"Although extensive research demonstrates the complexity of why teens drink, there is a lack of comprehensive attention to understanding this

behavior," says Anderson. "Investigating a variety of teen drinking cultures - including teens' earliest experiences, patterns of [alcohol consumption](#) and the messages they may or may not get about alcohol from peers, parents, community leaders and others - gives special insight into how to tackle what is becoming an increasingly difficult problem in communities across the country."

The researchers also found that while teens are clearly receiving the message to not drink and drive, they don't understand the dangerous impact that consuming large amounts of alcohol can have on their growing bodies, nor do they realize the many legal and social consequences that come with drinking alcohol.

Anderson notes that parents and community members play a vital role in communicating with teens about risky alcohol-related behaviors. However, when parents were asked to share their perspectives on teen drinking, most underestimated how much teens drink and at what age they started drinking. It was widely reported that many parents often wrongly believe that their teen is one of the few who does not drink.

School officials and teens themselves agreed that alcohol awareness programs at school are ineffective and lack a consistent focus and that there is too much discrepancy between what teens are told about alcohol in schools and their own personal experiences. In addition, teens reported being more afraid of getting caught with alcohol at school than in the community since they see drinking laws as not strictly enforced.

Based on the results of the study, the researchers developed a set of recommendations and strategies to help parents and community leaders address and reduce teen drinking. Some of these include:

- Maintain a positive perspective that changing the circumstances and cultures surrounding teen drinking is attainable.

- Create community-wide strategies and develop long-term initiatives that include parent education. Messages about alcohol should be clear and consistent throughout the community and match what teens experience in their own lives.
- Provide a range of extracurricular activities so that youth have other outlets of feeling connected rather than hanging out and drinking.
- Establish opportunities for teens to talk frankly and openly about alcohol and other concerns either with parents, other teens or school and community leaders.

“The most distinctive aspect of our research is that older siblings can play a key role in either providing [alcohol](#) to younger siblings or providing guidance and advice that can moderate teen drinking,” says Gusterson. “In addition, we found that many parents find it difficult to talk to one another about the issue of teen drinking. It is important that we find a way to help parents talk more candidly about this issue.”

**More information:** A full copy of the study can be found [here](#).

Provided by George Mason University

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