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Each year, approximately 5,000 young people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking; this includes about 1,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 as a result of homicides, 300 from suicide, as well as hundreds from other injuries such as falls, burns, and drownings (1–5).

Yet drinking continues to be widespread among adolescents, as shown by nationwide surveys as well as studies in smaller populations. According to data from the 2005 Monitoring the Future (MTF) study, an annual survey of U.S. youth, three-fourths of 12th graders, more than two-thirds of 10th graders, and about two in every five 8th graders have consumed alcohol. And when youth drink they tend to drink intensively, often consuming four to five drinks at one time. MTF data show that 11 percent of 8th graders, 22 percent of 10th graders, and 29 percent of 12th graders had engaged in heavy episodic (or “binge¹”) drinking within the past two weeks (6) (see figure).

Research also shows that many adolescents start to drink at very young ages. In 2003, the average age of first use of alcohol was about 14, compared to about 17 1/2 in 1965 (7,8). In fact, new research shows that the serious drinking problems (including what is called alcoholism) typically associated with middle age actually begin to appear much earlier, during young adulthood and even adolescence.

Other research shows that the younger children and adolescents are when they start to drink, the more likely they will be to engage in behaviors that harm themselves and others. For example, frequent binge drinkers (nearly 1 million high school students nationwide) are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including using other drugs such as marijuana and cocaine, having sex with six or more partners, and earning grades that are mostly Ds and Fs in school (10).

The first school-based prevention programs were primarily informational and often used scare tactics; it was assumed that if youth understood the dangers of alcohol use, they would choose not to drink. These programs were ineffective. Today, better programs are available and often have a number of elements in common: They follow social influence models and include setting norms, addressing social pressures to drink, and teaching resistance skills. These programs also offer

interactive and developmentally appropriate information, include peer-led components, and provide teacher training (66). One of the most successful school-based programs, *Project Northland*, is a multi-component comprehensive intervention. It is perhaps the strongest approach for preventing underage drinking and involves the coordinated effort of all the elements that influence a child's life—including family, schools, and community.

Project Northland is an example of a comprehensive program that has been extensively evaluated. The intervention included (1) school curricula, (2) peer leadership, (3) parental involvement programs, and (4) community-wide task force activities to address larger community norms and alcohol availability. It targeted adolescents in grades 6 through 12. A study done on the long-term outcomes of community action to reduce adolescent use with the *Project Northland* program shows that consistent implementation of the various aspects of the program from 6th - 12th grade was critical in its success. When there was a break in the program in grades 9 and 10, it negatively impacted the success of the program in reducing alcohol use in adolescents during those years. Consistent involvement with developmentally appropriate, multi-component, school community-wide programs throughout adolescence appear to be what is needed in order to effectively reduce alcohol use. Project Northland has been designated a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and its materials have been adapted for a general audience.

CONCLUSION

Today, alcohol is widely available and aggressively promoted throughout society. And alcohol use continues to be regarded, by many people, as a normal part of growing up. Yet underage drinking is dangerous, not only for the drinker but also for society, as evident by the number of homicides, suicides, alcohol-involved motor vehicle crashes, and other injuries.

People who begin drinking early in life run the risk of developing serious alcohol problems, including alcoholism, later in life. They also are at greater risk for a variety of adverse consequences, including risky sexual activity and poor performance in school.

Identifying adolescents at greatest risk can help stop problems before they develop. And innovative, comprehensive approaches to prevention, such as Project Northland, are showing success in reducing experimentation with alcohol as well as the problems that accompany alcohol use by young people.

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