



## **Nation Buzzing On Underage Drinking**

*Opinions vary on need for regulation*

By: Erin Gibson  
The Daily Tar Heel  
September 6, 2005

The argument might seem tired: If you can fight a war at 18, you can drink, too.

But underage drinking continues to plague college towns, and not everyone is on board with cracking down.

With several teenage deaths in the state involving alcohol in recent years, awareness of the issue is increasing.

“Six (college) students died in the United States between October and November,” said Kendall McDevitt, a campus and community organizer for Study to Prevent Alcohol-Related Consequences. “If it was a meningitis (outbreak), it would be ended.”

The reasons young people drink can be as simple as trying to fit in.

Most people overestimate the percentage of people who drink and the quantity consumed, and then they try to conform to that misconception, said Robert DuRant, principal investigator for SPARC.

“About three-fourths of students on campus are drinking,” he said. “And the vast majority of them recently have engaged in drinking to excess.”

But most students are not 21 years old until at least their third year in school, meaning legal adults are brought into the illegal mix.

“When they can’t get it themselves they are more likely to get it from someone over 21 in a social setting where high-risk drinking is taking place,” DuRant said. “We know among college students (high-risk drinking) decreases with age and maturity, so it really is more underage.”

Not everyone gets their alcohol from older friends.

McDevitt said 65 percent of underage college students reported receiving alcohol from their parents.

Most parents of college-aged people grew up with a drinking age of 18. Some of them don’t discourage their children from drinking before turning 21 because of the way they grew up.

“There is a rite-of-passage rule the way parents see it,” said Ron Kaylor, Alcohol Law Enforcement District IX supervisor.



Sheila Reynolds, the mother of a UNC-Chapel Hill freshman, said she always has talked to her daughter about the peer pressure and implications of drinking and has every confidence her daughter will not drink underage.

“It’s illegal,” she said. “Do what you feel is morally right, but follow the law.”

Her concern primarily is with the legality of drinking before 21. She drank at 18, but it was the legal age at the time.

“Honestly, I feel that if you’re old enough to serve in the military, you should be able to make that choice,” Reynolds said.

ALE officers said they often see situations where parents or other adults allow underage people to drink in their homes because it is safer than letting them drink somewhere else. But it isn’t always safer if the parents don’t monitor for binge drinking.

Diane Chapin, ALE District II supervisor, said she has seen people die of alcohol poisoning at home with the parents present.

“Parents think, ‘I know my kid’s going to drink so I’m going to let them drink in my house and not drive home,’” she said. “They can die just as easily at their house as they can behind the wheel.”

Parents who are caught providing alcohol to minors or allowing them to drink at home are charged with aiding and abetting a minor, said Mike Robertson, the state’s ALE director.

Tyndall Evans, a junior transfer student from New York, said she knows a lot of people who use fake IDs or get alcohol from their parents — something she said her mother never did.

“I had friends whose parents would let us drink at a party,” she said. “Even parents would join in for the Fourth (of July) and graduation.”

But refusing to provide the alcohol won’t end the problem, said Rob Turrisi, a professor of biobehavioral health at Pennsylvania State University. Parents have to think about the message they’re sending.

“The more accepting parents are of (a child’s) drinking, the more likely they are to drink more often and heavily outside of the home,” he said.

But he also said it is important for parents to use their own judgement, even if that means allowing underage drinking.

“They know the maturity levels of their own families — their own family values,” he said. “They have to stay true to that.”

Still, changing the drinking age would not be a solution, he said. When the legal age was 18, the 12- to 17-year-old age group was at higher risk for alcohol-related problems.



But now the demographic with the highest rate of drinking is 18- to 25-year-olds.

Underage possession accounts for the largest number of arrests by ALE officers in the state, and sale to minors is second, Robertson said.

“ALE policy on underage drinking is arrest and charge,” he said. “There is no tolerance for possession or sale.”

*Copyright 2005 Daily Tar Heel*