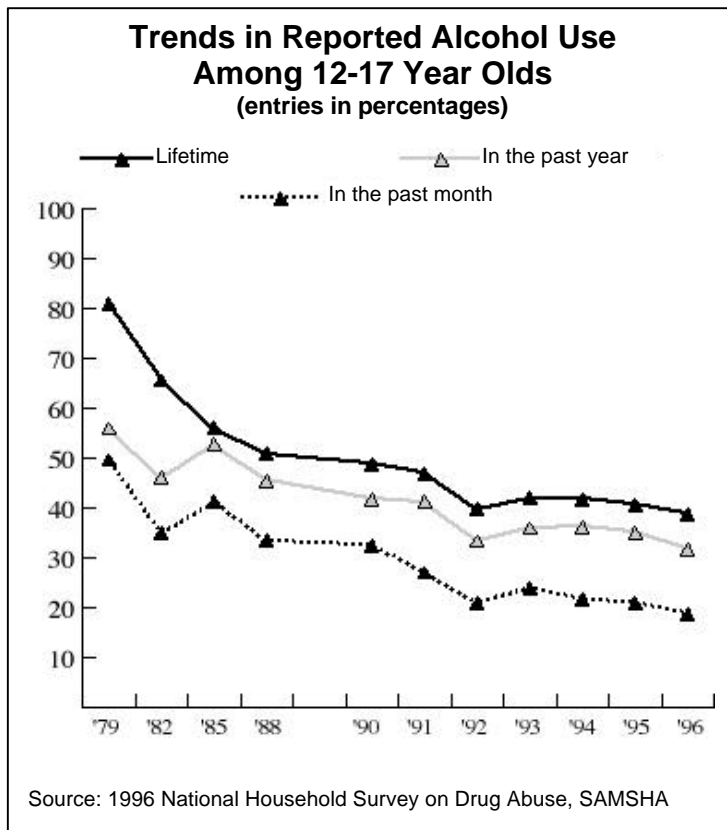


Alcohol and Youth

Alcohol use and abuse is a serious problem among young people. There are a number of unhealthy risks associated with it, including alcohol dependence, and alcohol-related accidents and violence. In fact, the most likely cause of death for a 16 year old is alcohol related.¹ For that reason, it is important to clearly understand the extent of youth involvement in underage drinking.

The statistics on alcohol use should be examined in light of the large number of youth *not* involved in this unhealthy risk behavior, especially when they are empowered by positive relationships with parents who give them clear direction.

More than three-fourths of youth ages 12-17 are not regular drinkers.² It is very encouraging that despite some sensational headlines and tragic incidents related to alcohol use and abuse, data from the past two decades show a continuing trend of decreasing youth alcohol use.^{3*} One major area of concern remains; however, the increasing percentage of teens who binge drink.



* Although the overall, long-term trend in youth alcohol use is decreasing, specific categories of drinking behavior may rise or fall during a certain year. Statistics from different sources may vary due to a multitude of factors, including differing methods of data collection; choices of age ranges and time periods; measurements of perception versus actual use; reporting by rates or actual numbers; and definitions of use. Through this overview of statistics, IYD hopes to provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of youth risk behaviors, recognizing that some specific statistics may seem to indicate inconsistent trends or levels of use.

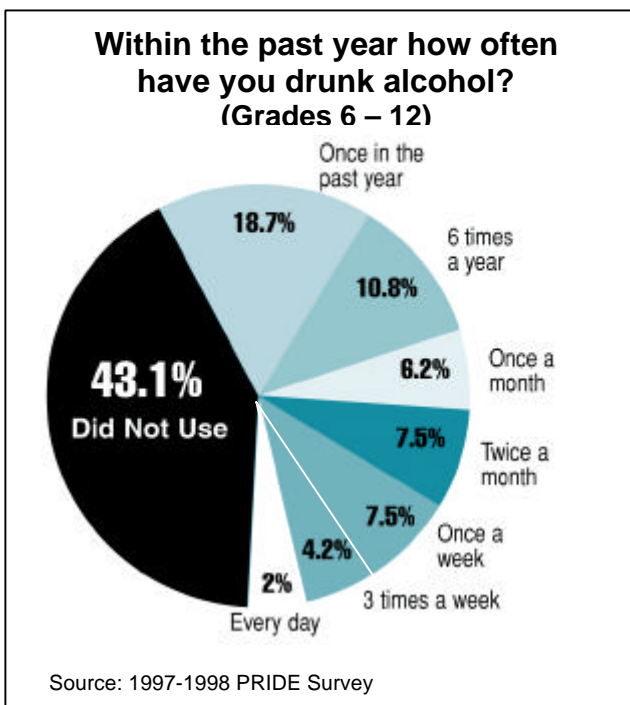
Prevalence of youth alcohol use

Current use (at least one drink in the past month) among youth ages 12-17 has been declining since 1979 (49.8 percent), with 1996 levels of current use being reported at 18.8 percent.⁴ For high-achieving students, the number was even lower, with only nine percent reporting they drank alcoholic beverages on a monthly basis.⁵

Similar findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (known as Add Health), a federally sponsored study of more than 90,000 teens, found 17.9 percent of teens drink alcohol more than once a month, and 10 percent reported drinking weekly.

In examining past-year drinking of beer, the PRIDE Questionnaire Report revealed increasing alcohol use with age: 17.7 percent of sixth graders, 40.4 percent of eighth

graders, 56.9 percent of tenth graders and 64.5 percent of twelfth graders.⁶



Understandably, the number of students who have *ever* tried alcohol is significantly higher than those who *regularly* drink alcohol. Eighty percent of students have tried alcohol by the twelfth grade. Fifty-six percent of eighth graders report ever having used alcohol.⁷

Binge drinking, which is having five or more drinks in a row, can have serious health risks. Although binge drinking levels are lower than they were in the 1980s, there is still a significant minority of youth who are engaging in this risky behavior. Binge drinking levels increase throughout

adolescence and peak at ages 18-22. According to one annual survey of youth, 16 percent of eighth graders, 25 percent of tenth graders and 30 percent of twelfth graders reported binge drinking in the past two weeks.⁸ Recent 1997 data on binge drinking among college students found that 52 percent of college alcohol drinkers binge drink – an increase from 39 percent in 1993.⁹

Characteristics of adolescent alcohol users

Not surprisingly, significantly fewer junior high school students drink alcohol compared to high school students; and slightly more males than females drink more than once a month or binge drink. Black adolescents have the lowest risk of alcohol use compared to white and Hispanic youth.¹⁰ Suburban youth reported the highest level of drinking with nearly one in five drinking twice a month or more.¹¹ Also, private high school students report less drinking among their peers than public high school students.¹²

Youth in families with both biological parents report less alcohol use or dependence than those in families without both biological parents present (i.e. stepparent families, one parent families and other family types).¹³

First use trends

The age at which young people initiate this risk behavior is another critical factor for consideration. While overall youth alcohol use rates give a perspective on current participation, age of first use is vital to an understanding of present and future trends.

Experts agree that age of initiation is a powerful predictor of consequences and dependence. Studies suggest that adolescents who begin alcohol use at early ages not only use it more frequently, but also escalate to more frequent use more quickly and are less likely to stop using.¹⁴

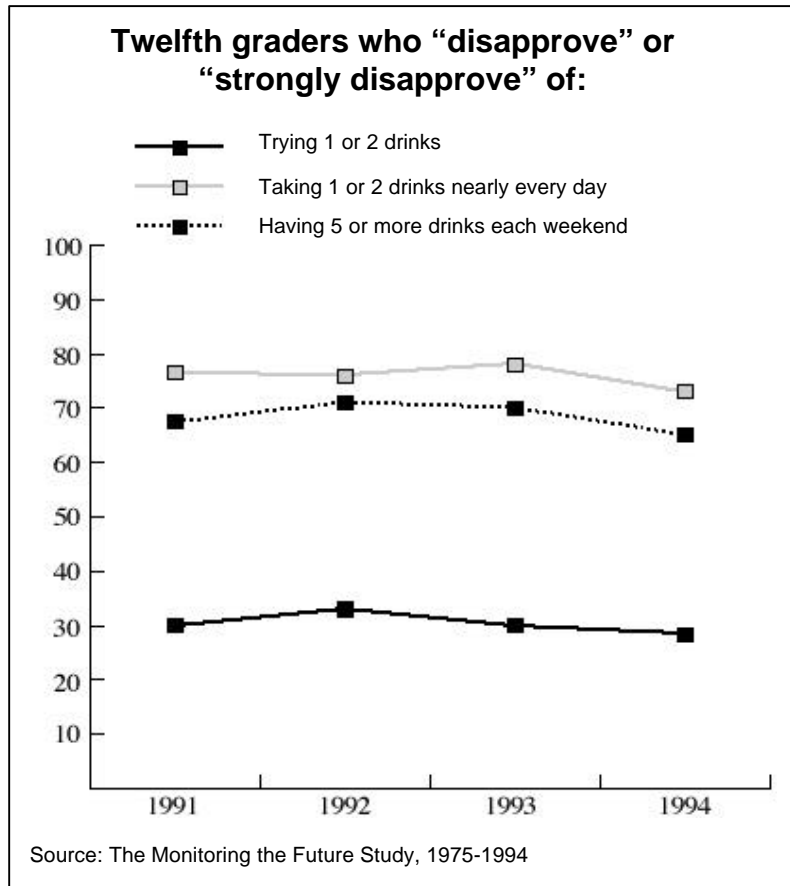
Although overall youth drinking levels are decreasing, adolescents who do drink are beginning earlier. The current average age of drinking initiation is 15.9 years, compared to 17.4 years in 1987. (footnote—currently 13) From 1989 to 1995, the rate of initiation of alcohol use among 12 to 17 year olds increased from 113 to 165 per 1,000 person years.¹⁵

This is an alarming trend in light of findings by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Researchers found the younger the age of drinking onset, the greater the change of the individual developing an alcohol disorder. Young people who begin drinking before the age of 15 are more than twice as likely to develop alcohol abuse and are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who began drinking at or after age 21.¹⁶

Youth perceptions about alcohol use

Youth perception about the extent and harmfulness of alcohol use can certainly affect



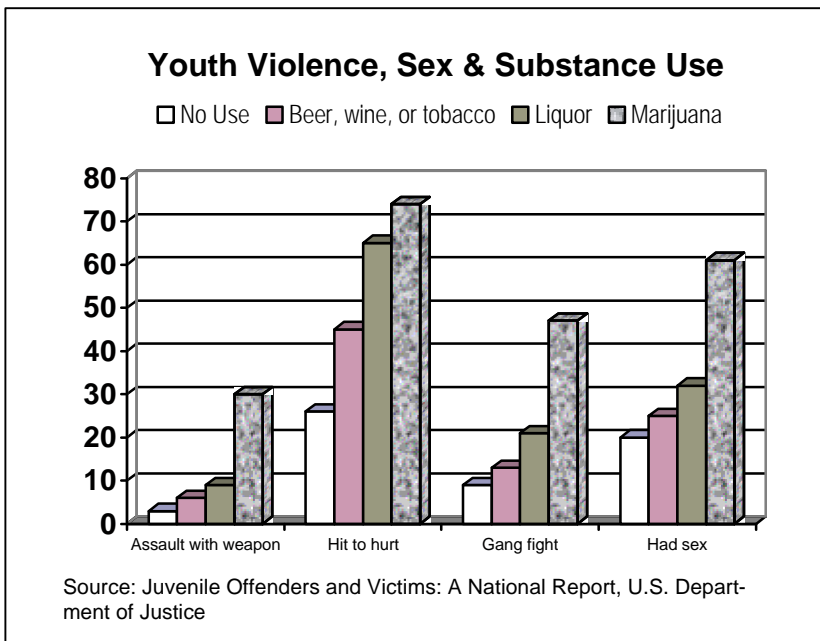
whether or not adolescents are involved in this activity. If adolescents believe most of their friends drink, their behavior may be affected by a desire to feel “normal.”

Despite the minority of students who report drinking on a regular basis, many students perceive that alcohol use is prevalent among high school students. Eighty-one percent of students surveyed by Who’s Who Among American High School Students report “a lot” of alcohol use at their school.¹⁷

Youths’ perceptions of harmfulness of alcohol and their disapproval of alcohol use, also affects underage drinking levels. Less than half of youth (45 percent) ages 12-17 believe there is “great risk” in having five or more drinks once or twice a week – a decrease from 58 percent in 1992 who considered that to be a risky behavior.¹⁸ It should be noted in the same time period when perceived harmfulness and disapproval levels decreased, binge drinking levels slightly *increased*.¹⁹

Alcohol’s interconnections with other risk behaviors

While involvement in one risk behavior does not guarantee involvement in another, it does increase the likelihood that a young person will participate in other risk behaviors. The use of a substance like alcohol places an adolescent at greater risk for engaging in sexual activity or violence, or for abusing other substances.



The Alan Guttmacher Institute, in its report, *Sex and America’s Teenagers*, stated that young teenagers who use alcohol and other substances on a regular basis are more likely to be having sex.²⁰ Also, substance abuse may impair a young person’s ability to make sound decisions, especially in regards to sexual activity. Nationwide, among students who are currently

sexually active, one-fourth reported they had used alcohol or drugs at last sexual intercourse.²¹ Other research shows the misuse of alcohol often results in an earlier onset of sexual activity.²² According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are strong relationships between the use of alcohol and other substances. Three-quarters of smokers ages 12-21 (compared to less than one-fourth of those who have never smoked) had consumed alcohol in the last thirty days.²³ In addition, other studies

have found past month alcohol users ages 12-17 were almost eight times more likely to report illicit drug use.²⁴

In addition, linkages between alcohol and juvenile delinquency and violence seem to exist. Both junior- and senior-high students who reported using substances (including liquor, marijuana, cocaine and inhalants) were significantly more likely to carry a gun to school, participate in gang activities, consider suicide often, threaten someone, or get into trouble with police.²⁵

Students who report easy access to controlled substances like alcohol and illicit drugs were more likely to report violent acts at school such as physical attack, robbery, and bullying, than those students who reported little access to controlled substances, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Of students who knew of peers attending school drunk, 56 percent reported violent acts at their school. Only 36 percent of students who did not know of fellow students who came to school drunk reported violence.²⁶

The impact of parents and family on underage drinking

Parent relationships and family life strongly impact whether or not a youth will be involved in risk behaviors, including alcohol use. Children whose parents tell them to avoid alcohol are less likely to drink alcohol. For instance, in a poll of high-achieving high school students, of those students who reported their parents forbid them to drink (88 percent), 69 percent had never tried alcoholic beverages.²⁷ In contrast, children of parents who have favorable attitudes about drinking are more likely to initiate and continue to drink.²⁸

The Add Health study also found parents play a significant role in protecting children from alcohol use. Students were protected against alcohol use if they felt “parental connectedness,” which was defined by researchers as a sense of closeness to parents and feeling loved and cared for by parents. Parental presence was found to be another protective factor against alcohol use, although to a lesser degree. However, students who reported easy access to alcohol in the home were more likely to drink alcohol.²⁹

The IYD approach

Recognizing the links between the major youth risk behaviors, the Institute for Youth Development (IYD) promotes a comprehensive risk avoidance message for multiple unhealthy behaviors, including underage drinking. IYD believes that youth are capable of making the healthy decision to avoid alcohol completely, especially if they are empowered by positive relationships with their parents and family.

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To receive additional copies of this publication or a list of other IYD publications that are available, please contact the Institute for Youth Development at 703-471-8750.

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