Underage Drinking in El Paso

A status report

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The Paso del Norte Health Foundation (Foundation) commissioned this report as a part of our alcohol prevention initiative, Shift+. The report will be used to establish baseline data on underage drinking and associated harms in El Paso, Texas, and to promote evidence-based strategies and policy improvements that have been proven to reduce underage and binge drinking. When possible, local data was used to highlight the impact of underage drinking on El Paso youth.

Youth and young adults are particularly vulnerable to alcohol-related health and social consequences. These include but are not limited to violence, sexual assault, unplanned sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, unintentional injuries including traffic crashes, school and social problems, and criminal justice system involvement. According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, almost 5,000 young people die every year from underage drinking and many more suffer short and long-term health, social, or legal consequences.

Underage drinking is a community problem. Evidence has shown that community-based strategies can help reduce underage drinking and associated harms. Examples of these strategies are highlighted in the following pages. We hope that this report is useful to community members and organizations committed to improving the health and well-being of all young people in the Paso del Norte region.

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The mission of the Foundation is to promote health and prevent disease in the region through leadership in health education, research, and advocacy.
**Underage Drinking in El Paso: A Status Report**

**Introduction**

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug among youth in El Paso – more common than tobacco or any other drug. Two-thirds of Texas high school students reported having tried alcohol in 2013, and one in five reported binge drinking (five or more drinks within a couple of hours) at least once in the past month.\(^5\)

Recent El Paso-specific data are only available for 9th graders; among them, in 2015 28.6% reported drinking in the past 30 days, 16.6% reported binge drinking, and 4.8% reported having 10 or more drinks within a couple of hours.\(^1\)

In contrast, only 10% reported smoking cigarettes in the past 30 days.\(^1\)

In part, the continued high prevalence of alcohol use among El Paso teens reflects adult drinking. Figure 1 shows that binge drinking by adults in El Paso County rose substantially from 2002 to 2012 – by 30% for men and 9% for women.\(^8\)

Across Texas, youth alcohol use decreased during that period, but at a slower rate than tobacco.\(^5\) El Paso has led Texas in protecting its young people from tobacco use. El Paso was the first city in Texas to pass a comprehensive clean air ordinance, and the city has succeeded in reducing tobacco use more than other jurisdictions in Texas since the turn of the century.\(^9\)

Excessive alcohol use takes a heavy toll among El Paso’s young people, and this toll affects the entire community. Reducing underage drinking and related consequences has long been a priority in El Paso, and there is a diverse network of people and organizations throughout the region committed to keeping young people safe and healthy. The purpose of this report is to raise awareness of that toll, and to explore how, by building on our strengths and following the research evidence, people and organizations in El Paso can take further actions to protect youth from the dangers of alcohol use.
Alcohol Consumption among Youth in El Paso

Across Texas high school students, young men drink and binge drink more frequently than young women; however, the gap between male and female binge drinking has been closing in recent years.

Data from a 2012 survey of 4500 students in El Paso show that twice as many students from grades 7 to 12 had used alcohol compared to tobacco. Female students were slightly more likely than male students to report having tried alcohol, and having had a drink in the past 30 days. Prevalence of past-month drinking ranged from 13.1% of 7th graders to 38.2% of 12th graders. Beer and liquor were nearly tied as the beverages most commonly consumed. Binge drinking in the past 30 days ranged from 7.5% of 7th graders to 34.3% of 12th graders, with beer the most common drink consumed during a binge drinking session.

In 2015, 1 in 20 9th graders in El Paso drank 10 or more drinks in a row in the past 30 days. Among 9th graders who drank, 83.1% had started drinking (had their first full drink of alcohol) at age 14 or younger.

Consequences of Underage Alcohol Use in El Paso

National studies have found that the younger children start drinking, the worse the consequences will be.

Among 9th graders who reported drinking in the past 30 days in El Paso in 2015, 55% were binge drinkers. These young people were 11 times more likely to report current smoking than their peers who did not binge drink, and 5 times more likely to have had sexual intercourse.
Ninth grade students who reported current drinking were also twice as likely to have ridden with a driver who had been drinking (54.9% versus 25.3% among all 9th graders); 1 in 4 also reported having driven after drinking.1

Alcohol use is closely associated with increased sexual risk-taking, including unprotected sex.10 Nationally, young adult drinkers are twice as likely as their non-drinking peers to have had a sexually-transmitted disease (STD) during the past year. Men who report heavy drinking (defined as drinking 5 or more drinks on 5 or more days in the past 30 days) are almost 4 times as likely, and heavy drinking women are 3.5 times as likely to have had an STD in the past year.11

In El Paso County in 2014, there were 1739 cases of chlamydia and 208 cases of gonorrhea among 13-20 year-olds.12 Without alcohol use, it is likely that many of these could have been averted. And El Paso has a rate of teen pregnancy that is almost double that of the US as a whole, and 20% higher than the rest of Texas.13,14

Among high school students nationally, youth who drink are more likely than non-drinkers to think about or attempt suicide.15 Heavy drinkers are even more likely to harm themselves: compared to youth who do not drink heavily, young heavy drinkers were 23.6 times more likely to deliberately attempt to cut, hang or poison themselves.16 In El Paso in 2014, 5 11-18 year-olds and 12 19-25 year-olds committed suicide;17 if national estimates hold true, then at least 4 of these were due to alcohol use.18

Academic achievement also suffers when students drink. El Paso seniors who report getting “A” grades are less likely to drink than those who received lower grades.1 And 1 in 14 (7%) of secondary school students reported attending a class drunk at least once in the past year.2

Youth across the country report that home or residential parties serve as their primary sources of alcohol.19,20 Home parties often include large numbers of youth consuming high levels of alcohol resulting in significant health and safety consequences. The El Paso Police Department reported 9443 calls for service for loud parties in 2014 alone; these parties are likely to include alcohol. El Paso Police report underage drinking is common at the loud parties.
Alcohol-related homicide is nearly as common a cause of death among youth as DUI — 47% of homicides and 23% of suicides are caused by alcohol. Yet despite the frequency with which young people are drinking, and the large numbers of house parties that apparently occur in El Paso, few young people are apprehended for drinking: only 1% of 7th-12th graders reported getting in trouble with a teacher and only 2.3% reported getting in trouble with police.

The El Paso County Sheriff’s office arrested 33 young people under 21 for driving while intoxicated in 2012, and 38 in 2013. That office also reported that 2 young people were convicted of manslaughter with a vehicle while intoxicated in 2012 and 3 more of assault with serious bodily injury while drunk; 2013 saw 2 more cases of assault while intoxicated among young adults under 21.

These cases of assault underscore that alcohol-related homicides are nearly as common as DUI as a cause of death among youth. CDC estimates that nationally 47% of homicides and 23% of suicides are caused by alcohol use. These criminal justice examples point to the fact that alcohol use among young people costs all of us. CDC estimates the cost of underage drinking in Texas to be $1.8 billion per year. If allocated based on population, the city of El Paso’s share of this amounts to nearly $48 million in healthcare, lost productivity, criminal justice, and traffic crash costs.

Environments of Risk

In 2003, when Congress asked the National Academy of Sciences for advice on reducing underage drinking, the authors subtitled their report, “A Collective Responsibility.” Young people learn about and obtain alcohol from the adults around them, and adults have a critical role to play in preventing and reducing underage drinking.

Adults create and control the environments in which young people learn about alcohol — at home, in retail outlets, at private parties. Among secondary school students in El Paso, only three out of five reported learning anything about alcohol in school in the past year. Roughly the same proportion reported that alcohol is either somewhat or very easy to obtain, a powerful lesson they have learned from environments outside the school, and a reflection of how available alcohol is to El Paso youth.
Students most commonly get alcohol from their friends or at parties, and less frequently (although the numbers rise with age) from a store or at home. In fact, high school students are doing their drinking primarily in private homes: among El Paso 9th grade drinkers in 2015, 73.6% reported that they drank at their own or someone else’s home. In 2012, 56% of 12th graders and 30% of 9th graders said that at the parties they attended in the past year, alcohol was being consumed either most of or all the time.

Social settings matter. When alcohol is a constant feature at teen parties, it sends young people a powerful message, and it points to the need to intervene in social as well as commercial settings to prevent and reduce underage use.

Ultimately, however, all alcohol comes from a commercial source somewhere, so interventions that affect commercial sellers of alcohol are also important. El Paso has one commercial outlet for every 550 people, and 1 for every 363 adults over 21. Some states have set optimal levels of alcohol outlet density – for instance, Maryland recommends 1 outlet for every 1000 persons. Studies from cities across the country have linked higher concentrations of alcohol outlets within a single geographic area with greater likelihood of underage drinking and other negative consequences in that area.

**Solutions: Alcohol Policies – Following the Research**

Young people in El Paso are getting alcohol from their friends and from private parties. They report on surveys that they “know” that alcohol use among young people is dangerous: in 2012, at least 70% of secondary school students characterized underage drinking as somewhat or very dangerous. And close to 80% report that their parents disapprove of it.

But all the efforts of parents and teachers are overshadowed by what children see around them. Inexpensive alcohol, widely and visibly promoted, and in use at most or all of the parties young people attend, sends a much stronger message than anything parents or teachers can say.

It is critical that parents continue to play the “parent” role with their children regarding alcohol use. Recent research has found that children whose parents provided alcohol to them at home are more likely than their peers to drink more and suffer alcohol-related problems.

Beyond talking to young people about alcohol use, and setting clear policies at home against underage use, there is another important role for adults to play, and this entails taking action to enact and enforce policies that research has shown can protect young people from the dangers of alcohol use outside the home as well.

According to a recent study in Los Angeles, 11-14 year-olds see 2 to 4 ads for alcohol per day. Given the dominance of alcohol marketing messages in young people’s lives, policies to
influence or limit those messages seek to counter those messages, whether direct or indirect. And marketing is not just about alcohol advertising – it incorporates what are known as the 4 P’s: product, price, promotion, and place. One way of thinking about effective alcohol policies is to orient them to each of these elements of the marketing mix.

**Product**

Nationally in recent years, liquor has caught up to beer as the beverage of choice among young people; however, in El Paso, beer is still the beverage most commonly consumed by youth when they are binge drinking.

Other products, such as “alcopops” or flavored alcoholic beverages (FABs), are disproportionately popular among youth. Young people who drink these are also more likely to binge and to suffer alcohol-related injuries.

It is important that alcohol policies reflect that a drink is a drink – no matter what form the alcohol comes in, it can still be dangerous in the hands and lives of young people. For products like the alcopops, it is worth looking at how prominently these are featured in stores and how cheaply they are sold. In a recent scan of 94 outlets in El Paso selling alcohol for off-premises consumption, 45 sold alcopops. Thirty-four of these also sold the inexpensive high-strength beers known as “malt liquors,” while only 36 of the 94 outlets had any signage indicating they checked for age identification.

The state of Washington has pioneered in the use of “Alcohol Impact Areas” for limiting sales of high-alcohol content, low-cost malt-based beverages and wines. Local jurisdictions must first attempt to establish such an area, for instance near a school or in an area with particularly high rates of alcohol problems such as police calls for service, voluntarily by asking local retailers to remove these products from their shelves.

If voluntary efforts are unsuccessful, mandatory AIAs may be established. The cities of Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane and Olympia have done so. Facing a barrage of cheap alcoholic beverages that were driving excessive alcohol use, the cities were able to ban the sale of many of those beverages within their borders.
Price

Perhaps even more than adults, because they have less income, young people respond to the price of alcohol:

> the higher the price, the less young people will drink it.\(^{24}\)

Taxes are an important part of the price of alcohol. Because most alcohol taxes are fixed to the volume of the beverage, they do not rise with inflation. As years go by, they lose much of their value, and they become cheaper in comparison to other consumer products. In some outlets, a young person seeking out the least expensive liquid will settle on – not the water, the orange juice, the milk or the soda – but the beer.

Texas is a case in point. The state last raised its excise taxes on alcohol in 1984. These taxes are currently among the lowest in the nation, and since 1984, the state alcohol tax has lost 56% of its value in real terms.\(^{32}\)

Failure to keep alcohol taxes current cost the state significant revenues that could be used to reduce and prevent underage drinking. In 2013 alone, lost revenues totaled $264 million.\(^{32}\)

More importantly, increasing alcohol taxes would reduce underage drinking. A nickel-a-drink tax increase would cut underage drinking in the state by 4.5%; a quarter-a-drink increase would reduce it by 19%.\(^{32}\)

Of course, taxes are not the only influence on the price of alcohol. Retailers also frequently discount their products, including alcohol, to promote sales. Limiting this kind of discounting – in the form of bulk purchases, or special event or population discounts like happy hours or ladies’ nights – can also help make alcohol less accessible to young people. In the scan of El Paso off-premises outlets, a 750 ml. bottle of Smirnoff Vodka cost an average of $3.93, or approximately $.23 per standard drink.
Promotion

Numerous long-term studies – more than 20 to date – have found a strong association between youth exposure to alcohol marketing, and youth drinking behavior: the higher the exposure, the more likely young people are to start drinking or, if already drinking, to drink more.33

These promotional messages are everywhere that young people are. Billboards, signs in retail outlets, television and radio ads – these are the most visible, and some of them can be limited by a local jurisdiction. Numerous cities have banned alcohol billboards in residential neighborhoods.34

Less obvious but also influential are alcohol mentions (both branded and unbranded) in films and television programming. Alcohol appearances in films have skyrocketed in recent years, particularly in youth-rated movies. And seeing those movies is associated with higher risk of alcohol use and problems among adolescents.35

Requesting the Motion Picture Association of America to include alcohol content when considering what rating a film should have could be one way of discouraging this trend.

Another approach some communities are taking towards promotion is encouraging youth-led counter-advertising campaigns. Evidence from the tobacco field suggests that such campaigns can keep kids from smoking.36 Although the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine encouraged lots of experiments in youth-oriented media campaigns about alcohol, there have been few such efforts, and none have been evaluated.

One youth group in Baltimore partnered with students from a local arts college to analyze the alcohol advertising they saw in their neighborhoods, and to develop counter-ads. The pictures below show one of the alcohol ads they found, as well as two examples of how the young people decided to counter it.

Figure 5: Alcohol appearances in G or PG-rated movies, 1996-20104

A recent alcohol ad (on the left) and two counter-ads created by Baltimore youth
Such efforts at least have the effect of teaching young people important media literacy and resistance skills, which can reduce the likelihood of alcohol use.  

**Place**

Place strategies target where young people obtain alcohol, and where they consume it. El Paso has a high concentration of alcohol outlets. Too many commercial alcohol establishments increase the risk of youth drinking. While it may seem obvious, research studies have found that the more businesses there are selling alcohol in one area, the more likely young people are to obtain it, drink it, drink heavily, drink and drive, and ride with a drinking driver.  

State and local liquor licensing authorities are usually the first line of defense against this overconcentration. Many communities have also found it helpful to supplement this with local zoning laws that allow more resident input into the locations and practices of businesses serving and selling alcohol.

However, because so many young people in El Paso report drinking in social settings – that is, in their own home or someone else’s – it makes sense to focus on strategies that can reduce drinking in these settings.

One approach has been passage of civil “social host” ordinances. Research has shown that, in communities with social host ordinances, law enforcement agencies find them useful, and there are fewer police calls for service over time, fewer large underage drinking parties, and fewer underage youth drinking at parties compared to underage youth in communities without such measures. These ordinances give law enforcement a powerful tool to more effectively address these parties and reduce the negative consequences often associated with them. They allow police to write a civil citation, the equivalent of a speeding ticket, when called to a loud, unruly and/or underage drinking party.

Combining social host laws with other effective strategies, such as DUI checkpoints and minor decoy operations (in which minors work with law enforcement to test whether stores are complying with laws against sales to minors), can make them even more effective.
Multi-level, multi-component interventions: Do more of what works

Success in reducing underage drinking has generally come through multi-level, multi-component interventions, which address the many factors that influence young people’s drinking behavior. Some effective strategies have been around for decades. We can thank the 21 year-old minimum drinking age law, for instance, at least in part for the fact that young people in the US drink far less than their peers in European countries with lower drinking ages.3

The Community Preventive Services Task Force, an independent non-federal body that advises the government on effective health interventions, found that greater enforcement of the underage drinking laws made them even more effective at preventing youth purchases of alcohol.46 Laws that target the manufacture, distribution, lending, transfer or sale of fake IDs are also effective in reducing sales of alcohol to young people.47

Conclusion: Big Problem, Many Solutions

Drinking-driving, assaults, self-harm, poor academic achievement, sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies – these are just a few of the consequences El Paso youth risk when they consume alcohol. These problems cost young people their futures, El Paso parents their peace of mind, and El Paso government, businesses and taxpayers $48 million per year.

The good news is that there is much we can do as a community to reduce underage drinking and associated harms. Many people working in public health, law enforcement, education, business, faith-based organizations, and other sectors are using proven strategies to keep our children and communities safe and healthy. We can help them by addressing where young people drink and buy alcohol, by reducing youth exposure to alcohol marketing, and by advocating for policies that reduce availability of alcohol to youth and create healthier environments.
REFERENCES

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