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PSU study finds why teens use alcohol

Reasons may help intervention program

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High school seniors who dabble with alcohol may be looking for a few different things in those forbidden glass bottles.

Most are driven to experimentation. Some just want a good time, and others use it to relax, according to a new study by Penn State researchers.

One segment of surveyed teenagers, according to the report, drink alcohol for all those reasons and several more: They also use booze as a salve for anger and frustration, to escape their problems and to get a high.

“The first time I really started drinking was senior week, right after high school when I was 18 years old, and we were away from our parents,” said one Penn State student who recently turned 21.

The student, who spoke under condition of anonymity, said he avoided drinking in high school because he was too involved in sports and didn’t want to jeopardize his position on the baseball and basketball teams. But during senior week, he tried alcohol, he said, because his friends were drinking and he was excited about it.

“When you are around your friends who are doing it, it’s pretty hard not to,” he said.

He may be an exception. According to the Penn State study, more than 75 percent of the surveyed seniors had already experimented with alcohol at some point.

The study, published in this month’s issue of the journal *Prevention Science*, uses data provided by a national Monitoring the Future survey. Almost 1,900 students — all of whom graduated from high school in 2004 — were surveyed.

“We thought that this would be able to inform interventions,” said Donna Coffman, a research associate at the Penn State Methodology Center. “If the intervention is designed to target the particular motivation that the student has for drinking ... then the intervention may work better.”

One recent State College Area High School graduate, who spoke to the Centre Daily Times under anonymity, said she drank in her later high school years with friends who were in college.

But her decision, she said, “didn’t have anything to do with peer pressure, like some people assume.”

“It was more like a group of people would get together, and it’s fun to drink with your friends. It was just funny,” she said. “ ... I would think for most people, it would be more about experimentation.”

Similar trends

Surveys of local teens’ self-reported drinking habits show trends in Centre County echo the national study, though State College may be a higher-consumption spot than other parts of the county.

In Bald Eagle Area and Bellefonte and Penns Valley districts, the portion of seniors who said they drank in recent days fell from 50 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2005 — the most current year for which survey data are available.

But in State College, drinking among seniors has followed more of a roller-coaster line. The volume of seniors who said they drank in recent days started at its lowest level — about 42 percent in 2000 — then jumped to its highest level, about 55 percent, just two years later.

In 2005, the percentage dropped to 44 percent.

Those data come from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey, conducted once every year or two by Centre County Communities that Care and the Centre Region Care Partnership. The results of a 2007 survey are still pending.

Parental attitudes

Bryan Peach, a Penn State senior whose father is a state police officer, said he never drank before he turned 21.

But for some of his high school peers in Lebanon, Pa., parental approval helped enable the early habit, he said.

“I think a lot of parents had the attitude that we’d rather have you drinking here where it’s safe and we can keep tabs,” Peach said.

For the Penn State junior who first drank during high school senior week, it was just the opposite: being away from home at Penn State’s campuses helped propel his drinking habits.

During his freshman year at Penn State’s campus in York, he said he commuted from home and hardly drank. But once he moved to the Altoona campus and then later to University Park, he started attending parties.

“It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college when I started to drink more regularly,” he said.

Now he drinks about two or three nights a week — typically on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, he said.

Social norms

Regular drinking, however, doesn’t necessarily translate into dangerous drinking.

Megan Patrick, a Penn State doctoral student, said programs that focus on social norms and expectations are effective in curbing excessive consumption.

“A lot of students tend to overestimate the amount of drinking that other students do,” said Patrick, who worked on the alcohol-related research at the university.

Public-relations efforts on campus have emphasized norms, including survey results that suggested 70 percent of Penn State students consume no more than four drinks in any one sitting.

Patrick said some students tend to overestimate the experiences they’ll encounter while drinking, as well. Preventative methods often work when they include personalized feedback and “motivational interviewing,” she said.

Kimberly Cassidy, community mobilizer of Communities that Care, said the drop in alcohol use among high school seniors at Bald Eagle Area, Penns Valley and Bellefonte “is not just something that has happened by chance.”

Six programs are in place, she said, and are designed to help parents understand exactly what the latest Penn State research has found: the factors that prompt kids to drink.

“Yes, I think it is very important parents understand the rates of use, but more important, (that) parents understand what the underlying risks are,” Cassidy said. “Students tend to think everyone is doing it, when in reality that is not happening.”

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