

## **WHERE DO UNDERAGE COLLEGE STUDENTS GET ALCOHOL?\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Alcohol consumption and related problems are common among underage college students, yet qualitative, in-depth information on how/where these students obtain alcohol is limited. We conducted focus groups pertaining to access to alcohol and related issues with 19 underage college students. They reported that alcohol is easy to obtain from a variety of sources, with friends/acquaintances who are of legal age or those with a false ID being the most common. Parties were also common sources, but “shoulder tapping” (i.e., asking a stranger to purchase alcohol) was not common. Disagreement arose over whether underage fraternity/sorority members have greater access to alcohol than non-Greeks. Our results provide updated information on the various sources of alcohol and associated issues among underage college students.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite all states in the United States having a minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) of 21, many underage youth continue to consume alcohol and experience alcohol-related problems. In 2005, 47% of 12th graders and 33% of 10th graders report consuming alcohol in the past 30 days, and 28% and 21% respectively are considered high-risk alcohol users (defined as 5+ drinks in a row during the previous two weeks; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2006). Drinking among underage college students is even more common—63% report drinking alcohol in the past month and 44% report high-risk drinking (Wechsler et al., 2002). Underage alcohol use, including use among college students, is associated with many problems, including assaults, violence, traffic crashes, and school problems (Benton et al., 2006; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004; O'Brien et al., 2006).

Underage youth drink, in part, due to a lack of enforcement of the age-21 MLDA, allowing youth to access alcohol from both commercial sources (i.e., licensed alcohol establishments) and social sources (e.g., friends, parents, siblings, strangers; Dent, Grube, & Biglan, 2005; Jones-Webb et al., 1997; Wagenaar et al., 1996). Although the propensity of alcohol establishments to sell to underage youth has declined since the early 1990s, individuals under age 21 can still easily purchase alcohol without showing age identification (ID), with recent studies showing sales rates ranging from 26% to 39% (Britt, Toomey, Dunsmuir, & Wagenaar, 2006; Freisthler, Gruenewald, Treno, & Lee, 2003). However, neither of these studies, or any of earlier studies of propensity of sales to underage youth, were college-specific. Youth are even more likely to use social sources of alcohol—social sources may include coworkers, friends, parents, siblings, and even strangers approached outside alcohol establishments. Little is known about the context of different types of social provision, particularly among college students.

In this study, we collected and analyzed qualitative data to advance our understanding of the sources of alcohol used by underage college students. Identifying how youth obtain alcohol will assist in developing the appropriate interventions to reduce access to alcohol, and in allocating resources (i.e., staffing, money) from federal, state, and local governments to address this problem.

## METHODS

In August 2005, we conducted two focus group discussions with underage college students to assess sources of alcohol and related alcohol issues. The focus group discussions were funded as part of a larger study, Propensity for Obtaining Alcohol through Shoulder Tapping, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Results of focus groups were used to develop the protocol for shoulder tap assessments for this larger study (see Toomey, Fabian, Erickson, & Lenk, 2007).

## Participants

We recruited participants through e-mail listservs (e.g., undergraduate Psychology students) and university bulletin boards. All participants were 18 to 20 years old and students at the University of Minnesota. In total, 19 students participated in the two groups—8 in the first and 11 in the second. We collected demographic information from participants including age, gender, race, year in school, whether or not they lived in a residence hall, and if they were part of the Greek system (Table 1).

## Procedures

The project coordinator and a trained focus group moderator conducted the focus group discussions following standard focus group procedures (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Each focus group session lasted approximately 1.5 hours. All participants completed a consent form and were assured that discussions were confidential. Each participant received \$40 at the end of the session as an incentive to participate. We assured participants that the incentive was not dependent on responding to focus group questions. We audiotaped and later transcribed all focus group discussions, but we did not include any individual identifiers with the final transcripts. We used notetakers in case of audio recorder failure. The University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures for recruitment and participation.

Table 1. Demographics of Focus Group Participants ( $n = 19$ )

	Number of participants		Number of participants
Age		Year in School	
18	1	Sophomore	4
19	3	Junior	10
20	15	Senior	5
Gender		Live in Residence Hall?	
Female	17	Yes	6
Male	2	No	13
Race		Member of Fraternity or Sorority?	
Asian	3	Yes	4
Black	2	No	15
Spanish/Hispanic	1		
White	13		

### Discussion Questions

To facilitate consistency across the two sessions, we created a predetermined list of questions to lead each focus group discussion. We asked participants a series of 10 open-ended questions that introduced main topic areas (see below). Participants were not asked about their own behavior but rather about the behavior of underage youth in general. Participants were asked what are the most common *social* sources of alcohol, including shoulder tapping (underage youth approach adults outside of liquor stores asking them to buy alcohol), as well as about *commercial* sources of alcohol and other alcohol issues. The 10 main questions were:

1. How do underage people you know generally get alcohol?
2. How common is it for people under 21 to approach a stranger outside a liquor or convenience store and ask him/her to purchase alcohol?
3. Are there strict controls for bringing alcohol into the residence halls?
4. Are there often kegs at parties?
5. How many students use false (i.e., fake) IDs to get into bars/restaurants?
6. What are barriers to obtaining alcohol from these sources?
7. Has the recent smoking ban affected what bars your friends/acquaintances visit?
8. How easy is it to access alcohol at sports stadiums?
9. What do you think of the age-21 minimum legal drinking age?
10. What do you think of the University policies on underage drinking?

### Analysis

We used standard qualitative data analyses methods to identify major and minor themes from the focus group transcripts. We imported transcribed transcripts into NVivo, an established ethnographic software package, for analysis (Richards, 1999). This software package facilitates the mechanical tasks of qualitative data management, including locating individual words and phrases and attaching codes/themes to segments of text. Two research staff first independently read transcripts and developed lists of major (i.e., broad) and minor (i.e., narrow) themes for coding. The two coders generally identified similar themes and discussed any discrepancies until a consensus on a final list of themes was found, resulting in three major themes and 13 minor themes. We then searched the transcript text using NVivo to attach themes to segments of text and obtain quotes that represented each theme.

## RESULTS

The three identified major themes were social access, commercial access, and overall drinking culture—each major category had several minor themes (Table 2). We discuss major and minor themes below.

Table 2. Major and Minor Themes of Focus Groups

Major Themes	Minor Themes
<i>Social access to alcohol</i>	Friends/acquaintances (over 21 or with false ID) Parents, siblings Dormitories/residence halls Greek system (fraternities/sororities) Kegs Shoulder tapping (approaching strangers outside of stores)
<i>Commercial access to alcohol</i>	Sports stadiums False IDs Smoking ban
<i>Drinking culture</i>	Getting into bars and nightclubs Age-21 minimum legal drinking age Friends who have passed out or are very sick from drinking University drinking policies

### Social Access

Seven minor themes arose pertaining to social access to alcohol. Participants reported that alcohol was readily available from social sources and could usually be obtained within a matter of hours. All participants agreed that *friends/acquaintances who are older or have false age identification* were the easiest way to obtain alcohol. One female participant said, “I think most of the times, [you get alcohol from] older friends. That’s been my experience with it. Usually, I know friends that just pay their older friends to get alcohol.” Participants also mentioned *parents and siblings* as sources of alcohol.

Reported underage drinking in the *dormitories/residence halls* was quite prevalent, with participants indicating drinking was common in the dorms, and security or administration did not usually interfere with this drinking. The participants reported that Resident Advisors (RAs) are present for students’ safety and security, but they sometimes “turn their head” regarding alcohol issues. Participants reported being able to bring alcohol into the dorms by concealing it (e.g., in a backpack, wrapped as a Christmas present, or in a grocery bag). Many participants said that “you shouldn’t just walk in with alcohol not concealed because if a RA sees you walking down the hall with a bottle of alcohol, they’re gonna stop you.” Participants agreed that “it is a long process to actually write up a person [for underage drinking]. That’s why our RA used to always say, ‘I just don’t want to see it, if I don’t see it then I’m not going to report it’.”

Participants who were members of the *Greek system* agreed that being in sororities and fraternities did not make alcohol any easier to obtain, since alcohol

is everywhere at parties already. As described by one participant, “You can just show up at a party and take some, like, they don’t know who buys it, but it’s there.” However, one non-Greek participant stated, “I have a few friends who are in sororities and they don’t have parties but they said they don’t have to worry about it ‘cause all their other friends are frat guys and they just go over there to drink.”

The consensus from the participants was that drinking from *kegs* doesn’t occur at fraternity parties as much as it does at regular house parties, and sometimes even in the residence halls. One student reported, “Where I [lived] last year, someone brought a keg in the dorms. And, there were a lot of people and they didn’t get caught.” Additionally, underage students make deals with older friends to buy kegs for them. For instance, “When we had a kegger we said the two guys who got the kegs for us could drink for free. And that’s what we did to get them to get stuff for us.”

When asked about *shoulder tapping*, the majority of the participants would not attempt to ask a stranger outside of a liquor store to buy alcohol for them. In fact, they thought doing so would be “dorky and weird.” Shoulder tapping may sometimes be used as a last resort and if attempted, participants stated it would only be appropriate to approach someone younger-looking and casually dressed. One female participant said, “If I was waiting outside of the liquor store to ask someone, I’d probably ask a guy. And I would probably ask someone that looked more, I guess, like a frat boy. I would try to ask someone that looked more like a person that partied. Just because I would think that they’d buy it for me more easily.”

The final social access theme was ease of underage alcohol access at *sports stadiums*. One focus group participant reinforced this by saying, “It’s much easier at the stadium just because first of all, you could just have your friend go and get you one, and sit down and you can drink it and it’s not like at a restaurant where if they buy you something, you can’t sit at the table and drink it, ‘cause they know.”

### **Commercial Access**

Three minor themes pertaining to commercial access arose. First, participants reported frequent use of *false IDs*. Participants noted that false age IDs were obtained either by tampering with their own ID or using another person’s ID. One focus group participant characterized false IDs by saying, “most of my friends who have IDs just have other people’s IDs. If you’re at a bar and they’re like ‘this isn’t you’ then they can swipe it, and it’s real, it has holograms. And girls change how they look on a daily basis. You can wear your hair down or up, and it doesn’t look like you. . . . my license picture looks nothing like me.”

Secondly, with the recent *smoking ban* in all bars and restaurants in Minneapolis (where the University of Minnesota is located), the drinking environment has changed slightly. Most participants said the bar scene has not changed much since the smoking ban other than making access into the bars easier for underage individuals. This was explained by one participant, “One of my friends, she just

goes into the bar with a fake ID, comes outside and smokes, gives one of her other friends who hasn't gone in yet the same ID, to the same bouncer, and they don't even care. She'll just go in with the same exact ID."

The third minor theme pertained to *getting into bars and nightclubs*. In general, participants were aware of the risks of illegally getting into bars and nightclubs, but attempted entry nevertheless. Typical methods of entry include using false IDs, sneaking in, or relying on friends who are bouncers or bartenders. All participants agreed that some bars were more meticulous than others regarding checking IDs. One student noted, "A lot of bars have books of [legal age identifications] for the IDs from other states and they'll look at them more carefully because they know that people use them." In fact, one student commented that she "had a bartender friend that got fired from his job because he served a minor." On the other hand, one student said, "I think some bars don't really care that much either. I had an ID from Arizona and it looked nothing like me. Not only did it look nothing like me, but it said I was 5'11" and I'm 5'2". And I used it so many places. . . . I used it for almost 3 months and they looked, and they didn't care." Most participants agreed that bars overall are law abiding, however the focus group discussions made it clear that minors can drink depending on if they know the right places and the right people. It was clear that the reputation of bars is well-known among students. For example, "I think there are definitely bars where, I mean, I know there are places where I can go and just walk in and they would never card me. Everyone kind of knows of a place or two, and you may not tell everyone, because then, you won't be able to go in anymore. But everyone kinda knows . . . ."

### Drinking Culture

The final major theme discussed was the overall drinking culture. This led into a discussion of the age-21 minimum legal drinking age and University drinking policies. Participants all agreed that the *age-21 minimum legal drinking age* was unfair and not practical. Here are a few participants' comments:

I think since we're all under 21 we probably agree that it's not very appropriate. But, I feel that if you are 18 you can go and fight for your country . . . why aren't you able to make the decision to intake this substance into your body? You know what I mean? We should be able to have that right also.

I don't think it would make that much of a difference. I mean, if you look at countries, like France, or in Europe where the drinking age is lower, there is not as much abuse of alcohol. When you turn 21 here, people usually go crazy and just get wasted and get sort of . . . they pass out, throw up. Whereas, in France, you don't see that as much, it's part of their life . . . but it's not as big of a deal. I mean here, it's such a big deal to be able to drink. That's why we have fake IDs and so much stuff going on. If you're 18 you can do almost everything, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to drink.

Participants acknowledged that when *friends passed out from drinking or were very sick* from drinking something should be done. However, participants reported that underage students don't want to be caught themselves for underage drinking, so they are reluctant to contact the police. One student described this situation by saying, "Not only would the person who was drunk get in trouble, but if the person who brought him in was also drinking and underage, that person would also get a ticket. It's not only a risk for the drunk person but it's a risk for the person reporting." All participants agreed that friends are scared to turn in their friends because they are worried they are going to get caught. Participants all had the same opinion that something should be done in terms of getting their friends help when they are really drunk.

Participants generally seemed critical of *University policies* and favored a harm reduction approach rather than a "no tolerance" approach. As one participant said: "People are going to do it no matter what . . . it's better to make sure . . . they can drink safer or do something more than saying 'oh, no alcohol allowed' 'cause people are going to always do it."

## DISCUSSION

The focus group discussions confirmed that underage college students still have easy access to alcohol from both social and commercial sources of alcohol. One challenge of preventing underage youth from obtaining alcohol from social sources is that there are many different types of social providers and little is known about the context of their use. The underage college students who participated in our study suggest that one type of social source of alcohol—strangers approached outside alcohol establishments who agree to purchase alcohol for underage youth—is not a frequently used source among college students. Rather, friends are the most common source. The context of where they get alcohol from these friends varies. Although fraternity and sorority members often report higher rates of alcohol use than other students (McCabe et al., 2005; Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003), alcohol is readily available at parties located at other sites as well, including in private homes and residence halls. These findings add to the ongoing debate whether membership in the Greek system is associated with greater access to alcohol and/or higher consumption levels. Participants also agreed that alcohol is easy to obtain from friends in other settings such as sport stadiums.

Some possible strategies to address these social sources of alcohol include: 1) noisy assembly ordinances to enable law enforcement to break up underage drinking parties; 2) keg registration laws to identify and penalize individuals who purchase beer kegs and allow underage youth to consume alcohol from the kegs; 3) social host liability and social provider laws; 4) individuals other than Resident Advisors enforcing no-alcohol use rules in residence halls; and 5) limiting the number of alcoholic beverages per sale per person at sporting, community, and

campus events (Toomey & Wagenaar, 2002). The effectiveness of these strategies, however, has generally not been evaluated.

Despite decreases in the propensity for illegal alcohol sales to underage patrons, youth still have relatively easy access to alcohol from commercial providers (Britt et al., 2006; Freisthler et al., 2003). As the focus group participants indicated, in some situations they have access to alcohol from alcohol establishments that reportedly do not abide by MLDA laws. In these situations, regular enforcement campaigns may be effective in increasing compliance among licensed establishments (Wagenaar, Toomey, & Erickson, 2005). The students also indicated that different types of false identification are frequently used by underage college students. Various states, including the state of Minnesota, have been moving towards drivers' licenses that are more difficult to falsify although studies have not evaluated effects of these changes. In addition, this is the first study to assess how smoking bans in bars and nightclubs affect underage access to alcohol—several participants noted that the ban has made access into the bars easier for underage individuals due to the increased traffic among smokers moving in and out of the bars, resulting less stringent checking of age identification.

The focus groups' discussions also suggest that colleges students, like much of the general population, do not understand the rationale of the age-21 MLDA. Participants raised two of the most frequently raised arguments about the age-21 MLDA—individuals under age 21 participate in military combat so they should be able to drink, and that the less stringent drinking age laws in European countries are more appropriate. Numerous studies counter these common arguments, including many studies demonstrating the effectiveness of the age-21 MLDA law in reducing traffic crashes and consumption (Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002), as well as European studies citing major problems with underage drinking. These findings need to be disseminated to the college students as well as the general population.

Participants stated that underage students don't want to be caught themselves for underage drinking so they are reluctant to contact the police when a friend passes out or is sick from drinking. These findings provide support for amnesty policies for college campuses where an underage person who calls for medical assistance for someone who is intoxicated will not be charged with a campus alcohol violation.

Although qualitative research among small samples is usually a necessary step in developing effective prevention and intervention public health programs, there are some limitations to this approach. Even though we brought together a diverse sample of underage college students from a major university in the Midwest, we cannot be certain that comments, opinions, and perspectives from participants would be similar to all college students. Surveys of large numbers of students are needed to confirm the validity and generalizability of these findings. We acknowledge that although we conducted only two groups (vs. the recommended three or more; Krueger & Casey, 2000), we would not expect results to differ substantially with additional groups given the consistency of comments among the focus group

participants. There is also a slight risk that those motivated by the \$40 incentive are different in some way from those who did not participate. We attempted to bring together students from a variety of backgrounds; however these data are based on responses from only 19 students. For example, although we did gather some interesting data on alcohol issues in the Greek system, we had one representative from a fraternity and three from sororities. Regardless, participants showed a variety of opinions and informative perspectives about alcohol access. Similarly, we attempted to recruit even numbers of male and female participants, however we only had two men participate. Although more men participants would have given us additional information on sources of alcohol among male college students, results may have not differed substantially with more male participants given a recent national survey of college students in the United States which shows that most alcohol-related behaviors were very similar among male and female college students (<http://www.acha-ncha.org/data/ATODquestions.html>).

Despite limitations, this study contributes to the underage drinking research literature. This study provides *new* information about specific situations in which underage youth might obtain alcohol, such as shoulder tapping and at bars where smoking bans are in place. In addition, the results provide *updated* information about additional sources of alcohol among underage college students. Results from these focus group discussions also provide information similar to that obtained through focus groups conducted over a decade ago among high school students (JonesWebb et al., 1997; Wagenaar et al., 1993), suggesting that we still have significant work to do to create changes in the underage drinking environment. Our results provided useful information to develop a larger quantitative study assessing shoulder-tapping practices among youth (Toomey et al., 2007), and as the focus groups of high school students conducted in the 1990s were used to inform the effective intervention program Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol (Wagenaar et al., 2000), results from our focus groups can help inform future interventions to reduce youth access to alcohol and allocation of public funds to address this important issue.

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