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U OF MINNESOTA REPORT COMPARES ALCOHOL POLICIES ACROSS NATION

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL--A report released this week by the University of Minnesota provides the country's first and most comprehensive reference guide to alcohol-related laws and policies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Alcohol Policies in the United States: Highlights from the 50 States, being widely disseminated to policymakers and legislators across the country, provides information on patterns and trends of selected alcohol policies around the country and on the status of the policies in each state.

According to the University of Minnesota research, numerous changes have occurred in state alcohol policies over the past few decades; in particular, considerable progress has been made in lowering general and youth blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits for drivers and in enacting laws requiring training of servers and sellers of alcoholic beverages. Several states also have enacted laws requiring the registration of beer kegs sold to private citizens. The report also reveals little change in state and federal taxes levied on alcohol across the United States, despite current research that shows the effectiveness of higher alcohol taxes in reducing alcohol-related problems.

"The report is designed to serve as a policy tool to examine, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of existing state laws across the country and to fill the gaps in existing research," said Alexander Wagenaar, Ph.D., director of the University's School of Public Health Alcohol Epidemiology Program. "It's important to understand and compare state policies around alcohol because the impact of alcohol use is profound." Alcohol use contributes to hundreds of thousands of injuries, illnesses and deaths each year in the United States and billions of dollars in social costs. Despite significant changes in some alcohol policies and the considerable decline in such alcohol-related problems as traffic crash and liver cirrhosis fatalities, alcohol problem rates remain staggeringly high.

The University conducted the national study as part of the ImpacTeen Project. ImpacTeen is a five-year interdisciplinary partnership of nationally recognized alcohol, tobacco and other drug experts in the fields of economics, etiology, epidemiology, law, political science, public policy, psychology and sociology. Administered by the University of Illinois at Chicago's Health Research and Policy Centers and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, ImpacTeen builds on existing information about youth alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug use by collecting data on trends, markets, policies, legislation, enforcement, treatment, educational programs, advertising and other environmental factors. The University of Minnesota is leading the alcohol component of the project.

The University's research data will be cross-referenced with nationally representative surveys of youth to evaluate the relative effectiveness of specific prevention programs and policies in reducing youth alcohol use and associated health and social problems. A primary goal of the ImpacTeen Project is to provide science-based information to enable legislators and policy-makers to develop effective policy and make well-informed decisions about the best use of limited dollars for alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention.

Known for their long-standing work in the field of environmental approaches to reducing the harms related to alcohol, University of Minnesota researchers believe the report provides a valuable resource when considering changes in state alcohol policies intended to further reduce problems associated with alcohol use, including serious problems connected to underage drinking.

"Once cross-referenced with trends in youth alcohol use, this report will be an extremely valuable resource for those who make decisions on where to spend limited dollars to address those issues – such as mandatory server and seller training, enforcement of penalties for drinking and driving, and treatment and education programs," said Wagenaar.

The report examines four major areas of alcohol law: distribution systems, purchase and sales, taxation, and drinking and driving, and is organized into three main sections: 1) a brief description of each policy; 2) a national overview, including research findings in each policy area and summary information on the status of each policy across the United States; and 3) a state highlights section presenting detailed data on the policies for each state as well as a national average.

Data were collected on state alcohol laws from a variety of legal sources, including state session laws, codified statutes, case law, regulatory law, and law review articles. Researchers also reviewed technical reports and reports of trade associations and advocacy groups. Funding by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism also supported the data collection.

"While our research will help in making tough decisions, it's not just one study that is going to provide the answers," said Wagenaar. "Communities and states need to understand the issues around alcohol use and then determine what solutions best meet their needs in order to develop a comprehensive effort to prevent alcohol-related disease and injury, and ImpacTeen is providing the opportunity to continue these scientific studies."

The complete report can be found on the Internet at www.epi.umn.edu/alcohol.