

Underage Drinking Among College Students

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## **Health Behavior and Statistics**

The purpose of this assignment is to examine the factors that contribute to underage drinking among college students and strategies that can be used to prevent it. Evidence shows that this is a relevant topic since alcohol is the most commonly used drug among adolescents (Komro & Toomey, 2011). Shocking amounts of youth engage in the consumption of alcohol before the legal age of 21. The initial alcohol use among adolescents (those who have a whole drink or more) start during early adolescence around ages 13-14 and the number sharply rises until it plateaus around the age of 21 (Masten, Faden, Zucker, & Spear, 2008). Similar studies show that all amounts of alcohol use also increase with age (Masten et al., 2008). Keeping with the trend, the number of binge-drinking days, which are defined as consuming large amounts of alcohol in a short amount of time with serious negative health effects, sharply increases during adolescents and then continually decreases thereafter (Masten et al., 2008). Similarly, 80-90% of college students drink alcohol and 40-45% of these students engage in binge drinking, defined as five or more alcoholic beverages during one night (Haines & Spear, 1996).

## **Negative Health Effects**

Drinking underage while in college has serious, negative health effects on students. Most of the underage drinking done in college is binge drinking, which is the most dangerous type of alcohol consumption. Binge drinking has been known to have negative effects on behaviors including being a factor in date rape, vandalism, accidents and unintended sexual activities (Haines & Spear, 1996). Some other negative consequences of this style of drinking include academic difficulties, antisocial behavior, health and psychosocial problems, and other risky behaviors (Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002).

## **Healthy People 2020 Objective**

Healthy People 2020 is aimed to improve the health of the country in a decade with specific topics and objectives pointed towards this goal. Decreasing underage drinking among college students would fall under the category of Adolescent Health. The goal is to improve the healthy development, health, safety, and well being of adolescents and young adults (*Healthy People 2020: Adolescent Health*, 2014). This is important because

adolescence is a time of growth and transition, which is highly influenced by their surrounding. These influences shape who these adolescents are and who they will become. They are forming habits and making decisions that will affect the rest of their life. In this assignment, the focus will be on improving the health of adolescents by examining the factors that go into underage drinking and planning ways to improve the health and well being of adolescents in the United States.

### **Intrapersonal factors on beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge**

Beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge are all considered predisposing factors for behavior change. For one to view how these factors affect underage college students' views on drinking, we must first analyze the interaction of these beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge intrapersonally among adolescents. With the boom of technology within the past 20 years, more young people are becoming exposed to things of the "adult world" at a younger age. One of these main things is advertisements. Whether they're on the television, Internet, or billboards on the highway, advertisements shape the thoughts and attitudes of those who are viewing them. According to a Grube and Wallack study in 1994 on how television beer advertisements affect schoolchildren's drinking knowledge, beliefs, and intentions, showed positive correlations between exposure to beer advertisements and likelihood to drink as adults (Grube & Wallack, 1994). The children that were more aware of beer advertisements more positive beliefs about drinking, intended to drink as adults, and had more knowledge of beer brands and slogans (Grube & Wallack, 1994). Though this study was aimed at children and their habits into adulthood, it's safe to say that underage college students are even more exposed to the influences of beer advertisements and the effect on their attitudes of underage drinking. The study also proved that many schoolchildren didn't understand the negative aspects of drinking, showing that their beliefs about drinking are largely being influenced by media's association of drinking with romance, sociability, and relaxation (Grube & Wallack, 1994). Advertising has a large portion of making people believe that drinking is fun and relaxing, even for those who are underage, and those beliefs affect what adolescents value: a fun carefree lifestyle. College students' attitudes towards drinking are that it is a sociable and fun past time, while their knowledge of the negative effects of it are limited.

**Intrapersonal Factors: Demographics and SES**

One's beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge are largely influenced by their demographics and socio-economic status. One's demographics and socio-economic status has a large influence on the way that one is raised to interact within ourselves and with others. According to a study done by Komro and Toomey in 2011, factors that have a high correlation with alcohol use among adolescents include low socio-economic status and minimal parental education, and other parental and peer influenced factors (Komro & Toomey, 2011). Families in a low socio-economic situation are more likely to be exposed to stressful situations, and stress is a high influencing factor early alcohol use (Masten et al., 2008). These families are also more likely to have less parental involvement and supervision of their adolescents' lives due to increasing demands on their time and attention, which lead to poor parent-child relationships, having a high influence on alcohol use during adolescence (Komro & Toomey, 2011).

**Intrapersonal Factors: Psychological and Personality characteristics**

One's psychological and personality characteristics largely influence their likelihood to engage in underage drinking in college. College is a time where most adolescents are living on their own for the first time and are figuring out who they want to be and what they want to stand for. This newfound freedom also leads to many risky behaviors, experimenting with drinking is one. There are certain personality traits that are risk factors for students to engage in underage drinking in college. According to a study done by Cyders, Flory, Rainer, and Smith in 2009, there are five behaviors with higher likelihood to engage in risky behaviors such as underage drinking: lack of planning, lack of perseverance, negative urgency (the tendency to act rashly when distressed), positive urgency (the tendency to act rashly when extremely positive), and sensation seeking (Cyders, Flory, Rainer, & Smith, 2009). Obviously, some personality traits are more likely to lead someone to engage in risky behaviors than others and the first years of college are the most apparent time that adolescents discover these traits within themselves.

**Interpersonal Factors: Social Support**

Family and close friends provide a huge support system for students throughout their college years. The first few years of college are tough living on your own for the first time, which includes making new friends and figuring out what kind of person you want to be. It's during these stressful times that college students look to stress relievers. If they don't have people that they can talk to in their lives, students are more likely to engage in underage drinking to relieve their stress. Those who have "family disruption and conflict," "weak family bonds," and "low parental supervision" are social influences that favor adolescence alcohol use (Komro & Toomey, 2011). Close friends are also huge parts of one's social support. Friends, peer group norms, and social policies are also factors that influence underage drinking (Masten et al., 2008). Relationships with family and close friends are extremely important for social support, especially in high stress situations like the first few years of college. If one doesn't have this support, then they are more likely to engage in underage drinking.

**Interpersonal Factors: Social Interactions**

Social interactions are largely shaped throughout one's late teens/ early 20s. The social interactions during the first few years of college largely involve alcohol, even though most students are underage at this time. Access to alcohol is much easier during this time of life than it was in the past and the emphasis on social interactions is also increased, which has led to this view of underage drinking as a "rite of passage" by many parents as well as adolescents (Masten et al., 2008). Interestingly enough, antisocial personality and family history of antisocial behavior are also risk factors for alcohol use among adolescence (Masten et al., 2008). This proves the importance placed on social interactions and strength that alcohol has, or is viewed to have, in reducing barriers that may be preventing these interactions.

**Interpersonal Factors: Other Social Influences**

Not only does the presence or absence of these social influences affect underage drinking among college students, but the beliefs that others have towards this behavior is likely to influence how likely one is to partake in it. Social norms help provide a theory that

states that “our behavior is influenced by incorrect perceptions of how other members of our social groups think or act” (Berkowitz, 2004). The key to this definition is “incorrect perceptions” meaning that what we think other people believe is more important than their actual beliefs or actions (Berkowitz, 2004). This misperception is what drives college students to constantly evaluate others’ opinions on certain topics, particularly underage drinking. If their family or peers have a favorable view of drinking, then they are more likely to drink underage. The first few years of college are key in developing opinions and beliefs, as well as connecting with others, which is why social norms have a greater impact on behavior than biological, personality, familial, religious, cultural, and other influences (Berkowitz, 2004).

### **Organizations and Social Institutions**

College is tough for many adolescents with the stress of newfound freedom, studying for classes, figuring out who their morals, and more, which is why many clubs and organizations have been created to help alleviate this stress as well as to form bonds among students with common interests. Involvement in these institutions, or lack of involvement, can affect an underage college student’s decision to drink or not. Many students choose to join a social fraternity or sorority. According to Clemson University’s Fraternity and Sorority Life page, twenty three percent of Clemson students are members of one of the 42 Inter/National Greek Organizations (*Clemson University: Fraternity and Sorority Life*, 2014). An article in 2008 in *The Harold Journal* reported that a study that showed alcohol use and binge drinking rates are noticeably higher in Greek organizations than in comparison to the student population. The percentage of students who used alcohol within the last 30 days was 65%, while among Greek students the percentage jumped to 90% (Stevens, 2008). Of the freshman (ages 17-19), half reported to using alcohol within the last month (Stevens, 2008). The rate of binge drinking among students was 40%, while the Greek percentage also jumped up to an alarming 80% (Stevens, 2008). Of the 390 students surveyed, 273 were between the ages of 17 to 20 (Stevens, 2008). Many people stereotype Greek students as “crazy partiers” for their emphasis on alcohol at many of their events. This may influence underage students to drink due to the easy access, peer pressure, and social stigma towards drinking within their Greek community.

**Physical Environment**

The physical environment of many college campuses is encouraging for drinking among students, even those who are underage. Clemson University, for example, has bars on seemingly every corner of downtown, which is within walking distance of campus. One thing that restricts underage students from drinking downtown are the police officers that continually patrol the bars to keep people safe as well as to enforce the legal drinking age. Though those that are under 21 are allowed to go into bars, they must get large X's marked on their hands so that police officers can easily identify who is legally allowed to drink and who is not. The problem with this is that fake ID's are widely used on college campuses and many bars don't check closely enough to recognize a fake ID. Another environmental factor is the availability of alcohol at fraternity parties. Many fraternity houses are located on or near most campuses involving only a walk or short drive to attend. These parties consist of large amounts of alcohol and most don't ID drinkers, making it very easy and even acceptable for students to drink underage. These environmental factors of easy access to alcohol within close distances to campus whether downtown, at fraternity parties, or even at house parties, positively affect students' decisions to drink underage.

**Public Policy, Laws, and Regulations**

The biggest legal restriction combating drinking among adolescent college students is the legal drinking age. The National Minimum Drinking Age Act that was passed on July 17, 1984 prohibits anyone under the age of 21 from purchasing and publically possessing alcoholic beverages and has been the most successful method to decrease the adverse affects of alcohol on adolescents and even lower the amount of alcohol consumption among under 21-year-olds (Wechsler, Lee, & Nelson, & Kuo, 2002). There have also been passed other laws in certain states that require those selling alcohol be 21 years or older and limiting purchase of alcohol for high volume sales and consumption (Wechsler et al., 2002). Colleges are even required to inform their students about the laws that regulate alcohol use, including the MLDA, to warn them about the consequences from drinking underage (Wechsler et al., 2002). These federal, state, and local laws are put in place to help deter college students from drinking underage and the adverse consequences that comes from it.

**Predisposing, Enabling, and Reinforcing Determinants**

Predisposing factors to underage drinking among college students are considered the antecedents to the behavior, which include the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that college students have towards underage drinking. These predisposing factors can also be called intrapersonal factors. Personality is one of the main determinants of underage college drinking that falls under this category. The transition into a new environment, college for example, causes personality to have a very large influence on behavior and the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs toward this behavior (Cyders et al., 2009). These personality traits are related to low conscientiousness, an emotional-based disposition, and sensation seeking (Cyders et al., 2009). Another main determinant is the affect of mass media on the attitudes of college students towards drinking. Many adolescents perceive drinkers as being attractive, athletic, or successful due to advertising campaigns (Grube & Wallack, 1994). They also perceive both the amount of alcohol regularly consumed by their peers to be higher than in actuality as well as the amount of their peers that actually drink (Haines & Spear, 1996). All of these factors predispose college students to be more likely to engage in underage drinking.

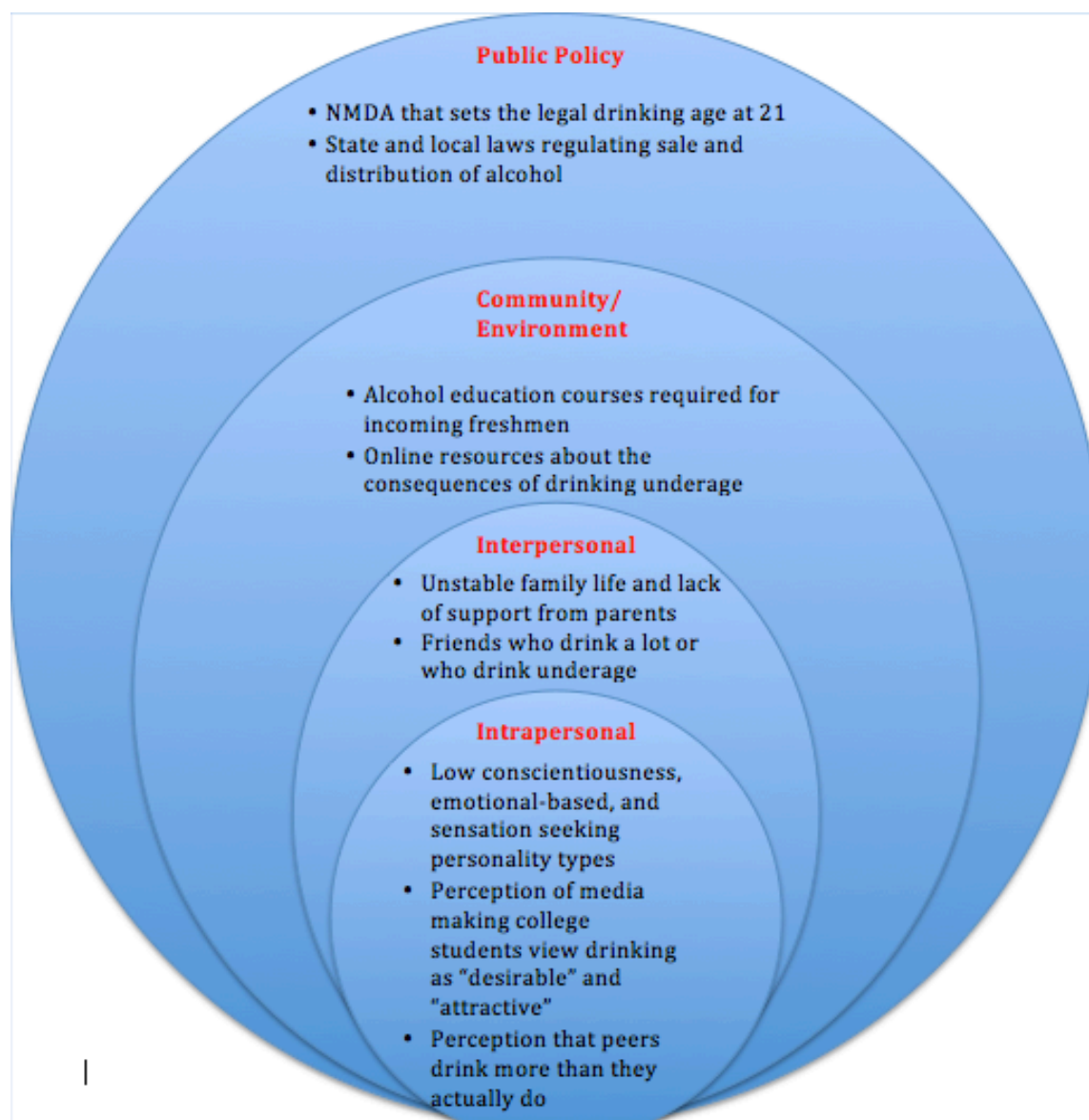
Enabling factors to underage drinking among college students are considered the antecedents that facilitate behavior change, which include the availability and accessibility of health resources that affect underage drinking as well as the laws, regulations, and policies set in place. The National Minimum Drinking Age Act that was passed in 1984 and prevents adolescents under the age of 21 is the most successful method for combating underage drinking (Wechsler et al., 2002). There are also additional state laws that monitor the sale of alcohol (Wechsler et al., 2002). There are also abundant resources on the Internet that provide information on negative effects of underage drinking and ways to manage drinking in a safe. Many colleges require their incoming freshmen to participate in courses that focus on alcohol education and awareness. All of these factors enable college students to make informed decisions about whether or not to drink underage.

Reinforcing factors to underage drinking among college students are considered the interactions with others that provide rewards or feedback for the behavior, which include interactions with peers, family members, co-workers, health providers, etc. Family and



friends provide a huge support system for students throughout their college years. Students who have a good relationship with their friends and a stable family life are less likely to use alcohol as an adolescent (Komro & Toomey, 2011). Conversely, those students with friends or family who use alcohol frequently are more likely to drink underage.

**Figure 1. Social Ecological Model Graph**



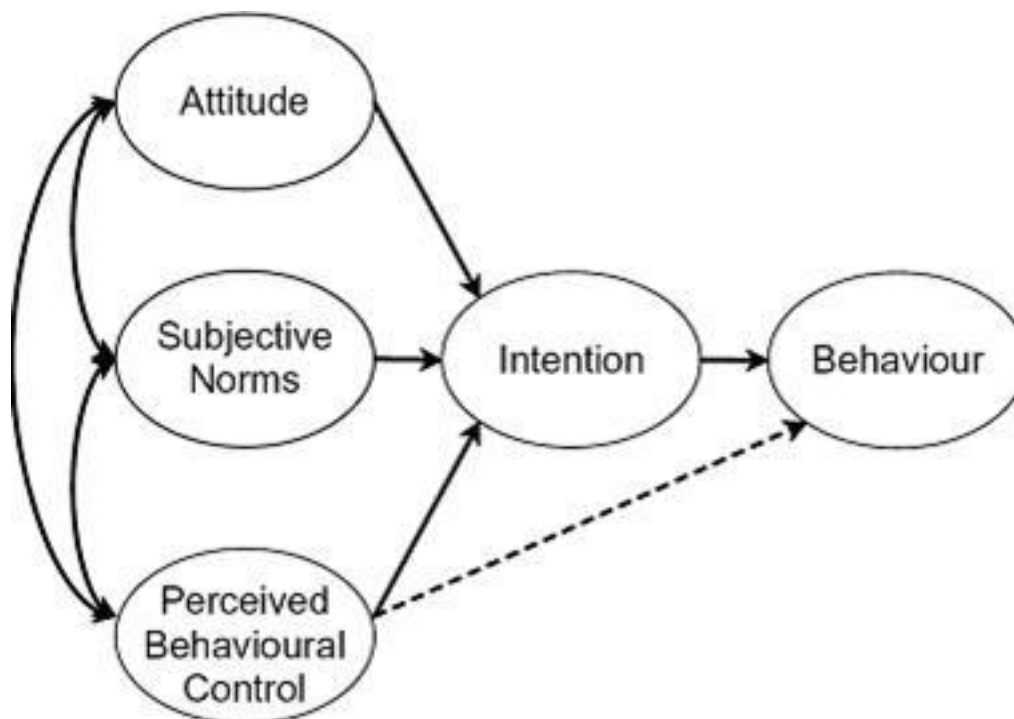
### **Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior**

The Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior is a set of two theories that have been combined into one; the Theory of Reasoned Action was the original theory with the addition of the Theory of Planned Behavior later. This model focuses on a rational decision-making process that connects people's attitudes and their behavior (Ajzen, 2004). The main constructs of this theory are one's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control towards the behavior (Ajzen, 2004). These all feed into one's intention to perform the behavior, which is the key construct of the theory. The interactions between these constructs can be shown in Figure 2 (Dubois, Barreteau, & Souche, 2013). Each construct is affected by other factors as well. Attitude is affected by one's belief that the behavior is associated with a certain outcome (Behavioral Belief) and the value that one has attached to that outcome (Evaluation). Subjective norms are affected by one's belief about others' approval or disapproval of the behavior (Normative Belief) and one's motivation to comply with what others think (Motivation to comply). Perceived behavioral control is affected by the perceived likelihood that influential conditions exist (Control Belief) and the weighted influence of these means (Perceived Power) (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992). All of these components are motivational factors that affect their larger construct, which in turn drive the behavioral intention.

The Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior can be applied to why college students drink underage. By first viewing the reasons that this occurs, we can effectively design intervention methods that target certain constructs. Many students go to college desiring a fun experience and close relationship with their peers. Some students think that drinking will help them achieve this goal. Many intend to drink underage upon entering college because they have a positive attitude towards drinking, they believe that their friends also have positive attitudes towards drinking, and others' opinions heavily influence their actions. As previously discussed, mass media's portrayal of drinkers as attractive, athletic, or successful lead many incoming college students to believe that by drinking they will achieve the "fun experience" of college, close friends to share these experiences with, and that they will become these qualities that the advertisements portray (Grube & Wallack, 1994). The value of achieving these outcomes is high because many students believe that if they aren't experiencing college in this way that they will fall behind

their peers, whether it's in success, experience, friendship, etc. These both affect college students' positive beliefs about drinking underage in college. The subjective norms towards underage drinking are heavily influenced by one's friends and family. When one has family and/or friends that are supportive of drinking, it makes them more likely to drink underage upon entering college. If one is easily swayed by others and thinks highly of these friends and/or family's opinions, then they are more motivated to comply with what they think. Many students have also engaged in underage drinking before entering college and may believe that they don't have the ability to stop. They have many perceptions (most untrue) about the way that they will be viewed if they don't continue their habit in college. They place the control of their behavior in the opinion of others rather than the power that they have to change their behavior. All of these factors compound to affect the intention of students to engage in underage drinking. Once we know the interactions between these factors, we can effectively plan interventions to help students change their behavior of underage drinking in college.

**Figure 2. Theory Of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior**



**Intervention Plan**

Strategies to prevent underage drinking among college students have included, but are not limited to: intrapersonal, interpersonal, school-based, community wide, and policy-focused interventions. According to the Theory of Triadic Influence (TTI) the three biggest components that affect human behavior are a person's social characteristics, their current social situation, and their cultural environment (Komro & Toomey, 2011). Knowing the influential factors of underage drinking helped Komro & Toomey (2011) create prevention strategies that led them to implement programs aimed at reducing the alcohol intake of minors. The prevention approaches that they have implemented combine the effects of personal characteristics of adolescents with their social world and largely the environmental factors that all shape their decisions (Komro & Toomey, 2011). The ones that they used were school, extracurricular, family, policy, and community strategies, and some that included a combination of multiple strategies (Komro & Toomey, 2011). The best prevention methods used multiple strategies that focused on countering or changing the messages that adolescents receive about alcohol in order to hopefully influence them not to drink underage.

The best intervention plan to reduce the amount of underage college students that consume alcohol would be one that was focused on incoming freshman. Personality is one of the main determinants that influence adolescents to drink. Coming into college is an important transitional period that causes adolescents to turn inward and evaluate themselves and who they are and who they desire to be. During this transitional period colleges should require an Alcohol Education course for incoming students to take that explains the negative impacts of alcohol on themselves and also on others. This course should explain the facts to counter the societal norms that make adolescents believe that drinking makes them attractive, athletic, or successful. Since the influence friends is important during this transition, the facts should also show adolescents the truth about how much their peers actually drink because most mistakenly believe that their peers drink more than they actually do (Haines and Spear). In addition, the course should explain the importance of finding a positive support group in friends and family members, since those who lack that support in their lives are more likely to turn to alcohol use and abuse (Komro & Toomey, 2011). The school should also take responsibility in communicating to

all of its students its policies towards underage drinking and the actions that it would take if these policies are broken. The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act set the minimum drinking age to 21 and the school should follow this law (Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002). The school should be consistent in the way that it enforces the national and local laws towards underage drinking, and this should be made aware to all of the school's incoming students in a mandatory Alcohol Awareness assembly and reinforced in the Alcohol Education course. It's the school's job to keep the students informed of the facts and consequences of drinking underage.

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