

Group says nearly one-third of teens binge drink regularly

Alcohol industry, government dispute advocates' figures

By JANELLE CARTER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nearly a third of high school students say they engage in binge drinking at least once a month, according to a new report by an advocacy group. The government estimates that underage drinkers account for 11.4 percent of all alcohol consumed in the United States.

"Underage drinking has reached epidemic proportions in America," said Joseph Califano Jr., president of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, which issued the report yesterday.

The report, which analyzes two years worth of research, "is a clarion call for national mobilization to curb underage drinking," said Califano, who was U.S. secretary of health, education and welfare under President Jimmy Carter.

Califano's group also asserted that 12- to 20-year-olds accounted for 25 percent of all alcoholic beverages consumed in the United States.

That contention prompted the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the government agency that conducted the 1998 survey cited by Califano's group, to issue a statement saying underage drinkers account for 11.4 percent of U.S. alcohol consumption.

"REGARDLESS OF any discrepancies . . . any alcohol use before age 21 is unacceptable and against the law," said the agency, an arm of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Citing the government figures, the alcoholic beverage industry accused Califano's group of falsifying its numbers.

"It looks like Mr. Califano and CASA have adopted Enron's accounting practices," said Phil Lynch, a spokesman for Louisville-based Brown-Forman Corp., whose products include Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey.

Frank Coleman, a spokesman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, called Califano "a serial abuser of statistics for sensational purposes."

Both the government and the advocacy group's percentages were based on a 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse in which

25,500 people, including 9,759 between 12 and 20, were questioned in their homes.

While the 12-20 age group represented 38 percent of those surveyed, they account for only about 13 percent of the total U.S. population, according to 2000 Census Bureau figures. The government says it weighted its survey results to account for the age discrepancy between its survey sample and the total population.

Noting this, the alcohol industry said it felt it had to respond to the advocacy group's report quickly.

"We decided, as an industry, we had to respond aggressively and quickly on this because, if we didn't, this distortion would become part of the lexicon of the society," Lynch said.

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Califano made a basic proposition that underage drinking is a huge and growing problem, Lynch said. "It's not huge and growing. It's not insignificant, but it's not growing."

The Distilled Spirits Council labeled the 25 percent figure a distortion and a lie and referred reporters to alcohol researcher David Hanson, professor of sociology at the State University of New York, Potsdam.

Hanson said the figure defies both common sense and most other research into underage drinking.

"They say people under the age of 21 are consuming 25 percent of the alcohol in the country," he said. "If you take the dollar value of that and divide it by the number of 12- to 20-year-olds in the country, they'd have to average four drinks a day and be consuming over \$1,500 worth of alcohol a year."

Hanson said the likely figure for underage consumption probably is less than half the center's estimate.

While the substance-abuse administration, which produced the 1998 data, said underage drinkers account for about 11.4 percent of alcohol consumed in the United States, the spirits council estimates 11.8 percent.

"There are a lot of people out there working hard on this, correcting misperceptions of how much people drink," Hanson said. "These exaggerated reports are countering the only effective program we have."

In an interview, Califano defended his group's decision not to make that adjustment.

"The household survey is taken by going into a home and asking parents if you can talk to their children. If parents are in the living room and you (the surveyor and the teen) are in the kitchen, the odds of getting a really solid answer are slim. So there's a tremendous underestimate in reporting," Califano said.

INDEED, MORE teens reported drinking in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in schools by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, than they do on the annual National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, which is conducted in homes.

In the school-based survey, almost half the teens aged 14-18 have tried the new alcopops — fruit-flavored malt-based alcoholic beverages with names like Hard Lemonade, Smirnoff Ice, Skyy Blue, Tequila and Hooper's Hooch — which are particularly appealing to young people because of their sweet taste. Indeed, teens were three times likelier to know about these drinks than adults, and among 14- to 16-year olds, twice as many preferred such alcopops to beer or mixed drinks.

While teen-agers drink less frequently than adults, they tend to drink larger, more dangerous, amounts at any one time. The study found that at whatever age teen boys and girls begin to drink, they almost always continue to drink as they get older.

Some of the advocacy group's report's other findings:

■ Eighty-seven percent of adults who drink had their first drink before age 21.

■ The gender gap for drinking is disappearing. Female ninth-graders were just as likely to be drinkers as male ninth-graders.

■ Eighty-one percent of high school students have consumed alcohol, compared with 70 percent who have smoked cigarettes and 47 percent who have used marijuana.

■ Most teens who experiment with alcohol continue using it. Among high school seniors who had tried alcohol, 91.3 percent still were drinking in the 12th grade.

Staff writer David Goetz and The New York Times contributed to this story.