

## **Problems with underage drinking not just DUI**

**By Liane Petras**

In the 1980s, Pennsylvanians started understanding that we could prevent drunk driving. We also saw the connection between underage drinking and underage DUI. Teenagers and their passengers—all too young to be drinking any alcohol—were dying on our roadways. Once we saw the problem of underage DUI, we focused on keeping kids from drinking and driving and from riding with a drunken friend. “Key parties” were born—take their keys at the door, and don’t let them drive if they are drunk.

At the time, these efforts made sense. What got lost was that the alcohol problems went beyond drinking and driving. Even when kids weren’t drinking and driving, they were still drinking and becoming addicted to alcohol, having school trouble and engaging in risky behavior.

Today, we are starting to see the larger picture. A good example of this new insight is SADD. For years, SADD stood for Students Against Drunk Driving. Then, the students recognized that drunk driving was related to other risky behavior. They renamed the organization Students Against Destructive Decisions.

Drunk driving and underage drinking destroy young lives. In addition, SADD students focus on other destructive behaviors like suicide, violence and other substance abuse. These behaviors are inextricably linked with alcohol.

Why is alcohol the number one youth drug problem in Pennsylvania?

Here are three reasons why:

- 1) Alcohol is easy to get because it is legal for anyone 21 and older.
- 2) Attitudes about alcohol haven’t kept up with science. As we learn how alcohol harms children and what does—and doesn’t—work in reducing underage drinking and alcohol abuse,

society doesn't listen to the researchers.

3) The relationship between alcohol and destructive behavior isn't always clearly understood by those affected. When a teenager dies in a car crash, most people ask whether alcohol was involved. However, when a teenager commits suicide, most people don't ask whether the teen had been drinking at the time or had been abusing alcohol or other drugs in the months beforehand.

Students from upper elementary school and into the first college years are vulnerable to the lure of alcohol. Every day that society delays in addressing the problem of underage drinking costs \$145 million. Each day, underage drinking costs us the lives of 23 children.

In September the National Academy of Sciences issued a landmark report: "Reducing Underage Drinking—A Collective Responsibility." The report includes recommendations that will reduce underage drinking and prevent underage DUI, teen suicide and juvenile crime. Of course, this will only be possible if we heed the recommendations. This will only be possible if we accept that reducing underage drinking is all of our responsibilities.

To do that, we need to be clear about what the words "responsible," "responsibly" and "responsibility" mean. We know what these words mean in everyday life. However, when we begin talking about alcohol, the words have taken on new meanings.

We hold kids *responsible* for underage drinking; after all, they are the ones making the destructive decisions. Strangely, we forget about the word responsible when it comes to the adult who bought the alcohol—wouldn't want to offend a taxpaying voter.

We like "drink *responsibly*" campaigns because they sound good. However, there is no such thing as responsible drinking for those under 21. And lots of visibility for these campaigns sends the message that drinking alcohol is what adults do. These campaigns don't include the

idea that drinking alcohol is a choice and that it is possible to choose not to drink. These campaigns don't include the dark side of alcohol consumption.

*Responsibility* is a favorite word of alcohol industry lobbyists when they blame underage drinking on kids or bad parenting. It's convenient to point the finger elsewhere when 20 percent of the alcohol in the US each year is consumed by underage drinkers. Would the industry lose 20 percent of its annual profit if we solved the underage drinking problem?

SADD students figured out that underage DUI was only the tip of the iceberg. When they did, they acted quickly, first to change a symbol, the name of their organization, and then to change the substance by expanding their activities to prevent other destructive decisions.

The National Academy of Sciences has painted the larger picture for underage drinking: only focusing on kids hasn't been enough to protect our children. The NAS has shown us what we need to do. It is up to us to accept our collective responsibility—and act upon it.

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Liane Petras is the coordinator of Pennsylvania SADD, a member of Pennsylvanians Against Underage Drinking. Parents and others looking for ways to protect children can visit [www.padui.org/SADD/index.html](http://www.padui.org/SADD/index.html) or [www.alcoholpolicysolutions.net](http://www.alcoholpolicysolutions.net). Pennsylvania SADD is holding its 13<sup>th</sup> annual conferences at the Seven Springs Mountain Resort on November 3 and at the Lancaster Host Resort & Conference Center November 5, 2003.