



# Under-Age Drinking

*Waln Brown*

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America's attitudes toward drinking can be traced back to the early settlers who colonized this country. Colonial Americans believed that the use of alcohol was an acceptable, even essential part of life. The tavern was the focal point for business, political, social and community activities. Some historians refer to colonial times as the "wettest" period in American history. Everybody drank - men, women and children.

Colonial America had no laws restricting children from drinking alcohol. Prior to 1700, the use of alcohol was primarily a family-controlled activity. The family meal included beer and wine, and boys as young as 12 drank in taverns. Fathers taught their sons to drink and were proud when they participated in this "manly" activity. Colonial America did not have a great concern about alcohol abuse or "underage drinking."

In the 1700s, American drinking patterns changed dramatically, creating sanctions regarding the use of alcohol. Large numbers of unmarried men immigrated to America during the period when distilled spirits such as whiskey became the dominant drink. Public drunkenness and wild destructive behavior were common. Citizens grew concerned about the abuse of alcohol and the threats it posed. The American "temperance movement" was initiated to combat the excessive consumption of alcohol.

For nearly two centuries, the temperance movement has influenced American attitudes toward all forms of alcohol. Its philosophy and approach has shifted from reliance on moral persuasion against drunkenness to legal enforcement of all alcohol use. Various states prohibited the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic beverages in the 1850s, 1880s and early 1900s. A national "Prohibition Amendment" went into effect in 1919 and remained in effect until its repeal in 1933. More recently, the legal age for drinking has risen. The relationships between age and alcohol use has become a major social and political concern.

Underage drinking poses many problems for contemporary America. The relationship between underage drinking and driving is probably the most current and visible danger. Every year, thousands of underage drinkers are involved in traffic accidents. Many underage drinkers are injured or killed (and injure and kill other people) because they drive while intoxicated. The United States Department of Transportation consider underage drinking one of the greatest hazards in contemporary society.

Perhaps the greatest hazard of underage drinking involves the effects of alcohol on children. Alcohol is the drug most commonly used by children and is addictive. Its physical effects can damage body organs and even cause death from overdose. Alcohol abuse can cause emotional, behavioral and social problems that can seriously impair a child's abilities and potential. Family life can be devastated.

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