The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking

The Surgeon General has published a guide to action for communities to use in their underage age drinking prevention efforts. In this guide, the Surgeon General indicates that nearly 10.8 million youth, ages 12-20, are underage drinkers. What are some of the facts regarding underage drinking that a community may use to mobilize for action? Here are some examples of what the Surgeon General’s report calls “Fast Facts:”

- Most young people who start drinking before age 21 do so when they are about 13-14 years old.
- Many more young people use alcohol than tobacco or illegal drugs. By age 18, more than 70% of teens have had at least one drink.
- Of adults who started drinking before age 15, around 40% say they have had signs of alcohol dependence. That rate is four times higher than for adults who didn’t drink until they were age 21.
- Rates of death and injury nearly triple between the early teen years and early adult life. Dangerous activities like underage drinking play a large role.
- Approximately 5,000 people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking: this includes about 1,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 as a result of homicides, 300 from suicide, as well as hundreds from other injuries such as falls, burns, and drownings.
- Underage alcohol use increases the risk of carrying out, or being a victim of, a physical or sexual assault.
• Underage alcohol use can increase the risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

• Youth with histories of behavior problems, such as delinquent activity, impulsive actions, and difficulty controlling responses, are more likely to use alcohol than are other young people.

• Youth with unusually strong desires for new experiences and sensations, and for those with histories of family conflict and stress and/or alcohol problems, are more likely to use alcohol than are other people.

It’s never too early to start talking to young people about the dangers of underage drinking. According to the Surgeon General’s report, adolescents say that they rely on adults in their lives more than anyone else to help them make tough decisions and to provide good advice. For more information regarding underage drinking and community action, please see “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking: A Guide to Action for Communities.” Or visit the Surgeon General’s website at www.surgeongeneral.gov

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