

## *Talk It Up! Column*

### Youth and Alcohol are Not a Good Mix

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Last month, a young lady lost her life while attending a Halloween party in Orange County. This is an absolute tragedy and our hearts go out to the family, friends and all those impacted by her death. Unfortunately, it sometimes takes this kind of event for a community to talk about the potential consequences related to underage drinking. Could this tragedy have been prevented? If so, how? Those are some of the many questions we've heard.

The immediate focus is on the perpetrator(s) who brought a gun to the party, a situation that absolutely must be addressed. But we cannot overlook an additional factor: that alcohol was being provided to underage youth. This is particularly important because it is well documented that there is a strong connection between alcohol and violence. In fact, "alcohol is a factor in 40% of all violent crimes today" (NCADD) and 95% of violent crimes committed on college campuses are alcohol-related (N.C. Carolina Governor's Institute on Alcohol and Substance Abuse). While we know this event did not occur on a college campus, it involved young people of similar ages and that similarity cannot be overlooked.

Another important consideration is that as alcohol use becomes more widespread and visible throughout the community, these "norms" begin to affect our children, who are receiving a clear message about the role that alcohol plays in social and recreational activities. According to the National Academy of Sciences, "Youth drink within the context of a society in which alcohol is normative behavior and images about alcohol are pervasive." A 2015 report by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) showed that those who do drink underage are heavier consumers than adults (drinking an average of 3.2 drinks per day compared to those of legal age who drink 1.5 drinks per day). Heavy consumption of alcohol can lead to black outs, which can cause irreversible damage to the brain. In that case, and in many cases even without blackouts, youth alcohol use can permanently impair brain development. In addition, according to PIRE, annual sales of alcohol consumed by youth in North Carolina averaged \$982 *per* underage customer. That is *a lot* of alcohol! Considering all that, and the fact that youth who begin consuming before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependency later in life, prevention of underage drinking deserves considerably more awareness and effort.

And that awareness and effort *must* be community-wide. While it makes sense that parents and guardians should be concerned about this situation, they are not the only ones affected by youth alcohol use. For those that do not have kids, or if your children are grown, you are not necessarily immune to the effects of underage drinking. In North Carolina, underage consumption of alcohol costs taxpayers a whopping \$1.1 BILLION annually. Some of these costs include medical care, loss of work, property damage, criminal justice and other costs related to underage drinking consequences. And even the business community has reason to be invested in this cause, as these youth are the employees of the future.

One of the major issues that needs to be addressed, in relation to underage drinking, is access. The majority of adolescents get alcohol, either directly or indirectly, from adults. [We are not yet sure if this was the case](#) at the recent [party](#). But as adults, we must ask ourselves: are we truly seeking to provide a safe environment for our youth? Or are we trying to make a “safe” environment where they can use substances that are illegal at their age “with supervision”? If so, we need to also ask what message that is sending to our youth. Is it ok to observe some laws while breaking others? Adults must also consider laws addressing underage drinking that affect them, in addition to the general illegality of underage drinking. For example, North Carolina is a “no exception: state, meaning there is no exception to allow for youth possession or consumption of alcohol beverages. Period. This includes on personal property. An adult who purchases alcohol for (or provides alcohol to) underage youth can be held accountable for that, and possibly charged with aiding and abetting. Consequences for such charges can include fines, court costs, community service and even possibly jail time.

As we move into the holiday season, with more events and parties on the horizon, we need to look at how we, as a community, want to respond to this. Alcohol and youth use are not a good mix for many reasons. As a community, we need to come together to create safe spaces for our kids to socialize, without feeling the need to drink or being pushed to do so. As parents and guardians, do we know where our kids are, who they are hanging out with and, more importantly, do we know the parents of their friends? Have you talked with them to see if you are on the same “page” and that they understand your views when it comes to underage drinking? Do you know what they allow in their home? For the sake of our children and our community, we need to.

There are many ways parents, guardians, and all adults can be part of creating a safe and healthy environment for the youth of Orange County. If you want to learn how, get in touch with us at Orange Partnership. We can provide you with information and suggestions, as well as help you connect with others who want the same things, through our Safe Homes Network. For more, visit our website, [www.orangepartnership.org](http://www.orangepartnership.org).