

## **Underage drinking in the United States: The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Alcoholism has gained a reputation as one of the most shameful and nefarious forms of addiction in modern American society. In recent years, alcohol has become normalized to the point where underage drinking is not considered abnormal. Certain factors, such as social pressures, familial situations, and fragile restrictive laws influence the young generation to engage in such behaviors. The significance of these factors has been amplified in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With this information in mind, one must consider how the pandemic impacted the issue of underage drinking, and how these factors may have evolved. In an effort to fit in with their peers, underage teens may experiment with alcohol, not aware of the fact that their brain is still developing. If a family member drinks alcohol regularly, it may seem normal for underage teens to follow the same path. These negative indulgences have been made possible because of the lack of restrictions surrounding underage drinking. While there are policies in place to prevent this behavior, some are bypassed easily. For the purposes of this paper, the phrase underage teens applies to those who are below the legal drinking age of 21 years. This paper evaluates the leading causes of alcohol abuse in underage teens since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, considering possible reasons why this issue is so prevalent in America today.

Familial conditions may have influenced the number of alcoholic beverages consumed by underage drinkers since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an academic study published by the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol & Other Drugs, Johanna Dean and colleagues conclude that the parents of minors often enable their children to partake in underage drinking. The study finds that 20% of the 748 parents interviewed agree with nonrestrictive statements such as “It’s okay for parents to give their teenager one or two [alcoholic] drinks to take to an unsupervised party” (Dean et al., 2009). These results may have been affected by social desirability bias, so it is likely that a larger percentage of parents agree with such permissive remarks, as compared to the results found in the study. When the COVID-19 quarantine period was issued in the US around March 2020, schools discontinued in-person instruction and underage teens spent much more time at home. In an effort to help their children deal with this novel and stressful situation, some parents allowed underage teens to consume alcoholic beverages. As Jennifer Maggs, a PhD in Human Development & Family Studies et al. from Pennsylvania State University shares in her study of adolescent health, “No parents permitted adolescent drinking with family [before the pandemic]; nearly one in six allowed it during the shutdown” (Maggs et al., 2021). When exposed to such substances at a vulnerable age, it is easy for underage teens to consider substance abuse in the near future, especially alcohol. The habits that these parents enabled in their children during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the probability that their teens will go on to consume alcoholic beverages illegally, contributing to the prevalence of underage drinking.

Social pressures play a significant role in adolescents' perceptions of drinking alcohol, and these pressures have changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teens are likely to be influenced by or mimic the behavior of others who share similar characteristics or beliefs. If one engages in underage drinking, it is common for one's friends to follow such conduct. In his peer-reviewed article, William Clemens, a social scientist and research specialist, states that teens usually engage in illegal drinking activities while in a group setting (2022). He claims, "The initial number of friends who use substances is associated with increases in substance use" (Clemens, 2022). The substances that Clemens refers to include, but are not limited to, synthetic drugs and alcohol. Considering the fact that most teens were barred from visiting their friends in person during the COVID-19 lockdown, the sudden surge in social interactions involving substances after the lockdown was lifted was entirely expected (Perez-Brumer et al., 2022). With this information in mind, it is imperative to consider the largely positive attitude surrounding alcohol in adolescents. After staying home for extended periods of time with their parents since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, teens have been exposed to more alcohol, as discussed previously. According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics (NCDAS), 60% of Americans increased their alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdowns (NCDAS, 2023). With such a large amount of adolescents being exposed to alcohol every day, there is an increased amount of normalcy surrounding the subject, as compared to the years before the pandemic. To combat this, parents, schools, and media platforms should launch counter-marketing campaigns against underage drinking. When influencers or authority figures discourage these reckless behaviors, the social environment of teens will undergo a shift, making the subject of alcohol more taboo, especially for underage teens.

Laws set by the US government dictate the restrictions on alcoholic beverages and to whom these drinks may be sold. Yet these laws are not impenetrable and some underage teens find ways around them to obtain alcoholic drinks illegally. In a study conducted by PhD Rebecca Williams at the University of North Carolina, eight underage participants placed 100 orders of alcohol from popular Internet vendors. Of the orders placed, 45% were successfully received since most vendors used weak, if any, age verification (Williams, 2020). When considering these statistics with regard to the rise in Internet usage due to the pandemic, which the United Nations claims have seen an increase of 0.8 billion users, it becomes clear that many underage teens have had more access to alcohol (United Nations, 2021). With no solid restrictions in place to prevent risky drinking behavior in teens, it leaves no doubt that some will take advantage of the weak rules and use them to easily obtain such substances. As previously stated, this could lead to a domino effect of drinking in their social environment.

The long-term effects of underage drinking, aside from health-related complications, include trouble with the law. As Alexia Pace from the Department of Criminology at the University of Malta states, "Substance use and crime are linked together, and most juveniles who start making use of substances at an early age are at more risk to start a life in crime" (Pace, 2021). Pace conducted interviews with high-ranking officials from the Juvenile Court and



other such entities and qualitatively analyzed the results. The results of Pace's study incentivize the rising demand for restrictions against underage drinking, especially after the pandemic.

There is much progress to be made in relation to the issue of underage alcohol abuse, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents allowing their children to consume any alcohol, even small amounts, should be discouraged from doing so if their children are under the legal drinking age of 21. Teens need to acknowledge the fact that they may encounter alcohol in social situations, but they should not give in to peer pressure. The government should conduct further investigation into how teens are able to bypass alcohol restriction laws, and holes in the system must be patched up. Although American society is far from reaching an ideal state in which alcohol is unavailable to underage teens, it is imperative to understand that these are the preventative measures that can help to reduce the amount of illegal drinking in the future.

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