



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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A common misperception in American culture is that our young people drink more frequently and have more alcohol-related problems than those in Europe. European countries reportedly have more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes which foster a more responsible style of drinking by young people. This belief frequently leads to the argument that lowering the drinking age and developing programs that teach “responsible” drinking would result in fewer problems like our European counterparts.

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (OJP) posed this question: Do young people from Europe drink more responsibly than do young people from the U.S.?

OJP reviewed the results of two data sources: the 2003 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and the 2003 United States Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF). The ESPAD collected data from 15-16 year old students in 35 European countries. MTF is conducted annually among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the U.S. For their report, OJP compared data from the MTF 10th grade students to the ESPAD students.

Their results:

- United States/MTF – 35% of 10th graders reported alcohol use in the past 30 days.
- All but one European country in the ESPAD survey had higher rates, with most far exceeding the U.S. rate (ex. Austria – 82%, Denmark – 81%, Germany – 78%, Britain – 74%, Turkey – 20%)
- United States/MTF – 22% of 10th graders report heavy drinking (five or more drinks in a row) in the past 30 days
- All but one European country in the ESPAD survey had higher rates than the U.S. (ex. Denmark – 60%, Netherlands – 58%, Germany – 57%, Britain – 54%, Italy – 34%, Turkey – 15%).
- United States/MTF – 18% of 10th graders report drinking to intoxication in the last 30 days.
- One third of European countries surveyed had twice the rate of the U.S. for intoxication in the last 30 days (ex. Denmark – 61%, Ireland – 53%, Britain – 46%, Germany 35%, Italy – 19%).

If early socialization to alcohol use leads to responsible drinking, then European countries should have lower rates of binge drinking. They do not. Similarly, relaxed cultural beliefs and practices should have an effect on rates of intoxication. This report indicates that this is not the case.

What does this mean? Lowering the drinking age and being more lenient with our policies and practices isn't the "missing" solution. Ongoing community discussion and collaboration is critical to addressing social problems relating to alcohol (and drug) use and abuse. As members of this Centre County community, we all have a role to play. Your involvement in these efforts is part of the solution.

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