

YOUTH AND ALCOHOL *Executive Summary*

Overall, alcohol is responsible for more than 100,000 deaths in the United States every year, and for economic costs that amounted to \$166.5 million in 1995, the most recent year for which costs are available. The cost of alcohol use in our society include medical care costs, premature deaths, crime, injuries, lost productivity ~ and dramatic social costs that heavily affect our country's children.

- ✓ Alcohol is the most widely used and abused drug among youth. It kills more teenagers than all other drugs combined, and is a factor in the three leading causes of death among 15-24 year olds: accidents, homicides and suicides.
- ✓ Alcohol is an illegal drug for youth. All states and the District of Columbia now have 21-year-old minimum drinking age laws.
- ✓ Nearly four million young people suffer from alcohol dependence, accounting for over one-fifth of all alcohol-dependent people.
- ✓ Alcohol is the most important "gateway drug." More than 67% of individuals who start drinking before the age of fifteen end up using an illicit drug. Children aged 12 to 17 who drink are 22.3 times more likely to smoke marijuana than those who don't drink, and they are 50 times more likely to use cocaine.
- ✓ Most teenagers drink. Three out of five teenagers across the nation (61%) have had a drink in the last month. 80% of high school seniors and dropouts reported getting drunk, binge drinking or drinking and driving within the preceding year.
- ✓ At all grade levels studied (8th, 10th, 12th), children are more than twice as likely to have experimented with alcohol as they are to have tried marijuana.
- ✓ At all age levels, alcohol is the easiest drug for children to obtain. Beer is the alcoholic beverage of choice, followed by wine coolers. In 1991 alone, high school juniors and seniors consumed 1.1 billion cans of beer and 300 million wine coolers.

- ✓ Drinking at an early age has different health consequences than drinking later on. Those who take their first drink at age 13 have a 47.3% chance of becoming alcohol dependent during their lives. Those who wait until age 21, have only a 10% chance of developing alcohol dependence. The earlier one drinks the more likely one is to end up using other drugs and the more likely one is to have serious brain damage in the form of impaired memory and learning ability.
- ✓ Drinking leads to serious problems in school. High school youth who are regular substance users are three to five times more likely than non-users to have given up on school, to have dropped out of school at some time, or to have been suspended in the last year.
- ✓ Youth crime and drinking are closely related. The majority of youths sentenced to prison have a past history of substance abuse; their most commonly abused drug is alcohol.

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