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The Relation Between Parental Status and Alcohol Use Patterns and Attitudes About Underage Drinking

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Summary: In a sample of 143 adults from a population of households in Idaho, significant differences in patterns of alcohol use and attitudes about underage drinking were found as a function of parental status. Non-parents reported drinking alcohol more frequently than parents. Parents were significantly more likely than non-parents to report that it is never acceptable for minors to drink alcohol, that minors should not be allowed to drink alcohol at parties with no parents present, and that “sting” operations by police are warranted. Surprisingly, non-parents were significantly more likely than parents to report that stores and bars are not careful enough about selling alcohol to minors.

Illicit alcohol use by teenagers appears to be very common. Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman (1993) found that 90% of 50,000 high school students in a national sample had tried alcohol by the twelfth grade, and other researchers (e.g., Ellickson, McGuigan, Adams, Bell, & Hays, 1996; Maxwell, 2003) have reported teenage drinking to be similarly prevalent. Previous research has established an association between children's alcohol-related behaviors and parents' use of and attitudes toward alcohol (Sieving, Maruyama, Williams, & Perry, 2000; Yu, 2003). Recent studies have also examined the influence of parental status on adult drinking behaviors and attitudes about underage drinking. For example, adult parents tend to be more supportive of restrictive alcohol laws than adult nonparents (Wagenaar, Harwood, Toomey, Denk, & Zander, 2000). However, Latimer, Harwood, Newcomb, and Wagenaar (2001) found no relation between parental status and attitudes on alcohol policy. We surveyed 143 adult Idaho residents (94 women, 45 men) to evaluate the relationship between parental status and use of and attitudes toward alcohol. Telephone numbers were randomly generated for a representative sample of residential households across Idaho, and calls were placed to these numbers. Of the 507 numbers that led to contact with a household resident, 144 residents agreed to complete the survey and 363 refused (for a response rate of 28.4%). As respondents were drawn at random from the population and could refuse at will to participate in the study, there was no control for demographic information in our sample and we could not match demographic characteristics in our sample to previous samples. Further, as numbers were drawn at random and we had no way of knowing who would answer the phone, there is no way to compare the characteristics of those who agreed to participate and those who did not. To assess adult consumption patterns and attitudes about underage drinking, questions modified from a survey developed at the Alcohol Epidemiology Program at the University of Minnesota (Harwood, Wagenaar, & Bernat, 2002) were used (questions were made closed-ended Likert scale items rather than left open ended). The survey items asked adults about their own levels of alcohol consumption (e.g., how many days per week they drink and how many drinks they have on average), as well as their attitudes toward problems associated with teen drinking, youth access to alcohol, advertising and sponsorship of alcohol, and their knowledge and beliefs about teen alcohol consumption. Most questions were answered on a 7-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*, 7: *strongly agree*). As questions were answered individually and scale data was not calculated, no Cronbach's alpha was calculated for this sample.

The results indicated that parental status indeed is associated with reported alcohol consumption and with several attitudes related to underage drinking. With respect to consumption patterns, nonparents reported that they drank more frequently during the week ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 1.9$) than did parents ($M = .5$, $SD = 1.2$) ($t [137] = 2.2$, $p < .05$). With respect to attitudes toward underage drinking, parents were more likely to agree that it is never acceptable for minors to drink alcohol ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 2.10$) than were nonparents ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 2.3$) ($t [140] = 2.5$, $p < .05$). Parents also differed from nonparents in their attitudes about whether teenagers should be allowed to drink alcohol at a party with no parents present ($t [141] = 2.3$, $p < .05$). Parents were less in favor of allowing this type of activity ($M = 1.1$, $SD = .3$) than were nonparents ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 1.1$). Parents were also more likely to endorse the use of ‘sting’ operations (using specially trained teens to ask adults outside liquor stores to purchase alcohol for them; $M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.9$) than were

nonparents ($M = 4.9, SD = 2.6$) ($t [140] = 2.2, p < .05$). Surprisingly, nonparents were more likely to agree that stores and bars were not careful enough in their sales of alcohol ($M = 5.1, SD = 2.2$) than were parents ($M = 4.0, SD = 2.1$) ($t [135] = 3.0, p < .01$). Although this study involved the use of a relatively small sample of adults in one state and may not be generalizable to all adults in Idaho or in other states, these results may suggest that parental status may be associated with adult alcohol use and attitudes toward underage drinking which may affect teenage alcohol use. Given that our findings were not consistent with previous research (Latimer et al., 2001), future studies should examine the influence of parental status on attitudes towards underage drinking in other states and more diverse samples.

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