

The State of Underage Drinking in North Carolina

Qualitative Executive Summary

Background

The ABC Commission is interested in learning more about the concerns and factors influencing children who are underage with respect to use of alcoholic beverages. This research will be utilized to uncover factors that motivate teens to drink underage, as well as identify what factors might potentially dissuade children from using alcohol while under age. The focus of the study will be middle school students, those who typically are 11–14 years of age. Perspectives from both urban and more rural areas of the Triangle will be sought. Findings from a preliminary, quantitative survey will be utilized to identify areas of focus and help in preparation of materials to be presented during this qualitative phase of research.

Research Purpose

The primary purpose of these groups is to understand how parents and teens perceive underage drinking and to uncover motivating factors that will help inform the development of an awareness campaign on the issues surrounding underage drinking.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are to use respondent input to help:

- Identify gaps in perceptions between parents and teens on the subject of underage drinking as well as identify areas of commonality.
- Explore the emotional components of this topic, including what emotions are motivating in some way or could be leveraged as possible deterrents to underage drinking.
- Uncover language that is relevant/compelling/motivating and that could be utilized in development of an awareness campaign (i.e., put the story in “their own words”).

Methodology and Research Approach

Four focus groups were conducted in Raleigh, NC, at First In Focus Research on August 12–13, 2014. Two focus groups consisted of parents of children ages 11–14. Two focus groups consisted of middle school students ages 11–14 (1 group of boys, 1 group of girls). The parents’ focus groups lasted 2 hours, and the middle schoolers’ focus groups lasted 1.5 hours. For each group, 10 respondents were recruited in order to seat 8.

The parents and middle school students were recruited from different families, to discourage the likelihood of parents quizzing their children about the study. To encourage open and honest dialogue, the middle school students were grouped by gender and were reassured that their answers would be kept confidential. The respondents were recruited from a mix of urban/suburban and rural/small towns.

Summary/Key Insights: Confirms, Surprises, Challenges and Opportunities

CONFIRMS

- In keeping with the quantitative findings — kids recognize that drinking is an issue.
- Parents are largely unaware as to how young drinking can become an issue.
- Parents desire guidance on how to have impactful conversations with their kids about this subject.
- Kids (and parents) are more likely to receive messages about drinking from someone with whom they have a trusted relationship.

SURPRISES

- Parents who drink (or who drank underage) especially feel the need for guidance as to how to have conversations with their kids. They want to be authentic and honest but aren't sure how to do so without undermining their own credibility.
- Potential for addiction does not seem to be of primary concern for these parents. The main concerns are largely around drinking and driving vs. other possible repercussions of drinking.
- Teen girls are feeling more concern about sexual pressures and how drinking may contribute to their own risky behavior or potential pregnancy.
- Teens have a strong concern about the loss of love, respect and trust of their parents or other influential adults if they were to drink underage.

CHALLENGES

- Kids and parents are contending with numerous challenges, some of which seem more pressing than drinking. Breaking through this cluttered environment will likely be a challenge.
- Compounding this challenge are parents' unawareness/denial about the magnitude of the problem. Even when confronted with statistics, the tendency is to assume "not my child."
- Drinking and driving seems to be the primary concern. Getting people to view the repercussions of drinking more holistically will be a challenge.
- How to build bridges and create environments where children (and parents) feel safe enough to be honest could be a challenge.
- Elected officials are not a trusted source of information and guidance on this topic.

OPPORTUNITIES

- While elected officials may not be able to carry the message directly, they could be key in reaching the true influencers.
- Leverage the key influencers who include parents, school guidance counselors/camp counselors, coaches and youth ministers.
- If these key influencers and kids can learn to talk about the subject of underage drinking, that could open the door to talk more freely about the myriad of pressures facing youth today.

- It will be important to draw a connection between choices and consequences, therefore helping kids (and parents) to feel empowered in this struggle.

Summary/Key Insights: Concerns and Needs

PARENTS' CONCERNS

- Their lack of control while youth are away and not under their direct watch
- Drinking and driving with ensuing (potentially deadly) consequences

PARENTS' NEEDS

- Parents need to feel empowered:
 - That the things that they are saying to their children are the right things, and that their advice is having an impact even when their kids are not under their watchful eye.
 - That they can keep their children safe.

BOYS' CONCERNS

- Being restricted from friends if they divulge peer pressures to their parents
- Getting in trouble with the law
- Loss of parental trust/respect

GIRLS' CONCERNS

- Loss of parental trust/respect if they slip up
- Potential for risky sex/pregnancy

KIDS' NEEDS

- Kids want guidance and to be protected:
 - From peer pressures, yet they realize that their parents can't be with them in the moment that they face such pressure.
 - Therefore, they need reassurance that if they "slip up" they have a safe place to share, and that they will still be loved unconditionally, forgiven, given support for doing better (vs. just punishment) and that they won't forever lose their parents' respect and trust.
 - They want to protect their relationship with their parents and also protect their relationships with their friends. (i.e., not be forbidden to ever see their friends again).

Summary/Key Insights: Communication

This research seems to reinforce the notion that teens and parents *want* to be talking — they just need tools with which to do that. This supports the notion that launching a campaign to get parents and teens talking would be an effective route to take.

Parents want scripts/guidance/support from experts (or other parents) on how to have conversations.

There is consistency in persons whom both parents and teens would be likely to talk to or listen to:

- **Personal Testimonials:** Both camps agree that hearing testimonials from people who have experienced issues with underage drinking would be compelling.
- **Youth Ministers:** For those who are part of a faith community, youth ministers are seen as a trusted source, and this resource could be leveraged.
- **School counselors** are also an influential avenue for establishing relationships with kids and getting the word out to parents.
- Though **Elected Officials** may not be able to influence parents and teens directly due to lack of trust, they do have the potential to reach out and support the true influencers.

Summary/Key Insights: Most Relevant/Compelling Statistics

MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

These statistics seemed to be most compelling for middle schoolers, in that they drive home the seriousness/vastness of underage drinking consequences:

- In 2009 in North Carolina, underage drinking led to over 30,000 teens having risky sex and 737 teen pregnancies.
- In 2009, underage drinking led to 60 murders; 26,800 violent crimes such as rape, robbery and assault; and 67,400 property crimes including burglary and car theft.

PARENTS

Claims relating to death rates and the young age of teens drinking were the most shocking and motivating for parents. These did seem to inspire them to act sooner vs. later and could be leveraged in a campaign.

- In North Carolina, a child dies every week as a result of underage drinking and driving.
- Nationally, more teens die as a result of alcohol than all other illegal drugs combined.
- Forty-four percent of eighth graders have had alcohol at least once.
- Among youth who have tried alcohol, the average age that most youth try alcohol for the first time is 14 years old.

Summary/Key Insights: Impact of Visuals

Role of Devastating Images

- Car crash and hospital images are powerful and grab attention; however, there's a risk with these images of evoking feelings of powerlessness, futility and being overwhelmed because death is so final. Such feelings do not contribute to motivating action.
- It will be important to balance this with positive visuals and supportive messages (not just scare tactics) so that parents in particular feel a sense of empowerment that they can have an impact on preventing such outcomes.

Role of Family Images

- Family images are heartwarming and motivating, which is important.
- It's also important that parents understand the need to listen, as well as talk to, their children. The kids desperately need to be heard and reassured they have a safe place to be honest about the temptations they're facing and to be able to admit their mistakes. This needs to come through in any campaign.
- Parents may need some coaching in this regard.

Celebrity Image

- In general, both parents and children want to hear from someone with whom they have a trusted relationship or from someone who is speaking from his or her own experience (such as a parent or teen affected by the results of underage drinking).
- Therefore, a celebrity endorsement campaign would not be a recommended route to pursue.

Police/Authority Image

- This image seems to depict a school assembly of sorts. Kids indicated that current school assemblies tend not to be very impactful (watching outdated videos, police talking, kids disengaged).
- Kids want to hear from someone with whom they have a trusted relationship or someone authentically speaking from the heart.
- Based on this research — what *would* be impactful in this forum are personal testimonials from parents or teens who have been impacted by the consequences of underage drinking — someone the teens (or parents) could really relate to.

Summary/Key Insights: Awareness Campaign

Implications

- While these campaigns parents developed give insight into what is highly motivating to parents, they focus heavily on one consequence — the dangers of drinking and driving.
- They overlook the myriad of other repercussions of underage drinking of which the kids are well aware and concerned:
 - Heightened sexual activity including potential for date rape.
 - Impact on academics/athletics/future plans.
 - Gateway to other destructive, law-breaking behaviors.
 - Negative impact on relationships, including broken trust/diminished communication.
 - Diminished opportunities as a result of the above (current and future).
- A well-rounded campaign would help to call these implications to the forefront as well.

Summary/Key Insights: Next Steps

Seek a way to engage the faith community (ministers/youth ministers) who are in a unique position to impact kids who may be at critical places in their decision-making and experiencing the greatest peer pressure.

POTENTIAL FUTURE RESEARCH

- For a deeper dive that could help with the implementation of the campaign, perhaps conduct focus groups with additional key influencers (school counselors and youth ministers) to understand:
 - What they are experiencing in interactions with teens related to underage drinking.
 - Their perceptions on how much of a problem underage drinking is.
 - Learn what steps they are taking to have an impact and then leverage these ideas for the communication campaign.
- Once a campaign is developed, it's recommended to conduct a few interviews to see how parents/teens respond. This will help to assess if the campaign is having the desired effect and inform ways to optimize the campaign before launch.

COMMERCIAL AD

- The parent/teen conversation (Utah commercial) runs close to what these parents and teens are saying they want/need. (Understanding/Support/Enhanced Communication)
- Perhaps utilize that campaign as a springboard for North Carolina.

PRINT ADS

- The Utah Print Ads could also provide some insight as a benchmark.
 - “They do listen” — may emphasize too much a parent’s tendency to be judgmental and runs counter to teens needing a safe, supportive environment.
 - “Care about every little thing they drank” could be effective, but perhaps make the teen younger to drive home the age concern/urgency.