



# The Artful Dodger

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## Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan

This publication, with a nod to Charles Dickens's "Oliver Twist" is designed to provide information on the problem of Underage Drinking.

The nickname, "Artful Dodger", is still commonly used to refer to someone who is good at avoiding responsibility or the consequences of his/her actions.

### Did You Know?

*Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds.*

*In 2004, 24 percent of the young drivers age 15 to 20 who were killed in crashes had BAC levels of .08 g/dL or higher.*

## Underage Drinking - A Right of Passage or a Serious Problem?

By:  
*William B Patterson, Jr.*

You hear it on the news and you read it in the papers: Underage Drinking is everywhere. More than 5,000 youth die from underage drinking-related incidents every year. The question is: What is being done about it? We hear underage drinking is a parental problem, an education problem, an enforcement problem or "not my problem." In fact, underage drinking is everyone's problem and if we choose to ignore it then more communities and states will be facing the high costs associated with underage drinking. Underage drinking is widespread in the United States. Approximately 13.2 million underage youth in the US drink each year. In 2001, 16.2 percent of all alcohol sold in the United States was consumed by underage drinkers- totaling \$18.1 billion in sales. Alcohol is a drug. The cost of underage drinking is staggering and is claiming the lives of our youth. It also affects communities in respect to criminal activity,

unhealthy behaviors, inappropriate social interactions and poor school performance. Looking at the most recent cost analysis data on underage drinking, costs the United States \$61.9 billion dollars annually. This cost analysis is also available for all 50 States and the District of Columbia. For specific information on your state, go to:

[www.udetc.org/UnderageDrinkingCosts.asp](http://www.udetc.org/UnderageDrinkingCosts.asp).

When addressing the cost of underage drinking, you should not ignore the fact that underage drinking is often related to traffic crashes, unplanned sexual activity, sexual and physical assaults, school failure, vandalism, brain damage, and even death. These consequences not only affect young people, but also the overall quality of life in a community.

In some communities, alcohol use among young people under 21 is an acceptable norm and seen as a "rite of passage." Many parents raising children today were drinking when the minimum legal drinking



age was 18. However, the minimum legal drinking age in every state in the country is 21. Parents and their children often overlook the minimum legal drinking age and think that getting caught by law enforcement for underage drinking is not a serious offense. However, some states are trying to stress the seriousness of the offense by rescinding state-sponsored college scholarships for underage offenders. Communities and enforcement agencies must work together to show the consequence of underage drinking.

The latest research on ways to prevent underage drinking indicates that by changing the environment of a community this

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**What Can Communities Do To Enforce Underage Drinking?**  
Law enforcement agencies in Michigan receive grant funding each year to pay for overtime enforcement of underage drinking laws. These programs emphasize education and prevention to discourage minors from consuming and attempting to consume alcohol. One program has law enforcement officers and retailers working together to deter minors from purchasing (or adults to purchase for minors) alcohol. Another program has law enforcement officers working with festival organizers in their communities. A third grant program has officers responding to parties and working with schools to prevent parties from happening.

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problem can be reduced and young lives saved. Once a community decides that action is needed, there are strategies that can be implemented to save lives. First, law enforcement is essential to prevent underage drinking by holding those who supply alcohol to persons under 21 accountable. Operations, such as routine compliance checks, shoulder tap party patrols and controlled party dispersal, are preventing alcohol from getting into the hands of youth. Penalties for purchasing or possessing alcohol under the age of 21 should be enforced by alcohol beverage control officers and local law enforcement. Community support for law enforcement also is essential for enforcement operations to be successful. Collaborating with law enforcement is an investment in the quality of life in a community. The energy and long-standing support of the community including parents, retailers, academic institutions, the judicial system and leaders can send a

strong message that underage drinking or supplying alcohol to youth is unacceptable.

The answers are not all spelled out neatly. However, stopping the inevitable consequences of underage drinking is a must. Research tells us that young people who drink before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcohol dependent and two times more likely to become alcohol abusers than those who wait until they are 21. We are losing 1,700 college youth each year and 5,000 youth die each year to alcohol-related incidents.

There is hope. The Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) provide money to the 50 States and the District of Columbia for programs to enforce underage drinking laws. Through these funds, states and communities are working together to raise awareness and develop programs to reduce underage drinking.

As a prosecutor, you are encouraged to take a stand for our children and address underage drinking. Familiarize yourself with the number of underage drinking cases being handled in your area. Inquire about whether a zero tolerance stance is being enforced. Investigate whether the penalties for underage drinkers and those who supply alcohol to youth are being dealt with swiftly and effectively. Collaborate and support local coalitions that make this a priority issue. Be a part of the solution to saving the lives of our youth and protecting our communities' quality of life.

For additional resources and more information about how communities are affecting change, contact the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center at [www.udetc.org](http://www.udetc.org) or call toll-free at (877)335-1287.

**Editor's Note:** Edited due to space. William B Patterson Jr, is a Senior Program Manager for Law Enforcement at OJJDP's Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center.