

**Alcohol in Our Community: Investing in the Future of Montana's Youth**  
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Nationally, almost a quarter (22.8 percent) of all persons aged 12 or older participated in binge use of alcohol in the past month in 2005-2006. Only three States were ranked in the top fifth in all three age groups (12 to 17, 18 to 25, and 26 or older) and among persons 12 or older: Montana, North Dakota, and Wisconsin (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005-2006, Office of Applied Studies, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). The National Survey of 2003-2004 listed Montana in the top ten States for persons aged 12 to 20 reporting past month alcohol use.

So what does this mean for Montana? The answer seems pretty clear; there is a significant underage drinking problem, and unlike methamphetamine or other drug use, does not appear to be on the decline. In terms of the impact on our youth in our communities, this translates to a host of related problems, that as health care professionals, we deal with on a daily basis. Problems that typically manifest themselves regarding underage drinking in our communities include increased truancy and delinquency, criminal behavior, auto accidents, suicide ideations and attempts, risky behaviors (e.g., teen pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases) and family discord.

Youth Dynamics, Inc. is a private, non-profit organization that has been providing therapeutic services to Montana children and families since 1981. As such, YDI is committed to providing comprehensive and progressive mental health/substance abuse services to meet the ever changing needs of children and families in their community settings. Our mission is to "promote partnerships with people for the provision of progressive family and community-centered behavioral health services." Additionally, we believe in the motto: "Every child deserves a family." Youth Dynamics, Inc. has several offices located throughout the State of Montana (including Glendive), and focuses totally on working with Montana youth and their families.

Having worked in the addiction field for over 20 years, I have learned a few key facts regarding alcohol use and underage drinking. One of the biggest factors that typically lead to underage drinking involves the family. This usually includes a lack of communication with our children, a lack of involvement in what our children face everyday with their peers and environment, and all too often, parents' role modeling with their own use of alcohol. Add to this the high correlation between alcohol abuse and domestic violence, and genetic/family history for alcoholism/addiction, you can start to get the picture as to how significant family influence can be.

While we've spent many years on identifying the "problem," what can we do about it? First and foremost, we need to "invest" in our children's future. This means that we need to educate and communicate. Second, we need to focus on the family, meaning that it's just as important to help parents that are struggling with alcoholism and addiction, as it is to help our children. We also need to focus the same amount of attention to the dangers of alcohol and underage drinking as the Montana Meth Project has focused on methamphetamine use. The impact of the Montana Meth Project has contributed to an overall decrease (yes, that's *decrease*) of 45% in our youth using meth, since the

Project began. Just think of the impact that could have on underage drinking! Secondly, we need to communicate with our State legislators and elected leaders, and let them know that our youth need to be able to access treatment and services.

Finally, know who the human services providers are (both public and private) in your community and get involved, either by volunteering, becoming a foster parent or mentoring. The only way we will have an impact on underage drinking in our State, is to be aware and take action. Together, we CAN make a difference!