



RISKY BUSINESS:

YOUTH AND UNDERAGE

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION



A FOCUS GROUP STUDY IN SOUTHWEST NORTH DAKOTA

2009-2010



INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Laurence Pringle joined in sounding the alarm about youth and underage drinking.¹ He pointed out that alcohol was the number one drug abuse problem for youth and that nearly a thousand high school and college youth die from acute alcohol poisoning each year. He noted that both young people and adults appear to understand the risks involved, but these perceptions do not seem to have much effect on curbing underage drinking.

In 2004, Richard J. Bonnie and Mary Ellen O’Connell led an effort to bring together the best minds and the most current knowledge to bear on the problem of underage drinking. The book and the collected papers that emerged from this effort represent an exhaustive review of the issue of underage drinking and the prevention strategies available.² However, the problem of underage drinking is a persistent one.

The people in southwest North Dakota have more than these and other examples of national literature to draw on when underage drinking behavior is the topic of discussion. Some of the most comprehensive information on underage drinking in southwest North Dakota, made up of the eight counties in Region VIII, is found in the reports on major surveys completed in 2005 and 2007.³ Both students and parents in Region VIII were surveyed about their perceptions of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in their communities.⁴ In addition to attitudinal and perceptual measures, students and their parents responded to questions about their own use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The Region VIII surveys provided the backdrop for the exploration of underage drinking involving the focus groups in this study. To set the stage, here are some of the things we knew when we started thinking about focus groups:⁵

¹ Pringle, Laurence P. Drinking: a Risky Business, 1997, HarperCollins Publishers.

² National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004). Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility. Committee on Developing a Strategy to Reduce and Prevent Underage Drinking, Richard J. Bonnie and Mary Ellen O’Connell, Editors. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

³ See the report “Youth and Adult Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Perception Survey, 2007.” Prepared by DLN Consulting, Inc. for the Community Action Partnership and the Southwest Coalition of Safe Communities, 202 East Villard, Dickinson, ND 58601.

⁴ The Region VIII communities included in the surveys were Adams, Billings, Bowman, Dunn, Hettinger, Golden Valley, Slope, and Stark counties, all located in the far southwest corner of North Dakota.

⁵ By “we,” I mean Becky Byzewski of Community Action, the inspiration for this effort, Deb Nelson, the President of DLN Consulting, Inc., who directed the research and moderated the focus groups, and the staff of DLN Consulting, who took field notes and participated in discussions of the results of the focus groups.

THE FOCUS GROUP

The staff of DLN Consulting, Inc. developed a general outline of the procedures and questions that would guide the group interviews and discussions for each of the focus groups: the law enforcement group, the educator group, the youth group, the parents, and the university students. This outline remained essentially the same for each group, although there were some modifications that took into consideration special needs of the different groups. It was agreed that Deb Nelson should moderate the discussion for each group because of her experience and qualifications, although the staff did help prepare the moderator by reviewing the essential “do’s” and “don’ts” for moderators of focus groups.¹²

All five focus groups met in a private room at the Elks Lodge at 6:00 PM and all of the participants were offered dinner from the Elks restaurant, which most accepted. The law enforcement group met on February 25, the educators’ group met on April 27, the youth group met on May 5, 2009, the parents met on November 10, 2009, and the university students met on January 19, 2010.¹³ The sessions lasted about two hours in each case. Each group had between six and ten participants. In addition to the moderator, there were at least two and sometimes three note takers who were trained to take notes that summarized the discussions and also made note of body language and sidebars that might affect the interpretation of the qualitative data. A variety of verbatim quotes were written down so that any notable quotes could be incorporated. In addition, the sessions were tape recorded for later review as a check on accuracy and to supplement the field notes. At the end of each session, the staff met for a debriefing to review the moderator’s behavior and to offer first impressions on each session. The field notes and data from the electronic questionnaire were entered the next day for future analysis. After the first session and before each of the next sessions, the staff reviewed the questionnaire and process outline to determine if any changes were needed. Some minor changes were incorporated as appropriate, but there were very few changes. The questions and procedures were essentially the same for each group.

¹² The staff relied heavily on Volume 3: “Developing Questions for Focus Groups” and Volume 4: “Moderating Focus Groups,” in Morgan, David L., and Richard A. Krueger, *The Focus Group Kit*, Volumes 1-6. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

¹³ The university students were originally scheduled during November of 2009. Because of the tragic accidental death of three university students, the group was rescheduled to January 19th.

The Parents

Six couples joined in the conversation on underage drinking during their session on November 10, 2009 at the Elks. All were parents whose children were currently in school, varying in age from seven to eighteen. One couple, in addition to younger children, had an older child who had graduated from high school. At the time of the discussion, three couples had children in the Dickinson Public Schools, one couple had children in the Dickinson Catholic Schools (Trinity), and there was one couple each with children in the New England and Belfield schools.

Asked **how they viewed underage drinking**, many of the parents were surprised to learn that southwest North Dakota was so high in binge drinking. Their view was that most drinking occurred in groups and that some parents are “naïve enough to think it’s okay to drink with their kids.” Generally, the parents view was that the problem was less widespread in the junior high school (Hagen), a problem of “only a select few.” However, the parents acknowledged that the majority of high school students engaged in underage drinking. “It’s the thing to do,” said one. Another parent of younger children expressed this fear: “It’s scary to think of, but I know it’s coming.” The parent acknowledged that underage drinking is already an issue in their home.

Most of the parents expressed certainty that they know what their children are doing, that their children are not really “getting away with anything.” They attribute this to the “open and honest relationships” they try to maintain with their children. The parents expressed the belief that, in fact, underage drinking is less prevalent, or widespread, than it was “years” ago. Generally, the parents said they saw most alcohol abuse as a problem of twenty to twenty-two year olds. During those “years ago,” when the parents were adolescents, there were “a lot more parties and a lot more drinking.” That is, they thought alcohol consumption by youth was greater when they were young. None of the parents expressed tolerance of underage drinking, but that some other parents accommodate teen drinking. “You can’t stop it from happening,” is the attitude of those parents. For some other parents, ignorance is bliss: “If I don’t know, then it’s not happening.”

Asked about the **risks that accompany underage drinking**, parents pointed out that “some or all of the risks” were usually present: “When you’re drunk, you’re apt to do things that