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Youth Peer-to-Peer Groups Influence Attitudes and Behaviors of Teenagers



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YOUTH PEER-TO-PEER GROUPS INFLUENCE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF TEENAGERS

Many United States high schools have youth peer-to-peer groups that encourage students to refrain from drinking, from drinking and driving, and from riding in a vehicle with a drinking driver. Students Against Driving Drunk (SADD) alone is estimated to have more than 16,000 chapters. These groups work with their fellow students seeking to influence drinking and driving attitudes. They sponsor school and community activities and promote parent-student agreements about alcohol.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) sponsored an 18 month study to identify the characteristics of exemplary peer-to-peer high school anti-drinking and driving organizations, and to evaluate their impact on student attitudes, drinking and driving related behaviors, and motor vehicle crashes. A new report prepared by Preusser Research Group of Trumbull, Connecticut, documents the activities of outstanding high school youth groups.

12 High Schools in 3 States

National and state organizations were asked to identify high schools with exemplary programs. Six high schools (two each in Arizona, Ohio, and Wisconsin) were matched with six similar comparison schools without programs for a total of 12 high schools in the study. All of the active programs identified themselves as SADD chapters. The research team conducted focus groups with SADD members during the spring of 1994 and again in the spring of 1995. All 12 of the high schools conducted in-school surveys of their student bodies during 1994 and again during 1995. In all, 17,484 students completed surveys. Survey items covered drinking, drinking and driving, student attitudes, and self-reported behaviors. Police reported crash data were obtained for each school.

Why Teens Join SADD

From the focus groups, we learned that most members joined SADD because they wanted to prevent death and injury among their fellow students. Some had experienced a personal loss involving a friend, classmate, or family member. Others joined, or were recruited, to help break from friends or situations that were bad influences. The members were often students leaders in their schools.

School wide surveys showed that the programs were well known within their schools: 94 percent of the general student body knew that the school had a student anti-drinking and driving organization. Overall, 7 percent of the students were members of their SADD chapter (10 percent of the female students and 3 percent of the males).

Student Knowledge and Attitudes

All three states had "zero tolerance" laws for teens. In Arizona and Wisconsin, the limit was .00% BAC, where it is illegal for teens to drive with any blood alcohol content. In Ohio it was .02%. Overall, nearly three-fourths (72 percent) of all students knew of the lower BAC limit for underage drivers. There was a gradual improvement with grade level, from 68 percent for freshmen to 76

percent for seniors. The difference between SADD and comparison schools was moderate (5 percent).

Survey results of self-reported drinking and drinking and driving behaviors did not show consistent statistically significant differences between the active program and comparison schools. Nevertheless, the overall results generally favored the SADD schools.

Students in SADD schools were less likely to have ever consumed alcohol and female students in these schools were less likely to have ever used false identification to obtain alcohol.

Students attending an active SADD school, as compared with students who attend a school without an active program:

were more likely to agree that:

- Non-alcohol parties can be as much fun as parties at which alcohol is served.
- My parents would be extremely upset if I was caught drinking.
- The fear of getting arrested for driving drunk is enough to stop me from doing it.

and were less likely to agree that:

- There is nothing wrong with high school students drinking, as long as they don't drive.

There were no consistent statistically significance differences in police reported crashes between the SADD and non-SADD communities. Nevertheless, the results generally favored the SADD communities for all crash in-volvments, night time crash involvements, and single vehicle involvements of 16 to 17 year old drivers.

Students who attended high schools with SADD programs reported much more anti-drinking, anti-drinking and driving, and anti-drug related information at school than students who did not have a peer-to-peer group at their high school. This information was part of school activities like assemblies, mock crashes, alcohol-free proms and graduations, and was delivered in more ways. Students' attitudinal differences suggest that the primary program message to fellow students is a positive prevention message. The SADD message does not stress fear nor does it condone underage drinking.

Benefits

Peer-to-peer programs such as SADD chapters provide real benefits to their members in terms of personal growth and positive experiences. Chapter activities provide memorable information and alcohol-free alternatives. These activities have positive effects on attitudes about drinking, and about drinking and driving throughout the overall student body. These attitude changes, however, are not conclusively reflected in clear reductions in drinking and driving behaviors or clear reductions in alcohol related crashes. On balance, a vigorous program such as SADD should be viewed as one important component of a total community strategy to deal with underage drinking and driving.

For a copy of the 63 page (plus appendices) final report, *Evaluation of Youth Peer-to-Peer Impaired Driving Programs*, contact: Office of Program Development and Evaluation, NHTSA, NTS-33, 400 Seventh Street, S.W. Washington, DC 20950, (202) 366-2752, or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Linda Cosgrove, Ph.D. was the contract manager.

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