

Underage Drinking & Alcohol Policy in Iowa:

A Study of Social Host Prohibitions
& Other Prevention Strategies



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BACKGROUND

Why focus on underage drinking?

Underage drinking is a common risk behavior with considerable negative consequences. National surveys have found that 8%-30% of high school students have consumed alcohol in the past 30 days [1, 2]. In the 2018 Iowa Youth Survey, 3%-7% of middle school students and 20% of high school students reported consuming alcohol in the past 30 days [3]. Underage drinking is a public health priority as it has been associated with direct harms (e.g., poor school performance, strained family relationships, and interrupted cognitive development), indirect harms (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancy, interpersonal violence, motor vehicle crashes), and delayed harms (e.g., increased lifetime risk of alcohol use disorder), among others [4-6].

What are social host prohibitions?

Social host prohibitions are laws that hold adults accountable for providing alcohol to minors or for allowing minors access to alcohol on property that they control. Social host prohibitions are intended to reduce underage drinking and related consequences by limiting the availability of alcohol, especially through parties. They are often recommended as part of comprehensive alcohol control policies [4, 7]; however, they have been studied less than other alcohol control measures. As a result, the scientific evidence is not yet conclusive about the effect on teenagers' alcohol consumption; however, some research studies have found that social host laws are associated with fewer drunk drivers, decreased frequency of underage drinking in homes, and smaller size of teen drinking groups [8-10].



What Is the Situation in Iowa?

In 2014, the Iowa state code was amended to add a state-wide social host prohibition. The law granted exceptions for parents, religious observances, and landlords. Otherwise, violations are misdemeanors with a \$200 fine for the 1st offense and \$500 fine for 2nd offense. Before 2014, at least 23 counties and 26 cities in Iowa had already implemented local social host prohibitions. The state law does not preempt local action, so existing county and city ordinances have remained in effect. In addition, new local ordinances may be adopted. Often local ordinances are stricter than the state law, for example with higher fines for violations.

What did we study?

Dr. Paul Gilbert, Assistant Professor at the University of Iowa College of Public Health, led a study of Iowa's social host prohibitions. Initially the project sought to determine the effect of the state social host law on underage drinking. Over the course of a year, the project expanded its focus to identify mechanisms of effective enforcement, especially at the local level. The project culminated with a community summit in September 2018 to release findings and consider next steps for preventing underage drinking.

The research team drew on multiple sources of data. They looked at state alcohol convictions data from 2014 to 2017 to gauge enforcement of the state law and reviewed data from the Iowa Youth Survey from 2008 to 2018 to understand teen drinking patterns. In addition, interviews around the state with eight law enforcement officers, ten substance use prevention workers, and one state legislator provided insights into prevention and enforcement activities in communities with and without a local social host ordinance. Throughout the project, the Alliance of Coalitions for Change (AC4C) was a key community partner.

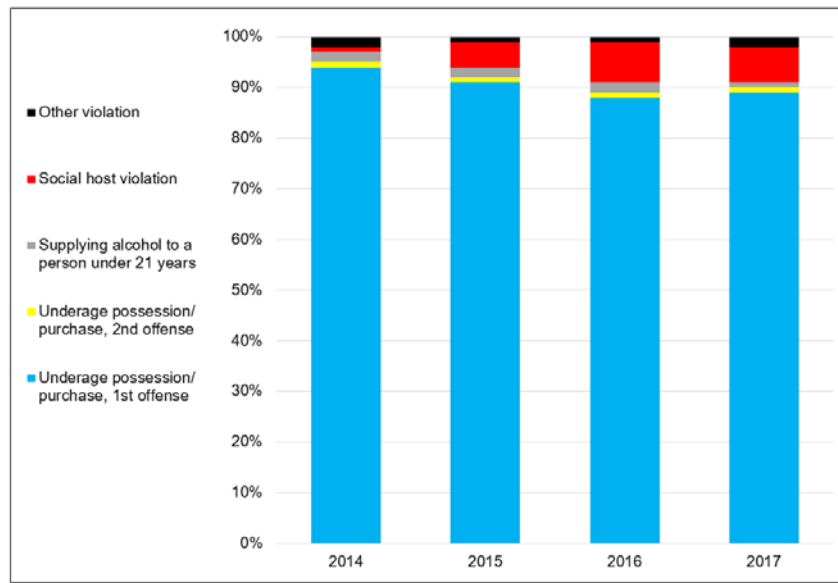
ALCOHOL CONVICTIONS

We reviewed state convictions data from 2014 to 2017, looking at the different categories of offenses related to underage drinking. This served as an initial review to gauge how the social host law might have been applied after the Iowa state code was amended.

First and second convictions for underage possession or purchase of alcohol accounted for the large majority of convictions (89%-95%) each year from 2014 to 2017. Convictions for permitting a minor under age 18 to consume or possess alcohol on one's property (a social host violation) increased from 2014 to 2017, but they remained a small proportion of all convictions, never more than 8% in any year.

Although there have been few convictions under the state social host law, we were encouraged to see increasing use over time. Unfortunately, these data could not provide any insight about the reasons for use or non-use of the law.

An additional limitation is that we only examined state convictions data. We were unable to review enforcement of local ordinances because there is no single source of information (i.e., data are maintained by each county).



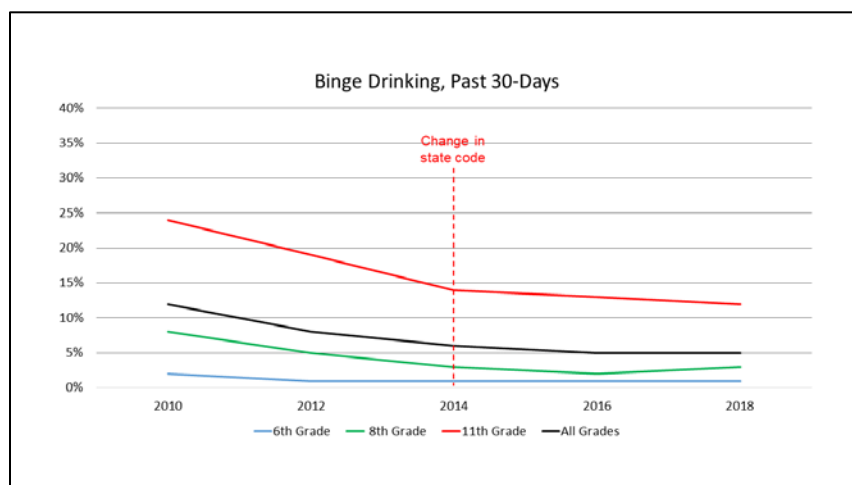
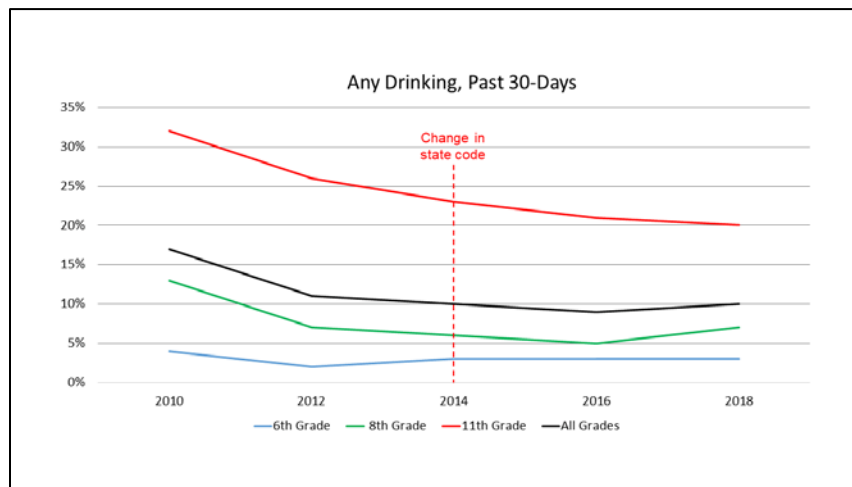
YOUTH ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

We reviewed data from the Iowa Youth Survey, a biennial survey of 6th, 8th, and 11th grade students, for information about changes in alcohol consumption, looking specifically at past 30-day drinking (any consumption) and past 30-day binge drinking (any episodes of 5 or more drinks on a single occasion).

As shown below, there is an ordering of alcohol involvement by grade that was consistent at each year. Larger percentages of 11th graders reported any drinking than 8th graders, and in turn a larger percentage of 8th graders reported any drinking than 6th graders. However, the overall trend showed decreasing alcohol use over time. From 2010 to 2018, levels of any past 30-day drinking and past 30-day binge drinking have declined or remained stable. One exception was any drinking among 8th graders, which reached a low of 5% in 2016 but increased to 7% in 2018.

The declines in Iowa mirror changes in adolescent alcohol use in the US and many other countries, but the reasons for declining alcohol use remain poorly understood [11, 12].

As there were few changes in any drinking or binge drinking levels after 2014, there does not appear to be a discernible effect of the state social host law. Nevertheless, given that any alcohol use is a risky behavior at these ages, adolescent drinking should remain a priority area for prevention.

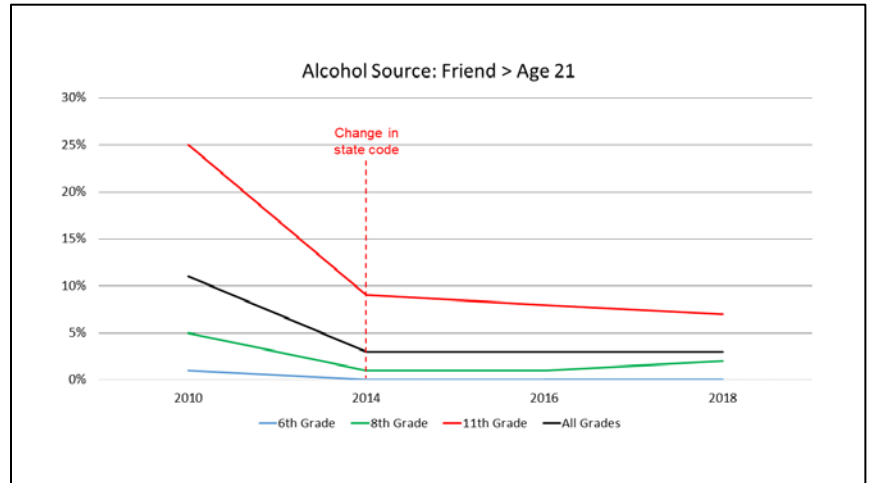


SOURCES OF ALCOHOL

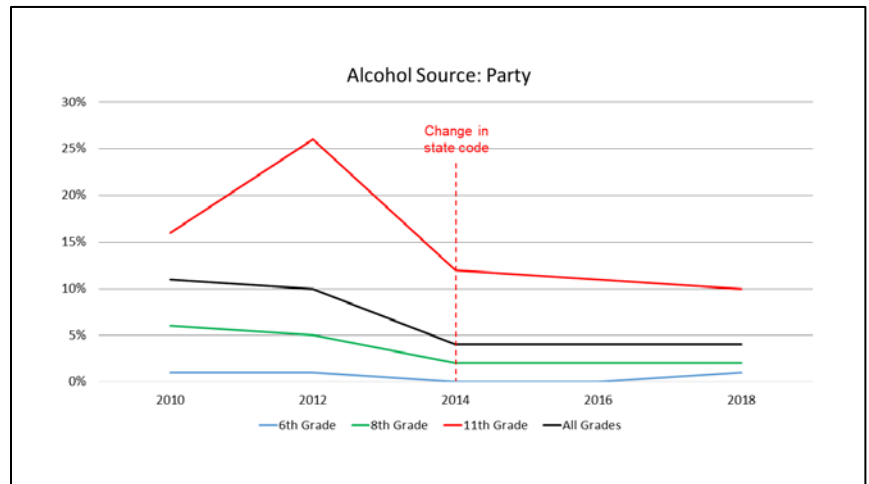
The Iowa Youth Survey includes several questions about sources of alcohol. The figures below show trends by grade over time for two sources relevant to social host prohibitions.

There was a sharp decline in friends over age 21 as the source of alcohol from 2010 to 2014; afterwards, levels remained generally unchanged.

(Note: This question was omitted from the 2012 survey)



There were declines in parties as a source of alcohol from 2012 to 2014, with the most pronounced change among 11th graders. The levels remained relatively unchanged after 2014.



As the declines in these sources of alcohol began prior to the 2014 change in Iowa code, the state social host law is unlikely to be a cause; however, it may contribute to sustained low levels.

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

After reviewing state convictions data and Iowa Youth Survey data, the research team embarked on a series of interviews around the state to better understand awareness and implementation barriers of the state social host law. Interviews were conducted with eight law enforcement officers, 10 substance use prevention workers, and one state legislator from communities with and without a local social host ordinance. It became apparent in discussions that some towns and counties stood out because of their very effective social host prohibitions. Over the course of the interviews, the focus shifted to better understand these local ordinances.

Interview participants explained that local ordinances, which were not pre-empted by the state law, were often more appealing because they could be tailored to local concerns and could be more strict than the state law (e.g., levying higher fines for offenses). In jurisdictions with local ordinances, they appeared to be more likely to be enforced than the state law; however, the existence of a local ordinance was not sufficient to ensure its use.

The interviews revealed that three constituencies must be involved for successful implementation of local social host ordinances. Indeed, examples of successful social host ordinances nearly always involved high alignment of the following three groups. First, law enforcement leadership (e.g., police chief or sheriff) must prioritize the issue of underage drinking as a concern. Second, the city or county attorney must be willing to prosecute violations of the local ordinance. Third, there must be active local substance use prevention workers, ideally working in community coalition.



In fact, local substance use prevention workers fulfilled several essential functions. Among their key activities, they served as the main persuasive force leading law enforcement, city or county attorneys, and other legislative bodies (e.g., city council, county board of supervisors) to prioritize underage drinking as a community concern. Beyond such advocacy, they also played a key role in educating the community at-large about the ordinance. The most successful cities and counties saw ongoing educational efforts, such as annual campaigns to promote alcohol-free graduation parties.

The interview results are not without limitations. Because no interviews were conducted with youth or their parents/guardians, their perspectives on successful local social host prohibitions are not reflected here. It is possible that they are an additional constituency that should be included as a key component.

COMMUNITY SUMMIT

The University of Iowa Institute for Public Health Research and Policy convened a community summit at the Animal Rescue League in Des Moines on September 13, 2018. The meeting brought together a diverse group of substance use prevention workers, law enforcement personnel, government agency staff, and academics to consider underage drinking and prevention strategies.



The summit began with Dr. Gilbert giving a summary of the preceding research into social host prohibitions in Iowa.

Next, an expert panel convened to address attendees. Speakers included Julie Hibben of the Iowa Department of Public Health, Jones County Sheriff Greg Graver, and Kris Rankin from the Van Buren County SAFE Coalition, who shared successes and challenges that they have encountered in their respective work. In addition, they responded to questions from the audience in a lively exchange.

Finally, summit attendees engaged in a working lunch that included an exercise to brainstorm and then rank alcohol-related action items for possible future work. Results of the exercise are shown below.

Possible Alcohol-Related Actions	Number of Endorsements
Implement mandatory alcoholic beverage server training	20
Increase the excise tax on beer	20
Develop or adapt a resource guide for community-based prevention work	19
Develop or adapt a restorative justice program for youth with alcohol violations	17
Increase the minimum age to sell alcoholic beverages	16
Establish mechanisms to ensure that establishments follow best practices to be issued/retain an alcohol license	5
Prohibit minors under age 21 years from entering bars	4
Collaborate with youth to develop a toolkit of social media prevention messages	1
Seek alternate penalties for alcohol code violations, such as through homeowner's insurance	1
Recruit partners who can lobby for alcohol policy work	1

CONTACT

Paul A. Gilbert, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Community & Behavioral Health
University of Iowa College of Public Health
Email: paul-gilbert@uiowa.edu
Tel: 319-384-1478

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