

Op-ed: Sheriff Voices Concerns of Teen Alcohol Use

I would like to take this opportunity to address the issue of under age drinking parties in Brown County and some concerns that have been voiced on this issue by parents and teenagers.

When complaints are made to law enforcement that teenagers are having a party involving alcohol, it is the duty of law enforcement to investigate and deal with the issue at hand.

Back in the day, the legal drinking age for cereal malt beverage 3.2% was 18 and parties like these were tolerated to some extent for whatever reason. During the course of time, it was noted that teenage drivers under the influence of alcohol were contributing to an alarming number of traffic related injuries and deaths. In fact, it was such a nationwide concern that some states were allowing alcohol consumption by those under the age of 21 that in 1983 the National Minimum Drinking Age Act was enacted. Since that time, the minimum legal drinking age is 21 throughout the United States.

Some statistics to be reviewed:

In 2012, 481 Kansas youth aged 12-20 were admitted for alcohol treatment. Young people who begin drinking alcohol before age of 15 are 4 times more likely to become alcohol dependant than those who begin drinking at age 21.

During 2012 in Kansas, 19 teenage traffic fatalities and 736 traffic injuries were attributed to driving after underage drinking.

In 2013 an estimated 267 teen pregnancies and 7,417 teens having high-risk sex were attributed to underage drinking in Kansas.

Drivers under the age of 21 account for 10% of licensed drivers in Kansas but they account for 17% of DUI related fatalities.

In 2013 underage drinking cost the Kansas taxpayer an estimated 1/2 of a billion dollars with costs attributed to medical care, work loss, and pain and suffering, etc.

In 2010 there were 189,000 emergency room visits nationwide by people under the age of 21 for injuries and other conditions linked to alcohol.

CONSEQUENCES OF UNDERAGE DRINKING

Young people who regularly consume alcohol are more likely to experience:

High absence rates or poor grades in school

More aggressive behavior

Higher risk for suicide and homicide

Increased need for mental health services

Increased rate of fatality accidents and unintentional injuries such as burns, falls and drowning.

As law enforcement officers we are reminded of the consequences of underage drinking almost daily, whether it be from media sources reporting on a teenage accident or death, parents with concerns of their child or someone else's child, updated statistics, posts on social media etc. It is a

very helpless feeling when parents have to be notified that their child has been injured or killed in an avoidable accident, especially if alcohol has been involved. It is something that you carry with you for the rest of your life. I feel that all law enforcement officers have an obligation to parents and their children to do everything possible to make sure their kids get the chance to grow in to adulthood and show the world what they have to offer. A young life shouldn't be cut short because of the mistake of consuming alcohol and driving or becoming the victim of a drunk driver if avoidable.

In Brown County we have a zero tolerance for underage drinking. When we receive concerns about minors having a party where alcohol is available to them, we have no choice but to investigate. A poor choice can lead to many criminal charges such as Minor in Possession of Alcohol, DUI, Child Endangerment, Unlawfully Hosting Minors, Furnishing Alcohol to Minors, etc.

This is in no way meant to "pick on" or "harass" teenagers, but an attempt to bring to light the serious lifetime consequences a "little fun" can bring on.

Most recently we had a report of a teenage party in Brown County with over 100 under age young people in attendance as well as a large supply of alcohol. This matter is currently under investigation by our department.

I understand that teens have to explore and make mistakes and from our standpoint, we don't want one mistake to be their last. We just cannot turn a blind-eye to this or ignore this problem because it will not go away.

Parents AND teenagers have been concerned about these parties and the safety of those attending and they are doing the right thing by letting us know of the situation before it's too late. I would much rather have a few people become upset with us for doing our job than ignore the situation and have a serious safety issue on our hands.

The Brown County Sheriffs office has invested a lot of time and effort on behalf of the kids in Brown County because they are our future and are well worth the effort.

We started with the child seat program over 7 years ago and have included a number of community programs and added many school safety programs which includes SAFE and most recently we are offering First Aid, CPR, AED education to all high school students in the hopes to provide positive choices and options for our young people. Many of these programs are being offered through grants, donations and offender registry money which limits the burden to the taxpayer.

I have always appreciated the support I have received from Brown County citizens when I have asked for assistance on any issue and I appreciate the trust you have in me as your sheriff.

I have made a commitment to provide proactive law enforcement to make our county a safer place to live and raise a family. I encourage any parent or teenager to come visit with me or give me a call and I will be glad to provide information or any assistance we can offer on this or any other area of concern.

Sheriff John D. Merchant

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