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New report details Wisconsin's problems with alcohol abuse

But Wisconsin's rates of drug abuse are, in many cases, equal to or better than national rates

By The Associated Press

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A report released today by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute tells a familiar story:

- Wisconsin has the highest rates in the nation for high school student and underage drinking. Forty-nine percent of high school students drink, while 39% of those younger than 21 do.
- About 2,100 Wisconsin residents die each year from accidents or diseases related to alcohol or drug use, and almost \$190 million in public money is spent on related hospitalizations and treatment.

The figures are based on the most recent data available for each category, either from 2005 or 2004.

"Wisconsin has a very serious set of problems related to alcohol use," said Paul Moberg, a senior scientist in population health sciences at UW-Madison and the lead researcher for the report. "And this has been going on for a long time."

The numbers didn't surprise Kari Kinnard, the state executive director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

"It's disappointing and frustrating, but, sadly, it's not a shock," she said. "What we really need to do is change the accepted norms and not tolerate these kinds of behaviors."

The report did have some good news:

- The portion of high school students who began drinking before age 13 decreased to 24% in 2005 from 29% in 1997. The 2005 figure was 2 percentage points better than the national average.
- The number of high school students who reported using marijuana in the previous 30 days was 16% in 2005, 5 percentage points lower than in 1997.

The state mirrored the nation in terms of how frequently other illegal drugs were used.

Researchers expected most of these results, but Moberg said the data would help state officials figure out how to spend federal money intended to combat alcohol- and drug-related problems.

"This report is part of an effort to take another snapshot of the current level of problems, so it could be used to set priorities that are contemporary," Moberg said.

In terms of fighting drunken driving, Kinnard said, the state needs to improve all three tools: education, treatment and punishment.

"A lot of this is going to come back to our state legislators," she said. "They need to be listening to a majority of people - we don't want our children drinking alcohol, we don't want people driving impaired on the roadway, we want to make a change."

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