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Alcohol deaths: In college, drinking games can be fatal

157 college-age people drank themselves to death from 1999 to 2005

By Amy Forliti, Associated Press
Tuesday, July 8, 2008

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WINONA, Minn. -- On the morning after the house party on Johnson Street, Jenna Foellmi and several other twentysomethings lay sprawled on the beds and couches. When a friend reached over to wake her, Foellmi was cold to the touch.

The friend's screams woke up the others still asleep in the house.

Foellmi, a 20-year-old biochemistry major at Winona State University, died of alcohol poisoning on Dec. 14, one day after she had finished her last exam of the semester. According to police reports, she had three beers during the day, then played beer pong -- a drinking game -- in the evening, and downed some vodka, too.

Foellmi's death was tragic, but typical in many ways.

An Associated Press analysis of federal records found that 157 college-age people, 18 to 23, drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005, the

most recent year for which figures are available. The number of alcohol-poisoning deaths per year nearly doubled over that span, from 18 in 1999 to a peak of 35 in 2005, though the total went up and down from year to year and dipped as low as 14 in 2001.

Locally, University of Colorado freshman-Lynn Gordon "Gordie" Bailey Jr. died from alcohol poisoning in 2004 after drinking whiskey and wine during a fraternity initiation ceremony. He was 18.

"There have always been problems with young people and alcohol, but it just seems like they are a little more intense now than they used to be," said Connie Gores, vice president for student life at Winona State. "The goal of a lot of them is just to get smashed."

Over the seven-year span, 83 of the college-age victims were, like Foellmi, under the drinking age of 21.

A separate AP analysis of hundreds of news articles about alcohol-poisoning deaths in the past decade found that victims drank themselves well past the point of oblivion -- with an average blood-alcohol level of 0.40 percent, or five times the legal limit for

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driving. In nearly every case, friends knew the victim was drunk and put him or her to bed to "sleep it off."

"Her friends were with her. It's not like they just left her alone," said Jenna's mother, Kate Foellmi. "She went to bed and she was snoring. She just didn't wake up."

Schools and communities have responded in a variety of ways, including programs to teach incoming freshmen the dangers of extreme drinking; designating professors to help students avoid overdoing it; and passing laws to discourage binge drinking.

Charges were filed in about 40 percent of the cases in which outcomes of criminal investigations were known — most often against fraternity members or others who obtained alcohol for someone underage. There were a few hazing charges. In most cases, plea bargains were reached and the penalties included fines, probation or community service. Jail time was rare.

The federal data showed deaths spiking on weekends — when young people are more likely to go out with the goal of getting drunk — and in December, when college students wrap up finals. Most of the dead were young men.

College students on average drink only a little more than adults in a typical week or month, said Scott Walters, an assistant professor of behavioral sciences at the University of Texas School of Public Health. But college students "tend to save the drinks up and drink them all at once."

The federal figures do not indicate whether a victim was a student or not. But the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed that adults ages 18 to 22 in college full-time are more likely to binge-drink than those not in school.

AP's analysis of news articles found freshmen at greatest risk, with 11 of 18 freshmen deaths occurring during the first semester.

Walters said one reason is that freshmen are on their own for the first time and trying new things. Also, there is a mentality that "if you're under 21 and someone's got alcohol, you've got to drink it, because you never know when somebody's going to have it again."

One practice — drinking 21 shots on a 21st birthday — has proven especially lethal. Of the college-age deaths that made news, 11 people, including eight college students, died while celebrating their 21st birthdays.

"The 21st birthday we knew was coming. We didn't know about the 21-shot thing," said Cindy McCue, who lost her son Bradley, a junior at Michigan State University, in 1998 after he downed 24 drinks in less than two hours.

The McCue family started a nonprofit organization nearly 10 years ago called Be Responsible About Drinking, or B.R.A.D., to teach young people about the dangers. The foundation created birthday cards reminding those turning 21 to celebrate responsibly.

Some universities are trying to send the same message with Web sites and programs that feature slogans such as "Remember Last Night."

San Diego State has a Web site that lets students punch in information about their drinking habits and learn about the risks. Winona State is starting an online course to teach incoming freshmen the dangers of excessive drinking.

Forty professors at Fresno State in California have taken a pledge to learn about the effects of alcohol misuse and advise students. The professors' names are on posters around campus. Other universities have banned or restricted alcohol advertising and sponsorships in athletics.

Minnesota passed a law that blocks people turning 21 from being served alcohol until 8 a.m. on the day of their birthday — a measure aimed at stopping customers who turn legal at midnight from drinking as much as they can before closing time. Other states have similar laws.

In the case of Bradley McCue, who went out at midnight when he turned 21, the bartender kept serving him, even though he was obviously intoxicated, his mother said. The bar owner was charged with supplying alcohol to an intoxicated person and other counts. The owner agreed to pay \$50,000 in fines and costs, close for 30 days, and retrain employees.

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Jenna Foellmi worked to put herself through school, made the dean's list one semester and was a high school member of Students Against Destructive Decisions, according to her mother.

"She was the one we never had to worry about," Kate Foellmi said. "I remember calling her up and saying, 'I am just so proud of you. I'm so glad you have your head screwed on straight.'"

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Comments

Posted by [Justin_thyme2001](#) on July 8, 2008 at 8:41 a.m. (Suggest removal)

here we go again with the alcohol hysteria. Didn't the country mess around with this during the "roaring twenties?" As I recall it didn't work out so well and this type of thing was common. You don't end this kind of behavior by passing laws - you make it worse. I was at CU when they tried this alcohol prohibition stuff back in the mid-90s. It was stark in that when nobody cares there'd be HUGE parties on the hill to the point where you were limited in the amount of beer you could consume because the keg could only pour out so much beer at a time. The whole point was to go and socialize. Then the city and the cops stepped in, and without those parties the only thing for the underage kids kids to do on the weekends was get blind, stinking drunk in their dorms. THIS is when the alcohol problems started showing up in earnest. If the city really wanted to do something about this they'd realize that kids are kids and to just leave it alone.

Posted by [Herb_Lackbooty](#) on July 8, 2008 at 8:55 a.m. (Suggest removal)

The irony is that she was a biochemistry major. Anyway, I lift up my glass in a toast to all who have worked so hard to educate the public about the dangers and tragedies of drinking. Alcohol is a killer.

Posted by [Johnbarleycorn](#) on July 8, 2008 at 9:44 a.m. (Suggest removal)

how many deaths from smoking pot? none? hmmm.....

Posted by [Justin_thyme2001](#) on July 8, 2008 at 10:55 a.m. (Suggest removal)

Herb -

A) most biochemists are heavy drinkers - I can tell you stories. B) EVERYTHING can kill - you could probably beat a guy to death with the Sunday New York Times if you tried hard enough. The point is we don't need a superfluous law every time somebody does something stupid. These laws only make things worse. First, there's the forbidden fruit effect, then there's the problem that kids are kids and if you restrict their drinking to binge drinking around the dorms out of sight and out of mind, they'll do that instead. That's where the problems start. If you turn a blind eye and allow kids to throw huge parties, the focus is not on drinking per se, but on being social. Believe it or not, any college guy would rather wake up with a girl than a hangover. However, since opportunities for the former are being restricted because of this kind of hysteria, the latter is the only option left for those that can't get into a bar or club. Because of the puritanical "just say no" mentality of our society, most kids refrain from fiddling with booze (at least in wholesale quantities) until they're on their own in college and then they go hog wild. They don't have this problem in Europe largely because they teach kids how to drink responsibly from an early age. Yeah sure, it would be nice to live in a perfect world but the perfect is always the enemy of the good.

Posted by [Slackr](#) on July 8, 2008 at 12:16 p.m. (Suggest removal)

Justin_thyme2001, I can also vouch for the drinking habits of biochemists, they maintain high long after undergrad. Seriously though, do these people think that more rules will curb anything? The drinking will continue, the how just evolves, as Justin said. Going through this and now as a parent, I am convinced that the best way to avoid this (although definitely not fool-proof) is talking to your kids about drinking from a young age and teaching them about responsible drinking--no DARE, just straight talk that is age appropriate. Tell them about the dangers of overdoing it from your own experiences. Teenagers break rules, but if you plant that seed in their head, hopefully they will know when to say when.

Posted by [Herb_Lackbooty](#) on July 8, 2008 at 1:44 p.m. (Suggest removal)

Justin and Slackr - I raise my glass to you two as well.

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