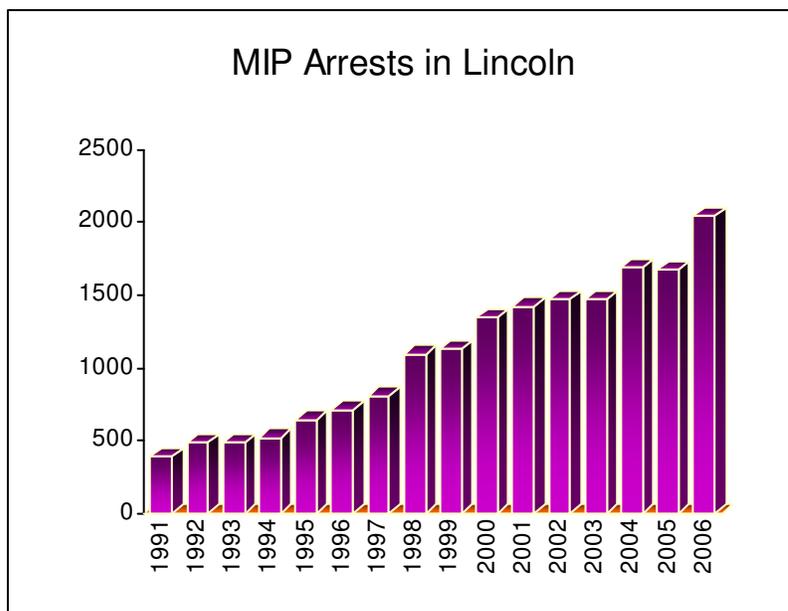


Curbing Underage Drinking—A Key to Safe Communities

—Tom Casady

The scene is familiar: the blue Grand Am weaves eastbound, making several erratic lane changes that cause a cascade of brake lights in the traffic flow. Two blocks behind, the police cruiser picks its way through traffic, and pulls the car over. The officer flips on her spotlight. The driver and passenger are shifting around quite a bit—obviously stuffing something under the seats. Approaching the door, she catches a whiff of pizza and beer. The driver is looking straight ahead, gripping the wheel, trying unsuccessfully to act calm. As the officer’s 30,000 candlepower Streamlight Stinger flashlight illuminates the interior, she notices that a ribbon of foam is forming on the floor mats.... Busted.

Minor in possession of alcohol is one of the most common arrests made by the Lincoln Police Department, and has received increased emphasis in recent years. Last year, 2038 MIP arrests were made by the Lincoln Police Department. In the past decade, the



number has tripled. The reason for this increased enforcement is a renewed commitment by officers to reduce other familiar scenes: three young people dead in an alcohol related traffic accident, a 17 year old sexually assaulted while passed out at a party, a teenager hospitalized with injuries from an alcohol-fueled fight. Police officers see these outcomes far too often, and are keenly aware of the risks of underage drinking.

From time to time, I hear someone talking about underage drinking as if it were an inevitable right of passage, something just destined to happen. I heartily disagree. Many young people abstain, and even more defer using alcohol until they can lawfully do so. We shouldn’t give up and adopt this defeatist attitude towards underage drinking, and there is something all of us can do to reduce the risk. Here are some examples:

Youths

- **Think about the risks and consequences of underage drinking.** Too many kids underestimate what can go wrong. Tragedies happen all the time to underage

drinkers: unwanted and unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancies, assaults, drunk driving arrests, traffic accidents, deaths. An arrest for MIP can have some impacts well into the future. I'm an employer, and every year we turn down applicants whose record of underage drinking concerns so much that they are eliminated from consideration for a career as a Lincoln police officer. Alcohol-related arrests can prevent you from receiving scholarships, being elected to public office, getting into medical school, being accepted into a service academy, and a lot of other things you've never thought of. Underage drinking can ruin many dreams.

- ***Focus on positive activities.*** There is more to life than drinking parties, and alcohol is unnecessary. Spend your time in productive activities—hobbies, studies, extracurricular activities, sports and recreation, part time jobs, volunteer work. I can't believe people who say they drink because there's nothing else to do. What a lame excuse. Your *grandparents* complained to your great grandparents that there was nothing to do! Get over it. Thousands of teens in Lincoln are so busy that they have a hard time fitting everything in. There's plenty to do without drinking.
- ***Educate yourself.*** Not just about the effects of alcohol, but also about the ways young people are influenced and manipulated by some advertising and marketing. Who do you think they are trying to sell *Zima* to? Who do you suppose would put a Mango-flavored *Spykes* in a beer? Where are they advertising these sophisticated products? Some promoters are trying to take advantage of you. Do you really think that the Florida motel offering a \$19 per person room and free beer all day during spring break has a great view of the beach, or cares if the towels are damp and the sheets filthy, or if you get assaulted by a drunken guest? Not! You're being ripped off by shrewd marketers that could care less what happens to you, as long as your money ends up in their pocket. They think you are sheep who haven't got the brains to resist a fad or an ad.

Parents

- ***Make you expectations known about alcohol.*** Don't assume your kids know how you feel, or that your opinion doesn't matter, or that teen drinking is unavoidable. They don't, it does, and it's not (in that order). Tell you kids you expect them not to use alcohol until they are 21, if at all. Kids want boundaries, and don't want to let their parents down. If they know where you stand, they will be less likely to use. Avoid the mixed messages. I suspect no teenager has ever actually called home and said: "Dad, you said if I was ever drunk, I could call you instead of driving. Well, I am. Will you come get me?"
- ***Stay connected to your kids.*** Spend some real time everyday talking to your son or daughter. Know where they are, and with whom. Get acquainted with their friends. Talk to their friends' parents. Go shopping, golfing, biking, to concerts,

movies or ball games with your teens. The stronger your connection, the less likely they are to head down a destructive path.

- ***Don't make mistakes of giving too much freedom too soon.*** Don't let your 16 year old take off with friends for a concert at Red Rocks, no matter how many times he or she tells you that *everyone else* gets to go. And something is amiss when your son or daughter is spending three nights a week at a friend's house. You're going to have a four or five year span when your child is too old for a sitter, and too young to stay at home overnight alone. Deal with it. We see lots of good kids who get into bad trouble because of the temptation of being home alone over the weekend while mom and dad are in Kansas City.

All of us together

- ***Speak out against high-risk marketing practices.*** Don't let the occasional unscrupulous advertiser, retailer, or promoter get away with marketing alcohol to kids, or marketing in a high-risk manner that promotes dangerous behavior or fast, cheap alcohol in large quantities. Watched any of that spring break stuff on cable lately? Promotions like "wet t-shirt night," "three-'fers," "Jello shots," "dollar pitchers," and so forth create a high-risk drinking environment. Kids under 21 are swimming in the same media and marketing soup, and are affected by these ads or promotions that normalize or glorify heavy drinking.
- ***Support activities for young people.*** In Pleasantville, options abound for kids—and no kids are left behind due to lack of transportation, no money for registration fees, or lack of adult leadership. Help keep swimming pools open at night in the summer, school dances regularly scheduled, skating rinks open to the public, live music available for teens, movies projected on bed sheets in church parking lots. Avoid creating activities that socialize kids into what I call the nightclub culture. Do we really need to be introducing high school sophomores to casino night and mocktails?
- ***Don't accept lax law enforcement.*** Advocate firm and fair enforcement, and support police efforts to curb underage drinking. There are many reasons that underage drinking is a low priority for law enforcement in some communities, but it usually boils down to a lack of public support. It's pretty easy for law enforcement officers to conclude that it's just not worth it to bust an underage drinking party. Don't let this happen in your community. Let your local law officers know that you expect underage drinking to be taken seriously.

These are only a few examples, and there is a great deal more that we can do to minimize the impact of high-risk and underage drinking on the lives of kids in our communities. A concerted effort by a committed community really can make a difference in underage drinking rates. It's not an exercise in futility and it *will save lives!*