

Schuylkill County has a drinking problem.

On the annual Sunday celebration famous for its football and alcohol consumption, statistics show that county residents drink more, drink at a younger age and are arrested more often for driving under the

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influence than state and national averages.

And it's not just on Super Bowl Sunday.

"We have a definite problem with alcohol in Schuylkill County, and for the most part, I don't think it's really acknowledged," said Maria T. Myers, administrator of the Schuylkill County Drug and Alcohol Executive Commission.

Consider this information from recent studies, surveys, law enforcement and alcohol abuse experts:

- The Schuylkill County DUI arrest rate is 365 per 100,000 residents, higher than the state's rural (355) and

urban (326) rates.

- Nearly 18.3 percent of county residents qualify as "binge drinkers" — higher than the state average of 15 percent and fourth highest among the state's 67 counties.
- More than 1,000 people were treated for alcohol addiction last year in the county, which has a population of about 148,000.
- Nearly two out of three eighth-graders said they had consumed alcohol at least once, compared to a 47 percent national average, and nearly one of three in the county said they drank within the last month.
- The average blood alcohol content of a DUI offender in Schuylkill County is .17 percent, higher than state and national averages. The state law considers .08 percent driving under the influence.

EXCUSE TO DRINK?

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, drunk driving fatalities increase dramatically on Super Bowl Sunday, rivaling New Year's Eve as the most unsafe day of the year to be on the roads.

But, according to a national survey conducted from 1996 to 2000 and compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many here don't need a special occasion to drink.

In Schuylkill County, 18.3 percent of the survey respondents were identified as acute or binge drinkers — those who consumed more than five drinks at least once in the previous month. The state average is 15 percent, which was also the average in Northumberland County. Schuylkill trailed just Cumberland, Perry and Bucks counties for chronic alcohol use rate.

The Schuylkill County Drug and Alcohol Commission assessed and treated more than 1,004 individuals for alcohol addiction last year and, according to Myers, more than half were referred by the legal system or through a student assistance program.

"In almost all cases, there is usually some third-party involvement, and they're not seeking treatment voluntarily," Myers said. "And the people our agency sees are the underinsured or uninsured, so that number doesn't account for all the people who are being treated for alcohol addiction in Schuylkill County."

A LIFETIME PROBLEM

If the results of a 2005 annual youth Behavioral Risk Factor Survey conducted by the Drug and Alcohol Executive Commission are similar to the 2004 survey — as Myers believes they will be — the community has some deep-rooted issues that must be addressed, she said.

The results will be released in March.

"The use of alcohol in the Schuylkill County community is often a daily part of life for many individuals, as well as a traditional part of many private and public events in our community," Myers said. "We're setting the stage in a lot of ways with the way we include alcohol as a major part of our celebrations and our community events. We really need to take a closer look at the message we're sending to our children."

In a 2003 drug and alcohol survey among local high school students, more than half said they had consumed alcohol before reaching eighth grade.

"Compared to state and national statistics, Schuylkill County's youth are drinking more often and starting earlier, and this problem behavior is carrying over into adulthood," Myers said.

STARTING YOUNG

A comparison of statistics from the Communities That Care Youth Survey by the Schuylkill Drug and Alcohol commission to the results of the national Monitoring the Future survey shows Schuylkill County youth ranked higher in alcohol consumption and first use.

Nearly 63 percent of the county's eighth-graders said they had consumed alcohol at least once, compared to a 47 percent national average. Among 10th-graders, the county's 75 percent rate was higher than 66.9 percent in the nation. And among seniors, it was 82.6 percent in the county and 78.4 percent nationally.

County students in 10th and 12th grades also ranked higher than national averages for alcohol consumption within the previous 30 days.

In more than 60 percent of all cases, local statistics have shown that the first experience with alcohol didn't happen at a backwoods "bush" party, but in the child's own home, Myers said.

Myers and other health officials say studies show parental attitudes and community tolerance allow — and even encourage — underage drinking.

"There are many parents in our community who believe that underage drinking is a rite of passage," Myers said. "Their belief is 'Well, that's what I did, and I turned out OK, so what's the problem, as long as they're doing it at home?'"

According to survey responses, alcohol is provided to minors primarily by parents, older siblings and friends.

"We're finding that it's very common, and even acceptable, especially around prom and graduation times, for parents to allow minors to drink in their homes," she said. "For the most part, they don't look at what they're doing as illegal. They figure that as long as no one's going to be driving, it's OK."

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism of the National Institutes of Health, a person who begins drinking as a teen is four times more likely to develop an alcohol dependence.

"Alcohol has significant effect on developing bodies and may affect brain development," Myers said. "It has also been associated with death by drowning, suicide and homicide."

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20, but teens who drink are twice as likely to die in an alcohol-related crash, NIH studies found.

A PUBLIC HAZARD

According to the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System, 1,091 arrests were made in Schuylkill County in 2004 for alcohol-related crimes, including DUI, liquor law violations and public drunkenness.

In 2005, there were 992 alcohol-related arrests reported.

According to the risk factor survey for Schuylkill County, 18 percent admitted to driving under the influence of alcohol within the past year, slightly higher than the state average. And the Pennsylvania DUI Association says there was a slight increase in the number of DUI arrests in Schuylkill County from 515 in 2003 to 539 in 2004.

The 2005 DUI arrests for Schuylkill County are not available.

Dave R. Everly, regional checkpoint and DUI enforcement operations coordinator for the North Central Highway Safety Network, said the numbers don't necessarily reflect an increase in the numbers of individuals drinking and driving, but rather that enforcement efforts have increased and more DUI offenders are being caught.

"I think what it shows is that what we're doing is working, and that we're getting more drunk drivers off the

roads, as well as preventing more people from drinking and driving through awareness and education," Everly said.

But the numbers reflect only the people who are arrested, not the number of people on the road who are drinking and driving every night, so prevention and enforcement efforts need to remain constant, he said.

ONE MAN'S STORY

Bill, a 41-year-old Pottsville resident recently arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, said he had driven "hundreds, probably thousands" of times under the influence before he was caught.

Bill is in a 12-step recovery program for his alcohol addiction and asked to be identified only by his first name.

Bill said he's been drinking since he was 14 — the first time was at a graduation party held at the home of an older friend.

Before his arrest, he drank as often as three to five times a week, and usually consumed more than five beers in a night.

He said he almost always "drank until he was drunk" and frequently experienced "blackouts," when he couldn't remember driving home or what he had done while intoxicated.

He admits now that he was "in big-time state of denial" of how much his alcohol use impacted his life until the night he found himself handcuffed and sitting in the back of a police car.

"I guess you could say that night was a huge wake-up call for me," he said. "Everyone says it, but I really never thought it would happen to me. That was the kind of thing that happens to 'the other guy,' a drunk. I have a job, and a family, a nice house. There's nothing wrong with going out after work and having a few drinks, right? Anyway, that's what I kept telling myself, until I got caught."

At the time he of his arrest, he had a blood alcohol content, or BAC, of .18 percent.

"Unfortunately, it took a DUI for me to realize how drinking was causing me problems in my life, not just with my family, but with my health," he said. "I realized that the majority of my problems in life were related to alcohol."

According to statistics from the Pennsylvania DUI Association, the average offender is an employed Caucasian male, 35 or older, middle-income level, often with a previous alcohol-related conviction.

HIGH BAC

But it's the average BAC, which C. Stephen Erni, the executive director of the Pennsylvania DUI Association, finds most alarming.

"The BAC of the average DUI offender in Schuylkill and Northumberland counties is .17 percent," Erni said.

State and national averages are around .15 to .16 percent, he said.

"In many cases, the BAC is as high as .22 percent," Erni said. "The average person wouldn't be able to stand up with a BAC that high, let alone get in a car and drive. These are what you would call heavy drinkers."

Erni feels the statistics may substantiate the coal region's reputation for heavy alcohol consumption.

"I've often heard people say that people who live in the coal regions have the reputation of working hard and

playing harder, and the statistics seem to show that in the rural areas of Northeastern Pennsylvania, the number of DUI arrests are higher," he said.

According to the Pennsylvania DUI Association, most drunk driving arrests in Schuylkill County occur between midnight and 3 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

"More than 50 percent of drunk driving arrests in Schuylkill County happen during this time, so I would have to say that it's not a good idea to be on the roads at that time," Erni said.

Officials focus their enforcement efforts at peak times, Everly said.

They're also cracking down on underage drinking.

This year the North Central Highway Safety Network will launch the Source Investigation Project funded by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board.

The pilot program will focus on underage drinking violations and DUI arrests by tracing the alcohol to the adult source who provided it to the minor.

The adults will be arrested and prosecuted, Everly said.

"We're trying to effect an environmental change in the community, to change the attitude of both adults and our youth that underage drinking is not acceptable," Everly said. "If you buy alcohol for minors you will get caught and the penalties can be quite high. I don't think people realize that they could face fines as high as \$1,000 if they get caught providing alcohol to minors."