



Utah's Strategy to Address Underage Drinking

The Utah Juvenile Court receives more than 43,000 referrals each year, with alcohol-related offenses the second most frequently referred to the court. Most of these referrals (90%) are for alcohol possession and consumption. Before implementation of Utah's risk assessment and case management process, youths were handled in a myriad of ways. For example, many received a citation requiring the payment of a fine, some were ordered to perform community service work, and others were put on probation. The consequences for each youth were determined by a subjective analysis of his or her prior history (if any), a Sentencing Guidelines matrix, and the probation officer's best professional appraisal.

Today, each youth referred to Utah's Juvenile Court has an actuarial prescreen risk and needs assessment completed by a probation officer. If the youth scores moderate or high risk, the Protective and Risk Assessment tool is administered. The assessment contains 91 questions and identifies the youth's level of risk, level of need, and protective factors across 10 domains.

Nearly half (48%) of the youths referred for alcohol-related offenses are low risk; however, 31 percent are moderate risk and 21 percent are high risk. Based on the assessment results, the probation officer now has a much better idea of what recommendations to make to the court if the case is petitioned. The officer also has some discretion to handle the case non judicially for first-time offenders who commit minor offenses. A nonjudicial agreement often involves the payment of a fee and can include performing community service hours, attending an alcohol education program, or going to counseling. In 2008, 42 percent of the alcohol referrals were handled through nonjudicial agreements.

Youth who see a judge can receive multiple dispositions. A small percentage of youth (8.5%) are given probation; however, most receive a fine and community service hours. Some are ordered into an alcohol education class, and almost 20 percent receive a driver's license sanction, either suspending or delaying their license. New legislation, effective July 1, 2009, extends the suspension period for an alcohol-related offense from 90 days to 1 year for a first alcohol possession or consumption offense. For a first driving-under-the-influence (DUI) offense, youths now lose their licenses until age 21. Although these sanctions are severe, they communicate a community standard that drinking and driving in Utah is not acceptable, especially for underage youth.



Is Utah's strategy working? Alcohol-related referrals are at their lowest point in the last 7 years. Although this downward trend is reflected across all referral types, the 20 percent decline from 2007 to 2008 in alcohol-related referrals is a significant drop that cannot be explained by the overall trend. Further analysis of the data is needed, but the overall picture indicates that Utah's comprehensive strategy is making a difference.

Submitted by Susan Burke, Assistant Juvenile Court Administrator, Utah Administrative Office of the Courts. For more information on this program, please contact Aidan Moore at 603-369-1766 or by email at amoore@pire.org

The Judicial Probation Outreach Project is a program of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation and is supported by Grant No. 2007-AH-FX-K003 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). OJJDP is a component of the Office of Justice Programs. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the United States Department of Justice.