



The U.S. Department of Education's
HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER
for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention

E-FACT SHEET

Controlling Rowdy House Parties Through Enforcement

Off-campus parties that foster underage and high-risk drinking and become a nuisance to neighbors are often a sore spot when it comes to town-gown relations. Responding to these parties is leading communities to adopt new measures and enforcement strategies to reduce a range of problems faced by students and residents alike.

What Science Tells Us

While many policy and enforcement strategies have been identified and implemented at colleges and universities and in surrounding communities aimed at reducing underage and/or unruly house parties, little research has been conducted to identify the effectiveness of specific measures. [*A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges*](#) (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002) states: “Mutually reinforcing interventions between the college and surrounding community can change the broader environment and help reduce alcohol abuse and alcohol-related problems over the long term. . . . The joint activities that typically result help produce policy and enforcement reforms that, in turn, affect the total drinking environment.”

Two separate studies reported in a special college drinking supplement of the [*Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*](#) (July 2009) developed programs in which colleges worked closely with their surrounding communities, using measures such as increased police patrols in problem neighborhoods and raising student awareness of their responsibilities as community residents. The studies found reductions in heavy drinking and a decrease in the number of off-campus incidents involving students. One study was led by Mark D. Wood, Ph.D., of the University of Rhode Island, and the other by Robert F. Saltz, Ph.D., of the Prevention Research Center, Berkeley, Calif., working with two universities in Washington state.

“Shaming” Houses That Host Rowdy Parties

Since 2005, police in Narragansett, R.I., have cited more than 300 homes under a town law aimed at curbing rowdy gatherings—especially among off-campus students from the nearby University of Rhode Island. According to an Associated Press dispatch (Aug. 4, 2009), the ordinance permits police to place 10-inch-by-14-inch orange stickers on properties where parties of five or more people create a “substantial disturbance” through loud noise, public drunkenness, illegal parking, or other such behavior. The first sticker serves as a warning, though the next noise violation carries a fine of \$300. Stickers must remain up for the duration of the school year or summer, depending on when they were given out.

Narragansett’s ordinance is modeled on a similar ordinance implemented in Tucson, Ariz., intended to rein in underage drinking among University of Arizona students. And in San Luis Obispo, Calif., home to 19,000 students enrolled at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo and Cuesta College, Police Chief Deborah Linden is proposing an ordinance modeled on those in Tucson and Rohnert Park, Calif., home to Sonoma State University. San



Luis Obispo Council member Andrew Carter wrote: “Host an unruly party of this kind, not only would you be immediately cited, but your residence would be ‘red tagged.’ That would mean residents would be subject to fines of \$1,000 or more if there is a future unruly gathering and attendees at that future party could be personally cited as well” (PublicCEO.com, Sept. 24, 2009).

Noise Ordinances in Virginia College Towns

Passing and enforcing noise ordinances is one strategy that college towns are using to combat unruly parties. The city of Williamsburg, Va., home of the College of William and Mary, implemented its noise ordinance on Aug. 24, 2009, which is the strictest noise ordinance of any college town in Virginia. Noise ordinance rankings are primarily ordered by the severity of the misdemeanor class. Factors such as decibel levels and the length of quiet hours define rankings within these classes. Williamsburg ranks first because noise violators are charged with a Class 1 misdemeanor on their third noise violation.

Some cities have added special twists to noise ordinance punishment and enforcement. Community service is required for offenders of the noise ordinance of Harrisonburg, home of James Madison University. First-time violators must complete 50 community service hours in addition to whatever punishment is meted out by a court. For the second violation (and each thereafter), 100 community service hours must be performed.

Some noise ordinances include a “Large Party Public Nuisance” clause. In Blacksburg, home of Virginia Tech, the “Large Party Public Nuisance” clause states, “A gathering of ten (10) or more people where the gathering is not contained within a structure, but spills outdoors into balconies, yards, common areas, parking lots, or other outdoor spaces, which creates excessive noise as prohibited by this chapter.”

Keeping Students Informed

The Web site PartySafe@Cal is designed to help University of California, Berkeley, students “Have Fun. Manage Risks. Reduce Harm.” Among other things it includes information about alcohol laws and enforcement. Here’s what it tells students about party patrols: “UCPD and Berkeley Police conduct joint Party Patrols Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights regularly throughout the academic year. The Party Patrol Teams are largely made up of dedicated officers with specialized training. They respond quickly to concerns and complaint calls about parties, thus reducing the drain on the police serving the remainder of the community. . . . Student surveys show that off-campus parties are the largest source of student alcohol-related injuries, assaults, and sexual harassment. Party Patrols are the enforcement strategy which impacts these issues most directly when they reduce the number of parties that spill out onto the street, attract uninvited people, disrupt the sleep and study of others, and foster other harm associated with drinking. . . . If you’re at a party that starts to get out of control, call the police before someone else does. Breaking up your own party can save a lot of money and problems later on.”



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