

The Huntsville Times

Alcohol is No. 1 problem with kids

Local figure tops national average; forum aims to help

By **WENDY REEVES**

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Drinking among sixth-through 10th-graders in Madison County is higher than the national average, and there is an effort under way to try to change it.

"This is a wake-up call," said Deborah Soule, executive director of the Partnership for a Drug Free Community.

Next week, parents, teens and educators are invited to attend a free Underage Drinking Town Forum sponsored by the partnership at the SAIC Conference Center in Huntsville's Cummings Research Park.

The forum will be one of more than 1,100 being held across the country, Soule said.

"We need to break the wall of denial and have people understand that alcohol is the

number one problem with our young people," she said.

Soule said most kids don't think alcohol is a drug, making it more acceptable.

In 2004, an analysis by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration showed that every day 7,000 young people under 16 have their first drink of alcohol.

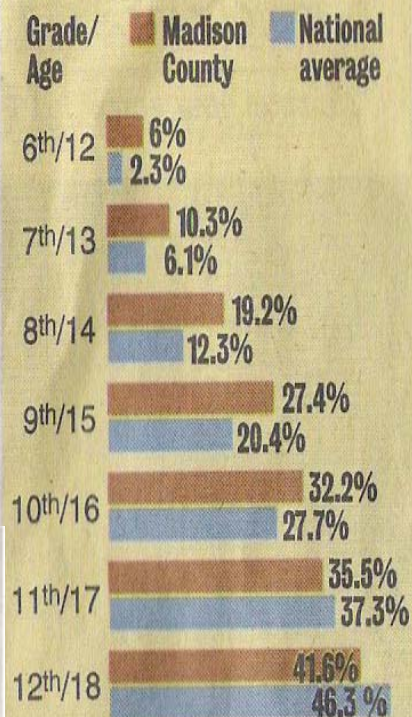
Nearly 29 percent of young people between the ages of 12 and 20 say they are already drinking, according to a 2004 national survey on drug use and health.

Soule said people who attend the forum will learn

Please see **ALCOHOL** on A6

Teenage alcohol use

Surveys taken in 2004 show that students in Madison County, Huntsville and Madison city schools are above the national average for underage drinking.



Source: 2004 National Survey on Drug

Alcohol

Continued from page A1

about the dangers of underage drinking, the importance of preventative steps for youth and ways the community can take action to reduce underage alcohol use.

There will be a group of students - middle and high school and college - who will talk about what they're seeing in their schools.

Educators, law enforcement, community leaders, an attorney, emergency room doctor and minister will also comprise discussion panels. Soule said speakers will be limited to just a few minutes so attendees will have more time to ask questions or express concerns.

In addition to the forum, fifth- and sixth-graders

Want to go?

The Underage Drinking Town Forum will be held March 28 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the SAIC Conference Center, Cummings Research Park, 6725 Odyssey Drive.

To get there: From Research Park Boulevard, exit Bradford Drive west. Turn left onto Explorer and then take the first left onto Odyssey Drive. Turn right into SAIC parking lot.

For more information, call 539-7339.

throughout the country will be targeted for a new alcohol awareness campaign. Soule said the program will be taught in several local schools next month.

"This is just the beginning of trying to prevent and decrease alcohol use among our youth," Soule said. "It's not the solution, but the beginning."