

**Statement of George A. Hacker, Director, Alcohol Policies Project,  
Center for Science in the Public Interest**  
on  
**The National Academy of Sciences' Report to Congress on Underage Drinking**  
*September 10, 2003*

I'm George Hacker from the Alcohol Policies Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. We have worked for more than twenty years to reduce alcohol problems, and we thank Representatives Roybal-Allard and Wolf, many other members of Congress, and our colleagues at MADD and the AMA for their roles in helping to create today's long-overdue plan to combat the nation's number-one youth drug problem.

Today's NAS report signals an historic first step toward ending decades of complacency about one of the most damaging public health and safety threats facing our society. We now have a roadmap. What's needed is the political will to move forward.

Although alcohol kills six times more kids than all illicit drugs combined, federal efforts on underage drinking have been under-funded and scattered among many agencies, with no coherent vision or strategy. In 2001, the GAO estimated that our government spent only \$71 million specifically to prevent underage drinking in 2000. That compares with \$18 billion to fight the drug war, \$58 billion in costs related to underage drinking, and some \$3 billion that alcohol producers spend on slick ads with the message that drinking is fun, glamorous, and harmless.

Aggressive campaigns to reduce teen smoking are paying off. In contrast, the absence of a similar commitment on underage drinking has allowed teen use and binge drinking to continue at alarmingly high rates. Federal inaction leaves alcohol producers with a near monopoly as educators of young people about alcohol.

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During the past five years CSPI and a large coalition of diverse groups has worked to promote a hard-hitting national media campaign that would give parents and youth the facts about the massive harm alcohol causes young people each year. We're pleased that the NAS report prominently recommends such a campaign.

We're not surprised that the alcoholic-beverage industry has attacked the report even before its release. Why wouldn't it? Up to 20 percent of the alcohol consumed in America is downed by underage drinkers. For the industry, underage drinking is both a profit center and a breeding ground for its best customers—the addicts of tomorrow.

To really put the brakes on underage drinking, we especially urge Members of Congress and state legislators to study carefully and implement the report's recommendations on alcohol taxes. Higher taxes on alcohol would help reduce underage drinking and save young lives, and could fund important education and treatment programs. They are long overdue all across this nation. Those Members of Congress who have co-sponsored measures to *reduce* beer and liquor taxes should be embarrassed that they are jeopardizing the health of America's kids in order to pad the bottom line of a politically connected industry.

The time has come for action. We call upon Congress to closely review the NAS report, schedule hearings on its important recommendations, and take leadership to prevent and reduce underage drinking and its widespread harms.

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*The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on nutrition, food safety, and alcohol policies. It led efforts to obtain warning labels on alcoholic beverages and is well-known for revealing the nutrition content of many restaurant foods. CSPI is supported largely by the 800,000 U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its Nutrition Action Healthletter and by foundation grants.*