Preventing Adolescent Alcohol Misuse
Survey targets preteens and teens

By Joanne Littlefield

Drugs, guns, violence, alcohol, sex—these are the distractions young people face today. With all the media attention given to youth problems around the country, it’s easy to believe that ‘everyone is doing it.’ ‘Not so’ in the case of alcohol consumption, say researchers Jennifer Maggs, University of Arizona and John Schulenberg, University of Michigan. By using data on alcohol use collected from 20,000 middle school and high school students and parents, these researchers have found that not as many youth are drinking alcohol as the public may think.

The Alcohol Misuse Prevention Study (AMPS), funded by the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, began in 1984. Maggs joined the project while at the University of Michigan and continued as co-leader with her move to the University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences as an assistant professor of family studies and human development in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences in 1995. A three-year subcontract from the University of Michigan to the University of Arizona (1996 to 1999) has enabled Maggs and her graduate student assistants to conduct analyses and write papers based on the AMPS data. At the point Maggs joined the AMPS, the data had been collected and the research team was focusing on evaluating for whom the AMPS curriculum was most effective, and why.

“One goal of the AMPS was to give young adolescents more accurate data about alcohol use among their peers,” Maggs explains. “Adolescents (and adults) invariably overestimate the prevalence of alcohol and other substance use among students. When people learn the more accurate information that the great majority of middle school students do not abuse alcohol, a potential not-so-subtle pressure to experiment with alcohol loses much of its power.”

“Another important finding from the AMPS is that the timing of interventions is crucial,” Maggs states. “The AMPS curriculum was implemented in fifth and sixth grade, but was most effective for those early teens in sixth grade who had already begun to experiment with alcohol. This suggests that while prevention should begin at an early age, it is possible to begin TOO early.” She says information and skills presented need to seem relevant to the participants.

“Of course, the most appropriate timing will vary for different locations and populations, but program planners should seriously consider issues of timing to maximize impact.” Maggs and Schulenberg are guest editing a special issue of the journal Applied Developmental Science that will focus on how prevention programs can alter the course of child and adolescent development in positive ways. They note in particular how the AMPS success­fully targeted risk factors such as susceptibility to peer pressure as a way of reducing substance misuse during adolescence. The future for the AMPS is to integrate these findings into drug, alcohol and tobacco ‘resistance trainings’ offered to young people throughout Arizona.