

Sobering Depiction of Teen Drinking

Jackie Burrell, Contra Costa Times

With an empty martini glass at her elbow, teenager Serena van der Woodsen, star of the CW's "Gossip Girl," leans against the tony Manhattan bar and blithely downs another vodka concoction, unscathed.

It's no surprise the frothy series about the sexy lifestyle of Upper East Side prepsters has some parents and reviewers in an uproar over its glamorized glimpse of underage drinking.

But the truth is, though American youths may not knock back limoncello and champagne as blithely as couture-clad Serena, TV shows such as "Gossip Girl" offer a fairly accurate depiction of teen partying across the country.

According to the U.S. surgeon general's office, underage consumption of beer and alcohol accounts for a quarter of alcohol sales.

The truth is also that many parents are in denial.

Parents think, "Oh, not my wonderful children," said Orinda parenting expert Ksenija Soster Olmer. "They pretend it's not happening, that it couldn't happen to their family."

But according to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, it is happening - to 11 million youths ages 12 to 20.

Although the overall percentage of drinkers has held fairly steady for the past five years, the most recent statistics from that survey show teens have begun drinking at younger ages, and binge drinking has surged - nearly 7.2 million teens reporting they sometimes down five or more alcoholic beverages in a single sitting.

It's the middle school numbers that psychologist Sara Denman of Danville finds most alarming. Teen drinking is not just glamorized, she said, "it's accepted. It's expected. Now, if you're not going to (drink), you hold a beer so people think you are."

It's "an epidemic of underage drinking that germinates in elementary and middle school with 9- to 13-year-olds and erupts on college campuses, where 44 percent of students binge drink," said Columbia University's Joseph Califano Jr., who heads the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

A fifth of California's seventh-graders have drank alcohol - not sipped or tasted, but consumed at least one alcoholic drink, according to the most recent California Healthy Kids Survey. Nine percent have imbibed until they became very drunk or threw up.

The numbers go up from there. A quarter of the state's high school freshmen and 41 percent of its juniors say they have been very drunk at least once; 21 percent of the 182,000 juniors polled had binged within a month of taking the survey.

In the San Francisco Bay area, more than a quarter of San Ramon Valley High School's juniors say they had binged in the 30 days before taking the survey, and 18 percent had been drunk or high while at school. So had half of Berkeley High's juniors and 5 percent of that city's seventh-graders.

Blaming "Gossip Girl" and its booze-without-consequences message misses the point, said Ellen Peterson of the Acalanes Drug and Alcohol Task Force, a 12-year-old advocacy group. The lack of televised consequences doesn't carry much impact in a culture where unsupervised teen partying is an every-weekend occurrence.

"When teens drink, they don't think about the consequences," the Diablo Valley (Calif.) College psychology professor said. "They drink to have fun, to make talking easier, to lose inhibitions. I'm not sure if showing consequences makes much difference."

Teens focus on the here and now, Denman said, not grim prospects down the road.

And those prospects are not just the threat of a hangover or puking in the lap of a crush, say adolescent health experts, it's the dramatic effect alcohol has on risky sexual activity, physical assault and teen drunken-driving deaths.

Now, recent research has tied early drinking to adult alcoholism. A teen who begins drinking before age 15 is four times more likely to develop alcohol dependency as an adult.

Parents are a critical piece when it comes to addressing the issue. But they're also part of the problem, Califano said. According to a 2006 study produced by Califano's department, 99 percent of parents said they would never serve alcohol to minors. But 28 percent of partygoing teens said parents had chaperoned their booze-soaked parties.

Ten percent of Bay Area parents with teens ages 14 to 17 mentioned alcohol when pollsters for a 2006 Lucile Packard Foundation study asked what concerns they had for their children.

Too many parents are either naive or delusional - or they're buying the keg so they can "supervise" the drinking, said Olmer, whose daughters went to Miramonte High School. Add in the secrecy and frequency of unsupervised parties and the time constraints of curfews and you've got a recipe for disaster.

"Even the best kids make stupid decisions," Olmer said. "The circumstances are conducive to being drunk. It's not an excuse, but I see how it leads to their doing that. They're knocking them down to get drunk as fast as possible."

The solution has to come from not just one home, Olmer said, but all of them.

"There's a lot of drinking and partying going on in the parents' lives too, and no one's talking about that," she said. "There's media influence, but we don't have to look that far. It's in our communities. That's the reality."