

Top law-enforcement officials say alcohol abuse is key to youth crime in region

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Alcohol abuse is the top crime issue among the region's teenagers and young adults, Trumbull Police Chief Thomas Kiely said Thursday.

Top law-enforcement officials from Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Easton and Monroe concurred with Kiely's view, and blamed at least part of the growing problem on parents' attitudes.

"Kids are going to die from this. The extent of their drinking is so extreme it astonishes me," said Lt. Mike Walsh, representing Fairfield police at a meeting of the Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project board of directors at the Burroughs Community Center in Bridgeport.

"Changing the parents' opinion is key," said Mark Pastore, Easton's school resource officer. "When you call parents about a problem it seems sometimes the parents are more worried about being embarrassed than taking care of the problem."

The officials, who attended the RYASAP forum to discuss the nature of youth crimes in their communities, said they hope a new state law will alert more parents to the problem.

The law allows police to investigate suspicions of underage drinking on private property and holds homeowners criminally responsible for allowing a person under 21 years old to possess alcohol on their property.

While alcohol abuse tops the list of crime problems, the law-enforcement officials also reported an uptick in graffiti, sexual promiscuity and bullying via the Internet.

In Stratford, Chief Michael Imbro said he's noticed an increase in the number of fights between teen girls, bullying, and altercations that are often gratuitous in nature.

"Things are more aggressive than they were years ago. More retaliatory than they were," he said.

Easton police are responding to more complaints about bullying involving children as young as 7 years old, according to Pastore.

He also sees more students engaging in sexual activity at younger ages.

"Things are happening in the schools, at parties. Sex, inappropriate touching among students the same age. Kids are a lot freer with what they do," he said.

In Monroe, Police Chief John Salvatore said alcohol and drug use fluctuates, but there does seem to be a dangerous spike in drinking that can feed into promiscuity and vandalism.

"Some weekends we go crazy with mailboxes [being damaged] and we know alcohol is involved," he said.

He said parents should be a roadblock to these problems.

"We have parents who defend their kids no matter what," Salvatore said.

Even when a teen is stopped for a traffic violation and given a warning, Salvatore said he hears from parents angered by the enforcement — and sometimes their lawyers.

"It's not teaching kids to take responsibility for their actions," he said.

In Bridgeport, Kenny Jackson, a peer mediator at Harding High School, said students even slip alcohol into school by putting it in soda cans.

"The drug of choice is alcohol," said Bridgeport Police Chief Bryan T. Norwood.

Bridgeport last year saw its first upswing in teen alcohol use in years.

The problem is still more widespread in the suburbs, but the city is catching up, said Bob Francis, executive director of RYASAP.

Norwood said the department is striving to shut down establishments that sell alcohol to minors, and working with a group of teens to help identify the issues that can cause alcohol abuse.

"We've learned a tremendous amount from them," he said of the teens. "They are very verbal."

A 2005 survey of state high schools found 45 percent of students had consumed alcohol recently, 28 percent had binged recently, and 74 percent had alcohol at some point in their lives. In addition, 21 percent had their first alcoholic drink before age 13.

Stratford is the only area community that saw a decrease in alcohol use among young people in 2005. Imbro credited efforts by the town's Community Services Department for helping reduce the number.