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Children Will Play

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August 25 2006

When Canton Police Chief Lowell Humphrey started on the town force around 1970, local teenagers could hammer down the brew and rock till dawn in secluded homes and outdoor spots.

But the likelihood that a neighbor will be within hearing distance of a high-decibel, puke-on-your-shoes party has grown as the town has grown.

"I've found, with over 25 years' experience, that as the neighborhoods have become more densely built out, it's tough for kids to get away with much," Humphrey says. "There used to be a lot of hot spots in the '70s and early '80s, but it's tough to have a big, rip-roaring party nowadays."

Teenagers, Humphrey and other police officials say, will find a way to drink. They have their secret places, their clueless or apathetic parents, older siblings who can legally buy alcohol and friends with fake IDs.

But factors are converging to dampen the teen revelers' spirits, including possible jail time for parents who allow underage drinking on their property and the growing difficulty of keeping parties hidden from adults. Farmington police spokesman Sgt. Daniel Devine agrees with Humphrey.

"The big keg parties with the bonfires, that free space has been encroached on," Devine says.

But the sergeant also sees a troubling logic among some parents, who believe their teenagers will be safe if they drink in their own houses. The main problem with that philosophy, Devine says, is that teenagers and alcohol can quickly become a volatile mix.

"You can't turn it on and off," he says.

A party in Farmington earlier this year helped spur a new state law, effective Oct. 1, that makes it a crime to allow underage drinking on private property. Maximum punishment is

one year in prison and a \$500 fine.

The birthday party that Paul and Dawn Bracone threw in January for their 18-year-old son attracted dozens of teenagers, who later told police they had easy access to alcohol provided by their adult hosts. Both Bracones pleaded guilty to reckless endangerment and both received suspended sentences and probation.

The new law will bite into the problem, says Craig Turner, vice president of the Connecticut Coalition To Stop Underage Drinking, a program of the Governor's Prevention Partnership. Although many communities have ordinances against teen house parties, the law covers the state and encourages neighbors to report underage drinking on private property, Turner says. Also, he says, adults who have allowed underage drinking will have to think about the criminal sanctions.

"We now have a consistent statewide law and no confusion," he says.

Recent studies have found that Connecticut minors drink more than their peers nationally; that 77 percent of state high school students say they obtain alcohol in their homes, with or without their parents' consent; and that 61 percent of teen drinking occurs at parties in their own homes.

Across the nation, one in four teenagers has seen a peer drink in front of parents at a party, and two out of three teenagers say getting alcohol from their homes without their parents' knowledge is easy, according to national studies.

"There's laws against keeping guns locked up, but nothing to prevent a fridge full of beer or a fully stocked bar," Humphrey says.

He and other police supervisors say teenagers have keen ears for news of absent parents.

"Sometimes a kid will invite one or two friends over, and the one or two friends multiply," Burlington resident state Trooper Ray Buthe says.

So the kid who expected to hang out with a couple of buddies ends up with a dozen or more people streaming in the door with pints and six-packs and expectations of a rollicking house party.

Police say they strive to squash teen house parties before they begin, but parents and neighbors have to help.

"The first thing I'd say is, `Don't leave the kid at home,'" Humphrey says. "I've found that even the most well-intentioned, best-behaved teenagers are no match for some of their friends who learn that the house is going to be parentless for the weekend.

"The trust that you place in your kid can easily get overwhelmed by the peer pressure of his friends."

Teen parties are most prevalent during the first weeks of school, around proms and other

major events and during school vacations, Taylor says. Extended online messaging and attempts to keep those conversations secret is one sign that a big party is in the works, he says.

Some parties are scrubbed when parents and police officers find teens chatting about their plans on the popular website myspace.com, according to news reports from around the country. When school is in session, Connecticut police say they frequently get tips about planned beer bashes from school officials, who pick up information in the hallways and classrooms.

If they find out early enough, police will try to put the kibosh on a party by calling parents. Sometimes, parents call police.

"On a couple of occasions, parents have called to say, 'Junior's home. Junior knows that we're calling you, and we would just appreciate it if there's any unusual activity, you check it out,'" Humphrey says

Parties frequently are broken up after neighbors complain about loud noise or report an unusual number of cars parked outside a house.

Police advise parents who have to leave their teenagers alone to have a neighbor or relative watch the house. Also, police in Canton, Farmington and other towns have installed hot lines that people may call anonymously to report teen parties.

"We've had our share of tragedies resulting from parties," Humphrey says.

One of the most effective actions parents can take, Turner says, is to ensure their teenagers have gone where they said they were going. A common scenario: Dave tells his parents he's going to Jimmy's house, while Jimmy tells his parents he's going to Dave's. Jimmy and Dave both head to a party at Chelsea's, where the parents are absent.

"It's the simplest thing to check," Turner says. "It's amazing that parents are so reluctant to do that."

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