

## Health

# Five binge-drinking deaths 'just the tip of the iceberg'

## Tragedies reignite debate on campus

By Robert Davis  
USA TODAY

This month has been deadly for binge-drinking college students.

Five underclassmen in four states appear to have drunk themselves to death, police say, after friends sent their pals to bed assuming that they would "sleep it off."

Some college presidents are promising to crack down on underage drinking — four of the students were too young to drink legally. Others have shut down fraternity houses where bodies were found.

But one expert calls those moves too little, too late. "It's locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen," says Henry Wechsler, a Harvard University researcher who has studied campus drinking. He says schools with weak enforcement of drinking rules put students at greater risk.

"The schools that have the greatest problems take the easiest solutions," he says. "They have educational programs and re-motivation programs. But they don't try to change the system. These deaths are just the tip of the iceberg."



Top by Evan Semon, The Rocky Mountain News, via AP; right by Paben Photography via AP

**Grieving:** Friends remember Samantha Spady, 19, right, who was found dead at a Colorado State University fraternity house in Fort Collins on Sept. 5.

In some college towns, drink specials at bars and loose enforcement of liquor laws make it easier and cheaper for students to get drunk than to go to a movie, Wechsler says. The result, research suggests, is 1,400 student deaths a year, including alcohol-related falls and car crashes.

"Some schools enforce," he says. "But others have a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. It's a wink."

Others say schools can't stop a young adult who chooses to drink.

Drinking problems start in high school and are simply let loose in college, says the American Council on Education, a Washington-based advocacy group that represents about

1,800 colleges and universities.

"Shouldn't colleges crack down on alcohol consumption?" asks Sheldon Steinbach, ACE's general counsel. "They could. But you would be turning the college into a quasi-police state and impairing their ability to grow up."

All of these students, last seen drinking heavily, were found dead:

► Samantha Spady, 19, of Beatrice, Neb., was found Sept. 5 in a Colorado State University fraternity.

► Lynn Gordon Bailey Jr., 18, of Dallas, was found Sept. 17 at a University of Colorado fraternity house.

► Thomas Ryan Hauser, 23, a junior from Springfield, Va., was found Sept. 19 in his apartment near Virginia Tech.

► Blake Adam Hammontree, 19, of Medford, Okla., was found Sept. 30 in a fraternity house at the University of Oklahoma.

► Bradley Barrett Kemp, 20, of McGehee, Ark., was found at home Saturday at the University of Arkansas.

The official cause of death has not been determined for the three most recent cases.

Colleges with large Greek systems and big, highly competitive intercollegiate athletic programs have the highest rates of student binge drinking, Wechsler says. "There is a culture of drinking on campuses that must change," says Patty Spady, Samantha's mother. "People put her in a room thinking that she would sleep it off."

But chug too many drinks — Samantha is said to have consumed up to 40 beers or shots of vodka the night she died — and the blood alcohol level continues to rise even after a person passes out. Alcohol kills when the person is too intoxicated to maintain his own airway. He then suffocates on his own vomit or on an otherwise harmless obstruction, such as a pillow.

"These kids don't know this," says Spady, who set up a foundation (SAMspadyfoundation.org) to find ways to prevent deaths on campus. "Drunks cannot take care of drunks." Spady urges students to "stay sober to take care of your friends."



By Joshua Buck, Longmont (Colo.) Daily Times-Call, via AP

**Evidence:** Boulder police remove a keg of beer from the Chi Psi fraternity house near the University of Colorado.

## Alarming numbers on college drinking

Research on college drinking reveals these facts about students:

- Those younger than 21 consume 48% of drinks on campus.
- 48% drink "to get drunk."
- 500,000 students are injured each year while intoxicated; 1,400 of them die.

Sources: Harvard School of Public Health; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism