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Teens help police bust underage alcohol sales

Many stores sell to minors without checking IDs

By **Rossana Weitekamp**1 2 3 [Next page >](#)

ROSSANA WEITEKAMP

Hing Liquors on Woodfield Road in West Hempstead has a history of selling to underage customers, police say.



How easy is it for a juvenile to buy alcohol in a store without showing identification to the clerk?

A lot easier than you would think. Just ask Sergeant Edward Grim.

Grim leads the Nassau County Police Department's undercover Project 21 initiative in the 5th Precinct — an effort that cracks down on stores that sell alcohol to underage customers. His department's work has resulted in an average of 60 arrests in stores in West Hempstead, Valley Stream, Franklin Square and Elmont each year since 2012.

Project 21 is conducted with the help of teenage volunteers — or underage agents — interested in law enforcement. Some volunteers come on the recommendation of the school districts they attend. Others are part of the county's Law Enforcement Exploring program, which gives young adults the opportunity to do volunteer work in law enforcement.

Through Project 21, the police, together with the underage agent, travel in unmarked cars to area liquor stores. The teenager is given money, and enters the liquor store to attempt to make the purchase. Once the teen exits with an alcohol purchase, the police go in, make the arrest and recover the money given for the purchase.

Grim said he's always surprised at the results of his work. "At first, I never really went to liquor stores [as opposed to other establishments that sell alcohol] because I thought, 'this is their bread and butter — they would never sell to a minor,'" said Grim. "They were, however, the worst offenders. If I went to nine liquor stores today, nine would sell to a minor. I do this for a living — and I'm still shocked."

What's even more shocking is that many stores are repeat offenders. In October 2014, police arrested a dozen store clerks in West Hempstead, Franklin Square and Elmont for selling to minors. Eight of these locations sold to minors again during another Project 21 sweep in March of this year. "In all eight cases, the situation involved the same store, the same clerk, and the same underage agent," said Grim.

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Keywords

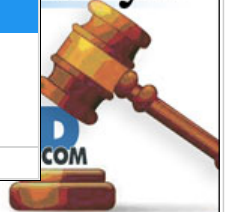
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Teens help police bust underage alcohol sales

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ROSSANA WEITEKAMP

Hing Liquors on Woodfield Road in West Hempstead has a history of selling to underage customers, police say.



Police reported the following stores in West Hempstead sold alcohol to underage residents during the past several months: Hing Liquors and Resturante Y Pupuseria, both on Woodfield Road, and Figaro Liquors on Hempstead Ave. Hing Liquors, police say, has repeated offenses.

Why do stores sell to minors and risk losing their business? "I personally don't think they're doing it out of greed. They're doing it out of ignorance," said Grim, who says that many store clerks believe the drinking age to be 18.

The lack of heavy penalties may also be to blame. In the past, if businesses were caught selling alcohol to minors, the police would issue court appearance tickets, which weren't effective in stopping repeat offenders, said Grim. "They were given a ticket, they'd pay the ticket, and would be selling to underage kids again the next week," said Grim. The Nassau County First District Court refused to comment on the fee amount because circumstances vary widely.

The ticket fine, however, represents only a penal law charge from the county clerk's office, and really doesn't influence compliance with the law, said Grim. The real source of influence comes from the police's referral to the New York State Liquor Authority about the offense. The Liquor Authority issues fines starting at \$3,000, but in the past have been relatively slow to act, and court cases would take nearly a year to begin. This would leave time for the store owner to apply for an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal — or an ACOD — which was often successful in dismissing and expunging the case as long as the defendant stayed out of trouble.

This situation has changed within the past year, said Grim, due to the Liquor Authority's new prosecutor, Michael Ammirato, who is based in Harlem and covers New York City, Long Island and Westchester. "The Liquor Authority is now taking a more pro-active approach to businesses who break the law, and are hearing cases within a month's time, said Grim.

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ROSSANA WEITEKAMP

Hing Liquors on Woodfield Road in West Hempstead has a history of selling to underage customers, police say.



If an establishment sells to a minor a second time, the fee goes up. Bill Crowley, a spokesperson for the Liquor Authority, said, "The second sale is around \$4,500, depending on the circumstances. But when you have two-to-three sales to minors, you are looking at losing your license."

Despite the Liquor Authority's slow approach in the past, the 5th Precinct has still managed to close more than 15 stores within the past 10 years because of repeated offenders.

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