

## Findings of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study

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### Extent of Drinking

The drinking style of many college students is one of excess and intoxication. Four of five college students (80%) drink alcohol. Almost half of these drinkers (48%) report that drinking to get drunk is an important reason for drinking. One in four (23%) drinkers drink 10 or more times in a month, and three in 10 (29%) report being intoxicated three or more times in a month.

### Binge Drinking

The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS) classified college men as "binge" drinkers if they consumed five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past two weeks, and women if they consumed four or more drinks in a row during that period. Two in five (44%) students attending four-year colleges in the United States were binge drinkers according to this measure. More than half of the binge drinkers (23% of all students) were frequent binge drinkers. This rate of binge drinking has remained constant through four CAS surveys from 1993 to 2001.

At one in three colleges more than half of the students were binge drinkers.

Other major national surveys, including Monitoring the Future study, the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey (CDC), the U.S. Department of Education's CORE survey, and the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse have found similar rates of drinking, despite varying sampling strategies and methods.

Few students who reported frequent binge drinking consider themselves to be heavy or problem drinkers and even fewer report that they have sought treatment or counseling for their drinking.

### Alcohol-related Consequences

Many college students who drink alcohol experience negative academic, social, and health consequences as a result of their drinking.

An NIAAA commissioned study using data from the CAS, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National College Risk Behavior Survey found that each year more than 1,400 U.S. college students die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, the majority occurring in motor vehicle crashes.

More than two million of the eight million students drove a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol and over three million rode with an intoxicated driver. More than 500,000 students became injured unintentionally while under the influence of alcohol, and more than 600,000 were hit or assaulted by another student who had been drinking.

The rate of driving after drinking among college students is of particular concern. Three in ten college students (29%) reported they drove after drinking, one in eight (13%) after consuming five or more drinks and one in four (23%) rode with a driver who was high or intoxicated.

Alcohol has a significant impact on academic performance. Three in ten student drinkers (30%) reported that they missed a class as a result of their drinking and one in five (22%) fell behind in schoolwork. Higher alcohol consumption was associated with a lower grade point average, in part due to fewer hours spent studying.

Heavy drinking is associated with risky sexual behavior. One in five drinkers (21%) reported that they engaged in unplanned sexual activity as a result of their drinking, and one in ten drinkers (10%) did not use protection during sex due to their drinking. Students who engaged in frequent binge drinking had a seven-fold increased risk of engaging in unplanned sexual behavior.

Drinkers also reported anti-social behaviors due to their alcohol use that were higher. One in nine drinkers (11%) reported that they vandalized another person's property when under the influence of alcohol and one in fourteen (7%) said they got into trouble with the police when drinking.

### Secondhand Effects of Alcohol

The impact of college student alcohol abuse is not limited to the drinkers themselves. Students who attended schools with high rates of binge drinking experienced a greater number of secondhand effects, including disruption of sleep or studies, property damage, and verbal, physical or sexual violence, than their peers attending schools with low binge drinking rates. Three in ten (29%) college students reported that they were insulted or humiliated by another student who had been drinking, and 19% said they had been in a serious argument or quarrel with an intoxicated student. One in eleven (9%) reported having been pushed, hit or assaulted by a student who had been drinking. One in twenty (5%) female students reported that they were the victim of a sexual assault, and three in four of these students were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the rape. These sexual assaults tended to occur more often at colleges with high rates of binge drinking. In addition, residents of neighborhoods near heavy drinking schools experienced higher rates of noise disruptions, property damage and police visits than those who lived in neighborhoods surrounding schools with lower rates of heavy drinking and those who did not live near a college.

## High-Risk Students

Drinking behavior is not evenly distributed among college students. Fraternity and sorority members, particularly those who live in Greek housing, exhibit the highest rates of binge drinking. Four in five fraternity house residents (80%) and seven in ten (70%) of all members were classified as binge drinkers. For sorority women these numbers were only slightly lower. Seven in ten sorority house residents (69%) and four in ten (40%) of all sorority women were binge drinkers.

Another major center of binge drinking on campus involved intercollegiate athletics. Students who took part in intercollegiate athletics and non-athletes who were fans and attended college athletic events were more likely to be binge drinkers than other students who were not involved in athletics.

Where students live during college is an important factor in how much alcohol they consume. Students living at home with their parents had the lowest rates of binge drinking among all college students. On campus, residents of housing designated as substance-free (i.e., alcohol and tobacco use prohibited) had the lowest rates of binge drinking. Students living in fraternity or sorority houses had the highest rates of binge drinking.

Student drinking and heavy drinking appears to vary by setting. Fraternity/sorority parties, off-campus parties and off-campus bars were the sites of heaviest drinking. While off-campus parties and bars were most heavily attended, a higher percentage of drinkers engaged in heavy drinking at fraternity/sorority parties.

Alcohol use prior to college predicts heavy drinking and related problems during college. Onset of drunkenness among college students prior to college was associated with frequent binge drinking, alcohol dependence, driving after drinking, riding with an intoxicated driver, and sustaining injuries that required medical attention as a result of drinking.

## Contributing Factors in the Environment

Rates of binge drinking vary dramatically by college (ranging from 1% to 76%), by region of the country (higher in northeastern and north central states, lowest in western states) and by the sets of policies and laws governing alcohol sales and use on campus and in the local community and state. Features of the environment such as residential setting, price of alcohol, marketing practices of local providers of alcohol, density of alcohol outlets as well as the prevailing drinking rates at the college are significantly related to the rate of binge drinking in college.

The price students pay for alcohol is an important factor in their drinking. Low price and very easy access to alcohol are strong correlates of underage drinking. Students who pay a higher price for alcohol are less likely to take up binge drinking in college. The number of bars and liquor stores in neighborhoods surrounding college communities can be very large. In one college site, there were 185 alcohol outlets within two miles of campus. The greater the number of alcohol outlets, the higher the drinking rates and second hand effects of alcohol experienced by community residents of the neighboring areas.

More extensive campus, local, and state policies that target alcohol use and greater enforcement are associated with less drinking and binge drinking among college students. Students attending colleges that ban alcohol were less likely to binge drink and more likely to abstain from alcohol. However, students who drank at these colleges drank just as heavily as students at non-ban schools. Perhaps the greatest benefit of banning alcohol was that fewer students experienced secondhand effects of the drinking of others than students at non-ban schools.

At schools that allow students some access to alcohol, substance-free residences, where students are prohibited from using alcohol and tobacco products, are associated with less alcohol use and fewer secondhand effects of alcohol. The benefit of substance-free compared with unrestricted housing was greatest for students who did not binge drink in high school and for those on campuses with lower overall levels of binge drinking.

College student drinking is also influenced by state of residence. A joint study using data from the CAS and CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) study found that binge drinking rates of college students in a state was strongly correlated to the binge drinking rate of adults living in that state. State alcohol control policies and their enforcement were associated with the level of drinking among college students.

Restrictions on sales to and possession by persons under the legal drinking age are associated with less drinking by underage college students. Underage students in states with extensive laws restricting underage and high-volume drinking were less likely to drink and to binge drink. These policies were also associated with lower rates of drinking and driving among college students.