



Research Findings on College Drinking and the Minimum Legal Drinking Age

College drinking has been a frustratingly persistent problem on America's campuses.¹ The tradition of drinking on and around campus is strong, and despite efforts to curtail the behavior, the majority of students—both underage and of age—drink, many of them heavily. The negative consequences of alcohol consumption by our Nation's college students are wide-ranging; they include academic problems, date rapes and assaults, and deaths from unintentional injuries and alcohol poisonings. Clearly, these consequences affect both drinkers and those around them.²

For most, college drinking does not begin in college.

Most students come to college having experienced alcohol in high school. By the 12th grade, 72 percent of high school students have had a full drink, 26 percent report engaging in binge drinking in the past 2 weeks, and 55 percent report ever having been drunk. Although colleges may “inherit” drinking problems, many students do increase their consumption when they get to college.³

Drinking is deeply ingrained in the campus culture at many universities across the Nation.

Eighty-three percent of college students drink, and 41 percent report drinking five or more drinks on an occasion in the past 2 weeks, a particularly dangerous pattern of consumption.⁴ In addition, anecdotal reports and some research studies⁵ indicate that many college students drink far more than five drinks per occasion. An extreme example is the practice of attempting to drink 21 shots within the first hour starting at midnight of one's 21st birthday, which has resulted in alcohol poisonings.⁶

Compared with all other age-groups, the prevalence of periodic heavy or high-risk drinking is greatest among young adults aged 18–24, whether they are in college, the military, or the workforce.

In fact, the highest prevalence of alcohol dependence occurs in this age-group.⁷ Although college-bound 12th-graders are consistently less likely than their noncollege-bound counterparts to report occasions of heavy drinking, the higher rates of such drinking among college students compared with noncollege peers who entered the workforce indicate that college students catch up to and pass their working peers in binge drinking after high school graduation.^{8,9}

Addressing college drinking is complicated by the fact that some students can drink legally, whereas others cannot.

Whereas underage drinking laws apply only to drinking by individuals under age 21 and to those who provide alcohol to them, addressing the problem of excessive drinking for all students, not just those under 21, is critical to reducing alcohol-related consequences on and around campus. This combination of underage and of-age drinkers also is a problem for the military.

It is important to address college drinking both at the individual and the environmental level.

Although there is no silver bullet, we do have evidence that a variety of individual, environmental, and campus–community approaches can work.¹⁰⁻¹³ Their effectiveness will depend on the culture and context of a particular campus. Generally, strategies that encompass multiple aspects of campus life, including the surrounding community, have been most successful. It also is important to note that underage drinking laws vary among States, and, therefore, college and university administrators need to understand how their State laws apply to their campuses.¹⁴

Notes/Additional Resources

For additional information about college drinking, go to NIAAA's College Drinking Prevention Web site at: <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/>.

- ¹ Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2007. Volume I: Secondary School Students* (NIH Publication No. 08–6418A). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2008, p. 26.
- ² Hingson R, Heeren T, Winter M, Wechsler H. Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24: Changes from 1998 to 2001. *Annu Rev Public Health* 26:259–279, 2005.
- ³ Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2007. Volume I: Secondary School Students* (NIH Publication No. 08–6418A). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2008, p. 26.
- ⁴ Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2007. Volume I: Secondary School Students* (NIH Publication No. 08–6418A). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2008, p. 26.
- ⁵ White AM, Kraus CL, Swartzwelder H. Many college freshmen drink at levels far beyond the binge threshold. *Alcohol: Clin Exp Res* 30(6):1006–1010, 2006.
- ⁶ Rutledge PC, Park A, Sher KJ. 21st birthday drinking: Extremely extreme. *J Consult Clin Psychol* 76(3):511–516, 2008.
- ⁷ Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2007. Volume I: Secondary School Students* (NIH Publication No. 08–6418A). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2008, p. 26.
- ⁸ Dawson DA, Grant BF, Stinson FS, Chou PS. Another look at heavy episodic drinking and alcohol use disorders among college and noncollege youth. *J Stud Alcohol* 65(4):477–488, 2004.
- ⁹ Timberlake DS, Hopfer CJ, Rhee SH, et al. College attendance and its effect on drinking behaviors in a longitudinal study of adolescents. *Alcohol: Clin Exp Res* 31(6):1020–1030, 2007.
- ¹⁰ Larimer ME, and Cronce, JM. Identification, prevention, and treatment revisited: Individual-focused college drinking prevention strategies 1999–2006. *Addict Behav* 32(11):2439–2468, 2007.
- ¹¹ Toomey TL, Lenk KM, and Wagenaar AC. Environmental policies to reduce college drinking: An update of research findings. *J Stud Alcohol* 68(2):208–219, 2007.
- ¹² Weitzman ER, Nelson TF, Lee H, Wechsler H. Reducing drinking and related harms in college: Evaluation of the “A Matter of Degree” program. *Am J Prev Med* 27(3):187–196, 2004.
- ¹³ *What Colleges Need to Know Now: An Update on College Drinking Research*. Available at: http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/1College_Bulletin-508_361C4E.pdf.
- ¹⁴ Alcohol Policy Information System (APIS), a project of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Available at: <http://www.alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/stateprofiles/>.