Characteristics of Underage Drinking

Excerpts from Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility

All text in this fact sheet is excerpted directly from Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, a 2004 report from The National Academies.

**Long Term Trends**

**Drinking Initiation**

**How Youth Drink**

**College Drinking Patterns**

**Gender**

**Overall Consumption Levels**

**Contexts of Underage Drinking**

**TABLE 2-2: Drinking Prevalence Among Eighth, Tenth, and Twelfth Graders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>8th Graders</th>
<th>10th Graders</th>
<th>12th Graders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last 30 days</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Drinking*</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Defined as five or more drinks in a row in the previous 2 weeks.

SOURCE: Data from Johnston et al., 2003. Table reproduced from Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, 43.

**Long Term Trends**

The prevalence of drinking among high school seniors peaked in the late 1970s and then decreased throughout the 1980s. Drinking rates have been relatively stable since then, with 30-day prevalence rates hovering at approximately 50 percent throughout the 1990s (Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, 37).

The proportion of high school seniors who report drinking in the last 30 days was the same in 2002 as it was in 1993 (48.6 percent). The proportion of seniors who report having five or more drinks in the past 2 weeks was higher in 2002 (28.6 percent) than it was in 1993 (27.5 percent) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 37).
Although there have been modest reductions in the 30-day and annual prevalence rates for the past five years, current rates are not significantly different than they were in 1993, and remain high\(^4\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 37).

**Drinking Initiation**

The average age of first use of alcohol among individuals of all ages reporting any alcohol use, based on the respondents’ recall of this information, has decreased from 17.6 years in 1965 to 15.9 years in 1999.\(^5\) For 12- to 20-year-olds only, the average age of first use in 2000 is even younger\(^6\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 40).

**Prevalence of Youth Drinking Before Age 13, By Race/Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Report Drinking Before Age 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino Youth</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Youth</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American Youth</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Reducing Underage Drinking, 40\(^7\)

**How Youth Drink**

Although overall alcohol use is low for the youngest age group, almost one-half of the 12-year-olds who reported alcohol use reported having drunk heavily\(^8\) in the past 30 days. The rate of heavy drinking doubles from age 14 (about 6 percent) to age 15 (about 12 percent) and continues to increase steadily\(^9\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 40-41).

When reported by race or ethnicity, white youths aged 12-20 have the highest reported rates of heavy drinking (21.4 percent), followed by American Indians and Alaska Natives (20.3 percent), Latinos (17.2 percent), African Americans (10.3 percent), and Asian-Americans (7.9 percent)\(^10\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 41).

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Despite continual decreases between 1996 and 2002 in lifetime use among junior high students (eighth graders), nearly one-half (47 percent) still report drinking in their lifetimes. Similarly, while the proportion of high school seniors who report having had 5 or more drinks in the past 2 weeks has decreased every year since 1998, nearly 30 percent (28.6) still report such use\(^11\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 42).

**College Drinking Patterns**

Nearly half (48 percent) of all the alcohol consumed by students attending 4-year colleges is consumed by underage students\(^12\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 44).

According to data from the 2000 NHSDA, 41 percent of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 engaged in heavy drinking, compared with 36 percent of young adults who were attending college part time or not at all\(^13\) (Reducing Underage Drinking, 45).

**Gender**

As of 2000, the prevalence of alcohol use among boys and girls aged 12 to 14 and 15 to 17 were within a few percentage points of each other. Girls aged 12 to 14 in all three racial and ethnic groups, but most notably Hispanic girls, are actually more likely than boys to have used alcohol in the past 30 days\(^14\) 9.8 percent of Hispanic
females, 8.3 percent of non-Hispanic white females, and 4.8 percent of African American females. These rates compare with 6.3 percent of Hispanic males, 7.5 percent of non-Hispanic white males, and 4.2 percent of African American males (Reducing Underage Drinking, 49). 14

**Alcohol Use in Past 30 Days, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Girls, 12-14</th>
<th>Boys, 12-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, the differences between girls and boys is greater for heavy drinking than for recent use: for example, non-Hispanic white males age 18-20 have a 13 percent higher prevalence for heavy drinking than non-Hispanic white females, compared to a 5.9 difference for any recent use. Similar patterns are observed in Hispanics and African Americans. Hispanic males have a 14.9 percent higher prevalence and African American males have a 8.6 percent higher prevalence for heavy drinking compared to their female counterparts15 (Reducing Underage Drinking, 49).

**Overall Consumption Levels**

Underage youths consume in the range of 10 to 20 percent of all drinks and account for a somewhat lower, albeit still substantial, percentage of total expenditures16 (Reducing Underage Drinking, 55).

**Contexts of Underage Drinking**

Of high school seniors, more than one-half of males and more than one-third of females drank beer in the past 30 days. Liquor (the term used in MTF) was a close second 41.7 and 30.7 percent of males and females, respectively17 (Reducing Underage Drinking, 56).

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
8 "[H]eavy drinking refers to five or more drinks on the same occasion in the past 30 days" (Reducing Underage Drinking, 37). This definition applies for all references to heavy drinking in this fact sheet.
10 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I.* 
National Survey Results on Drug Use, 2003.


14R.L. Flewelling, M.J. Paschall, and C. Ringwalt, "The Epidemiology of Underage Drinking."

15Ibid.

16Committee conclusion.

17R.L. Flewelling, M.J. Paschall, and C. Ringwalt, "The Epidemiology of Underage Drinking."