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Fact Sheets

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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*.

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TABLE 2-2: Drinking Prevalence Among Eighth, Tenth, and Twelfth Graders
(in percent)

Prevalence	8th Graders	10th Graders	12th Graders
Lifetime	47.0	66.9	78.4
Last 30 days	19.6	35.4	48.6
Heavy Drinking*	12.4	22.4	28.6

* Defined as five or more drinks in a row in the previous 2 weeks.
SOURCE: Data from Johnston et al., 2003.¹ Table reproduced from *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, 43.

Long Term Trends

[T]he 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 1990s² (*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)³ (*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 high⁴ (Reducing Underage Drinking, 37).

Drinking Initiation

[T]he 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—14⁶ (Reducing Underage Drinking, 40).

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

	Report Drinking Before Age 13
Latino Youth	33.7%
White Youth	28.4%
African-American Youth	28.2%

SOURCE: Reducing Underage Drinking, 40⁷

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 heavily⁸ 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 steadily⁹ (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).

[D]espite 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 use¹¹ (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 students¹² (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 all¹³ (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—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

Race/Ethnicity	Girls, 12-14	Boys, 12-14
Hispanic	9.8%	6.3%
Non-Hispanic white	8.3%	7.5%
African-American	4.8%	4.2%

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

[U]nderage 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

[O]f 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, 55).

¹L.D. Johnston, P.M. O'Malley, and J.G. Bachman, *Monitoring the Future National Results on Adolescent Drug Use: Overview of Key Findings, 2002* (Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003).

²L.D. Johnston, P.M. O'Malley, and J.G. Bachman, *Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975-2002, Volume I: Secondary School Students* (Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003).

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I. Summary of National Findings* (Rockville, MD: Office of Applied Studies, 2002).

⁶S.E. Foster et al., "Alcohol Consumption and Expenditures for Underage Drinking and Adult Excessive Drinking," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 289, no. 8 (Feb. 26, 2003).

⁷J.A. Grunbaum et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance United States, 2001," *MMWR* 51, no. SS-4 (June 28, 2002): 44.

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.

⁹R.L. Flewelling, M.J. Paschall, and C. Ringwalt, "The Epidemiology of Underage Drinking in the United States: An Overview," in *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, Background Papers (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2004).

¹⁰Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I*.

¹¹L.D. Johnston, P.M. O'Malley, and J.G. Bachman, *Monitoring the Future:*

National Survey Results on Drug Use, 2003.

¹²H. Wechsler et al., "Underage College Students' Drinking Behavior, Access to Alcohol, and the Influence of Deterrence Policies: Findings from the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study," *Journal of American College Health* 50, no. 5 (2002): 223-236.

¹³Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Summary of Findings from the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (Rockville, MD: Office of Applied Studies, 2001).

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."

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