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FACT SHEET: Alcohol Facts

Bob Aaron
Illinois Wesleyan University

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FACT SHEET: Alcohol Facts

• Standard drink--definition:

- Contains a half-ounce of alcohol, the amount you'd find in a 12-ounce can of beer . . . a 4-ounce glass of table wine . . . or a 1-ounce shot of 100 proof distilled spirits, such as whiskey or vodka.
- Generally, this is the amount of alcohol a person can metabolize in about an hour . . . although many factors can affect metabolism.

• Binge drinking--definition:

- A University of Wisconsin-Madison study by its Center for Addiction Research and Education defined binge drinking as six or more drinks in a single sitting.
- Another definition defines binge drinking as "the consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion."
 - In national surveys about one-third of high-school seniors and 42 percent of college students reported at least one occasion of binge drinking within the previous two weeks.
 - The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines female "at-risk" drinking as seven or more drinks a week . . . and 14 or more drinks a week or a history of occasional binge drinking for men.
 - Binge-drinking consequences: academic failure, sexual assault, and depression.

• The Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University reports:

"As young people enter the culture of the college campus, they are confronted with many challenges and opportunities: the opportunity to be independent of parental control; the need to conform; and the insecurity of a new social setting. Forty-one percent of college students engage in binge drinking, as compared to their non-college counterparts."

- Junior and senior high school students drink 35 percent of all wine coolers sold in the United States; they also consume 1.1 billion cans of beer.
- Use of alcohol is associated with the leading causes of death and injury among teenagers and young adults.
- Students with grade-point averages of D or F drink three times as much as those who earn As.
- College students drink an estimated 4 billion cans of beer annually.
- The total amount of alcohol consumed by college students each year is estimated at 430 million gallons, enough for every college and university in the United States to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool.

- Beer manufacturers spend an estimated \$15-\$20 million yearly to promote their products to college students.
- Almost 4 percent of all college students drink alcohol daily.
- The number of college women who drink to get drunk has more than tripled in the past 10 years, climbing from 10 percent to 35 percent.
- On America's college campuses, alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of all academic problems and 28 percent of all dropouts.
- 75 percent of male students and 55 percent of female students involved in acquaintance rape have been drinking or using drugs at the time.
- Alcohol consumption, abuse, and its consequences have been estimated to cost U.S. society \$86 billion annually--\$26 billion more than the cost of Operation Desert Storm, the 1991-92 international military action to free Kuwait from an Iraqi invasion.

Binge Drinking

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) reports that, "College presidents agree binge drinking is the most serious problem on campus."

What is binge drinking?

What if you were in a restaurant and saw another diner at a nearby table consume a six-pack of soda, you might think it was strange. Consuming 72 ounces of any fluid at one time can tax your body. In the case of soft drinks, you might have the problem of film on your teeth, an influx of calories expanding your waistline, and a "rush" from all that caffeine.

Now, let's say that the same diner was guzzling a six-pack of alcohol. That's just as bizarre as downing 72 ounces of soda, but many college students do it all the time.

That's binge drinking--putting away at least five drinks at one time, in one sitting. The side effects of this behavior in the short run can be serious: vomiting, dizziness, impaired mental capabilities, and hangovers. In the long run, the effects can be more serious.

A recent study shows that students spend about \$5.5 billion each year on alcohol--more than they spend on soda pop, tea, milk, juice, coffee, and books combined.

Campus Drinking Trends

CSPI points to a recent survey about binge drinking conducted by Harvard University's School of Public Health, which surveyed students at 140 campuses:

- 44 percent of U.S. college students engaged in binge drinking during the two weeks before the survey.
- 50 percent of men drank five or more drinks in a row.
- 39 percent of women drank four or more drinks in a row.

Commenting on the Harvard study, CPSI said: "Students more likely to binge drink are white, involved in athletics, or are residents of a fraternity or sorority. If they were binge drinkers in high school, they were three times more likely to binge in college."

A key conclusion of the Harvard report is that although the number of students who abstain from alcohol has climbed from 15 percent to 19 percent between 1993-97, students who do drink are drinking more heavily.

Henry Wechsler, director of college alcohol studies at the Harvard School of Public Health, brought the term, binge drinking, to public attention five years ago, when he released his first report on college drinking.

Binge Drinking: Fraternities, Sororities Worst Offenders

Wechsler's follow-up survey shows that fraternities and sororities are the worst campus offenders: four out of five members are binge drinkers.

"There has been a very small drop in binge drinking between 1993 and 1997," Wechsler said, "due mainly to an increase of students who do not drink at all. However, this has been more than offset by the increased intensity of drinking among those who drink: more drinking to get drunk, more frequent drunkenness, and more alcohol-related problems."

According to the Harvard study, the percentage of students who are binge drinkers is nearly uniform from freshman to senior year, even though students under age 21 are prohibited from purchasing alcohol.

The study also revealed that about half of binge drinkers--one-in-five overall--were frequent binge drinkers, that is, they binged three or more times in a two-week period.

Consequences of Binge Drinking

Binge drinkers pinpoint these reasons for drinking: drinking to get drunk, status associated with drinking, culture of alcohol consumption on campus, peer pressure, and academic stress.

Frequent binge drinkers are more likely than non-binge drinkers, according to CSPI, to have missed class, fallen behind in school work, engaged in unplanned sexual activity, not used protection when having sex, gotten in trouble with campus police, damaged property, been hurt or injured, driven a car after drinking, or used other drugs.

Two-thirds of students responding to the Harvard study reported experiencing at least one adverse consequence of another student's drinking during the school year:

- 44 percent had to "baby-sit" an intoxicated student.
- 43 percent had their sleep or study interrupted.
- 27 percent had been insulted or humiliated.
- 22 percent had a serious argument.
- 21 percent had experienced an unwanted sexual advance.
- 13 percent had been pushed, hit, or assaulted.
- 12 percent had property damaged.
- 2 percent had been the victim of a sexual assault or "date rape."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the four leading injury-related causes of death among youths under age 20 are motor vehicle crashes, homicides, suicides, and drowning. Alcohol is involved in many of these deaths.

The Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University reports: "Binge drinking, or the partying lifestyle of young people, may be related to an environment that appears to support heavy drinking. Youths report that alcohol is more easily available to them today than it was five years ago, and there is a high correlation between availability and use. In addition, alcoholic

beverages remain inexpensive in comparison with other beverages, especially beer when purchased in kegs, often the center of a party."

Tragedies at MIT, LSU

College and university administrators nationwide, grappling with alcohol use and abuse on campus, have two youngsters in mind as they struggle with the issue: Scott Krueger and Benjamin Wynne.

Krueger was a Massachusetts Institute of Technology freshman, who died Sept. 29, 1997, after an "Animal House Night," a hazing event at the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, where he consumed enough alcohol to raise his blood-alcohol level to .401--a toxic amount more than five times the legal limit in Massachusetts.

Benjamin Wynne, a 20-year old Sigma Alpha Epsilon pledge at Louisiana State University, died from alcohol poisoning after a bid night celebration in August 1997. Wynne consumed the alcohol that killed him at a fraternity member's home and a fraternity party at a local bar.

Commenting on LSU actions in the aftermath of Wynne's death and a wild "barnyard" party by another fraternity, the Baton Rouge Advocate wrote: ". . . that death seems to have prompted some deep soul-searching in the university administration, which eventually kicked Sigma Alpha Epsilon out of LSU and took only several weeks to take the same action against Kappa Sigma.

"Those actions," the newspaper continued, "speak much louder than the lofty words we have been hearing about changing the culture of alcohol at LSU and riding herd on fraternities that don't get the message.

"It looks like LSU's leaders, at least," the Advocate concluded, "have taken that message to heart. And LSU should be a safer, more civilized, more productive place because of it."

In the aftermath of these incidents, the fraternities involved were closed.

Affect of Drinking on Higher Education

"Binge drinking," CSPI observes, "is a widespread phenomenon on most college campuses, a problem that not only interferes with the mission of higher education but also carries with it serious risks of disease, injury, and death.

"Findings from the Harvard survey," CPSI adds, "suggest that college and university administrators will want to intensify their search for new approaches to preventing both underage and binge drinking."

While alcohol use is widespread in U.S. society, Wechsler said, "this doesn't remove the responsibility of colleges to face up to alcohol-related issues. "Let's not put the onus on students. College presidents and students have to develop codes of behavior that are enforced for everybody, including alumni and star athletes. Parents need to be brought in, even if it's 'only beer.' More deaths in this country are attributable to alcohol than to illicit drugs."

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