



UPDATED FOR 2002 NATIONAL SURVEY ON DRUG USE AND HEALTH

Drinking in America: Myths, Realities, and Prevention Policy

Myths About American Drinking

“Alcohol is an integral part of American life. It is a normal accompaniment to most social events. Most Americans enjoy drinking on a regular basis.” These are widely held perceptions about alcohol—created in part by alcohol advertising and popular culture. But these perceptions are not entirely true. These perceptions—and misperceptions—affect our attitudes toward alcohol and our policies regarding the sale to and consumption of alcohol by youth as well as adults.

This paper provides a more realistic picture of who drinks, how much, and how often. It compares the drinking patterns of adults to those of people under age 21. It then analyzes the implications of these drinking patterns for alcohol policy.

Alcohol: Counting the cost

While there are many positive impressions associated with alcohol, Americans are becoming conscious of the problems created by alcohol. For example, we no longer accept impaired-driving crashes as unavoidable “accidents.” But alcohol-related problems go well beyond impaired driving. In fact, more than 75,000 deaths are attributable to alcohol consumption each year and the economic costs associated with alcohol problems total more than \$184 billion annually.¹ As large as they are, these figures do not begin to capture all of alcohol’s social and health toll; more than one-third of Americans report that alcohol has caused problems in their immediate family.²

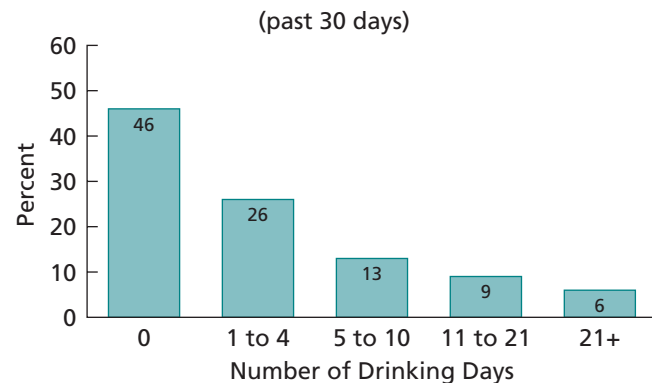
When society views drinking as a normal and accepted part of life, these problems may seem inevitable. Some of this view is based on misperception of drinking patterns. A more accurate picture has implications for strategies to reduce alcohol-related problems.

Adults: Who drinks and how much?

A large majority of Americans either do not drink or drink infrequently. For this majority alcohol is an unimportant consumer product. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (an interview survey carried out in homes), about 46 percent of adults 21 years of age and older report that they did not consume any alcohol in the past month and an additional 26 percent report drinking once a week or less.³ (See Figure 1.)

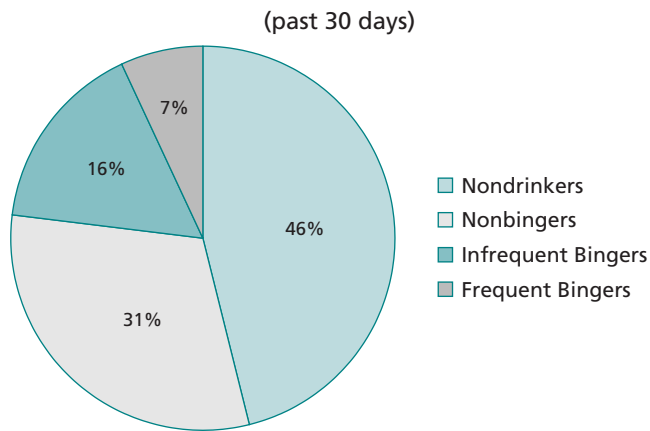
In addition to information about how frequently people drink, it is also important to examine the quantity people typically drink on each occasion. Figure 2 provides information about whether adults 21 and over had five or more drinks per occasion (termed here a “binge”). Among adults, 46 percent did not drink at all, and 31 percent drank but did not have five or more drinks on any occasion. That is, 77 percent of adults do not drink at a hazardous level.

FIGURE 1 Frequency of Drinking Among U.S. Adults 21 and Older



Source: NSDUH, 2002.

FIGURE 2 Drinking Patterns Among U.S. Adults 21 and Older



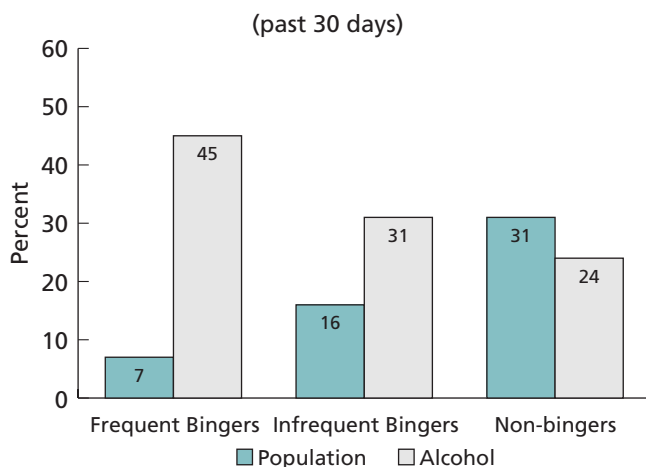
Source: NSDUH, 2002.

Even among drinkers, only a minority consume this much alcohol on any occasion. About 43 percent of adult drinkers had five or more drinks on any occasion in the last 30 days.

The average number of drinks consumed by drinkers who do not binge was fewer than three per week. By contrast, frequent bingers who have had five or more drinks at a time five or more times in the past month consume on average more than 24 drinks per week. Even though frequent bingers are only seven percent of the population, they drink 45 percent of the alcohol consumed by adults in the United States. Figure 3 shows the proportion of alcohol consumed by different types of adult drinkers.

- Binge drinkers are 23 percent of the population, but drink 76 percent of the alcohol.

FIGURE 3 Alcohol Consumed by Drinking Pattern Among Adult Drinkers



Source: NSDUH, 2002.

- Frequent bingers are only 7 percent of the population, but drink 45 percent of the alcohol.

These statistics show the importance of heavy drinkers for the alcohol market. Alcohol sales depend on the heaviest drinking consumers. The claim that the “overwhelming majority of Americans” use alcohol responsibly is true only because most Americans either abstain or consume alcohol very infrequently.

The following picture of adult drinking emerges from these data:

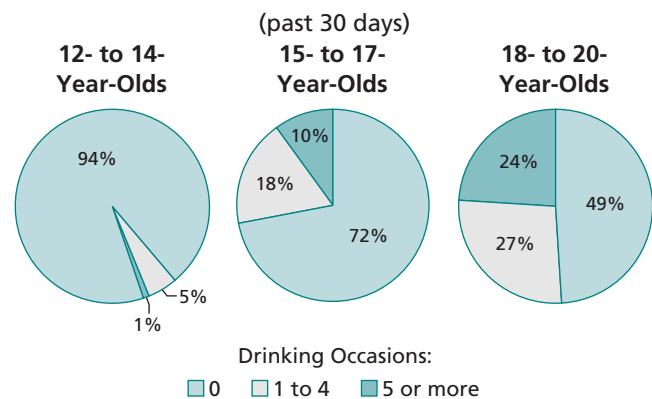
- Most American adults either abstain or drink very little.
- A relatively small percentage of drinkers drink most of the alcohol.
- This small percentage often consumes several drinks at a time, increasing the risk of serious health and safety problems.

Underage: Who drinks and how much?

The picture for underage drinking is somewhat different. Most young people reported to the National Household Survey that they had not had anything to drink in the last month. About 94 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds reported that they had not drunk alcohol while 72 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds and 49 percent of 18- to 20-year-olds reported that they had not drunk in the preceding month. Figure 4 shows the proportions of young people reporting drinking at different frequencies.

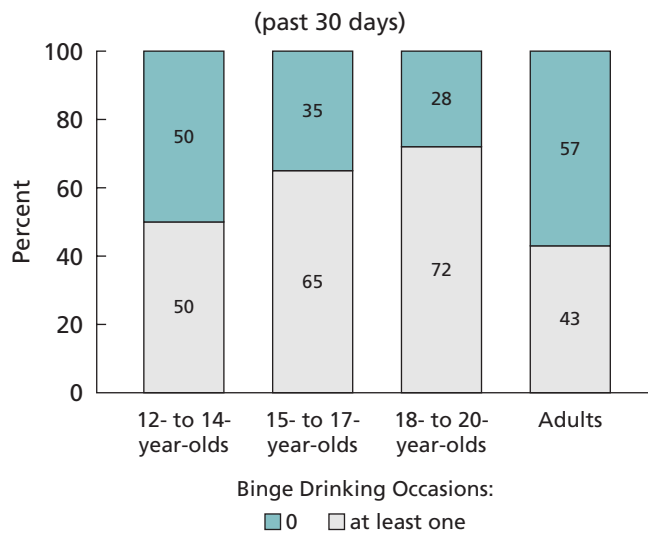
In terms of the quantity of drinking (Figure 5), the proportion of young drinkers who report drinking heavily (five or more drinks at a sitting) is higher than for adults.

FIGURE 4 Drinking Among Youth



Source: NSDUH, 2002.

FIGURE 5 Binge Drinking Among Youth and Adult Drinkers



Source: NSDUH, 2002.

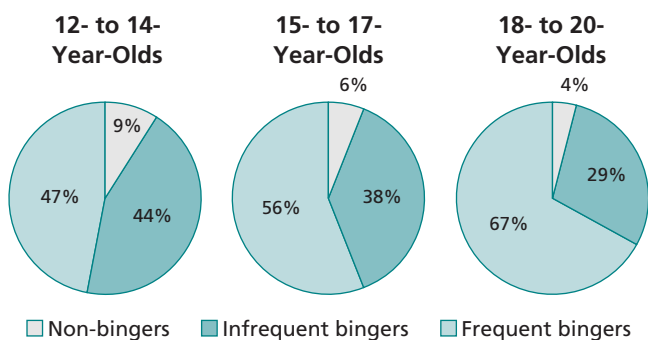
While about 43 percent of adult drinkers report heavy drinking on one or more occasions in the past month, 50 percent of 12- to 14-year-old drinkers, 65 percent of 15- to 17-year-old drinkers and 72 percent of 18- to 20-year-old drinkers report heavy drinking in the past month.

Young people who drink heavily consume the vast majority of the alcohol consumed by their age group (Figure 6). Percentages range from 91 percent for 12- to 14-year-olds to 96 percent for 18- to 20-year-olds. Underage drinkers consume about 11 percent of all the alcohol purchased in the United States in 2002, and the vast majority of this alcohol is consumed in a risky fashion.

The following picture of underage drinking emerges:

- The majority of young people abstain from regular use of alcohol—a greater percentage than adults.

FIGURE 6 Percentage of Drinks Consumed by Drinking Pattern Among Underage Drinkers



Source: NSDUH, 2002.

- Young people who do consume alcohol are more likely than adults to drink heavily.
- The small proportion of youth who drink heavily consume the vast majority of the alcohol consumed by underage drinkers.

Social norms and social policy: Correcting perceptions

How do social beliefs about drinking affect our efforts to prevent problems associated with drinking? Social norms and expectations play a powerful role in shaping the *alcohol environment* at both the community and societal level. The belief that most adults drink in moderate amounts without problems translates into public policies that make alcohol readily available at low prices and permit widespread marketing that communicates only positive messages about alcohol's effects. These policies in turn create an environment that encourages alcohol use and downplays its potential for harm to public health and safety.

Although we may think that our alcohol policies are simply helping to meet the demand from moderate-drinking adults, they are actually accommodating heavy and hazardous drinking by a small minority of consumers, many of whom are underage. Such policies undercut our efforts to reduce alcohol-related problems and underage drinking.

Consider the impact of the following environmental influences on potential consumers—especially young people.

- *Alcohol is cheap and becoming cheaper.* The real price of alcohol has been steadily dropping for the last five decades, in part due to the decline in the real value of alcohol excise taxes (which have been eroded by inflation). Cheap beers are now roughly the same price as popular brands of soft drinks.⁵ Price promotions, such as happy hours and drinking games, often target young drinkers and promote binge drinking.⁶
- *Americans are bombarded with \$4 billion of alcohol marketing each year.* Alcohol advertising and product placements are very common and often occur on television and in radio shows for which the majority of the audience is underage, on Internet sites attractive to young people, and on billboards and in retail outlets where young people are frequently present.⁷ Advertising often uses youth-oriented themes.⁸

- *Alcohol is one of the most readily available consumer products.* Many communities, especially in low-income areas, are saturated with alcohol outlets.⁹ Alcohol is often more available than basic staples and school supplies. Alcohol sales are often key to the success of convenience stores and gas stations, which may be located in residential areas, near schools, and in other locations frequented by children.
- *New alcohol products cater to youthful tastes and may promote underage drinking.* Sweet alcohol products blur the line between alcohol and soft drinks; malt liquors, which have high alcohol content and low prices, are sold in 40-ounce and larger containers used by young people as single servings. Clever marketing ploys—such as test tube “shots,” containers that look like TNT explosives, and drinks that change the color of the drinker’s tongue—target youthful drinkers.¹⁰

Our community environments make alcohol easily available and send messages that promote alcohol’s glamour and attractiveness.

Realistic perceptions: Effective policies

The common public perception is that the majority of people drink alcohol and that most alcohol is consumed in a moderate fashion. Given these perceptions, the public and policy makers are often reluctant to impose restrictions and controls on how alcohol is manufactured, promoted, sold, and consumed; if the vast majority of adults drink responsibly, then controls on sales place a burden on these responsible drinkers.

However, most Americans do not drink frequently and most alcohol is consumed by heavy drinkers and in a risky fashion. Therefore, controls on alcohol have little or no impact on the majority of Americans, but such controls *can* reduce heavy and hazardous drinking, especially among underage drinkers.

A variety of policies have been proven to be effective or show promise in reducing alcohol consumption and related problems. Some key policy strategies are discussed briefly in the section that follows.

Increasing alcohol prices

Alcohol prices have not kept pace with inflation, and thus, the real price of alcohol has been dropping steadily. Many different studies have found that higher alcohol prices lead to lower consumption and fewer alcohol-related problems.¹¹ Higher prices tend to have a particularly strong effect on young people.¹²

One common argument made against increases in alcohol prices is that such price increases would penalize the majority of responsible drinkers. As has been shown here, the vast majority of Americans would feel little or no impact from a price increase because they do not drink or drink very little and infrequently.

Restricting alcohol outlets

Restricting the density of alcohol outlets and their location is one way of decreasing consumption and related problems.¹³ Several studies have demonstrated the connection between the density of alcohol outlets in a community and the rates of violence, particularly among youth.¹⁴ Alcohol outlets can be restricted through limiting the number or density of outlets or through limiting the types of locations where alcohol may be sold. For example, many communities have imposed limits on sales or consumption of alcohol in public places (such as parks and beaches), at public events (such as fairs and festivals), or at certain kinds of retail locations (such as gas stations).

Strengthening and enforcing minimum purchase age laws

Raising the minimum purchase age for alcohol has been very effective in reducing drinking and related problems among young people.¹⁵ Despite the progress that has been made, young people report that alcohol is readily available from a variety of sources, in part because current laws are not well enforced.¹⁶ Effective enforcement of the law can substantially reduce youth alcohol access.¹⁷ In addition, strengthening existing laws to further restrict youth access to alcohol shows promise in reducing underage drinking and related problems. For example, some communities require that purchasers of kegs of beer be registered in order to deter serving keg beer to underage drinkers at parties.

Strategies Aimed at Curbing Social Availability

Young people can obtain alcohol from noncommercial sources such as older friends, family members and other

adults who buy or provide alcohol to them.¹⁸ Adults who provide alcohol to minors can be held accountable for their actions through enforcement and policy approaches aimed at social availability of alcohol.¹⁹ Shoulder tap operations focus on third-party transactions of alcohol that involve adults purchasing alcohol for youth. Social host liability laws and proactive party patrols and controlled party dispersal operations may also deter adults from hosting underage parties and providing alcohol to minors.

Controlling alcohol advertising and promotion

Studies on the effects of advertising on adults do not show a strong connection between exposure to advertising and overall consumption.²⁰ However, survey studies on alcohol advertising and young people consistently indicate that children and adolescents who are exposed to alcohol advertisements have more favorable attitudes toward drinking, are more likely to be underage drinkers, and intend to drink more when they are adults.²¹ The fact that these survey effects are small may be due, in part, to the pervasiveness of alcohol advertising in the environment. Nearly everyone is exposed to hundreds or even thousands of alcohol advertisements each year. It is impossible to say what effect a major change in the nature of the alcohol messages in the environment might have.²²

Public Support for Alcohol Policy Change

It is often believed that moderate drinking Americans would not support policies that would make alcohol more expensive or more inconvenient to obtain. After all, we believe the status quo reflects what people want. A recent survey of public opinion, however, demonstrates that these assumptions are inaccurate. There is strong public support for policies designed to create a healthier environment with regard to alcohol, especially to prevent alcohol problems among youth.²³ These survey findings shouldn't be surprising—after all, most people have no stake at all in the current status quo that makes alcohol so readily available and attractive because they either do not drink or drink very little and infrequently.

Tables 1 and 2 review some of the findings from the *Youth Access to Alcohol Survey* published in September 1998.

Large majorities of the population favor various regulatory strategies designed to reduce underage drinking problems, including such things as

- alcohol tax increases to pay for prevention programs
- restrictions on alcohol advertising to make drinking less appealing to young people
- compliance check programs (in which law enforcement agencies use underage decoys to determine whether alcohol retailers are selling to minors)
- keg registration laws to deter the purchase of kegs of beer for underage consumption
- restrictions on public drinking in locations where young people are likely to be present.

TABLE 1 Percent of U.S. population (18+ years of age) favoring alcohol policies designed to reduce alcohol problems among youth

Proposed Policy	Favor Strongly	Favor Somewhat	Oppose Somewhat	Oppose Strongly
Increase alcohol tax by 5 cents to fund prevention programs	65.0	16.8	5.7	12.6
Restrict alcohol ads to make drinking less appealing to youth	52.6	26.0	10.5	10.8
Conduct compliance checks to reduce illegal sales to minors	46.5	19.0	9.5	25.0
Require registration of beer kegs	39.9	21.3	15.3	23.5

Source: Harwood, E., Wagenaar, A., and Zander, K. (1998). *Youth Access to Alcohol Survey: Summary Report*. Prepared for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

TABLE 2 Percent of U.S. population (18+ years of age) favoring restrictions on drinking in public locations

Public location	Ban drinking	By permit only	No restrictions
Parks	63.0	27.3	9.8
Concerts	51.2	34.1	14.6
Beaches	53.1	28.7	18.2
Stadiums/arenas	47.8	29.6	22.6

Source: Harwood, E., Wagenaar, A., and Zander, K. (1998). *Youth Access to Alcohol Survey: Summary Report*. Prepared for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

Conclusion

Most Americans either abstain from alcohol or drink very infrequently—less than once a week. Our public policies and social norms, however, do not reflect this fact and make alcohol readily accessible at low prices. Alcohol sales are dominated by a relatively small minority of the population who drink heavily. Policies and norms that promote alcohol availability support and encourage these problematic drinking behaviors. Most Americans consume very little alcohol, so it is not surprising that large majorities of the population support stricter alcohol policies designed to reduce drinking problems, especially among young people. These policy reforms have been shown to be effective in reducing alcohol consumption and problems.

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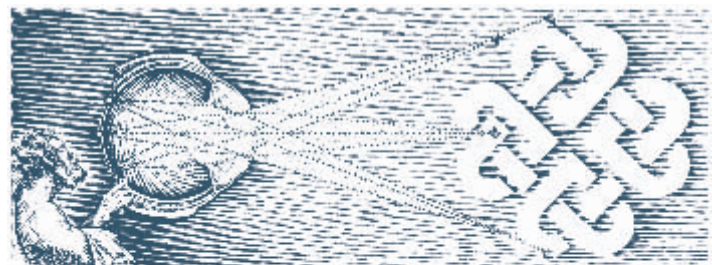
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