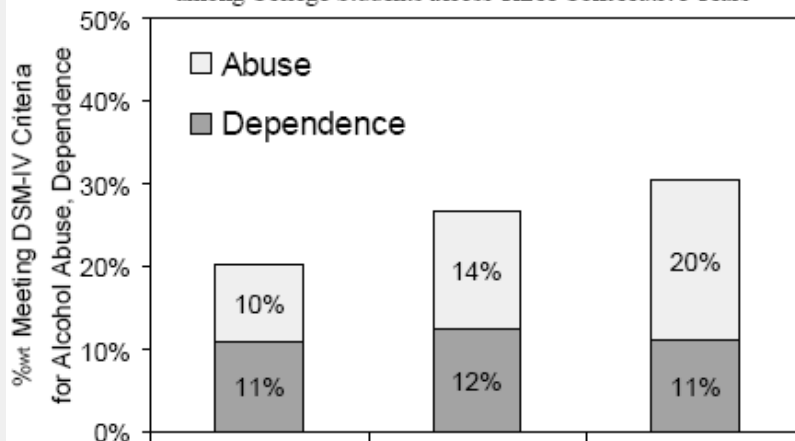


Underage drinking and alcohol dependence among college students: An update from the College Life Study

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Research on the first three years of college in a large cohort of students has provided invaluable insight into the development and consequences of underage drinking. First, the data confirm earlier research showing that the more students drink in high school, the more they will drink in college. This counters the popular myth that students who are encouraged to “learn to drink” early on will be better equipped to develop good drinking habits when they enter college. For example, among students who did not drink during their senior year of high school, 73% remained free of any DSM-IV alcohol-related problems throughout the first three years of college as compared with only 36% of students who did drink during their senior year of high school.

Figure 1. Annual Prevalence of Alcohol Use Disorders among College Students across Three Consecutive Years



Second, the results illustrate the magnitude of alcohol-related problems in college students. Annually, 11-12% of all students met criteria for alcohol dependence, and by their third year of college, one in five were alcohol-dependent at least once. From the first to third year of college, the proportion of students who met DSM-IV criteria for alcohol abuse doubled, increasing from 9.5% to 19.5%. Among those who met the criteria for an alcohol use disorder (either abuse or dependence), very few (7%) sought help or treatment. Particularly concerning is the increase in drunk driving between the first and third year of college. The number jumped from 5% in their first year to 23% in their third year. According to the research, drunk driving and riding with a drunk driver appear to be “red-flags” for alcohol dependence.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Practice and Policy Suggestions: Parents should resist the temptation to let their teenage children drink alcohol in hopes of helping them “learn” how to drink responsibly. Allowing adolescents to drink early exposes them to a greater risk of developing alcohol-related problems later in life, including alcohol dependence. Providing high-quality early intervention services should be a priority for policy makers on college campuses. As is apparent from the low number of help-seeking students, there is a dire need for students to be educated about the seriousness of alcohol abuse and dependence. For some students, the alcohol problems they develop in college will become life-long struggles. Colleges and universities should strive to identify opportunities to help these students including implementing individualized risk assessments and early identification of emerging alcohol problems.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M. (2008). Underage drinking and alcohol dependence among college students: An update from the College Life Study. *Compass*. 2008(2), 1-2.



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.¹ Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

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