

# Social context of drinking and alcohol problems among college students

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

The purpose of this study was to examine how social contexts of drinking are related to alcohol use disorders (i.e., alcohol abuse and dependence), other alcohol-related problems, and depression among college students. Of the students interviewed, 728 were considered current drinkers, which means they drank on five or more days in the past 12 months. The researchers performed two sets of analyses to better understand why students were drinking.

The first analysis compared alcohol abusers and alcohol-dependent drinkers to their non-problem drinking peers. Alcohol abusers were less likely to drink with their family than were non-problem drinkers. Both alcohol abusers and alcohol-dependent drinkers were more likely to drink while in a moving or parked car. Alcohol-dependent drinkers were more likely than alcohol abusers to drink in a sex-seeking context, meaning drinking to reduce inhibitions, build up courage to talk to someone, or to make it easier to go to bed with someone.

The second analysis compared depressed and non-depressed students on their drinking levels. The researchers found that depressed students drank significantly less in a social context but more because of emotional pain, meaning to forget about academic problems, to get rid of depression, or to forget about social problems.

**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** Schools should educate students about the importance of drinking in moderation and the risks of underage drinking. Schools should also provide engaging alcohol-free activities. These activities need to be exciting and intriguing to students so that they are not seen as just another alcohol-free event.

Parents may also be able to help with early prevention in a variety of ways. Parental monitoring and supervision, along with setting healthy expectations about drinking behavior and being good role models will help parents help their children avoid problematic alcohol consumption patterns.

### *Of major interest to:*

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



*(Practice and Policy Suggestions continued):* Although students who are drinking to relieve emotional pain may not have already experienced negative outcomes as a result of their drinking, it is likely that problems will emerge as they grow older. The researchers are following these students over several years and hope to discover the longer-term patterns of drinking and their relationship to academic success as well as physical and mental health outcomes. In the years to come, as the researchers learn more about these students, their insights into how to help them will continue to improve.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Beck, K.H., Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D. (2008). Social context of drinking and alcohol problems among college students. *American Journal of Health Behavior*. 32(4), 420-430.



### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.cls.umd.edu) or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at [aarria@umd.edu](mailto:aarria@umd.edu).

<sup>1</sup> 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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