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Latest alcohol trends indicate concerns about some adult drinking patterns

By Pamela Erickson and Lise Gervais

There is an impression that problems with alcohol basically encompass two issues: underage drinking and drunk driving. These are still major problems even though we have made substantial progress in reducing them. However, recent data on alcohol consumption suggest there are other problems needing attention.

1. The Gallup organization's annual poll on US drinking patterns reported that the percentage of adults who drink has stayed about the same--about 64% for some time.⁽¹⁾ However, an article in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found increased mortality for white men and women ages 45-54 most likely due to drugs, alcohol and suicide. This is an unusual reversal in long term increase in longevity.⁽²⁾
2. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation found that from 2002 to 2012, among those who drink, heavy drinking and binge drinking have increased, especially among women. Over those ten years, heavy drinking rose 17%; binge drinking among men increased by 23% and among women by 36%.
3. Women also seem to be doing more drunk driving. FBI statistics show that women arrested for DUI's increased by almost 30% between 1998 and 2007. ⁽⁴⁾ However, more

recent data show a decrease of 14% from 2010 to 2014 and the decrease of those under 18 was 43%.

These trends suggest we may need to pay more attention to problems of adult excess drinking, especially among women. However, we should not drop the ball on underage drinking and drunk driving among males. While progress on underage drinking is significant, it is still unacceptably high. Prevention for this problem has a major pay-off for future generations. Drunk driving still results in over 10,000 deaths per year and 75% of those arrested for drunk driving are males.

Some greater attention seems warranted for female drinking especially because alcohol is more harmful to a woman's body than a man's. This is why health authorities recommend lower drinking levels for women. These are based on the particular physiology of the female body. Alcohol is processed more slowly because women generally have more body fat per pound than men who have more water. A lower level of two enzymes that break down alcohol in the liver and stomach cause women to have more alcohol in their bloodstreams per drink than men.⁽⁵⁾ The long term effects can happen sooner and with more severity to women than men. Women are drinking more heavily at a time when the known health effects make a compelling argument for moderation.

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For this reason, the National Institutes of Health define moderate drinking as up to one drink a day for a woman, up to two for a man.

Women who have problems with alcohol tend to access treatment less often than men.⁽⁶⁾ And one of the reasons that treatment and information are so important is the still alarming rate of fetal alcohol syndrome. In October a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics said that exposure to alcohol is the “leading preventable cause of birth defects.”⁽⁷⁾ Damage can happen in the first trimester when a woman may not even realize she is pregnant. While some women may be relying on old information, it's now accepted that no amount of alcohol is considered safe when pregnant. To put aside the grief and suffering of the family and put that into dollars, the lifetime cost of care for an individual with Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is estimated to be more than \$1 million⁽⁸⁾-- much more than the cost of alcohol treatment for the mother would cost.

Some states have succumbed to the notion that they should “modernize” their liquor sales to pursue theoretical job gains and revenue increases. As a result, alcohol has become available in more places including grocery stores, where opportunities for impulse purchases are part of the business model. The link between over-consumption and outlet density is a good reason for municipalities to carefully consider applications for licenses and zoning change issues.⁽⁹⁾

There are many complicated issues around alcohol. 2015 Issue Briefs for States⁽¹⁰⁾ were created to help explain complicated issues around alcohol, backed up by sound research and reasonable arguments based on up-to-date information.

- (1) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1582/Alcohol-Drinking.aspx>
- (2) www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1518393112
- (3) www.healthdata.org/news-release/heavy-drinking-and-binge-drinking-rise-sharply-us-counties
- (4) <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/table-35>
- (5) <http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/women-and-alcohol.htm>
- (6) <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh291/55-62.htm>
- (7) <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/pages/AAP-Says-No-Amount-of-Alcohol-Should-be-Considered-Safe-During-Pregnancy.aspx>
- (8) <http://alcalc.oxfordjournals.org/content/46/4/490>
- (9) <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/alcohol/RRoutletdensity.html>
- (10) <http://www.healthyalcoholmarket.com/pdf/IssueBriefs2015.pdf>

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/moderate-binge-drinking>

<http://www.nhtsa.gov/About+NHTSA/Press+Releases/2009/ci.Transportation+Secretary+Ray+LaHood+Kicks+Off+Nationwide+Enforcement+Crackdown+on+Impaired+Driving.print>

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