



## October 2021 Newsletter

### Most of the News about College Drinking is Good! Let's See These Trends Continue!

By Pamela Erickson

College binge drinking has been one of this nation's most intractable problems. But, shortly before the Pandemic we saw that older kids were drinking a lot less than we would expect based on previous generations. There could be many reasons: concern over health, social media documentation of drunken behavior, parents' admonitions, etc.

"Millennials and Gen Zers are drinking less than older generations, in part because of fears related to losing control while drunk and having the evidence shared on Snapchat, Instagram, or Facebook." - *Business Insider*

But now we have data and studies about college age youth during the Pandemic. And, we're getting a fuller picture of the issue. A study by Brown University interviewed two groups of students: heavy drinkers and those who reported use of alcohol and cannabis. They concluded, "This study documents COVID-19 related changes in drinking among college student drinkers that were attributed to changes in context, particularly a shift away from heavy drinking with peers to lighter drinking with family."

Another study from the University of North Carolina found something similar: that a reduction in social engagement led to overall declines in alcohol use and binge drinking. That means students had less social encouragement from friends for drinking. A study authored by colleagues from University of Washington appeared to confirm that college student drinking declined during the Pandemic: "Most students in our sample reported

decreased alcohol use and perceived decreases in peers' alcohol use." They noted that perception of peers' use may have been a factor in the decline.

Finally, the national survey, Monitoring the Future, confirmed that "Binge drinking continues to decline among college students. In 2020, it decreased a significant 7.8 percentage points to 24%, a new historic low over the past four decades."

So, what have we learned about college binge drinking and how do we promote healthy trends? A few things:

**The importance of social context:** A common theme was lighter drinking when drinking with family. Less drinking was associated with less social engagement. How could college officials, parents, prevention programs and regulators promote socialization that does not focus on alcohol such as sports, nature walks, hiking? What about social events for college students over 21 where a wide variety of drinks are served including no/low alcohol beverages?

**Concerns about health:** Most states closed bars and restaurants during the Pandemic and the Texas Medical Association ranked bars as high-risk places. As I've noted in former articles, it shouldn't mean that all bars are risky. Rather, it is things like crowding, noise, promotion of excess drinking, lack of food service, etc. Can we develop incentives for bars to use practices that keep people safe from both violence and transmission of viruses and germs? When states opened such places, they often required attention to social distance, capacity and

cleanliness. How can communities and regulators promote healthier drinking environments?

### **Lingering problems:**

- Hazing still exists as a 19-year-old student at Virginia Commonwealth University died after being told to drink a whole bottle of spirits. In September of this year, eight people were arrested and will face criminal charges. It's unbelievable this practice still exists. How can we communicate zero tolerance for hazing?
- Some college students, especially those with stress, reported drinking more during the Pandemic. How do we emphasize that alcohol is not a cure for stress?
- Profits before health: some large bars make a lot of money by emphasizing heavy drinking. Communities may support these businesses in the name of jobs and economic development. These types of bars are very hard to sanction when violations occur. They can afford to hire lawyers who can delay the process so the bar can continue to make money.
- Social media can promote heavy drinking by glorifying and making it seem funny. Should there be rules for social media? How would communities influence them?

Finally, there is some evidence that adults drank more during the Pandemic. In a study using the RAND Corporations' nationally representative sample of those 18 years and older, they found that alcohol was consumed 1 day more per month by 3 of 4 adults. And, for women there was a significant increase in heavy drinking compared to the baseline data for 2019. While there has been more drinking at home, some of it may be a substitute for drinking when bars and restaurants were more open. Communities need local data, but they also need to remind adults that they are role models for their children. How can communities address this issue?

### **Send me your ideas!**

Readers of this newsletter have a lot of expertise, so I want to know what people think about this issue and how can we promote responsible drinking. I will

do another article that highlights some of the best ideas! I can be reached via email: [pam@pamaction.com](mailto:pam@pamaction.com).

### **Sources:**

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