

Students Binge Less in States Where Adults Also Binge Less

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Older adults tend to drink less as they age and students tend to binge-drink less when their campuses are in states where fewer adults over-imbibe, according to two new studies.

The first study, done by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that the rate of binge drinking among collegians was 32 percent lower in states with the lowest rates of adult bingeing compared to the 10 states where adult bingeing was most common.

And campus binge-drinking rates were 31 percent lower in seven states that had four or more laws targeting high-volume sales of alcohol vs. those that did not.

"A student who goes to school in a state with fewer adult binge drinkers is less likely to be a binge drinker," said Toben Nelson, a Harvard researcher who led the study published Wednesday in the American Journal of Public Health.

"The good news is that if more states and communities take relatively straightforward actions, such as laws that discourage high-volume sales, they could see fewer drinking problems on college campuses and their broader populations as well," Nelson added.

Binge drinking is defined as having five or more drinks in about a two-hour period for a male; or four or more drinks for a female.

Dr. Timothy Naimi, a member of the alcohol team on the CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention, said it's known that most alcohol purchases and consumption by college students occur off-campus. So, he added, "having programs to reduce binge drinking on college campuses in the absence of broad-based community interventions to do likewise is a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

The second study, also published in the American Journal of Public Health, suggested that people who are better educated and wealthier tend to be more comfortable continuing to drink as they age.

The study, led by Dr. Allison Moore, a professor of geriatrics at the University of California-Los Angeles, found what doctors and the alcohol industry have long thought to be true - that people drink less alcohol as they age. The findings came from national health surveys done in the early 1970s and follow-ups done between 1982 and 1992.

Drinking among those who were born in earlier years showed a faster decline than among people born more recently, although still considered elderly.

For instance, those born in 1925 decreased their drinking an average of 11 percent for each decade of aging, while those born in 1935 reduced drinking by about 9 percent each decade.

White married males with better education and income, and who smoked, generally tended to drink more than others. There was a faster age-related decline among married males with less education, who smoked and who were born earlier.

Some people simply stop drinking as they age while others become too ill to drink alcohol. "Another reason people cut down is because they don't feel as good when they drink, or are told by their doctor or pharmacist not to drink while taking a particular medication," Moore said.

The culture of drinking may have changed over time, with people of a certain generation tending to drink more. "My parents had cocktail hour," Moore said. "We don't have that anymore."

Also, later-born generations of seniors are healthier and more accustomed to better health care, so they may feel safer in drinking more as they age. "I think people in general are healthier than they used to be," Moore said. "They're drinking for longer periods because they are healthier."

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