

The NHSDA Report

October 12, 2001

Heavy Alcohol Use Among Young Adults

In Brief

- In 1999, almost 4 million young adults aged 18 to 25 had engaged in heavy alcohol use in the past month
- Rates of heavy alcohol use among young adults were highest for males, whites, and full-time college undergraduates
- Young adults who were heavy drinkers were more likely to have used marijuana and other illicit drugs in the past month compared with young adults who were not heavy drinkers

The 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) enables an examination of the rates of heavy alcohol use among young adults aged 18 to 25. Heavy alcohol use was defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion at least 5 different days in the month before the survey. The survey also examines the relationship between heavy alcohol use and the use of illicit drugs. "Any illicit drug" refers to the use of marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including LSD and PCP), heroin, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically during the 30 days prior to the interview.

According to the 1999 NHSDA, more than 13 percent of young adults aged 18 to 25 were heavy alcohol users (Figure 1). This percentage translates to approximately 4 million young adult heavy drinkers. The rate of heavy alcohol use among young adults aged 18 to 25 was higher than rates observed either for youths aged 12 to 17 (2 percent) or for adults aged 26 or older (5 percent).

Among young adults, men were more likely to be heavy drinkers (20 percent) than women (7 percent). Whites had the highest rate of heavy alcohol use (16 percent) of any racial/ethnic group, followed by American Indians/Alaska Natives and Hispanics (both at 10 percent), and blacks and Asians (both at 6 percent).

Figure 1. Percentages Reporting Past Month Heavy Alcohol Use Among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25, by Demographic Characteristics: 1999*

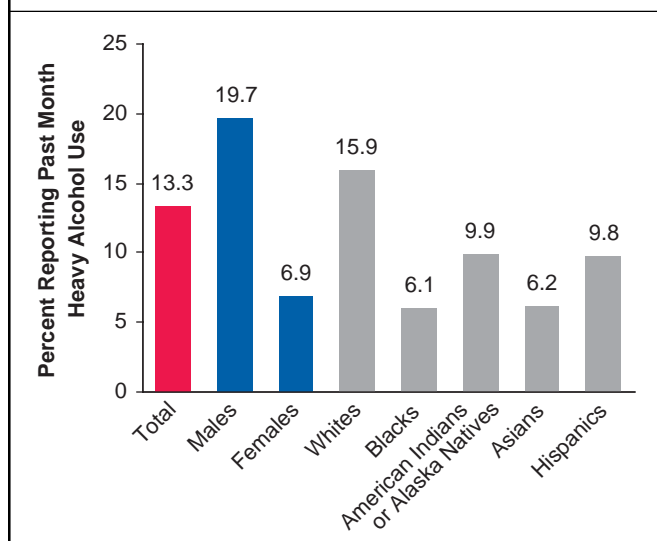
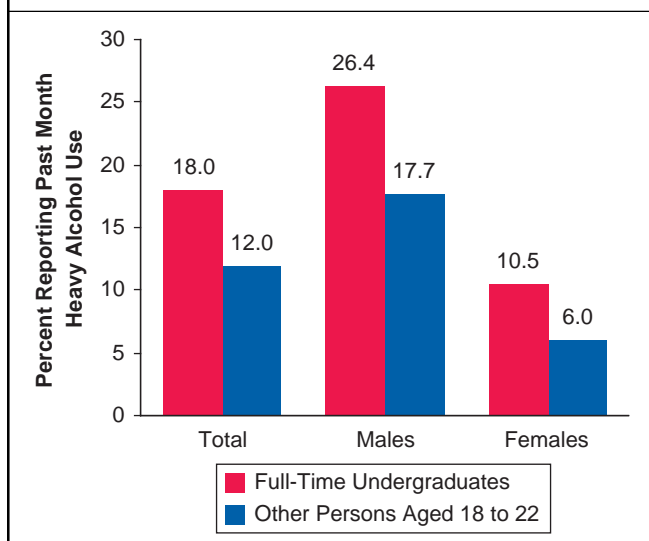


Figure 2. Percentages Reporting Past Month Heavy Alcohol Use Among Persons Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment Status and Gender: 1999*



Heavy Alcohol Use Among College Students

Among persons aged 18- to 22-years-old, 18 percent of full-time undergraduates were heavy drinkers compared with 12 percent of those who were not full-time undergraduates (Figure 2). Rates of heavy alcohol use were higher for both men and women who were full-time undergraduates compared with other persons aged 18 to 22. More than 1 in 4 men who were full-time undergraduates were heavy drinkers compared with 1 in 10 women who were full-time undergraduates.

Alcohol Dependence

Heavy alcohol use may be associated with alcohol dependence. According to the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), alcohol dependence is characterized by increased tolerance, withdrawal

symptoms when alcohol is not used, unsuccessful efforts to cut down on alcohol use, and interference with everyday life.¹ In 1999, approximately 9 percent of persons aged 18 to 25 (an estimated 3 million) were dependent on alcohol. The rate of alcohol dependence for persons aged 18 to 25 was higher than for persons aged 12 to 17 (4 percent) and for persons 26 or older (3 percent). Both heavy drinking and alcohol dependence peaked at age 21 (Figure 3).

Heavy Alcohol Use and Illicit Drug Use

Among young adults aged 18 to 25, the rate of past month illicit drug use was higher with increasing levels of past month alcohol use (Figure 4). Among heavy drinkers, 44 percent had used illicit drugs in the past month compared with 26 percent of “binge” drinkers (persons who had five or more drinks on the same occasion at least once in the past month), 11 percent of nonbinge drinkers, and 5 percent of

nondrinkers. This association between heavy drinking and illicit drug use was found for marijuana as well as for illicit drugs other than marijuana.

Summary

According to the 1999 NHSDA, an estimated 4 million young adults aged 18 to 25 engaged in heavy alcohol use in the month before the survey. The rate of heavy alcohol use was higher among young adults aged 18 to 25 than in any other age group. The rates of heavy alcohol use among young adults were highest for males, whites, and full-time college undergraduates. Rates of alcohol dependence were also higher for young adults than for other age groups, and the rates of both heavy alcohol use and alcohol dependence peaked at age 21. Finally, young adults who reported heavy drinking were more likely to have used marijuana and other illicit drugs in the past month compared with young adults who were not heavy drinkers.

End Note

1. American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Figure Notes

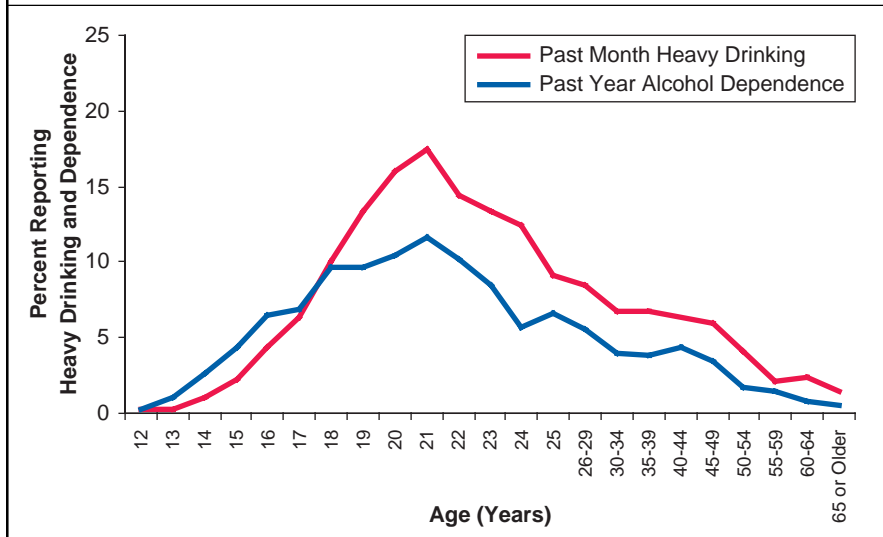
* Data presented may differ from previously published data from the 1999 NHSDA because of corrections made to imputation procedures.

** "Any illicit drug" indicates use at least once of marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens (including LSD and PCP), inhalants, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically. "Any illicit drug other than marijuana" indicates use at least once of any of these listed drugs, regardless of marijuana/hashish use; marijuana/hashish users who also had used any of the other listed drugs were included.

*** Binge drinkers reported that they drank five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days.

Source (all figures): SAMHSA 1999 NHSDA.

Figure 3. Percentages Reporting Past Month Heavy Drinking and Past Year Alcohol Dependence Among Persons Aged 12 or Older, by Age: 1999*



The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 1999 data are based on information obtained from nearly 70,000 persons aged 12 or older. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NHSDA Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000) *Summary of findings from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3466). Rockville, MD: Author.

Also available on-line:
www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov

Additional table available upon request; adapted from 1.108B from

http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/99detailedtables/Vol_1_Part_1/Sect1v1v1.htm.

Additional tables available upon request; adapted from 2.24B; 2.51B; 2.52A; 2.52B; 2.53B; 2.127B from

http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/99detailedtables/Vol_1_Part_2/Sect2v1v1.htm.

Additional tables available upon request; adapted from 5.2B; 5.3A; 5.3B from

http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/99detailedtables/Vol_1_Part_3/Sect3_5v1v1.htm.

Figure 4. Percentages Reporting Past Month Use of Illicit Drugs Among Persons Aged 18 to 25, by Level of Past Month Alcohol Use: 1999*

