



FACTS

on College Student Drinking

MARCH 2021

FAST FACTS

- Of the 19 million undergraduate students enrolled in college in 2018, 9 million were under age 21, the U.S. minimum legal drinking age.¹
- College students have an increasing risk for an alcohol use disorder as they near the legal drinking age. While 104,000 of 18-year-old college students met the criteria for an alcohol use disorder in 2019, that number more than doubled to 231,000 by age 21.²
- High blood alcohol concentrations and impairment levels associated with binge drinking place those who binge drink and those around them at a substantially elevated risk for negative consequences, such as traffic accidents, injury-related deaths, sexual assault, violent crimes, and reduced academic performance.³
- Alcohol contributes to an estimated 1,519 deaths per year among college students.⁴

*Current drinking = past 30-day use. In 2015, SAMHSA redefined binge drinking as five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women on the same occasion on at least one day in the past 30 days. Heavy alcohol use = binge drinking on five or more days in the past 30 days.

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

COLLEGE DRINKING OVERVIEW

Full-time college students tend to drink more than others in their age group. In 2019, 53 percent of full-time college students drank alcohol in the past month. Of those, 33 percent reported binge drinking and 8 percent reported heavy drinking in the past month. Among individuals ages 18 to 22 not enrolled full-time in college, the percentages were 44 percent, 28 percent, and 6 percent, respectively.⁵

Many students may come to college with established drinking habits. Among 12th graders in 2019, 59 percent had already tried alcohol and 41 percent said they had been drunk at least once.⁶

Risk of alcohol misuse appears to be greater among some college groups. While individual rates of substance misuse vary among fraternities and sororities across campuses, in general, membership in these groups is associated with increased rates of binge drinking and marijuana use.⁷ Among student athletes, 42 percent reported binge drinking in 2018. More than one-quarter of student athletes reported having a hangover, experiencing memory loss, and/or doing something they regretted after drinking.⁸

GENDER TRENDS IN STUDENT DRINKING REVERSE

Rates of current drinking by college males has historically been higher than that of females, but the trend has reversed over time. In 2015, 59 percent of male college students drank alcohol in the past month, compared to 57 percent of females.⁹ By 2019, the percent of males using alcohol each month was 51 percent, compared to 53 percent of females.¹⁰ However, rates of binge and heavy drinking by male students continues to exceed that of female students. In 2019, binge drinking was reported by 35 percent of male students and by 31 percent of female students. Heavy drinking was reported by 10 percent of males and 7 percent of females.¹¹

From 2015 to 2019, more male students than female students ages 19 to 22 reported drinking 10 or more drinks in a row in a two-week period—19 percent compared to 6 percent, respectively. Males also reported greater rates of drinking 15 drinks in a row in a two-week period when compared to females—4 percent compared to less than 1 percent, respectively.¹²

ALCOHOL USE CONSEQUENCES

About one-quarter of college students report having negative academic consequences because of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind in their studies, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.¹³