

Binge Drinking

Here we examine the problem of binge drinking, especially among college students. We look at facts and statistics, and describe an effective method to reduce the problem.

What Is Binge Drinking?

To most people, binge drinking brings to mind a self-destructive and unrestrained drinking bout lasting for at least a couple of days during which time the heavily intoxicated drinker "drops out" by not working, ignoring responsibilities, squandering money, and engaging in other harmful behaviors such as fighting or risky sex. This view is consistent with that portrayed in dictionary definitions, in literature, in art, and in plays or films such as the classic *Come Back Little Sheeba* and *Lost Weekend* or the recent *Leaving Las Vegas*.

It is also consistent with the usage of physicians and other clinicians. As the editor of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* emphasizes, binge describes an extended period of time (typically at least two days) during which time a person repeatedly becomes intoxicated and gives up his or her usual activities and obligations in order to become intoxicated. It is the combination of prolonged use and the giving up of usual activities that forms the core of the clinical definition of binge. ¹

Other researchers have explained that it is counter-productive to brand as pathological the consumption of only five drinks over the course of an evening of eating and socializing. It is clearly inappropriate to equate it with a binge. ²

A recent Swedish study, for example, defines a binge as the consumption of half a bottle of spirits or two bottles of wine on the same occasion. ³

Similarly, a study in Italy found that



consuming an average of eight drinks a day was considered normal drinking -- clearly not bingeing. ⁴ In the United Kingdom, bingeing is commonly defined as consuming 11 or more drinks on an occasion. But in the United States, some researchers have defined bingeing as consuming five or more drinks on an occasion (an "occasion" can refer to an entire day). And now some have even expanded the definition to include consuming four or more drinks on an occasion by a woman. ⁵

Consider a woman who has two glasses of wine with her leisurely dinner and then sips two more drinks over the course of a four or five hour evening. In the view of most people, such a woman would be acting responsibly. Indeed her blood alcohol content would remain low. It's difficult to imagine that she would even be able to feel the effects of the alcohol. However, some researchers would now define her as a binger!

How useful is such an unrealistic definition? It is very useful if the intent is to inflate the extent of a social problem. And it would please members of the Prohibition Party and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. But it is not very useful if the intent is to accurately describe reality to the average person.

It is highly unrealistic and inappropriate to apply a prohibitionist definition to describe drinking in the United States today. Perhaps we should define binge drinking as any intoxicated drinking that leads to certain harmful or destructive behaviors. Perhaps we should at least require that a person have a certain minimum level of alcohol in the bloodstream as a prerequisite to be considered a binger. Perhaps we could even require that a person be intoxicated before being labeled a "binger." But one thing is certain: the unrealistic definitions being promoted by some researchers are misleading and deceptive at best.

The conclusion is clear: Be very skeptical the next time you hear or read a report about "binge" drinking. Were the people in question really bingeing? By any reasonable definition, most almost certainly were not.

The Extent Of Binge Drinking

While a continuing barrage of newspaper articles, TV shows, and special interest group reports claim that binge drinking among young people is a growing epidemic, the actual fact is quite to the contrary. Binge drinking among young people is clearly declining and it has been doing so for many years.

As seen in this image, "binge" drinking among high school seniors has declined from 41.2% to 27.9% between 1980 and 2003. That's a drop of almost one-third (32.3%). ⁶

Similarly, the proportion of U.S. military personnel who "binge" has also declined significantly, according to six worldwide surveys conducted for the military over a recently-ended 15-year period. ⁷

"Binge" drinking is also down among American college students, and it has clearly been declining for a number of years. This is clear.

For example, according to a recent study of college drinking by Dr. Henry Wechsler of Harvard University, "binge" drinking has decreased significantly across the country over the four years since his earlier study. His research also found that the proportion of abstainers jumped nearly 22% in that short period of time. ⁸

These findings are consistent with data collected for the National Institute on Drug Abuse by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan. The ISR research found that college "binge" drinking in the United States recently reached the lowest level of the entire 17-year period that its surveys have been conducted. Similarly, it found that the proportion of drinkers has reached an all-time low among college students. ⁹

Research conducted at colleges across the United States repeatedly since the early 1980s by Drs. David Hanson (State University of New York) and Ruth Engs (Indiana University) has found declines over that time both in the proportion of collegians who drink at a high level and in the proportion who drink any alcohol. ¹¹

So the facts are clear. "Binge" drinking is down and abstinence is up among American college students. Yet in spite of this and other overwhelming evidence, the false impression persists that drinking is increasing and that "bingeing" continues unabated."

So What's The Harm?

This misperception is dangerous because when young people go off to college falsely thinking that "everybody" is drinking and bingeing, they are more likely to drink and to "binge" in order to conform. Correcting this misperception is important because it can empower young people and break the vicious self-fulfilling prophesy that helps

perpetuate collegiate alcohol abuse.

Individual students almost always believe that most others on campus drink more heavily than they do and the disparity between the perceived and the actual behaviors tends to be quite large. By conducting surveys of actual student behavior and publicizing the results, the extent of heavy drinking can be quickly and significantly reduced.¹² The most carefully assessed such abuse prevention project on campus has demonstrated a 35% reduction in heavy drinking, a 31% reduction in alcohol-related injuries to self, and a 54% reduction in alcohol-related injuries to others. And similar results have been demonstrated at colleges across the country with this quick and inexpensive approach.¹³

Too many college students still abuse alcohol. But people who exaggerate the problem and distort its magnitude are actually making the problem worse. If we are to further reduce alcohol abuse and the problems it causes, we have to publicize the actual facts and correct damaging misperceptions. Doing so will empower students to do what they as individuals generally want to do: drink less or not drink at all.

The challenge of correcting dangerous misperceptions about college student drinking is enormous. Many researchers and others have a vested interest in inflating the extent of "binge" drinking and stories of drinking epidemics make dramatic headlines that sell more publications. But scare tactics are actually counter-productive and it turns out that **the most effective way to reduce alcohol abuse is simply to tell the truth and make sure that young people understand the facts.**

Additional Information

- [Binge Drinking: A Serious Unrecognized Problem](#)
- [Many "Binge" Drinkers are Sober](#)
- [Responsible Drinkers are Bingers?](#)
- [Bingeing Doesn't Require Intoxication](#)
- [Binge Drinking is Deceptive Term](#)
- [College Binge Drinking Uncommon](#)
- ["Binge" Drinking Drops](#)
- [Trivializing Binge Drinking](#)
- [College "Binge" Drinking Drops](#)

- [Binge Drinking In The News](#)

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