Drinking in the United States:  
Myths, Realities, and Prevention Policy

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Abstract
There is a widespread perception that alcohol is an integral part of American life and a normal accompaniment to most social events. It is often assumed that most Americans drink on a regular basis. These perceptions are not entirely true, but have a major influence on our attitudes towards alcohol and our policies regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol. These attitudes and policies, in turn, affect the incidence impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes. This paper will provide a more accurate picture of drinking in the United States.

Introduction
Alcohol is an integral part of American life. It is a normal accompaniment to most social events. Most Americans enjoy drinking on a regular basis. These are widely held perceptions about alcohol—created in part by alcohol advertising and popular culture. But they are perceptions that are not entirely true. These perceptions—and misperceptions—affect our attitudes towards alcohol and our policies regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol. This paper provides a more realistic picture of who drinks, how much, and how often. It compares the drinking patterns of adults to those of young people under 21. It then analyzes the implications of these drinking patterns for alcohol policy.

Methods
Data on alcohol consumption in the US were analyzed to show the way alcohol is consumed and the problems associated with that consumption. The data are from National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, an in-home interview with a national probability sample of the US.

Results
Adults: Who drinks and how much?
A large majority of Americans either do not drink or drink infrequently. According the National Household Survey (1) about 51 percent of adults (21 years of age and older) report that they did not consume any alcohol in the past month and an additional 25% report drinking once a week or less. (See Figure 1.)
In addition to information about how frequently people drink, it is also important to examine the quantity people typically drink on each occasion. Figure 2 provides information about adults 21 and over regarding whether they have five or more drinks per occasion (termed here a “binge”). Among adults, 51% did not drink at all and 29% drank, but did not have five or more drinks on
any occasion. That is, 80% of adults do not drink at this level.

The average number of drinks consumed by drinkers who do not binge was less than three per week. By contrast, the heaviest drinkers (who have had five or more drinks at a time five or more times in the past month—“frequent bingers”) represent about six percent of the adult population but drink 50 percent of the alcohol consumed. These statistics show the importance of heavy drinkers for the alcohol market. Alcohol sales are dependent on the heaviest drinking consumers in that 83% of the alcohol consumed by adult drinkers is consumed by 20% of the population. Only 22 percent of all alcohol is consumed in a “moderate” fashion (defined by the US government as two drinks or less at a time (2)).

**Underage: Who drinks and how much?**
The picture for underage drinking is somewhat different. The drinking age in the US is 21. Most young people reported to the National Household Survey that they had not had anything to drink in the last month. About 94% of 12 to 14-year-olds reported that they had not drunk alcohol while 75% of 15 to 17 year-olds and 52% of 18 to 20-year-olds reported that they had not drunk in the preceding month. Figure 3 shows the proportions of young people reporting drinking at different frequencies.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3**
Frequency of Drinking Among US Youth 12-21 (Past 30 Days)

In terms of the quantity of drinking (Figure 4), the proportion of young drinkers who report drinking heavily (five or more drinks at a sitting) is higher than for adults. While about 30% of adult drinkers report heavy drinking on one or more occasions in the past month, 51% of the 12 to 14-year-old drinkers, 65% of the 15 to 17-year-old drinkers and 71% of the 18-20 year old drinkers report heavy drinking in the past month. Thus, among young drinkers, heavy drinking is the norm, especially for older adolescents.
The young people who drink heavily consume the vast majority of the alcohol consumed by their age group. Percentages range from 45% for 12 to 14 year olds to 70% for 18 to 20 year olds. Underage drinkers consume about 12 percent of all the alcohol purchased in the United States and the vast majority of this alcohol is consumed in a risky fashion. (3)

**Discussion**

How do social beliefs about drinking affect efforts to prevent problems associated with drinking? Social norms and expectations play a powerful role in shaping the alcohol environment at both the community and societal level. The belief that most adults drink in moderate amounts without problems translates into public policies that make alcohol readily available at low prices and permit widespread marketing that communicates only positive messages about alcohol’s effects. These policies in turn create an environment that encourages alcohol use and downplays its potential for public health and safety harms.

Although Americans may think that alcohol policies are simply helping to meet the demand from moderate-drinking adults, this alcohol-saturated environment is in fact accommodating heavy and hazardous drinking by a small minority of consumers, many of whom are underage. The environment undercuts efforts to reduce alcohol-related problems such as impaired driving. The common public perception is that the majority of people drink alcohol and that most alcohol is consumed in a moderate fashion. Given these perceptions, the public and policy makers are often reluctant to impose restrictions and controls on how alcohol is manufactured, promoted, sold, and consumed.

Most Americans do not drink frequently and most alcohol is consumed by heavy drinkers and in a risky fashion. Controls, therefore, have little or no impact on the majority of Americans and
these controls can reduce heavy and hazardous drinking and reduce alcohol-related problems. Alcohol sales are, in fact, dominated by a relatively small minority of the population who drink heavily. Policies and norms that promote ready alcohol availability support and encourage these problematic drinking behaviors. Policies that can change the environment to decrease consumption and alcohol problems include:

- Increases in price
- Controls on alcohol outlet density and location
- Restrictions on advertising and promotion
- Strengthening and enforcing minimum purchase age laws
- Restrictions on alcohol consumption in public places or at public events

In fact, large majorities of the US population support stricter alcohol policies designed to reduce drinking problems, especially among young people.(4&5)

References