

# Drinking and aggression among university students often depends on the context

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A significant proportion of university students experience violence, under circumstances that often involve alcohol. A new study has found that drinking at a fraternity, sorority or campus residence increases the likelihood of aggression, and that attending parties can especially increase aggression for women.

Results are published in the March issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*.

"A number of studies have shown that university students experience a wide range of harms related to alcohol consumption, including aggression," said Samantha Wells, a scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and corresponding author for the study.

Aggression among university students likely reflects aggression in society, said Tim Stockwell, professor and director of the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C. at the University of Victoria. "I would not expect students to have lower or higher levels," he said. "Aggression and violence are features of group drinking situations, in general, especially where these involve groups of young men who are strangers to each other and are in competition in various ways."

To better understand what may increase risk of aggression among students, Wells and her colleagues used data collected through the 2004 Canadian Campus Survey, a national survey of 6,282 students at 40 universities. Responses from 4,387 (64.3% female, 35.7% percent male)

respondents were analyzed, focusing on the students' three most recent drinking events.

"We found that that the more drinks students consumed, the greater their likelihood of experiencing aggression," said Wells. "We also found that aggression was more likely when students drank at a fraternity, sorority or residence, when their partner was present, and when they drank at three or more places on the same occasion. Drinking at a party also increased the likelihood of aggression, especially women. Conversely, aggression was less likely when students had a meal."

Given that the researchers controlled for alcohol intake as well as living arrangements, Wells said there is something about fraternities, sororities and campus residences that is particularly risky for students. "We need to understand what it is about these settings that make them particularly risky for aggression," she said. "Is it, for example, that large parties, such as keg parties, are held in these settings" Is it that drinking in these settings involves heightened concerns with masculinity""

Wells added that the finding of greater aggression among women than men at parties was consistent with previous research showing that women tend to report aggression with people they know and at home, whereas men are more likely to report aggression with strangers in public places. "Prevention programs that focus on preparing women for the risks associated with drinking at parties might help to reduce their likelihood of experiencing aggression," she said. "However, more research € would be useful to determine, for example, who women are fighting with and whether they are victims, mutual participants, or perpetrators."

Both Wells and Stockwell suggested that findings from this study can be used for policy and prevention purposes.

"The risk of alcohol-related violence is usually associated with a combination of intoxication and certain predictable social situations," said Stockwell, "mostly involving a degree of conflict or frustration. When people are intoxicated, they are less able or inclined to resolve these situations peaceably. Measures to reduce the risk of aggression and violence need to address not only reducing conflict and stress in drinking situations but also moderating the amount people actually drink. Both the amount people drink and the drinking context â€“ for example, the size of the drinking group, type of drinking setting, whether or not a partner is present â€“ increased risk of alcohol-related aggression and violence."

Wells agreed. "The present research clearly identifies an important role of alcohol in aggression," she said, "therefore prevention programs need to focus on reducing excessive drinking among college students. We found that drinking with a partner actually increased the likelihood of aggression. This may reflect that aggression occurs between partners or that incidents of aggression arise due to jealousy concerns, similar to research on aggression in bars. Therefore, programs that focus on preventing partner violence and other relationship-related conflicts may be highly effective. In addition, programs that promote the consumption of food, and encourage people to stay in one place rather than going from one drinking place to another, may likewise reduce the occurrence of alcohol-related aggression."

Source: Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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