

# Cheap drinks at college bars can escalate drinking among college students

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It's no secret that alcohol use among college students can cause a number of problems, including injury, violence and even death. A new study has examined the impact of drink discounts at college bars, finding that low alcohol prices at drinking establishments pose genuine threats to public health and safety.

Results will be published in the November issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"It may seem intuitive that cheaper [alcohol](#) can lead to higher intoxication levels and related consequences - such as fighting, drunk driving, sexual victimization, injury, even death - especially among the vulnerable college student population," said Ryan J. O'Mara, a graduate research fellow at the University of Florida and corresponding author for the study. "Nonetheless, 'drink specials' and other alcohol discounts and promotions remain a common feature of college bars in campus communities in the United States. This study's results challenge assertions sometimes made by the management of these establishments that drink discounts are innocuous marketing practices intended only to attract customers to better bargains than those provided elsewhere."

"What makes this study unique," added John D. Clapp, professor and director of the San Diego State University Center for Alcohol and Drug Studies, "is that it was one of the first to examine this relationship at the bar-patron level using methods that carefully examined price - that is, what people actually spent - and biologically measured intoxication."

"Most of this prior research has relied on population-level data, for example, comparing alcohol taxes and alcohol sales at the state level," explained O'Mara. "Our study examines this price-behavior relationship at the individual, or consumer, level in a natural drinking setting. We did this study in college bars because previous research has shown that young adults are more sensitive to alcohol price changes than older populations who generally have more disposable income."

O'Mara and his colleagues collected data on 804 patrons (495 men, 309 women) exiting seven bars adjacent to a large university campus on four consecutive nights during April 2008 in the southeastern United States. The data included anonymous interview and survey information, breath alcohol concentration (BrAC) readings, as well as each patron's expenditures per unit of alcohol consumed, based on self-reported information given regarding the type, size, number, and cost of consumed drinks.

"We estimated each patron's cost per gram of ethanol (pure alcohol) consumed at a bar," said O'Mara. "For example, one male participant consumed five 12-ounce bottles of a domestic beer (4.2% ethanol), or approximately 56 grams of ethanol. He paid \$5.00 for all of these drinks, so we calculated that he spent about nine cents per gram of ethanol consumed at a bar. His BrAC upon leaving the bar district was just above 0.08, the presumptive legal limit for driving in the US. We found that increases in cost per gram of ethanol were associated with lower levels of intoxication. For example, patrons with the lowest level of intoxication, a BrAC of less than 0.02, paid on average \$4.44 for a standard drink or 14 grams of ethanol versus patrons with the highest level of intoxication, a BrAC of more than 0.16, who paid \$1.81 per drink."

In other words, researchers found that for each \$1.40 increase in the average price paid for a standard drink, the patron was 30 percent less

likely to leave the bar district with a BrAC above 0.08. Essentially, higher alcohol prices were associated with less risk of being inebriated when driving away from a bar.

"It is not surprising that moderate price increases in standard drinks significantly reduce the risk of intoxication," noted Clapp, "as this relationship is well established at the population level. However, given that college students tend to have limited disposable income, determining potentially protective price points for drinks is important. The main research innovation of this study is methodological; their measurement approach to determining alcohol cost per gram advances the way such costs are typically determined."

"In our current economic recession," said O'Mara, "it is quite possible that some people with little disposable income are highly sensitive to alcohol price changes. A future study should seek to determine which specific populations are most vulnerable to drink discounting at bars."

He added that he is skeptical that bars and nightclubs that cater to college students would voluntarily eliminate drink discounts. "I suspect their primary aim is to generate revenue," O'Mara said, "which unfortunately conflicts with protecting public health and safety."

Clapp agreed. "Bars often argue that [college students](#) cannot afford to drink at 'regular' prices and thus inexpensive [alcohol](#) is a business necessity," he said. "Moreover, bar owners often argue such cheaper drinks do not result in drunkenness or other problems. This study suggests otherwise. Students will purchase more expensive alcoholic drinks and, when they do, become less intoxicated. It would seem from a both a business and public-health standpoint, inexpensive drinks are a problem."

Source: Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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