

Alcohol-related traffic-risk behaviors among college students become worse at age 21

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Alcohol-impaired driving and associated motor-vehicle accidents are a major public-health problem. National studies have shown that approximately 25 percent of college students report that they have driven while intoxicated in the past month, and an even greater percentage report having driven after having any amount of alcohol and/or ridden with a driver believed intoxicated. A new study on how these behaviors may change as students move through their college years has found that prevalence and frequency of alcohol-related traffic-risk behaviors took a significant upturn when students turned 21 years old.

Results will be published in the August 2010 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"[Drinking](#) and driving endangers the safety of not only the drinking driver and passengers, but also other individuals on the road," said Amelia M. Arria, director of the Center on Young Adult Health and Development at the University of Maryland School of Public Health and corresponding author for the study. "College students have limited driving experience, making drinking and driving possibly even more hazardous. [While] other studies have examined drinking and driving among college students, to our knowledge this is the first to have examined how the behavior changes over time in the same sample of students."

"Other studies have demonstrated that freshmen tend to drink more than

upperclassmen," added Robert B. Voas, senior scientist and director of the Impaired Driving Center at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. "This may have led some to the erroneous conclusion that existing college alcohol-safety programs are effective. This study tends to demonstrate that alcohol-related problem behaviors increase with age, perhaps due to greater opportunities for risk taking such as owning a car or the ability to patronize bars and purchase alcohol. If college programs were successful, we should be able to at least prevent an increase in risky drinking and driving during the period the students are at the university."

Arria and her colleagues recruited 1,253 first-time, first-year students (645 females, 608 males) attending a large, mid-Atlantic university. All were invited to be interviewed annually for four years regarding their alcohol-related traffic [risk behaviors](#) (with 88-91% follow-up rates); access to driving a car was also determined annually. Three alcohol-related traffic risk behaviors were examined: riding with a driver who was under the influence of alcohol (RWID), driving after drinking any alcohol (DAD), and driving while intoxicated (DWI).

Results showed that risky alcohol-related traffic behaviors are quite common among [college students](#). "In the preceding year, nearly half of underage students with access to a car drove after having anything to drink and one in five drove while intoxicated," said Arria. "For instance, at 20 years of age, eight percent drove after drinking any alcohol, and 20 percent drove while intoxicated. Moreover, among all 20-year-olds - regardless of car access - 43 percent rode with an intoxicated driver." Males were more likely to engage in these behaviors than females.

"There were noticeable increases in all three measures of alcohol-related traffic risk - RWID, DWI and DAD - when students reached the legal drinking age of 21," said Arria. "Our findings call into question the assertions of some advocates who claim that lowering the drinking age to 18 would be a useful strategy for reducing harm associated with alcohol

consumption. The present findings are consistent with numerous prior studies showing that increased availability of [alcohol](#) is associated with a greater level of problems especially underage drinking-and-driving fatal crashes."

Both Voas and Arria said these findings support maintaining the minimum legal drinking age at 21. "In fact," said Arria, "lowering the drinking age to 18 would likely result in a surge of alcohol-related traffic problems given that younger students would have even less driving experience."

"The continued growth in the percentages of youths who are reporting dangerous drinking/driving behaviours over the time they are in the university suggests that existing university prevention programs are not very effective," added Voas. "The high percentage of first-year students who engage in risky drinking/[driving](#) behaviors parallels previous studies showing that a high proportion of high-school students engage in such risk behaviours. While this is not new, it serves to emphasize the continuity of the problem. University administrations should become well aware of this problem and ensure it receives special attention when [students](#) arrive on campus."

Arria agreed. "College administrators should be more proactive in their approach to reducing underage drinking through a multi-pronged approach that includes health professionals identifying and intervening with individuals who are at risk for alcohol-related problems, as well as parents expressing strong disapproval of underage drinking and accurately communicating the health and safety risks associated with underage [alcohol](#) use to their children. Law enforcement officials also have an important role, and perhaps it is time for increased levels of high-visibility enforcement of underage drinking laws to occur on or around college campuses."

Arria said that she and her colleagues will continue to study the same cohort to examine post-college trends.

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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