

Teen drunkenness levels converge across cultures, by gender

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In the past decade, cultural and gender-based differences in the frequency of drunkenness among adolescents have declined, as drunkenness has become more common in Eastern Europe and among girls and less common in Western countries and among boys, according to a report posted online today that will appear in the February 2011 print issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Alcohol use is a major risk factor for illness, injury and death worldwide, especially in adolescence and young adulthood, according to background information in the article. "More specifically, [drunkenness](#) has been associated with various adverse consequences and health problems such as fatal and non-fatal injuries, blackouts, suicide attempts, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, academic failure and violence," the authors write. "A responsive public health policy with respect to adolescent drunkenness requires evidence-based information about the change of this behavior over time."

Emmanuel Kuntsche, Ph.D., of Addiction Info Switzerland, Research Institute, Lausanne, and colleagues studied trends in teen drunkenness by analyzing survey data from 77,586 15-year-olds (51.5 percent girls, 49.5 percent boys) in seven Eastern European and 16 Western countries. The frequency at which teens got drunk was assessed by gender and country and tracked over time using survey data collected in 1997/1998 and 2005/2006.

Overall, 15-year-olds had been drunk an average of two to three times.

Across all seven Eastern European countries, the average frequency of drunkenness increased about 40 percent over the 10-year study period. The increase was evident for both boys and girls but more consistent among girls. However, frequency declined in 13 of the 16 Western countries, with an average decrease of 25 percent. These declines were particularly notable among boys and in North America, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The authors speculate that changes in socioeconomic conditions and alcohol advertising and marketing practices may underlie the increase in drunkenness among Eastern European teens. "With the opening of borders and markets of the formerly planned-economy societies, Eastern European countries increasingly became confronted with contemporary global alcohol marketing strategies that target particularly young people," they write.

"While [alcohol consumption](#) might have appeared to be part of a new and attractive lifestyle element to [adolescents](#) in Eastern Europe, during the same period alcohol consumption and drunkenness may have lost some of their appeal to a formerly high-consuming group, i.e., mostly boys in Western Europe and North America. In these areas, the omnipresence of alcohol marketing may have saturated the market, making adolescents more likely to consider the prevailing ways of alcohol consumption as conformist and traditional rather than innovative."

The result suggest policy and preventive measures such as tax increases, restricting alcohol advertising and promotion of alcohol-free leisure activities might work in Eastern as well as Western countries, and that prevention policies should target [girls](#) as well as boys, they conclude.

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