

Adolescent drinking may be as important a risk factor for criminal activity as illicit drug use

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Alcohol use has often been linked to criminal activity on the part of both perpetrators as well as victims. While this relationship has been well documented among adults, fewer studies have explored this relationship among adolescents. A new study has found a strong relationship between drinking during adolescence and the commission of crimes, and criminal victimization, for both genders.

Results will be published in the March 2012 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"This issue is extremely important because [adolescents](#) who are criminally active are significantly more likely to be adult criminals," said Michael T. French, professor of health economics at the University of Miami and corresponding author for the study. "Although adolescents often commit less serious crimes than adults – for example, vandalism and shoplifting – these behaviors can quickly escalate into a criminally active lifestyle without effective interventions. Understanding how alcohol use among adolescents may contribute to criminal activity is therefore a logical and policy relevant area for research."

Unfortunately, French added, much of the research has focused only on illicit drugs and criminal activity. Second, quality data are hard to come by. The health survey data set used in this study, he said, is one of the few longitudinal datasets with excellent measures for alcohol use and

criminal activity.

He and his colleagues used data from four waves (n=20,746; n=14,738; n=15,190; n=9,576) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine alcohol-use patterns and criminal activity from adolescence through to young adulthood. They were interested in several questions: Does alcohol use have different effects on being a victim or being a perpetrator of a crime? Is the likelihood of committing a property crime for drinkers relative to non-drinkers greater than that of being involved in other types of crime? How do these relationships differ for males and females? Are frequent binge drinkers more likely to be involved in criminal activity compared to occasional drinkers or abstainers?

"We found that for both adolescent males and females, more frequent alcohol consumption is associated with a greater probability of committing a property crime, committing a predatory crime, and being a victim of a predatory crime," said French. "While we were not necessarily surprised that these relationships existed for both genders, the strength of the relationships was a bit unexpected as well as the fact that they were robust to numerous sensitivity tests."

The key message, he noted, is that frequent alcohol use by adolescents may be as important a risk factor for criminal activity as illicit drug use. "Educators, parents, clinicians, and others who interact with adolescents can use these findings as an incentive to be vigilant about underage alcohol use as this behavior could be linked with current criminal activities or at least a precursor to future illegal acts," he said. "Early intervention is probably the best defense in this case."

However, French cautioned, while these findings may inform public-policy measures designed to reduce drinking among adolescents with the goal of reducing criminal activity and delinquency, it would be incorrect

and misguided to conclude from these findings that all frequent-drinking adolescents are associated with criminal acts, either as a perpetrator or victim. "However," he said, "this study demonstrates that frequent alcohol consumption is an important risk factor that should not be easily dismissed as normal adolescent behavior."

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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