

## Alcohol abuse may be cause, rather than effect of social isolation, poor grades among teens

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Rather than gaining "liquid courage" to let loose with friends, teenage drinkers are more likely to feel like social outcasts, according to a new sociological study.

Published in the June issue of the [Journal of Health and Social Behavior](#), the study shows [alcohol consumption](#) leads to increased [social stress](#) and poor grades, especially among students in schools with tightly-connected friendship cliques and low levels of [alcohol abuse](#).

For their study, Robert Crosnoe, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, Aprile Benner, an assistant professor of [human ecology](#) at the University of Texas at Austin, and Barbara Schneider, a professor of sociology and education at Michigan State University, analyzed National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data on 8,271 adolescents from 126 schools. Add Health, which began in 1994, is the largest and most comprehensive survey of health-related behavior among adolescents between grades 7 and 12.

The researchers, who also drew on Add Health's companion Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement transcript study, found a correlation between drinking and feelings of loneliness and not fitting in across all school environments. But these feelings were especially significant among self-reported drinkers in schools where fellow students tended to avoid alcohol and were tightly connected to each other. When not

surrounded by fellow drinkers, they are more likely to feel like social outcasts, said Crosnoe, who, along with Benner, is a research affiliate at the University of Texas at Austin's Population Research Center.

"This finding doesn't imply that drinkers would be better off in schools in which peer networks are tightly organized around drinking," Crosnoe said. "Instead, the results suggest that we need to pay attention to youth in problematic school environments in general but also to those who may have trouble in seemingly positive school environments."

The researchers, who adjusted statistically for factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, and socioeconomic circumstances, tracked the respondents' grade point averages and found a direct link between feelings of isolation and declining grades. The difference between drinkers who felt as though they did not fit in socially in school and their peers could equal as much as three tenths of a point in grade point average from year to year.

"In general, adolescents who feel as though they don't fit in at school often struggle academically, even when capable and even when peers value academic success, because they become more focused on their social circumstances than their social and academic activities," Crosnoe said.

The study, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, has resulted in recommendations for how public schools should address nonacademic dimensions of school life and youth development in attempts to meet academic accountability benchmarks.

"Given that social development is a crucial component of schooling, it's important to connect these social and emotional experiences of drinking to how teenagers are doing academically," Crosnoe said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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