

A national study of colleges identifies gaps in efforts to enforce alcohol laws

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College students, when compared to their age-matched peers who are not in college, report higher rates of previous 30-day drinking as well as binge drinking. Not surprisingly, this can lead to academic problems, high-risk sexual behavior, sexual assaults, violence and aggression, serious injuries, driving while intoxicated, and traffic fatalities. A new study of campus law enforcement and security describes how they respond to alcohol-related incidents, how consequences and communication may differ based on characteristics of the incident, and identifies gaps in efforts to enforce alcohol laws, including the minimum legal drinking age.

Results will be published in the August 2014 online-only issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"There is wide variation between colleges in binge drinking rates," explained Toben F. Nelson, associate professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, as well as corresponding author for the study. "We think the factors that contribute to higher rates among college versus non-[college students](#) and at heavy versus lighter drinking colleges are largely environmental. These factors include easy availability of [alcohol](#) through high density of commercial alcohol outlets such as bars and liquor stores, fraternity houses and college-rental houses that serve alcohol at parties – particularly to underage students, low-cost alcohol due to cheap drink specials and low state and local taxes on alcohol, and heavy marketing of alcohol via billboards and other

public signage and student-targeted publications such as alternative newspapers. These factors, in addition to a student social life that emphasizes drinking – such as fraternity and sorority life, and spectator rather than participatory collegiate athletics – create an environment where [binge drinking](#) is a normative and expected part of college life."

Nelson and his colleagues asked directors of [campus](#) police/security from 343 colleges across the United States to complete a survey regarding their usual practices following serious, underage, and less-serious alcohol incidents on and off campus.

"Our study is the first to examine enforcement actions for alcohol laws by campus police and security agencies in a large, nationally representative sample of colleges," said Nelson. "We found that campus security or [law enforcement officials](#) were not likely to issue citations for violations of alcohol laws. More commonly, students were referred for discipline or sanctions to other officials within the university, rather than in formal courts. Students were generally not referred to the campus health center for alcohol screening or intervention. Contact with parents by campus security or law enforcement typically did not occur."

"These results clearly show that the most popular activity is to communicate with other campus personnel," added Darin J. Erickson, assistant professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota. "This is important because it shows enforcement is not just about writing citations, but embedding the activity in the large campus context. Second, the rates of citations, even for 'serious' incidents, are fairly low. This approach, while maybe considered fair or compassionate, may possibly undermine enforcement efforts by removing the severity of consequences. Finally, this lack of citations seems most concerning at small, private colleges that likely have security as opposed to police."

Nelson agreed. "It is likely that large and public colleges have more resources to conduct alcohol-related enforcement activities," he said. "In smaller and private colleges there may not be the collective resources or large enough police or security staff to conduct these kinds of operations. It is also possible that students who attend college in small towns make a larger, or more noticeable, impact on their surroundings as a consequence of their drinking and that these consequences can be more easily attributed to college-student drinking in smaller compared to larger towns. In smaller towns the community-based enforcement services may not be sufficient to address the issues related to student drinking."

Both Nelson and Erickson thought changes might improve the use of health centers by at-risk students.

"Students who are having difficulty with alcohol are likely to come to the attention of campus police or for other disciplinary reasons before they are identified by the health center," said Nelson. "We encourage colleges to better integrate their systems, including campus police/security and health centers, so that students who are at-risk can get the services they need, such as evidence-based counseling, brief intervention, and treatment."

"The seemingly low numbers reporting contacting health centers for screening might be misleading in that enforcement [often first] communicates with the Dean's office and they are then responsible for determining if the health center should be involved," noted Erickson. "The most important response may be to have a set and consistent policy, for example, all alcohol incidents are reported to campus officials and there are set criteria for determining next steps."

"The perceived severity of the infraction appeared to make a difference in the enforcement steps taken," said Nelson. "Campus security or [law](#)

enforcement officials were less likely to take action for violations they perceived to be less serious. Lack of action on less serious violations was more common on campuses perceived to have a major problem with student drinking. This may provide an opportunity for future intervention to increase enforcement, and the benefits of deterrence, for less serious violations."

"It is important to note that enforcement is one important part of the larger system of alcohol prevention and treatment on college campuses," said Erickson. "The longstanding elevated alcohol use among college students, and associated problems, dictate that there is not one way to solve this issue. Campus officials representing education, policy, treatment and intervention, and enforcement need to work together to ensure that all of these pieces of the system are available."

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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