

# Bar attendance supports heavy drinking by young adults in the US-Mexico border region

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Due to a legal drinking age of 18 years, cheaper alcohol, and marketing tactics of local bars that specifically target youth, Mexico is an attractive and geographically nearby destination where younger U.S. residents legally drink heavily. However, levels of drinking on the U.S. side are high even among youth who did not recently travel to Mexico. A new study examined whether two factors typical of risky drinking in Mexico – bar attendance and permissive alcohol-related social-cognitions – might also explain higher drinking on the U.S. side, finding that patterns of bar attendance were strongly linked to higher drinking among U.S. border youth, but liberal social cognitions were not.

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

"Younger age groups often travel to Mexico specifically to drink legally. This generally happens at local bars in the region, which target younger ages with all-you-can drink and ladies' night specials, and in general, by promoting a party-like atmosphere," explained Britain A. Mills, faculty associate at the University of Texas School of Public Health - Dallas as well as corresponding author for the study. "We were interested in understanding how these types of factors are related to [drinking](#) on the U.S. side of the border more generally."

"The alerts about [binge drinking](#) and alcohol-related problems like drunk driving for U.S. young adults living along the U.S.-Mexico border have

correctly been concerned about youth crossing into Mexico to drink," added Karen G. Chartier, assistant professor in research in the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. "However, the key point made by this study is that these concerns should not be limited to a focus on youth crossings into Mexico. Elevated drinking for Mexican-American young adults living along the border is also associated with more frequent bar attendance more generally on both sides of the border."

Researchers for the study collected data from representative samples of adult Mexican Americans on and off the U.S.-Mexico Border. Using data from 1,351 current drinkers, study authors used statistical models to compare drinking context – such as frequency of bar attendance – and six different social-cognitive variables, including alcohol-related attitudes, norms, motives, and beliefs, as mediators of border effects on drinking.

"We found that high levels of drinking among the border region's young adult population can be explained by how often they attend bars, but not by their overt ways of thinking about drinking – for example, their attitudes towards drinking, beliefs about alcohol's effects, or their personal reasons for drinking," said Mills, adding, "this is important because it indicates that increases in drinking among U.S. border youth are more a product of their environmental surroundings than any deliberative choice to drink more."

"This study importantly expands the focus of prevention efforts to reduce alcohol consumption by young adults in the U.S.-Mexico border region to drinking contexts on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border," added Chartier. "Mexican Americans who were 18 to 29 years old and living on the border drank more alcohol than their counterparts living off the border, and attending and drinking in bars more frequently was associated with increased drinking in this young border group."

"On the Mexico side, policies that directly target the region's bars – for example, requiring earlier closing times – have proven effective in the past," said Mills. "These types of policy initiatives may also be effective in the U.S., but currently little is known about the distribution of bars on the U.S. side, their characteristics, their clientele, or the atmosphere they encourage. Acquiring and analyzing this type of data is a clear next step for research and will help inform policy decisions."

"This study also points to the importance of controlling [young adults'](#) access to alcohol in the effort to reduce their elevated drinking in this U.S. border region," said Chartier. "Community-level campaigns are one likely approach and may include the use of local media to call attention to the problem and efforts to regulate the number, location, and density of bars. The goal of this approach would be to target structural changes in the drinking environment that can lead to changes in youth drinking behaviors. Additionally while parents are often viewed as having a weakened influence on youth's behavior during young adulthood, there is a large and strong literature around the importance of parents being aware of their child's activities and communicating when they are concerned about those activities. This may be particularly important in this context."

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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