

Identifying how drinking contexts and youth characteristics change over time

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Previous research among young and older adults has suggested that the context in which drinking occurs may contribute to specific alcohol-related problems, such as aggression, risky sex, and drinking and driving. However, little is known about how young drinkers select drinking contexts. A longitudinal study of drinking patterns, and demographic and psychosocial characteristics associated with youth drinking in different contexts, has found that where youth drink alcohol varies by characteristics such as age, gender, drinking frequency, smoking, and deviant behaviors.

Results will be published in the April 2015 online-only issue of [*Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*](#) and are currently available at Early View.

"Prior studies have identified places associated with specific negative drinking-related outcomes," explained Sharon Lipperman-Kreda, a senior research scientist at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation as well as corresponding author for the study. "For example, one study found that drinking in a public location was associated with greater drinking by young girls when compared with drinking in a private location. Another study of young people 15-20 years old found that frequency of drinking in restaurants and in cars increased the likelihood of drinking and driving. Among California college students, alcohol-related sex with a stranger was 10 times more likely to occur at Greek parties than at outdoor events. Another study identified bars as one of the riskiest places for [aggression](#) and injury among adults. These

findings collectively suggest that we need to learn more about the places young people drink."

"Drinking context is complex," added Traci L. Toomey, professor in the school of public health at the University of Minnesota. "Characteristics of youth and adults may predict which locations they will choose for drinking. On the other hand, the drinking context may influence [drinking behavior](#) and the likelihood of different types of alcohol-related problems."

"While several studies have looked at associations between drinking context and youth characteristics," noted Lipperman-Kreda, "our study is the first study to examine how these associations change over time."

The researchers used survey data collected from 2009 through to 2012 from 665 (369 boys, 296 girls) past-year, alcohol-using youths in 50 mid-sized California cities. Participants were 13 to 16 years of age at Wave 1. Measures of drinking behaviors and drinking in seven contexts were obtained at three annual time points. Other characteristics included gender, age, race, parental education, weekly disposable income, general deviance, and past-year cigarette smoking.

"First, we found that youths with different characteristics such as gender, age, and income drink in different places," said Lipperman-Kreda. "For example, youths who drank more frequently were more likely to drink at parties and at someone else's home. Heavier drinkers were more likely to drink at parking lots or street corners. Deviant youths were more likely to drink everywhere, and cigarette smokers were more likely to drink at beaches or parks and someone else's home. We also found that over time, the likelihood of [youth drinking](#) at parties and someone else's home increased, whereas the likelihood of drinking at parking lots/street corners decreased. Finally, the likelihood of drinking at one's own home, beaches or parks, and

restaurants/bars/nightclubs changed more rapidly among deviant youths compared with non-deviant youths."

"This study suggests that interventions could be tailored to specific groups of youth based on where they drink alcohol," observed Toomey. "By making the messages more specific and appropriate for a specific group, they may become more effective in reducing alcohol use and related problems. The findings also suggest that if you are trying to reach specific groups of youth, it is important to consider where they are drinking. For example, if you are trying to influence the drinking behavior of a younger, general-population youth, it would not make sense to focus on bars/restaurants. On the other hand, if you are trying influence the drinking behavior of deviant or older youth, it would be more appropriate to focus on bar and restaurant contexts."

Lipperman-Kreda agreed. "By understanding who drinks where, this study took a first step toward understanding potential dynamics that underlie the social ecology of drinking problems among youths," she said, "and supports the development of context-based interventions to target specific youths and prevent alcohol use and related negative outcomes. For example, interventions can be created with the goal of informing female students about risks associated with drinking at school events or targeting heavy drinking youths at outdoor places."

"Certainly for a school-prevention specialist, this information can directly inform where and how they target their limited resources to address drinking among different groups of students," said Toomey. "We hope that parents take action to address alcohol use among their teens/young adults. This information may better inform them about where their own kids are likely [drinking](#) alcohol. This information may also help them better focus their advocacy efforts on these specific locations to decrease the number of locations or opportunities for their kids to drink."

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