

Alcohol a 'very alarming' problem for nation's lawyers, study finds

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Lawyers in the United States, particularly those starting out in the profession, cope with depression and anxiety at troubling levels and turn to alcohol far more often than the population as a whole.

Those are among the results of a study released Wednesday that found 21 percent of practicing attorneys qualified as problem drinkers, 28 percent struggled with some degree of depression and 19 percent demonstrated symptoms of anxiety.

The collaborative research project, conducted by the Minnesota- and California-based Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and an American Bar Association (ABA) commission, marks the first nationwide attempt to capture such data about the [legal profession](#). About 15,000 attorneys from 19 states in all regions of the country participated.

The rate of problem drinking is roughly three times higher in the U.S. among lawyers than the adult population as a whole, said attorney and clinician Patrick R. Krill, Hazelden's architect of the project and the study's lead author. Lawyers also have alcohol problems at a rate higher than doctors and other professions.

Narrowing the focus strictly to the quantity and frequency of drinking, the study saw that more than a third of lawyers exhibit trouble with alcohol.

Krill added that "we found rates of depression are also significantly

higher than the general population," while lawyers also were coping with anxiety at a higher rate than the country as a whole.

"Any way you look at it, this data is very alarming, and paints the picture of an unsustainable professional culture that's harming too many people," Krill said. "Attorney impairment poses risks to the struggling individuals themselves and to our communities, government, economy and society. The stakes are too high for inaction."

ABA President Paulette Brown said, "This new research demonstrates how the pressures felt by many lawyers manifest in health risks."

The study also found that younger attorneys in the first 10 years of practice exhibit the highest incidence of these problems compared with their older counterparts.

Krill said he initiated the study and took his proposal to the ABA because he's a lawyer, "it's the population that I treat," and this effort was long overdue.

ABA officials were first approached in 2013 about taking on the study and "were cautious until they knew exactly what was being proposed. ... There has been a reluctance to deal with these problems as a whole."

The study found little difference in its findings from state to state or when comparing regions. The same was true for attorneys' particular specialty, Krill said, except that members of private firms showed the most difficulty with alcohol.

"Heavy drinking is completely normalized within law firms," Krill said, noting that entertaining clients plays into the culture. Drinking "tends to be a way that people blow off steam. ... It's a default coping mechanism."

Krill said he hopes these results prompt the profession to address the scope of the problem "with full-scale honesty."

"They need to step up to the plate and devote their resources," he said. "No more ignoring or minimizing the problem."

Just like in any part of society, there are family members and others around problem drinkers who pay a price. For attorneys, that includes their clients.

"We are handling people's important matters," he said. "It's an obligation to be in good shape."

Linda Albert, a co-author of the study and representative of the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, said there are countless ways this data will benefit the profession.

"While the numbers themselves are disheartening, the instructive value of the information is enormous and tells us that the problem is best approached from a systems perspective," Albert said. "All sectors of the profession will benefit from reading, understanding and utilizing this important study, and now we can better develop strategies for preventing and addressing substance use problems and mental health concerns in this population."

The Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs educates [lawyers](#) about alcoholism, chemical dependencies, stress, depression and other emotional health challenges. It supports bar associations around the country and lawyer assistance programs in recovery efforts.

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