

Study on heavy drinking in young adults and the psychological impacts of COVID-19 yields unexpected findings

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A novel longitudinal study on heavy drinking in young adults and the psychological impacts of COVID-19 has revealed some unexpected

findings that challenge preconceived notions regarding pandemic-related alcohol use.

In a sample of nearly 500 [young adults](#) ranging in age from 18 to 25, researchers saw a reduction in problematic drinking and alcohol consequences during the initial phase of the pandemic for both men and women. This is in contrast to many anecdotal reports of increased drinking and increased household spending on alcohol during that time period.

More startling, however, were the additional findings that showed increased rates of depression and anxiety symptoms among [young women](#)—increases that were not observed to a significant degree among male participants.

"These results reveal the complexity of the pandemic impacts," said senior author James MacKillop. MacKillop is the director of the Peter Boris Centre for Addictions Research of McMaster University and St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, as well as a professor of psychiatry and behavioral neurosciences at McMaster.

Researchers suspect that restrictions on socializing contributed to the reduction of risky alcohol use observed in this age group. With a decreasing proportion of individuals living with roommates or in group living arrangements, peer influence—usually a strong predictor of alcohol misuse—has decreased.

"The study participants were [young people](#), who typically drink in [social settings](#)," said Meenu Minhas, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral fellow at the Peter Boris Centre for Addictions Research. "If you take away bars, restaurants, and group events, like parties, it's not surprising that binge drinking in this group goes down too."

Conversely, the reported increase of mental health symptoms in the study illustrates some of the negative consequences associated with the pandemic. Among study participants, women showed a substantial increase in the odds of meeting the threshold for clinical depression from pre- to intra-pandemic. A similar effect was not found in male participants.

"We saw high levels of pandemic-related stress, irritability, sadness, which unfortunately were felt more strongly by females," said Minhas.

"Although certain public health measures were important in controlling the spread of the virus, the benefits of social support and interaction, which often act as buffers against the effects of stress, have also been reduced due to the pandemic," explained MacKillop.

Pandemic-related income loss was also found to be attributed to increased depression scores, with those reporting greater than 50 percent income loss experiencing significant increases in depressive symptoms. Researchers see this as a direct link between [economic impacts](#) and adverse mental health outcomes. They argue that government strategies that provide economic assistance may effectively act like an antidepressant when it comes to pandemic impacts on mental health.

Other studies on substance use during the pandemic have tended to use cross-sectional designs, meaning they do not account for changes over time. In contrast, the present study used a longitudinal design that tracked the same cohort before and during the [pandemic](#).

"Collectively, these results indicate the importance of critical thinking and considering population subgroups when it comes to COVID-19's psychological impacts," said MacKillop. "Rather than uniform increases or decreases, it's increasingly clear that subgroups will show very different patterns, including both negative—and in some cases—positive

changes."

Provided by McMaster University

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