

# College drinking declined during the pandemic

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First-year college students are reporting drinking less alcohol and having fewer episodes of binge drinking four months into the coronavirus pandemic than they were before the pandemic started, according to a

study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study is based on the experiences of 439 Carolina students and reflects how the pandemic affected students' social lives and stress. Researchers from the Carolina Population Center and the UNC School of Medicine published the study findings August 2 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"We found that [social factors](#), like social distancing and reductions in [social support](#) from friends, were associated with decreases in [alcohol use](#) among first-year students. By contrast, stress-related factors were less important," said lead study author Jane Cooley Fruehwirth, an associate professor in the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Economics in the College of Arts & Sciences and a faculty fellow at the Carolina Population Center.

Her collaborators include Ben Gorman, a senior communications and neuroscience major in the College of Arts and Sciences, and Krista Perreira, a professor of social medicine at the UNC School of Medicine and a faculty fellow at the Carolina Population Center. The work builds on their previous research looking at the [mental health of first-year college students](#) during the pandemic.

## **Alcohol Usage Declines**

Using [survey data](#), researchers found the prevalence of alcohol use by first-year college students decreased from 54.2% before the pandemic to 46% mid-pandemic. The prevalence of binge drinking dropped from 35.5% before the pandemic to 24.6% mid-pandemic.

"We followed the same group of first-year college students before and after the pandemic began, which allowed us to analyze COVID-related determinants of drinking behaviors while accounting for pre-existing

alcohol use and social factors," says Gorman, who also runs the TEACH Initiative, an organization which conducts near-peer substance use and [mental health](#) education in North Carolina high schools.

While the social factors dominated, stress did play a role for some students. Difficulties with distanced learning were associated with increased drinking for students who were already consuming alcohol before the pandemic. Furthermore, 20.5% of students reported using alcohol or other drugs to cope with the pandemic.

"The dominance of social factors suggests that reductions in alcohol use may not be sustained once college students return to campus," said Fruehwirth. "For students who were already drinking prior to the [pandemic](#), universities can support them by providing ways to help them manage stress, through counseling, [student](#) support groups and particularly targeting challenges with distance learning through academic coaching."

**More information:** Jane Cooley Fruehwirth et al, The Effect of Social and Stress-Related Factors on Alcohol Use Among College Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.06.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.06.016)

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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