

Stressed out and locked-down during pandemic, New Yorkers craved alcohol

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As New York state's lockdown orders wore on in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, residents increasingly felt cravings for alcohol—and reported subsequently misusing it, a new study from

scientists at the Yale School of Public Health and Stony Brook University has found.

The study analyzed [survey data](#) from nearly 600 [young adults](#) living in the state in 2020. The scientists found a staggering association between anxiety, sleep disturbances and even positive COVID-19 diagnoses with increased alcohol use.

It is believed to be the first study that analyzed alcohol use cravings during the [pandemic](#). The research is published in the journal *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*.

To explain the increase, the researchers pointed to the long-term psychological stress that the pandemic has placed on populations since the virus appeared. Previous studies have shown that many young adults use alcohol to cope with anxiety and stress, and those who were surveyed also showed a similar pattern. In addition, they found many of the surveyed New York residents who reported sleep problems also reported higher alcohol use.

More surprisingly, the researchers also found that being diagnosed with COVID-19 was directly associated with more alcohol use—despite federal warnings against drinking while infected with the virus. Perhaps, they wrote, the stress of the diagnosis led many to crave alcohol and drink more as a result. The stress got to the broader population as well, they found: Among those who identified that their alcohol use increased, almost half of the respondents reported moderate to severe depression and even suicide ideation.

"It comes as no surprise to most people that alcohol use increased during the pandemic, especially given the fact that in New York, liquor stores were deemed as essential businesses and were allowed to stay open during the stay-at-home orders," said Ijeoma Opara, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.,

M.P.H., an assistant professor at the Yale School of Public Health and the study's lead author. "Without proper access to brief [mental health](#) and substance use resources that can support young adults during a pandemic, it's possible that people are going to seek the use of substances as a way to cope with the stress of the pandemic."

The study also revealed an interesting trade-off inherent in lockdowns used to control pandemics: While the measures have been proven to be successful at minimizing the spread of a virus, they may also bring about isolation and loneliness, which can lead to more [alcohol use](#) and misuse. Evaluating these secondary effects may prove valuable for further research, the researchers wrote, especially in preparation for a future pandemic.

The findings suggest that policymakers, clinicians and public [health](#) experts should take significant steps to help curb pandemic-induced substance abuse and improve health outcomes, they wrote.

There are limitations to their study, the researchers added. Since the team only surveyed young adults in New York state, the findings may not be replicable throughout the entire United States population—which means they can't say that the pandemic caused [alcohol](#) cravings to rise. Still, the researchers wrote, their study should hopefully bring about more research into the impacts that the pandemic has had on mental health across the country, and especially with regards to those who have tested positive for the disease.

More information: Ijeoma Opara et al, Alcohol Use Cravings as a Mediator Between Associated Risk Factors on Increased Alcohol Use among Youth Adults in New York During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/07347324.2021.1950091](#)

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