

'Everybody is down to not drink.' Why young people are drinking less alcohol

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On her 21st birthday, Rabbah Johnson experienced a first: not a legal cocktail, but a roller coaster ride at Six Flags.

She'd never been on one before and knew she wanted to change that. The incoming junior at Temple University had never had [alcohol](#), either, but that didn't concern her much.

"It's something I never did, and I'm perfectly fine with it," she said.

Her attitude reflects a decadeslong trend that may seem surprising amid reports of Greek life gone wild and alcohol-involved sexual assault: Young people in the United States are consuming less alcohol.

According to the Monitoring the Future Study—an annual national survey of 50,000 adolescents and [young adults](#) in America—alcohol use has dropped steeply since the 1990s.

That's not to say everyone is going sober. Alcohol is still a large part of American culture, from happy hour after work to frat parties on college campuses—and so are the tragedies that can result. But researchers have found that young people today are throwing back fewer drinks than their counterparts 10 or 15 years ago. The decline is most significant in teens, but also present among adults in their 20s. The same trend has been recorded in Australia, the U.K., and several European countries.

Some see the trend as another example of millennial disruption. First, the generation—young adults in their 20s and 30s—killed cable TV, then

it was cars, and now alcohol. But ask the millennials themselves, and it's clear the reasons are more nuanced: from restoring control and balance in life to reflecting on what makes social interactions meaningful.

For Johnson, drinking never held much appeal. Born in Pakistan, she spent her early years in a society that disapproved of alcohol. That changed when she moved to the U.S. at 13. "I could make a different choice," she said, "but I didn't want to."

She likes feeling in control. So why turn to a substance that takes that away? She still enjoys going dancing with friends, grabbing dinner, or simply hanging out. "I don't see it as missing out on anything," she said.

Public health experts hope that's the case for many young adults, that years of education on the risks of alcohol are beginning to pay off with a cultural change. "Just like we got people to stop thinking smoking is cool, maybe we're finally seeing a change in the perception of alcohol," said Robert Bassett, associate medical director of the Poison Control Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

The idea rings true for Allie Miller, a 26-year-old living in New York City, who rarely drinks. She goes out to bars and clubs with friends, but doesn't feel pressured to consume alcohol. In fact, most people are complimentary when they learn of her choice.

"They're usually shocked and amazed," Miller said. "But I'm not trying to be on a high moral ground. It's just part of my routine." It's not an anti-alcohol principle; just an easy way to save money and turn down guys who offer to buy her a drink, she joked.

Studies show most young people who drink do so for social reasons. But with the rise of social media, many youth interactions—particularly for teens and college-aged students—are moving from parks and parking

lots to newsfeeds and Snapchats. "That naturally lends itself to less drinking," Bassett said. It also furthers the cultural shift in which alcohol isn't a necessary element for socialization.

As a bartender for more than 20 years, Kevin Scullin has seen the change firsthand. At the White Dog Cafe in University City, he says, a third of the students who come in don't drink. They're more excited about the half-price truffled Parmesan fries and oysters during happy hour.

"Before, people would look at you like you're strange if you weren't drinking in a bar," Scullin said. "But now it's every other person. You come for the food, for the socialization."

Even those who drink are often ordering just a glass or two, Scullin said. There's less bingeing than when he started bartending in the late '90s.

At the Love in Rittenhouse Square, bartender Kevin Lopez says young people are opting for quality over quantity, craft cocktails and microbrews over well drinks and drafts. "They're drinking less to get drunk and more to appreciate," he said.

And they want creativity. The same way a chef is asked to create dishes from seasonal ingredients, Lopez often receives requests for drinks with fresh elements, such as strawberry, peach, and celery. His most unique concoction? A beet and horseradish soda.

But not all young people are looking to optimize their cocktails. Some are drinking less as part of a concerted effort to focus on health and wellness.

Nick Harris, a 30-year-old musician from South Philadelphia, stopped drinking last year to be more productive. Rather than having five drinks during a set and heading to the bar after the show, now he opts for water

or soda. "I don't feel like garbage the next day," he said.

Despite what he calls a heavy-drinking culture in the music industry, Harris knows several people who don't drink or rarely drink. Some belong to the straight edge movement, a subculture of hard-core punk whose followers refrain from alcohol, tobacco, and other recreational drugs. Others are anti-capitalists who don't want to fund the beverage industry. "It's hard to find a common reason," he said.

Some skeptics wonder whether [young people](#) are simply replacing alcohol with other drugs. The Monitoring the Future study found use of most illicit drugs declined, along with alcohol. But there was one notable exception: marijuana.

It's difficult to determine whether that means people are substituting marijuana for alcohol, Bassett of CHOP said. In the past, marijuana and alcohol use have declined simultaneously.

Another possibility is substitution with new synthetic drugs that are sold on the street. "Surveys don't even know to ask the question about these agents," Bassett said.

But from where Adam Ravitz stands as bartender at Royal Boucherie in the Old City neighborhood, the trend of going dry is growing. A fifth of the cocktails he makes are nonalcoholic.

And it's not just customers. Bartenders are opting for less alcohol, too, Ravitz said. He has several bartender friends who stopped [drinking](#) to make their careers more sustainable. One friend puts on yoga classes for bartenders. Another organizes rock-climbing outings.

"Everybody is down to not drink," he said.

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