

# Teen and College Student Alcohol Use During COVID-19

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Excessive alcohol use costs the US an estimated \$249 billion each year.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people in ways that may increase their risk for heavy alcohol use.

Among **teens**:

- Some risk factors for alcohol use (e.g., less access to friends, fewer social gatherings) have been reduced during the pandemic, yet others have increased. These include:<sup>2,3,4</sup>
  - reduced social support
  - lack of parental supervision
  - increased family stress
  - poor academic achievement
  - increased parental alcohol use
  - limited access to mental health support
- Early alcohol use increases risk for experiencing other difficulties<sup>5,6</sup> (e.g., school failure/dropout, blackouts, sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, etc.) and developing long-term problems<sup>7</sup> (e.g., alcohol use disorder), which results in greater costs.
- Reduced access to mental health services, coupled with increased need, will likely increase long-term risks.<sup>8</sup>

Among **college students**:

- The majority report decreased alcohol use<sup>9,10,11</sup>, likely due to less socializing.<sup>12,13,14</sup>
  - Once social restrictions are lifted, however, it is likely there will be a dangerous rebound effect, with more risky behavior.
- A subset (~20% of those surveyed) report drinking more<sup>9,11</sup>, indicating heightened risk for the development of problems.
- The majority (~65-80% of those surveyed) report that their mental health has suffered since the start of the pandemic.<sup>9,10,11</sup>
- Negative impacts were more pronounced among disadvantaged students (e.g., low-income, people of color, LGBTQ+<sup>a</sup>, caregivers),<sup>15</sup> which increases their risk for higher alcohol use.

## Policy Recommendations:

- Invest in tele-mental health and addiction services to ensure accessibility of services even as states and universities reopen.
- Invest in evidence-based prevention programming (e.g., Life Skills Training; BASICS).
- Increase funding for school- and university-based mental health services to support:
  - 1) Accessible, evidence-based mental health and substance use intervention;
  - 2) The hiring of diverse practitioners to better serve a diverse population<sup>b</sup>; and
  - 3) A sufficient number of staff to enhance availability of and access to support.
- Increase providers' ability to offer mental health and substance use treatment services by:
  - 1) Protecting and expanding Medicare reimbursement rates;
  - 2) Reimbursing licensed providers for tele-mental health and substance use services; and
  - 3) Encouraging interstate reciprocity so marginalized patients and/or patients with specialized needs (particularly those from rural/low resource areas) have increased access to therapists with relevant expertise and lived experiences.

<sup>a</sup> LGBTQ+ refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or any other sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., pansexual, Two-Spirit).

<sup>b</sup> Diversity can refer to race, gender identity, sexuality, primary language, etc.

## References

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