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## AVERAGE WEEKLY ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: DRINKING PERCENTILES FOR AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** Data obtained from 44,433 students who reported the **average** number of drinks they consumed per week in response to the Core **Alcohol** and Drug Survey at 105 college campuses between October 1994 and June 1996 are discussed. The majority of the students indicated that, on an **average weekly** basis, they consumed little or no **alcohol**. Forty-eight percent of the students at 2-year schools and 38% of the students at 4-year schools reported consuming no alcoholic drinks per week. When responses from these students were combined with those of students who consumed only one drink per week, the total included 59% of the students at 2-year and 51% of students at 4-year colleges. Approximately 10% of the students reported they consumed 15 or more drinks on an **average weekly** basis. The authors provide a detailed table showing the cumulative percentages of student drinking at various levels and offer suggestions for clinical and programmatic interventions.

**Key Words:** alcohol, college students, drinking, substance abuse

In addressing the problem of **alcohol** abuse, health professionals often find it helpful to provide college students with comparative data so that the students can contrast their drinking with that of others. In this brief report, we provide college health educators and substance abuse counselors with specific data regarding **weekly alcohol consumption** among college students. This information can be used to guide our clinical interactions with students as well as our educational programming efforts.

In a thoughtful analysis, Perkins( [n1](#)) has pointed out that focusing on dramatic and aberrant **alcohol**-related behavior may have the paradoxical effect of creating an expectancy for the behavior we are trying to prevent. Rather than being dramatic, the data we have collected show that, on an **average weekly** basis, the majority of college students use little or no **alcohol**. A number of national reports, including one prepared by our group, have highlighted the dramatic and negative aspects of collegiate drinking and binge drinking.( [n2-n5](#)) These problems certainly exist. In this article, we provide another vantage point from which to consider the issue of college student drinking.

Our data were taken from the Core **Alcohol** and Drug Survey, an instrument that has been used frequently to assess campuswide patterns of substance abuse. First developed in 1989 by a committee of grantees from the Drug Prevention Program in Higher Education of the US Department of Education, the survey uses a

machine scored questionnaire that examines the use and consequences of **alcohol** and other drugs in the collegiate setting. To date, it has been administered to approximately 700,000 students at nearly 1,000 institutions in the United States. Descriptions of the survey questionnaire and some of its findings have been reported previously in this journal( n6, n7) and in other publications.( n8-n12)

A new long form of the Core Survey became available in September 1994. This expanded version of the instrument added questions about campus climate and campus violence; sexuality; students' beliefs about the effects of **alcohol** and second-hand effects of drinking; participation in campus activities and perceptions of group norms; and knowledge about risks involved in using **alcohol** and other drugs. The data we discuss in this article were obtained from surveys between October 1994 and June 1996 that used the new long form.

### The Problem

In the years since Core Survey data were first collected, students' **average weekly alcohol consumption** has remained relatively constant. Published monographs describing the data collected in the United States over 2-year periods show that **average weekly alcohol consumption** was 5.0 drinks per week per student among 58,625 students at 78 institutions in 1989-1991; 4.3 drinks per week (45,059 students from 87 institutions) in 1990-1992; 4.5 drinks per week (41,667 students, 77 institutions) in 1991-1993; and remained at 4.5 drinks (45,632 students, 89 institutions) in 1992-1994.( n8-n12)

**Averages**, however, can hide important differences. Consequently, it is important for campus health personnel to have specific data on **alcohol** use analyzed by gender and type of institution.

### Procedure

After an individual college or university administered the Core questionnaire, the survey forms were sent to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) for machine scoring. Raw responses were then converted into a report for the specific institution and simultaneously added to a composite national database at SIUC. Only schools that collected their data by means of random sampling techniques and used samples representative of the demographic characteristics of their institutions were included in the aggregation.

A question asking students to report the "**average** number of drinks you consume a week" received 44,433 responses from participants at 105 campuses (20 2-year institutions and 85 4-year institutions) between October 1994 and June 1996. A drink was defined as one bottle of beer, one glass of wine, one wine cooler, one shot glass of liquor, or one mixed drink. Responses were reported from 8,797 students at 2-year schools and 35,636 students from 4-year institutions. These institutions were distributed geographically among the four quadrants of the United States: 35 from the Northeast, 21 from the South, 32 from the North Central states, and 17 from the West.

### Results

In Table 1, we present our data by type of institution (2-year and 4-year colleges) and by sex, because previous research findings indicate that **alcohol consumption** differs significantly within these categories.( n9-n12)

In this table, the left-hand column shows the **average** number of drinks consumed per week. The main body of the table shows the percentage of students who reported consuming up to the number of drinks indicated on the left. In other words, the numbers in the body of the table are in cumulative percentages or as percentiles of **alcohol consumption**.

### Discussion

One of the most interesting aspects of these data is that the majority of students reported drinking little or no **alcohol** on an **average weekly** basis. Forty-eight percent of students at 2-year schools and 38% of students at 4-year schools reported consuming no (zero) drinks per week. When reports from these students were

combined with those of students who reported having only one drink per week the figures rise to encompass 59% of the 2-year students and 51% of the 4-year students--in other words, a majority of the students. When this finding is presented in residence hall or fraternity and sorority educational programs. it is bound to create a new awareness for students.

The percentage of students who consume large amounts of **alcohol** is relatively small. Only about 10% of the students reported consuming an **average** of 15 or more drinks per week. This finding does not negate the difficulties associated with sporadic binge drinking by otherwise light drinkers, nor does it negate the fact that the vast majority of students consume **alcohol** when the reporting period is extended to include the previous 12 months (described as annual prevalence in the research literature) or in the last month (described as 30-day prevalence).( n11, n12) However, the findings do add a new perspective to the overall picture.

The percentiles shown in Table 1 may also be useful in clinical settings to demonstrate to students that **consumption** levels are lower than they generally believe them to be. In an **alcohol** counseling session, for example, one could show a male student at a 4-year college who drinks "only" 10 drinks per week that he is actually in the 77th percentile of drinking for males at 4-year colleges. A woman at the same school who drank at this rate would be in the 92nd percentile. These reference points can help students see where they stand in relation to their peers. Thus, this table can be useful in clinical interventions as well as in educational programs.

Perkins and Berkowitz( n13) have demonstrated that students' perceptions of campus drinking norms are in excess of the reality. In another study, Perkins and Wechsler( n14) provide evidence to support the contention that students will try to emulate, in their own drinking, the campus norms they perceive. To the extent that we can correct their misperceptions,( n15) we can have a potential positive impact on students. We hope this report can serve us in having such an impact.

**NOTE**

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**TABLE 1 Alcohol Consumption Norms for US College Students, in Percentiles**

| Drinks per week | 2-year institutions |      |       | 4-year institutions |      |       |
|-----------------|---------------------|------|-------|---------------------|------|-------|
|                 | Total               | Men  | Women | Total               | Men  | Women |
| 0               | 47.7                | 37.9 | 54.9  | 37.8                | 31.9 | 41.7  |
| 1               | 59.2                | 47.8 | 67.5  | 50.8                | 42.4 | 56.3  |
| 2               | 66.2                | 54.0 | 75.2  | 59.1                | 49.6 | 65.4  |
| 3               | 70.5                | 57.9 | 79.6  | 64.8                | 54.8 | 71.4  |
| 4               | 73.0                | 60.7 | 82.0  | 68.3                | 58.0 | 75.1  |
| 5               | 77.7                | 65.4 | 86.6  | 73.5                | 62.8 | 80.5  |
| 6               | 79.9                | 68.0 | 88.6  | 76.5                | 66.0 | 83.4  |
| 7               | 81.2                | 69.4 | 89.9  | 78.1                | 67.6 | 85.0  |
| 8               | 82.7                | 71.2 | 91.0  | 80.4                | 70.1 | 87.1  |
| 9               | 83.3                | 72.0 | 91.6  | 81.0                | 70.9 | 87.6  |

|       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 10    | 87.5  | 77.5  | 94.8  | 86.2  | 76.8  | 92.4  |
| 11    | 87.7  | 77.8  | 95.0  | 86.4  | 77.2  | 92.5  |
| 12    | 89.8  | 81.3  | 96.0  | 88.7  | 80.5  | 94.2  |
| 13    | 90.0  | 81.6  | 96.1  | 89.0  | 80.8  | 94.3  |
| 14    | 90.2  | 81.8  | 96.4  | 89.4  | 81.4  | 94.7  |
| 15    | 91.7  | 84.1  | 97.2  | 91.8  | 84.5  | 96.5  |
| 16    | 91.8  | 84.3  | 97.3  | 92.1  | 85.0  | 96.7  |
| 17    | 91.9  | 84.4  | 97.4  | 92.2  | 85.2  | 96.8  |
| 18    | 92.4  | 85.4  | 97.5  | 92.7  | 86.0  | 97.1  |
| 19    | 92.5  | 85.6  | 97.6  | 92.7  | 86.1  | 97.1  |
| 20    | 94.3  | 88.7  | 98.4  | 94.9  | 89.6  | 98.4  |
| 21    | 94.5  | 88.9  | 98.5  | 95.0  | 89.7  | 98.4  |
| 22    | 94.6  | 89.2  | 98.5  | 95.1  | 89.9  | 98.5  |
| 23-24 | 95.8  | 91.7  | 98.8  | 95.9  | 91.6  | 98.8  |
| 25-26 | 96.5  | 93.1  | 99.0  | 96.9  | 93.4  | 99.2  |
| 27    | 96.5  | 93.1  | 99.0  | 96.9  | 93.4  | 99.2  |
| 28-29 | 96.7  | 93.4  | 99.0  | 97.0  | 93.6  | 99.2  |
| 30-31 | 97.8  | 95.5  | 99.4  | 98.1  | 95.8  | 99.6  |
| 32-34 | 97.9  | 95.7  | 99.4  | 98.2  | 96.0  | 99.6  |
| 35-39 | 98.3  | 96.6  | 99.5  | 98.7  | 97.1  | 99.7  |
| 40-41 | 98.8  | 97.5  | 99.7  | 99.1  | 98.0  | 99.8  |
| 42-44 | 98.8  | 97.6  | 99.7  | 99.1  | 98.1  | 99.8  |
| 45-49 | 99.1  | 98.2  | 99.8  | 99.3  | 98.5  | 99.9  |
| 50-60 | 99.5  | 99.1  | 99.9  | 99.8  | 99.5  | 99.9  |
| 61-68 | 99.6  | 99.2  | 99.9  | 99.8  | 99.5  | 99.9  |
| 69-79 | 99.7  | 99.5  | 99.9  | 99.9  | 99.8  | >99.9 |
| 80-99 | >99.9 | >99.9 | >99.9 | >99.9 | >99.9 | >99.9 |

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