

FACT SHEET: Characteristics of Underage Drinking

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All text in this fact sheet is excerpted directly from Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, a 2004 report from The National Academies.

Long Term Trends

The prevalence of drinking among high school seniors peaked in the late 1970s and then decreased throughout the 1980s. Drinking rates have been relatively stable since then, with 30-day prevalence rates hovering at approximately 50% throughout the 1990s.¹

The proportion of high school seniors who report drinking in the last 30 days was the same in 2002 as it was in 1993 (48.6%). The proportion of seniors who report having five or more drinks in the past 2 weeks was higher in 2002 (28.6%) than it was in 1993 (27.5%).²

Although there have been modest reductions in the 30-day and annual prevalence rates for the past five years, current rates are not significantly different than they were in 1993, and remain high.³

Drinking Prevalence Among 8th, 10th, and 12th Graders⁴

Prevalence	8 th Grade	10 th Grade	12 th Grade
Lifetime	47%	66.9%	78.4%
Last 30 days	19.6%	35.4%	48.6%
Heavy Drinking *	12.4%	22.4%	28.6%

* Defined as five or more drinks in a row in the previous 2 weeks.

Drinking Initiation

The average age of first use of alcohol among individuals of all ages reporting any alcohol use, based on the respondents' recall of this information, has decreased from 17.6 years in 1965 to 15.9 years in 1999.⁵ For 12 to 20-year-olds only, the average age of first use in 2000 is even younger—14.⁶

Prevalence of Youth Drinking Before Age 13, by Ethnicity⁷

Latino	33.7%
White	19.6%
African American	12.4%

How Youth Drink

Although overall alcohol use is low for the youngest age group, almost one-half of the 12-year-olds who reported alcohol use reported having drunk heavily⁸ in the past 30 days. The rate of heavy drinking doubles from age 14 (about 6%) to age 15 (about 12%) and continues to increase steadily.⁹

When reported by race or ethnicity, white youths aged 12–20 have the highest reported rates of heavy drinking (21.4%), followed by American Indians and Alaska Natives (20.3%), Latinos (17.2%), African Americans (10.3%), and Asian-Americans (7.9%).¹⁰

Despite continual decreases between 1996–2002 in lifetime use among junior high students (eighth graders), nearly one-half (47%) still report drinking in their lifetimes. Similarly, while the proportion of high school seniors who report having had 5 or more drinks in the past 2 weeks has decreased every year since 1998, nearly 30% (28.6) still report such use.¹¹

Gender

As of 2000, the prevalence of alcohol use among boys and girls aged 12–14 and 15–17 were within a few percentage points of each other.

Girls aged 12–14 in all three racial and ethnic groups, but most notably Hispanic girls, are actually more likely than boys to have used alcohol in the past 30 days — 9.8% of Hispanic females, 8.3% of non-Hispanic white females, and 4.8% of African American females.

These rates compare with 6.3% of Hispanic males, 7.5% of non-Hispanic white males, and 4.2% of African American males.¹⁴

Alcohol Use in Past 30 Days, Youth Age 12–14, by Gender

	Girls	Boys
Hispanic	9.8%	6.3%
White	8.3%	7.5%
African American	4.8%	4.2%

In general, the differences between girls and boys is greater for heavy drinking than for recent use: for example, non-Hispanic white males age 18–20 have a 13% higher prevalence for heavy drinking than non-Hispanic white females, compared to a 5.9% for any recent use. Similar patterns are observed in Hispanics and African Americans — Hispanic males have a 14.9% higher prevalence and African American males have a 8.6% higher prevalence for heavy drinking compared to their female counterparts.¹⁵

Overall Consumption Levels

Underage youths consume in the range of 10–20% of all drinks and account for a somewhat lower, albeit still substantial, percentage of total expenditures.¹⁶

Contexts of Underage Drinking

Of high school seniors, more than one-half of males and more than one-third of females drank beer in the past 30 days. Liquor was a close second — 41.7% and 30.7% of males and females, respectively.¹⁴