

What I've Learned Studying Youth Hazardous Drinking

September 18, 2017

Editor's Note: Professor Ryan J. Martin of East Carolina University authored this op-ed as part of our [Special Series on Youth Risky Behavior](#). Dr. Martin serves as Associate Professor in the Department of Health Education and Promotion, College of Health and Human Performance.

I have always been intrigued why people sought to be intoxicated. A part of that intrigue stemmed from reading about the lives of musicians and actors I grew up listening to and watching, some of which died at a young age from abuse of alcohol and drugs. Further, the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program was widely implemented in schools when I was young, and that program provided additional exposure to alcohol (and other drugs), including discussions around alcohol-related consequences, which piqued my interest further. As I continued onto a career in public health, my interest in addictive substances and behaviors persisted, and I sought opportunities to learn more about intoxication and the potential consequences and risk factors associated with using addictive substances.

Along with caffeine, tobacco and marijuana, alcohol is typically one of the first intoxicating substances with which adolescents experiment and are exposed. Hazardous drinking is a broad term, which can sometimes be used synonymously with other terms (e.g., risky drinking, harmful drinking). For adults, hazardous drinking behavior is often defined by the quantity of alcohol consumed (e.g., an individual's average number of drinks consumed per occasion or on a weekly or monthly basis) or the negative consequences (e.g., injuries, driving while intoxicated, tolerance, withdrawal) experienced as a result of alcohol consumption.

For youths/adolescents, any alcohol consumption is considered hazardous. Youth/adolescent hazardous drinking is worrisome, because adolescent brains are not fully developed and alcohol consumption impedes proper brain development. In addition, drinking in adolescence is a risk factor for engaging in other risky behaviors during that time, including the use of other drugs and risky/unsafe sex.

Further, hazardous drinking at a young age is a risk factor for experiencing subsequent alcohol-related problems in adulthood.

Recently, I collaborated with colleagues on a 3-year Alcohol Field Study examining drinking behaviors in samples of bar patrons, most of which were adolescents (college students). We found that hazardous drinking was associated with intentions to have unprotected sex (Chaney, Vail-Smith, Martin, & Cremeens-Matthews, 2016) and with experiencing alcohol-related injuries (Martin, Brechbiel, Chaney, Cremeens-Matthews, & Vail-Smith, 2016). In another study among college students who completed an online health survey, my colleagues and I found that hazardous drinking was associated with gambling-related problems and depression symptoms (Martin, Usdan, Cremeens, & Vail-Smith, 2014).

Long standing policies directed at youth/adolescent drinking (e.g., legal drinking ages, zero tolerance DUI enforcement for those under 21) are beneficial in reducing the occurrence of hazardous drinking. Moving forward, it is important that researchers/clinicians/policymakers continue to consider policies, interventions, and promotion strategies to reduce hazardous drinking in the youth/adolescent population.

Ryan J. Martin, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Health Education and Promotion

College of Health and Human Performance

East Carolina University

References:

Chaney, B., Vail-Smith, K., Martin, R. J., & Cremeens-Matthews, J. (2016). Alcohol use, risky sexual behavior, and condom possession among bar patrons. *Addictive Behaviors, 60*, 32-36.

Martin, R. J., Brechbiel, K., Chaney, B., Cremeens-Matthews, J., & Vail-Smith, K. (2016). Alcohol-related injuries, hazardous drinking, and BrAC levels among a sample of bar patrons. *The American Journal on Addictions, 25*, 132-137.

Martin, R. J., Usdan, S., Cremeens, J., & Vail-Smith, K. (2014). Disordered gambling and co-morbidity of psychiatric disorders among college students: An

examination of problem drinking, anxiety and depression *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 30, 321-333.

Pub Med links:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27082266>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26824504>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23430449>