The DRAM, Vol. 20(14) – Factors associated with high-risk drinking in Australia

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Heavy drinking is a public health concern in Australia, as around 25% of drinkers drank at levels that put them at risk of harm at least once a month in 2019. While women tend to drink lower amounts and less frequently compared to men, they still experience substantial alcohol-related harms. This week, The DRAM reviews a study by Victoria Kostadinov and colleagues that examined gender differences in sociodemographic factors associated with very high levels of drinking.

What was the research question?

What factors are associated with very high levels of drinking among men and women?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, a study that collects information related to alcohol and other drug use among adults in Australia. They analyzed measures relating to demographic characteristics, health-related variables (e.g., psychological distress and smoking status), and alcohol consumption. Participants who consumed 11 or more standard drinks per occasion at least once a month were considered very high-risk drinkers, while those who consumed anything less or abstained were considered low-risk drinkers. The researchers used logistic regression to assess factors that predicted very high-risk drinking.

What did they find?

Around 3% of women reported drinking at very high levels, compared to 10.4% of men. Among women, factors that predicted very high-risk drinking included having high psychological distress, being unmarried, having no dependents, smoking, and illicit drug use in the past year (see Figure). Among men, factors associated with very high-risk drinking included living in a rural area, smoking, and illicit drug use.

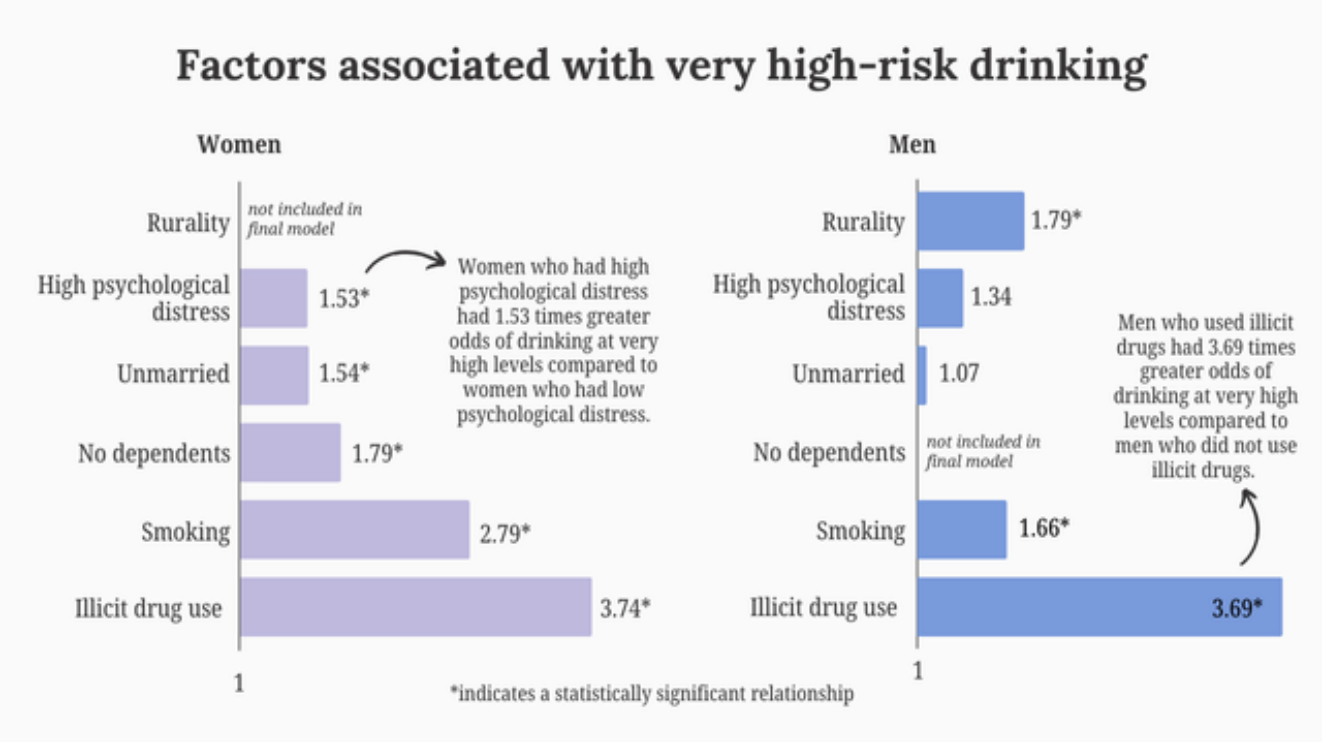


Figure. Odds ratios predicting very high-risk drinking. Asterisks mark effects that were statistically significant. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

There were some differences in characteristics associated with high-risk drinking between men and women, such as being unmarried and having no dependents. This emphasizes the importance of developing tailored interventions that consider how individual factors among different demographic groups affect treatment engagement. Examples of interventions include motivational interviewing for women and women's recovery groups, which focus on female-specific themes that might help increase their treatment utilization.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

This study only used self-reported data, so the results might be affected by biases such as recall and social desirability. This study was also conducted in Australia, so the results might not generalize to other countries with different alcohol consumption norms.

For more information:

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has tips and resources for people struggling with problem drinking. For additional drinking self-help tools, please visit our Addiction Resources page.

— Annette Siu

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