The DRAM, Vol. 21(6) – Harms experienced from family and friends' alcohol use

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Many people are negatively affected by the alcohol use of their family and friends. A recent study found that 21% of Australians reported experiencing harms due to someone else's drinking in the past year, including emotional neglect, interpersonal violence, and property damage. However, the extent to which different demographic groups (e.g., gender, age) are affected by these harms is less clear. This week, The DRAM reviews a study by Anne-Marie Laslett and colleagues that examined this association among Australian adults.

What was the research question?

How do experiences of harm resulting from the alcohol use of known others differ by demographic factors?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 2,574 Australian adults from a random mobile phone sample and an online panel. Participants were surveyed about whether they had been negatively affected by the drinking of someone they knew in the past 12 months (e.g., a family member, friend, co-worker), and if so, the harms they had experienced as a result of that person's drinking. The researchers used logistic regression to assess how experiences of harm varied by factors like age, gender, and drinking status.

What did they find?

Over one-fifth of participants (21.8%) had been negatively affected by the drinking of someone they knew well in the past 12 months. The most commonly reported harms were being emotionally hurt and negatively affected by someone's drinking at a social occasion. These harms were each experienced by over 10% of participants. Other common harms included financial trouble, feeling threatened, taking on extra responsibilities (e.g., childcare), and family problems. Women (compared to men) and participants who themselves consumed at least 5 drinks in a single session (compared to non-heavy drinkers or non-drinkers) were more likely to have experienced harm from a known other's alcohol use (see Figure).

Older participants (aged 65+) were less likely than younger participants to have been harmed from someone else's drinking.

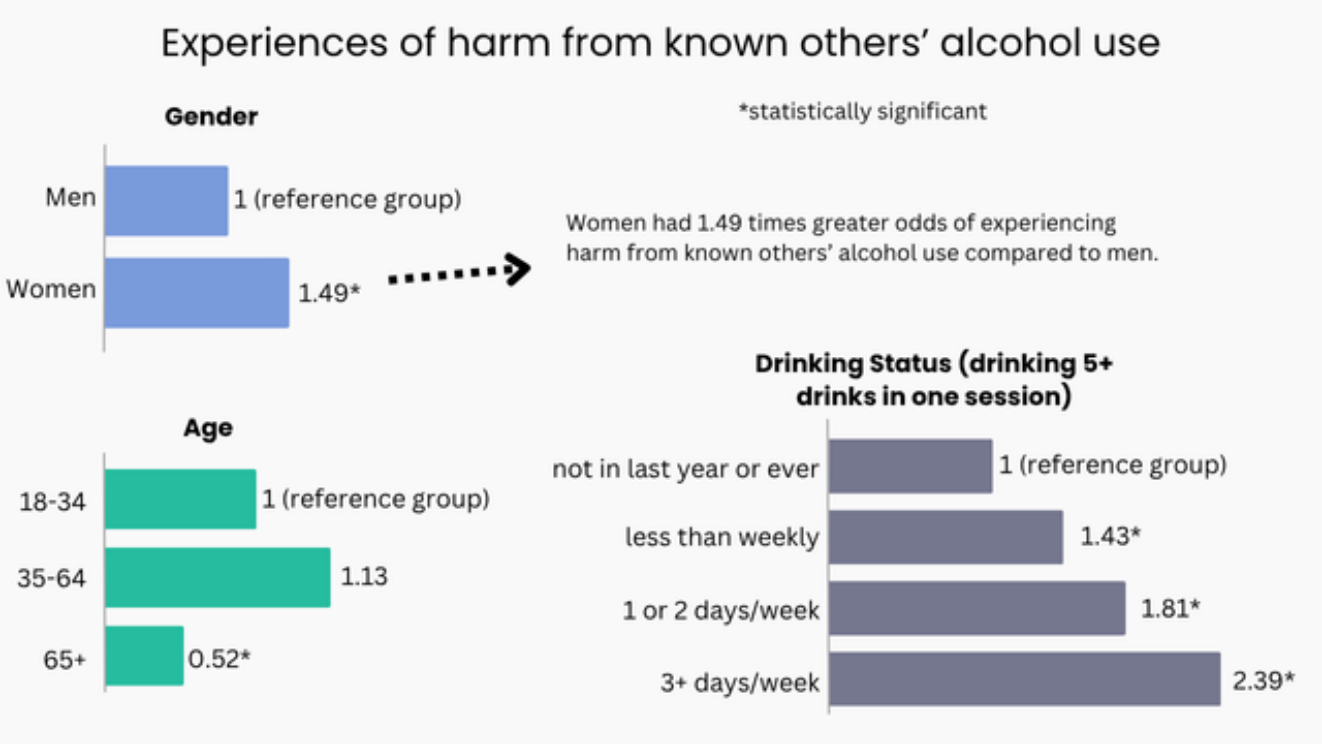


Figure. Odd ratios for factors (i.e., gender, age, and drinking status) that predict experiencing harm from a known other's alcohol use. Asterisks mark effects that were statistically significant. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

While it is common to be affected by the drinking of family and friends, certain groups are more likely to experience harm due to someone else's drinking—particularly women and people who heavily drink themselves. These findings highlight the importance of providing tailored support resources for different populations affected by the drinking of others. For example, women are at greater risk of experiencing household physical and financial abuse. Resources that help women navigate the potential and reality of those harms are needed. Those experiencing harm might also benefit from interventions involving therapists and counselors that specialize in motivational interviewing, anger and stress management, and coping skills.

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

This study was conducted in Australia, so the findings might not generalize to other geographic areas with different drinking norms. This study only used self-report measures, which are subject to social desirability bias.

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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