

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

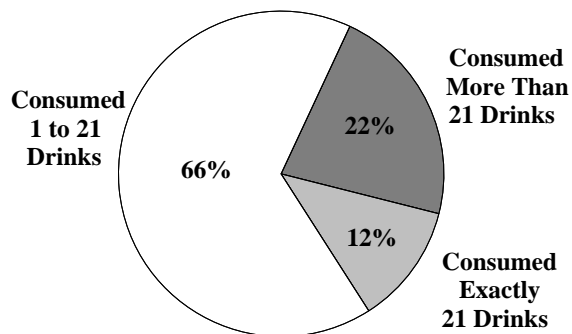
“21 for 21”: Extreme Drinking by College Students to Celebrate Turning 21

Four out of five college students (83%) drank to celebrate their 21st birthday, according to a longitudinal survey of students at a large midwestern university. Of these birthday drinkers, one-third of men (34%) and nearly one-fourth (24%) of women drank 21 or more drinks (see figure below). Anecdotal reports of the practice of “21 for 21”—drinking 21 drinks to celebrate your 21st birthday—have been reported in the media, as well as the “power hour,” where the 21 drinks are consumed in the time between midnight of turning 21 and the closing of the bar¹. Both practices are dangerous, as drinking alcohol in excess can be poisonous and potentially fatal—it is estimated that approximately 1,400 people die each year from accidental alcohol poisoning². The authors conclude that “the solution to the problem of extreme 21st birthday drinking likely lies in a multistrategy approach,” including those shown to be effective with general risky drinking, social norms marketing, alternative birthday celebrations, and public education about caring for seriously intoxicated people (p. 515).

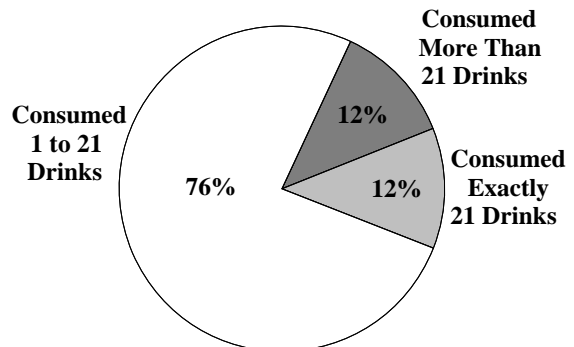
Number of Drinks Consumed by College Students Who Drank to Celebrate Their 21st Birthday, 2005

(N=2,084 large midwestern university college students)

Men Who Drank to Celebrate 21st Birthday



Women Who Drank to Celebrate 21st Birthday



¹Gardner, A. “‘21 for 21’: A Deadly Binge Drinking Ritual on College Campuses,” *HealthDay News*, June 6, 2008 (<http://www.healthday.com/Article.asp?AID=615821>); Zernike, K. “Drinking Game Can Be A Deadly Rite of Passage,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2005 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/12/education/12power.html?emc=etal>).

²Yoon, YH, Stinson, FS, Yi, HY, Dufour, MC. “Accidental Alcohol Poisoning Mortality in the United States, 1996-1998,” *Alcohol Research and Health* 27(1):110-118, 2003.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Rutledge, P.C., Park, A., and Sher, K.J. “21st Birthday Drinking: Extremely Extreme,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76(3):511-516, 2008. For more information, contact Patricia Rutledge at patricia.rutledge@allegheny.edu.

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