

Alcohol Use and Binge Drinking

The previous *California Student Survey* (CSS) in 2003 revealed a continuing decline since 1999 in the number of students who drank alcohol. The 2005 survey reveals a leveling-off in this trend, though with some marginal increases among 7th graders. Although alcohol consumption remains appreciably lower than in 1999, and some measures continued slight declines among 11th graders, the leveling-off and current extent of drinking — particularly binge drinking — are causes for concern. Alcohol remains the most widely used substance among California’s secondary students, endemic in youth culture, although half of students who report alcohol use in the past six months also reported using another drug.

Overall Prevalence and Frequency of Use

Lifetime (Ever) Use. Lifetime consumption of a *full drink* of alcohol was up by almost two percentage points in 7th grade to 18%. It was stable at 41% in 9th grade and 62% in 11th. These results still reflect declines of 7-9 percentage points across grades since 1999. Twelve percent of 7th graders reported having a full drink by age 11.

Past 6 Months (Recent Use). Use of *any alcohol* in the past six months was stable at 27% in 7th grade and 47% in 9th, and down only very slightly (1.5 points) in 11th, to 61%.*

Past 30 Days (Current Use). Twelve percent of 7th, 24% of 9th, and 36% of 11th graders reported having at least one alcoholic *drink* in the past 30 days. This compares to 1999 rates of 16%, 29%, and 44%, respectively. Consistent with lifetime results, current use rose about two points in 7th grade since 2003, but was stable in the upper grades.

Frequent Drinking. Weekly drinking (once a week or more often) in the past six months) remained at 7% in

9th grade but declined two points to 14% in 11th (compared to 19% in 1999). About one-seventh of drinkers in 9th grade did so weekly, increasing to one-fourth in 11th. Drinking on three or more of the past 30 days, an indication of weekly drinking, increased 1.5 points in 9th grade to 10% and declined 1.5 points to 16.5% in 11th. Daily drinking was only 2% in 11th grade.

Table 2.1. Overall Prevalence and Frequency of Alcohol Use

	Grade		
	7 th (%)	9 th (%)	11 th (%)
Lifetime (ever) — full drink	18	41	62
Past 6 months—any alcohol*	27	47	61
Weekly	3	7	14
Past 30 days — drink	12	24	36
3 or more days (weekly)	4	10	17
Binge Drinking — 5 drinks/row, 30 days	5	12	21
3 or more days (weekly)	2	5	12

*Six-month rates exceed lifetime among younger students because they are calculated based on drinking *any alcohol*, whereas lifetime is for a *full drink*, and there is a close proximity between initiation and use in the past 6 months.

Binge (Heavy) Drinking

Binge drinking — consuming five drinks in a row in the past 30 days — changed little in 7th and 9th grades, at 5% and 12%. It declined two points in 11th grade to 21%, a drop of almost five points since 2001. Still, bingers constitute almost half the current drinking population in 9th grade and two-thirds in 11th, as was the case in 2003. This makes binge drinking the predominant pattern of alcohol use in 11th grade. *If an adolescent drinks in the 11th grade, it is likely that he/she will be a binge drinker.* Moreover, about half of binge drinkers in 11th grade (one-third of current drinkers) binged on three or more of the past 30 days, suggesting a weekly pattern (See Table 2.1).

Compared to 11th graders who consumed at least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days but did *not* binge, bingers reported much higher rates on other measures of heavy alcohol use including frequency of drunkenness and use at school, and use-related problems. Binge drinking is thus a useful gauge for determining alcohol intervention needs.

Compared to the total sample of 11th graders, bingers also had higher prevalence of other problem behaviors. As shown in Table 2.2, these include drug use, violence, and poor school grades and attendance. This does not mean that binge drinking causes these problems, but it is part of a syndrome of problems that need to be addressed concomitantly.

The 2003 CSS Fact Sheet on Binge Drinking provides further information about the scope and nature of this problem, and reveals that 11th-grade females have similar rates of binge drinking to males and higher use-related problems.

Table 2.2. Other Problems, Total Sample and Binge Drinkers, 11th Grade*

	Total Sample (%)	Binge Drinkers (%)
Missed/cut school	60	81
Grades A/Bs	37	29
Carry weapon/school	12	24
School vandalism	17	26
Fighting at school	20	34
Gang member	9	17

* Past 12 months except current gang membership

Other Heavy Use Measures

Drunkness. The percentages ever *very drunk or sick* from alcohol remained about the same: in 7th grade at 8%, in 9th at 21%, and in 11th at 40%. Eight percent of 9th and 18% of 11th reported three or more occasions (down by two points); and 3% and 8%, seven or more occasions. Moreover, 6% in 9th and 15% in 11th reported ever *passing out or forgetting* from alcohol use. As in 2003, 11% and 21%, respectively, reported that they usually drank to *feel it a lot or get very drunk* (about the same percentages as for binge drinking). Those who aimed to get very drunk were 4% and 7%.

Use at School. Using alcohol at school — reported by 8-9% of upper graders — indicates willingness to take risks, disengagement from school, and in some cases serious involvement with substance use.

Excessive Alcohol User. The percent of students classified as Excessive Alcohol Users (EAU), after a moderate decline in 2003, was stable at 14% in 9th grade and declined 3 points to 27% in 11th. EAU classification is based on binge drinking, having been drunk/sick three or more times, or liking to get drunk or feel alcohol a lot.

Table 2.3. Heavy Alcohol Use Indicators

	Grade		
	7 th (%)	9 th (%)	11 th (%)
Ever very drunk/sick	8	21	40
3 or more times	2	8	18
Ever passed out	—	6	15
Drinks to feel a lot/get drunk	4	11	21
Used in school, past 30 days	4	8	9
Excessive Alcohol Use	6	14	27

Use-Related Problems and Cessation Efforts

Problem Experiences. Students in upper grades were asked to identify which of 12 possible pharmacological, personal, school, and social problems they experienced from use of alcohol. Consistent with previous surveys, 16% of 9th graders and 27% of 11th reported one or more problems, and 7% and 14%, about half of these students, two or more problems.

Driving and Drinking. Drinking and driving among 11th graders, or being driven by a friend who had been drinking, steadily declined by eleven points between

1997 and 2003. It rose three points in 2005 to 30%. Half of these respondents (14% of all 11th graders) reported three or more episodes, surely an indication of frequent risk-taking behavior.

Cessation Efforts. Only slightly more than one-in-ten 9th and 11th graders (12% and 14%) had made at least one attempt to stop their use of alcohol, a two-point increase in 11th grade. Cessation rates for alcohol are lower than for marijuana, despite higher use prevalence, reflecting the common acceptance of drinking among older teens.

Perceived Harm and Availability

The percentages reporting alcohol is *very easy* to obtain more than doubles between 7th and 9th grades, from 15% to 36%, and reaches almost half (48%) in 11th grade. Fully 76% of 11th graders found alcohol to be *very or fairly easy* to obtain. The most frequently selected source for obtaining alcohol was parties or social events (by 47% in 9th and 62% in 11th grade), followed by friends (40% and 53%), underscoring the social nature of alcohol drinking among teens. One-

fifth of 9th graders and 35% of 11th indicated they got adults to buy it for them. In a new option, only 5-6% selected bars, clubs, or gambling casinos.

The percentages perceiving *occasional* drinking as extremely harmful fell by over half across grades, from 37% in 7th to only 16% in 11th. For *frequent* drinking, the rates were 66% in 7th grade and 51-52% in the upper grades. These percentages are markedly lower than found for marijuana.

Conclusions

Although much of the public concern about substance use is focused on illegal drugs, the predominant problem among youth is alcohol consumption. About one-fifth of 11th graders still appear to be regular or heavy drinkers based on the results for binge drinking, weekly drinking, for having been drunk/sick on three or more occasions, and for liking to drink to get drunk or feel it a lot. The findings support national studies indicating that, although adolescents do not drink as frequently as adults, *a larger proportion may drink heavily when they do drink*. Heavy drinkers are not common in 7th grade, but they are an especially high-risk group.

About the CSS

The state-mandated 11th biennial California Student Survey was conducted in the fall-winter of the 2005-06 school year by WestEd under conditions of strict confidentiality and anonymity among 10,638 students in grades 7, 9 and 11 in 113 randomly-selected schools. Participation was voluntary and required parental approval. The survey is sponsored by the Office of the Attorney General, with the California Dept. of Education and Dept. of Alcohol and Drug Programs. Full results are online at www.Safestate.org/CSS.