ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND RELATED PROBLEMS: RESULTS OF A COUNTY SURVEY

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ABSTRACT: This study describes alcohol use in the general population of San Diego County. A random digit dial telephone survey was utilized to query 1656 adults about their drinking behavior. A quantity and frequency measure of alcohol consumption was used to classify drinking patterns. Alcohol problems were classified by acute problems and chronic problems. Males 18-25 years old reported the highest percentages of heavier drinking. Among females, this age group was also the most likely group to report heavier drinking. Overall, males and heavier drinkers were the most likely groups to report problems. However, lighter and moderate drinkers accounted for equal or greater percentages of each problem. Drinkers in the 18-25 year old age group were the group most likely to report the majority of all problems in both problem categories. Additionally, this group accounted for the majority of the reported acute problems.

Differences among the general population in alcohol consumption patterns can be useful in planning health promotion efforts targeting alcohol-related problems. However, large scale epidemiological research studies have varied in methodology, and the relationships among drinking patterns and problems are not established firmly. This study describes the drinking patterns and problems of the adult population of a large California county, paying particular attention to gender and age differences.

The consumption patterns reported by Americans have been fairly consistent over the twenty year period from 1964 to 1984. It is well established that men drink more than women. Consumption data from the 1984 national survey analyzed by the Alcohol Research Group were as follows: Abstainers—26% males, 36% females; lighter drinkers—28% males, 41% females; moderate drinkers—27% males, 18% females; heavier drinkers—21% males, 5% females. Hilton util...
lized a Q-F-V categorization scheme and also found that in comparison to men, women were more likely to be abstainers or lighter drinkers. Additionally, Hilton found men were more likely than women to be in "high max" categories (in which the drinker consumes a large number of drinks per occasion).

Alcohol consumption patterns also vary by age. Like their male counterparts, younger women have been found to be more likely than older women to report drinking frequently and heavily. Similarly, Hilton reports that among younger women there has been an increase in the proportion of heavier drinkers over the period from 1964 to 1984. Additionally, in the same analysis, Hilton reports increases in the proportion of young drinkers (among both sexes) reporting having drunk five or more drinks in a single setting over the same period.

Alcohol is associated with a wide range of problems including physiological problems, mental problems, casualties, and social problems. These problems occur throughout the drinking population. Clark and Midanik, for instance, found that moderate drinkers who reported intoxication also reported higher percentages of alcohol problems than heavier drinkers who did not report intoxication. Consistent with this finding Wilsnack et al. found intoxication was the best predictor of problems. Other studies have found that heavy drinkers are the most likely group to report alcohol-related problems, but because they comprise a small proportion of the total drinking population, moderate and lighter drinkers account for the majority of reports of these problems. Heavier and problem drinkers, however, tend to minimize reports of their drinking and drinking-related problems and may actually account for a larger percentage of these problems than indicated by self reports. Along these lines, Hilton suggests heavy drinking is the primary risk factor for drinking problems.

Alcohol problems also vary by individual characteristics such as gender and age. It is clear that single young men are the highest risk group for alcohol-related problems. Beyond this, differences in the prevalence and types of alcohol problems experienced by males and females are not well established. Although men and women may experience the same alcohol-related problems (e.g., family disruptions, driving while intoxicated etc.), women may be less exposed to certain problems. For instance, women may be less apt to drive or work full-time than men thus may be at a lower risk for alcohol-related problems at work and DUI arrests. Wilsnack et al., however, found the most frequent alcohol problem reported by women was driving while intoxicated.

Thus, the evidence to date suggests that, in general, men are