Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs
www.jsad.com

Freshman women's binge drinking tied to sexual assault risk

(January 2012)

PISCATAWAY, NJ – Many young women who steer clear of alcohol while they're in high school may change their ways once they go off to college. And those who take up binge drinking may be at relatively high risk of sexual assault, according to a study in the January issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs.*

The college years are famously associated with drinking. But little has been known about how young women change their high school drinking habits once they start college.

So for the new study, researchers followed 437 young women from high school graduation through freshman year of college. They found that of women who had never drunk heavily in high school (if at all), nearly half admitted to binge drinking at least once by the end of their first college semester.

What's more, binge drinking was linked to students' risk of sexual victimization -- regardless of what their drinking habits had been in high school.

Of all young women whose biggest binge had included four to six drinks, one quarter said they'd been sexually victimized in the fall semester. That included anything from unwanted sexual contact to rape.

And the more alcohol those binges involved, the greater the likelihood of sexual assault. Of women who'd ever consumed 10 or more drinks in a sitting since starting college, 59% were sexually victimized by the end of their first semester. Although young women are not to blame for being victimized -- that fault lies squarely with the perpetrator -- if colleges can make more headway in reducing heavy drinking, they may be able to prevent more sexual assaults in the process.

"This suggests that drinking-prevention efforts should begin before college," said lead researcher Maria Testa, Ph.D., of the Research Institute on Addictions at the University at Buffalo in New York.

The study also underscores the fact that even kids who don't drink in high school are at risk of heavy drinking once they head off to college, Testa said.

For parents, the bottom line is to talk with your kids about drinking before they go to college -- whatever you think their drinking habits have been in high school, according to Testa. And after they've left for college, keep talking.

"Parents still do have an impact on their kids after they go to college," Testa said. "It's not over."

###

Testa, M., & Hoffman, J. H. (January 2012). Naturally occurring changes in women's drinking from high school to college and implications for sexual victimization. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 73*(1), 26–33.

###

Available at: www.jsad.com/jsad/link/73/26

###

To arrange an interview with Maria Testa, please contact John DellaContrada at (716) 645-4601 or dellacon@buffalo.edu.

###

The *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (www.jsad.com) is published by the Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. It is the oldest substance-abuse journal published in the United States.