

# The NSDUH Report

October 31, 2003

## Alcohol Use and Risks among Young Adults by College Enrollment Status

Studies suggest that young adults are more likely than older adults to engage in heavy episodic drinking.<sup>1</sup> The dangers of excessive alcohol use include increased involvement in fatal vehicle crashes, sexual assault, unprotected

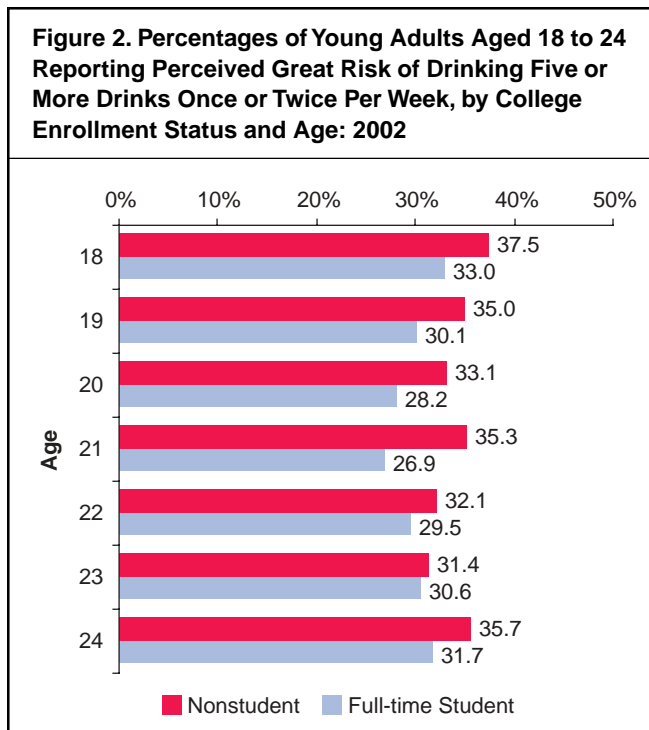
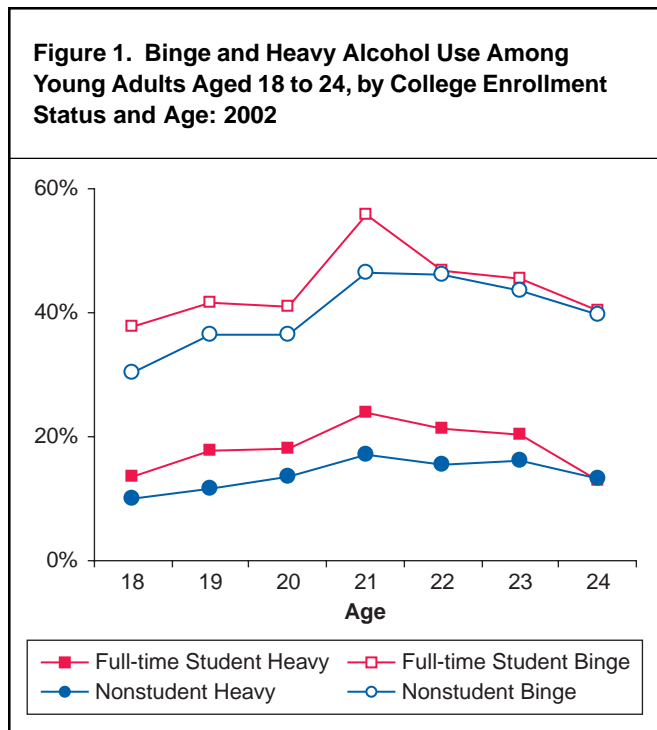
sex, violence, property damage, and increased risk of physical and mental health problems.<sup>2,3</sup> Studies conducted during the 1990s suggest that excessive drinking and driving under the influence of alcohol are more prevalent among college students than among nonstudents.<sup>4</sup>

### In Brief

- Full-time students aged 18 to 21 had higher rates of binge drinking than nonstudents
- Nonstudents were less likely than full-time students to use seat belts while driving
- Nonstudents were less likely than full-time students to drive while under the influence of alcohol

The purpose of this report is to compare the use of alcohol, perceived risks of heavy alcohol use, and risk behaviors related to alcohol use by full-time college students and nonstudents at each age from 18 to 24 using data from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH).

The NSDUH asks respondents about the quantity and frequency of alcohol use in the past month, symptoms of alcohol dependence or abuse, perceptions of drinking, and behaviors associated with alcohol use over the past year, including seat belt use, driving under the influence of alcohol, and symptoms of alcohol problems. Binge alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion (i.e., at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other) on at least 1 day in the past 30 days. Heavy alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days; all heavy



alcohol users are also binge alcohol users. Daily drinking is defined as drinking on 25 or more days in the past month, regardless of the quantity of alcohol consumed. Alcohol dependence or abuse are defined using criteria specified in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th edition (DSM-IV).<sup>5</sup>

The NSDUH also asks about college attendance. Respondents were classified as full-time students if they reported that they were attending their first through fourth year of college or university and that they were a full-time student. Respondents were classified as nonstudents if their current enrollment status was known and they were not classified as a part- or full-time college student. Part-time students and respondents whose current enrollment status was unknown were excluded from the analysis.

### College Enrollment Status

In 2002, there were an estimated 28 million young adults aged 18 to 24, including 9 million (32 percent) enrolled in college full-time.<sup>6</sup> The full-time enrollment rate varied by age. Thirty-two percent of 18 year olds were enrolled in college full-time in 2002. This rate increased to 46 percent among 19 year olds and steadily declined at older ages to a low of 14 percent among 24 year olds.

### Prevalence of Alcohol Use

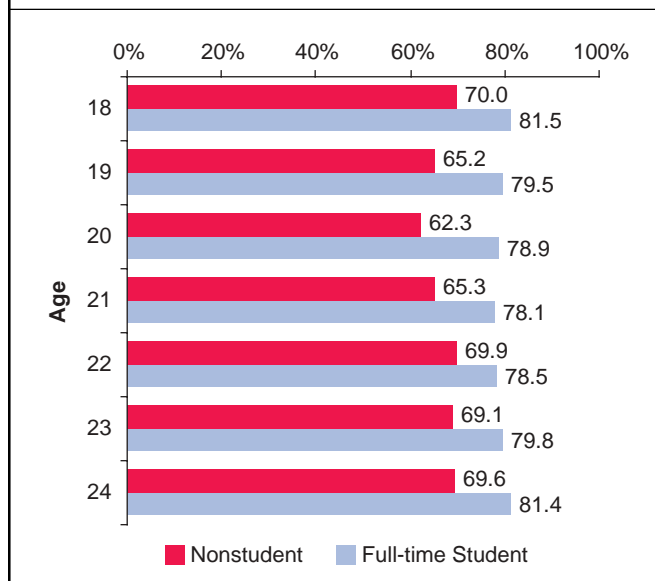
Excessive episodic drinking was prevalent among young adults, regardless of college enrollment status. More than 1 in 10 young adults aged 18 to 24 were heavy drinkers, and almost 2 in 5 were binge drinkers (Figure 1). Heavy drinking rates peaked at age 21 for both full-time students and nonstudents. Likewise, binge drinking rates peaked at age 21 for full-time students and nonstudents. Among those younger than 24, heavy drinking rates were 4 to 7

percentage points higher among full-time students than nonstudents, although the difference was not statistically significant for 23 year olds. Full-time students aged 18 to 21 had higher rates of binge drinking than nonstudents, but the difference was not statistically significant for 20 year olds. The rate of binge drinking was similar among full-time students and nonstudents aged 22 to 24. Daily drinking was substantially less common than both heavy and binge drinking, reported by fewer than 2 percent of full-time students and 3 percent of nonstudents.

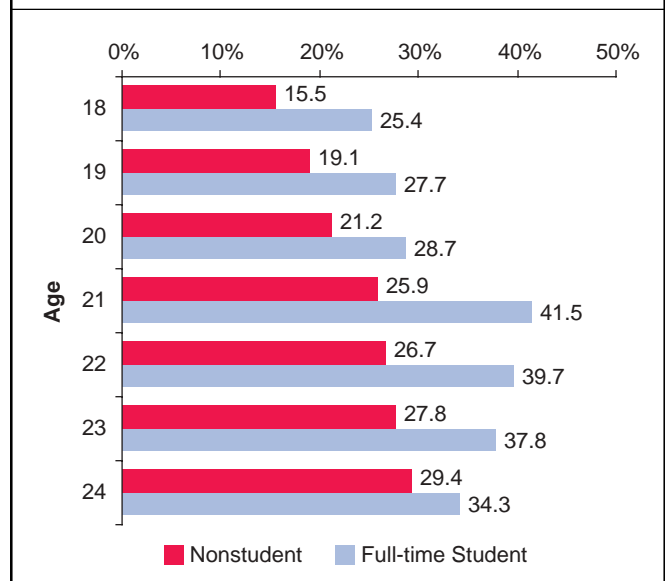
### Alcohol Dependence or Abuse

The rate of past year alcohol dependence or abuse peaked at age 21 for both full-time students (25 percent) and nonstudents (20 percent). The rate of past year alcohol dependence or abuse was higher among full-time college students than nonstudents overall, and the differences were statistically significant for ages 21 and 22.

**Figure 3. Percentages of Young Adults Aged 18 to 24 Reporting Always Using a Seat Belt While Driving,\* by College Enrollment Status and Age: 2002**



**Figure 4. Percentages of Young Adults Aged 18 to 24 Reporting Past Year Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol, by College Enrollment Status and Age: 2002**



## Risk Beliefs and Behaviors

At least one quarter of young adults between 18 and 24 perceived a great risk in weekly binge drinking (Figure 2). Overall, full-time college students were less likely to perceive great risk in weekly binge drinking, and differences were statistically significant for those aged 19, 20, and 21.

At all ages from 18 to 24, nonstudents were less likely than full-time students to use seat belts while driving (Figure 3). At the same time, nonstudents at each age were less likely than full-time students to drive while under the influence of alcohol, but this difference was not statistically significant among 24 year olds (Figure 4).<sup>7</sup>

### End Notes

- Office of Applied Studies. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3836, NHSDA Series H-22). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Office of Applied Studies. (2002, April 11). *The NHSDA Report: Binge drinking among underage*

persons. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration.

- Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (n.d.) *A snapshot of annual high-risk college drinking consequences*. Retrieved September 12, 2003, from <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/facts/snapshot.aspx>
- O'Malley, P. M. and Johnston, L. D. (2002). Epidemiology of alcohol and other drug use among American college students. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Supplement*, (14), 23-39.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Among young adults aged 18 to 24, 7 percent were part-time college students and 61 percent

were classified as nonstudents.

- The differences were significant at  $p=0.05$  for each age from 18 to 23, but  $p=0.156$  at age 24.

### Figure Notes

Source (all figures): SAMHSA 2002 NSDUH.

\*Respondents who indicated they did not drive were excluded from the analysis.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Prior to 2002, this survey was called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA). The 2002 data are based on information obtained from 68,216 persons aged 12 or older, including 20,362 adults aged 18 to 24. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence, including group housing, such as college dormitories or fraternity houses, as well as those living in single family homes and apartments.

The NSDUH Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

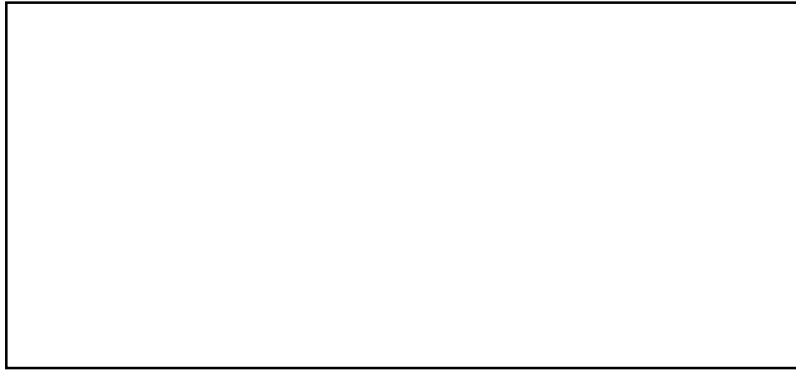
Office of Applied Studies. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3836, NHSDA Series H-22). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available on-line:

<http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov>.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES  
Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration  
Office of Applied Studies  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



Research findings from the SAMHSA 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

## Alcohol Use and Risks among Young Adults by College Enrollment Status

- Full-time students aged 18 to 21 had higher rates of binge drinking than nonstudents
- Nonstudents were less likely than full-time students to use seat belts while driving
- Nonstudents were less likely than full-time students to drive while under the influence of alcohol