

TRENDS IN AMERICAN FEMALE NURSING STUDENT'S DRINKING PROBLEMS OVER THE PAST DECADE

Paper presented: 36th ICAA Conference, Glasgow Scotland, 20 Aug. 1992

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BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, the literature has suggested an increase in the percent of women who consume alcohol in the USA. Although males, including collegians, have consistently been shown to consume more alcohol than females, at least 10% of college women are at risk drinkers^{1-6,8-12,17,9,20,22-24}. The literature also suggests that nurses, due to their high job stress, often have alcohol related problems¹⁵. Student nurses have also been shown to have alcohol related problems along with unfavorable attitudes towards problem drinkers^{8,13,14,18}. Over the decade of the 1980's there was much emphasis upon female drinking patterns. Because nurses must not only work with problem drinkers, but need to be mentally alert when working with patients, it would be of interest to determine the problems related to alcohol abuse among female nursing students over the past decade to assess possible changes. Thus the null hypothesis for this study was: there were no significant change over the past decade in problems related to alcohol consumption among a sample of American female nursing students.

METHODS

Sample

Colleges were selected as part of a quota sample which represented all four-year institutions of higher education in the U.S. in terms of financial control, number of students enrolled, size of the community location and demographic variables including gender and race²¹. At each university sociology, health or physical education faculty, who taught survey type classes which had a high probability

*This study was funded by Indiana University and the State University of New York, Potsdam. Appreciation is expressed to David Hanson, the co-investigator, for data collection.

of containing students from every academic major and class level, were contacted. Instructors were asked to randomly distribute up to a maximum of 75 questionnaires to each class. The response rate exceeded 97%. All female nursing students from among the total sample in each of the four time periods were selected out for analysis. The resulting sample of nursing students contained 607 students.

Instrument

A pre-coded instrument, the Student Alcohol Questionnaire (SAQ) was utilized. Used by numerous researchers over the past 15 years, it has an internal consistency reliability coefficient of .79. It includes demographic items, questions regarding the consumption of various alcoholic beverages, and items concerning behavior consequences of drinking^{7,12}. Instructions for completing the instrument explained the voluntary nature of participation in the study as approved by the author's institutional review board.

Calculations for problems related to alcohol consumption

For the 17 problems related to alcohol, the proportion of students who indicated they had experienced the problem at least once during the previous 12 months was calculated for each of the four time periods. Based upon a method by Engs¹², the Quantity-Frequency measure for each subject was determined from the beverage (beer, wine or distilled spirits) most frequently used and the amount consumed on a typical occasion. A drinker was considered a person who had consumed alcohol at least once during the past 12 months. A **Heavy** or "**Binge**" drinker was classified as someone who had drunk more than 5 drinks at any one sitting at least once a week or more.

The proportion of students exhibiting each of the problems related to alcohol and the percent who were heavy drinkers in each of the four time periods was calculated. These results were analyzed by Chi-Square analysis using a SPSS program on Indiana University's VAX computer.

RESULTS

Among this sample of female nursing students, who consumed alcohol at least once during the previous 12 months, there was a significant increase ($p < .05$) in 5 of the 17 problems related to drinking. These included "missing class because of hangovers", "been arrested for DWI", "received a lower grade", "been in trouble with the law" and "had problems with the school administration" as the result of drinking. However, there was no change in the percent of heavy or "binge" drinkers. Thus the null hypothesis was rejected for these variables and accepted for the remaining problems related to alcohol among this sample of American female nursing students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS:

Over the past decade, other than for five problems there appears to be little change in nursing students problems related to drinking. However, three of the problems could potentially affect school or clinical performance. Over a third of the student nurses had missed a class because of hangover. Since nurses, and sometimes student nurses, must work with critically ill patients and make rapid decisions, their judgment could be impaired by hangovers. Slightly over 10% of students were heavy drinkers which is similar to results of other studies concerning problem drinking among females as a whole.

In view of the relatively high number who had missed classes because of hangovers, it is recommended that nursing schools develop prevention programs aimed at consequence of heavy drinking. This is particularly true of that group who might be drinking heavily enough to exhibit behaviours which may affect their performance as a nurse.

Table 1. Percentage of nursing students who exhibited problems related to drinking

Drinking Problem	1982 (N=302)	1985 (N=141)	1988 (N=127)	1991 (N=37)
Had a hangover	65.7	70.8	59.5	82.1
Vomited as a result of drinking	36.6	39.8	40.5	53.6
Driven a car after having had several drinks	48.4	51.3	37.2	39.3
Driven a car when they knew they had drunk too much	32.9	30.1	26.6	32.1
Driven a car while drinking	32.5	34.5	26.6	39.3
Came to class after having several drinks	4.2	2.7	1.3	3.6
"Cut a class" after having several drinks	4.2	4.4	7.6	10.7
Missed a class because of a hangover	15.0	17.7	11.4	35.7*
Been arrested for driving while intoxicated	.0	.0	2.6	3.6*
Been criticized by someone they were dating because of their drinking	8.0	6.2	6.4	11.1
Had trouble with the law because of drinking	.9	.9	5.1	10.7*
Lost a job because of drinking	.0	.0	2.5	.0
Gotten a lower grade because of drinking too much	1.9	3.5	2.5	3.6*
Gotten into trouble with school administration because of behavior resulting from drinking too much	.5	.0	3.8	3.6*
Gotten into a fight after drinking	6.6	8.8	6.3	17.9
Thought they might have a problem with their drinking	2.3	4.4	2.6	3.6
Damaged property, pulled a false fire alarm, or other such behavior after drinking	2.8	.0	6.3	3.6
Heavy drinking	12.6	11.7	11.4	22.2

* p<.05

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