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**Highlights from the First National Comparison of  
Alcohol Use among U.S. and Canadian College Students**

Newly released research provides the first national comparison of college students' drinking habits in the United States and Canada, and finds that while more Canadian students drink, American students drink more heavily. This study is published in the December 2002 issue of the journal, *Addiction*.

The study is based on the 1999 College Alcohol Study, conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health and the 1998 Canadian Campus Survey, conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, based out of Toronto. Today's findings compare the responses of 12,344 American and 6,729 Canadian randomly-selected students under 25 years of age.

**Findings:**

The prevalence of lifetime alcohol use (92% vs. 86%) and past year alcohol use (87% vs. 81%) is significantly higher among Canadian than U.S. students.

American students, when compared to Canadian students, had higher rates of *heavy alcohol use*<sup>1</sup> in the past year (41% vs. 35%) and past week (54% vs. 42%).

American male students are also more likely to engage in heavy alcohol use than American female students, while gender difference is not significant in heavy alcohol use among Canadian students.

The rate of heavy alcohol use among students living at home with their parents in Canada (26%) and the United States (18%) is lower than the rates among students who live on campus (41% and 35%). Although, living with parents reduced heavy drinking more among American students than Canadian students.

The rate of heavy alcohol use among underage students in Canada (43%) and the United States (35%) is greater than the rates among legal-aged students (29% and 30%). The drinking age in Canada is 18 or 19 years of age (depending on the province). The drinking age in the United States is 21 years of age. However, in both countries heavy alcohol use is more prevalent among students age 20 or less.

For both countries, heavy alcohol use is more prevalent among college students who report first drunkenness before the age of 16.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Survey defines "heavy alcohol use" as consuming five or more drinks in a row for males, 4 or more for females.

## **Conclusions:**

Programs aimed at students' heavy alcohol use should target freshmen at entry to college or earlier.

Since students living with their parents are less likely to be heavy drinkers, parents may play a potentially important role in prevention efforts.

The patterns of drinking in both countries may be influenced by the legal minimum drinking age, but the relationship is complex. Irrespective of the legal drinking age, younger students are more likely to engage in heavy alcohol use than older students in both countries.

## **The study points out the need for additional research to answer the following questions:**

- Why is the difference in alcohol use between male and female college students less significant in Canada than in the United States?
- How does living at home during the college years affect drinking behavior differently in the United States and Canada?
- What differences in price, alcohol marketing, and alcohol-related policies are there in the United States and Canada?
- What differences are there in public versus private institutions, fraternities/sororities, and the policy environments in the United States and Canada?

"Our results provide new insight to the potential cross-national differences on important issues, like the gender gap in drinking, and the protective role parents may play. These findings could be used to advance research on heavy drinking in campuses across North America," said Dr. Henry Wechsler, principal investigator of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study.

According to co-author Edward Adlaf of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, "We now know that simple comparisons between the United States and Canada will likely mask important differences given the very different composition of American versus Canadian students."

The lead author of the article, "More Canadian Students Drink But American Students Drink More: Comparing College Alcohol Use in Two Countries," is Meichun Kuo, Sc.D. Co-authors include Edward Adlaf, Ph.D.; Hang Lee, Ph.D.; Andree Demers, Ph.D.; and Henry Wechsler, Ph.D.

Additional information on the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study can be found at: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas>.

Additional information on the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health can be found at: <http://www.camh.net>.

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