Heavy Drinking on Canadian Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe the prevalence and frequency of heavy drinking episodes among Canadian undergraduates.

Methods: Data are drawn from the Canadian Campus Survey, a national mail survey, conducted in the fall of 1998, with a random sample of 7,800 students from 16 universities.

Results: Overall, 62.7% and 34.8% of students reported consuming 5 or more drinks and 8 or more drinks, respectively, on a single occasion at least once during the fall semester. On average, drinkers reported having 5 or more drinks almost 5 times during the fall semester, and having 8 or more drinks almost twice during the same period. The groups reporting the highest rates of heavy drinking were males, those living in university residences, those with low academic orientation and those with high recreational orientation.

Interpretation: Generally, this study has shown that heavy drinking is highly engrained in Canadian undergraduates' drinking patterns, and is related to a number of factors. These factors can be used to develop targeted prevention efforts.

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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One of the most salient public health issues confronting college campuses is the consequences of heavy drinking, traditionally defined as consuming 5 or more drinks in a single drinking occasion.¹ In addition to alcohol intoxication, these consequences include motor vehicle crashes, high-risk sexual behaviour and poor academic performance.²⁻⁶ In addition, heavy drinking on campus affects non-drinkers as well as drinkers.^{7,8}

The epidemiological knowledge regarding heavy drinking in the US is longstanding, but the history of such studies in Canada is recent, sparse and regionalized,⁹⁻¹² and no study has been conducted nationally. This paper will describe the prevalence and frequency of heavy drinking among a nationally representative sample of Canadian undergraduates and assess the character of subgroup differences related to key demographic and campus lifestyle factors.

METHOD

The 1998 Canadian Campus Survey (CCS) is the first Canadian survey conducted nationally to assess alcohol and other drug use among university students.¹³ The CCS employed a stratified two-stage cluster selection of undergraduates enrolled in full-time studies at accredited universities during the 1998-99 academic year. The sample was stratified equally according to five regions: British Columbia, Prairies, Ontario, Québec, and Atlantic Provinces. Four universities per region were selected with probability-proportional to size (i.e., larger universities had a higher probability of selection than smaller universities) for all regions except BC, which sampled all 4 universities with certainty. In total, 23 universities (including 3 randomly selected replacements) were approached for their participation, of which 16 agreed to participate. Within each university, 1,000 students were randomly selected with equal probability. Sixteen thousand questionnaires were mailed, of which 15,188 were deemed eligible mailings. A total of 7,800 eligible and useable completions, representing about 442,000 Canadian undergraduates, were returned, for a 51% student cooperation rate. Mean student cooperation rates varied from 42% to 64% by university and

from 46% (Ontario) to 59% (Québec) by region. Table I, which displays the number of respondents and the weighted percentages, also indicates that the weighted distributions closely approximate the Canadian undergraduate population for key variables.

Measures

Our outcome variable, heavy drinking episode, is represented by the percentage and frequency of consuming 5 or more drinks (*5-plus*) and 8 or more drinks (*8-plus*) on a single occasion “since September”, an 8 to 12 week period. This timeframe was intended to capture any drinking occasions occurring on or off campus since the student began the 1998-1999 academic year.

These outcomes were examined relative to seven independent variables. Sex was represented by a binary measure (male=1). The five regional categories (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Québec and Atlantic) were represented by four effect-coded dummy variables. Living arrangement was represented by two dummy variables (university residence and off campus without parents or family) versus living at home with parents. The four categories of year of study were represented by three dummy variables (second through fourth years) versus first year. Year of study was chosen over age since it provides more campus-relevant risk factor information. Recreational orientation was based on the perceived importance of being involved in three activities (parties, athletics and recreation), while academic orientation was based on the importance of involvement in five activities (arts, academics, student associations, political organizations and cultural organizations).¹⁴ What distinguishes these groups of activities is the intellectual aspect of one versus the other. Academic hours was based on the quartile distribution of the weekly sum of hours devoted to class attendance and studying.

We first present prevalence analyses based on the total sample of students (Table II) and then present multivariate logistic regression assessing the prevalence of heavy drinking among past-year drinkers (Table III) and OLS regression assessing the frequency of heavy drinking among drinkers (Table IV). This analysis was performed on both the raw and log-

TABLE I
Sample Characteristics

	N (unweighted)	% (weighted)
Total	7800	
Gender		
Male	2884	45.6
Female	4916	54.5
Region		
British Columbia	1795	9.8
Prairies	1467	18.4
Ontario	1277	40.5
Québec	2306	22.5
Atlantic	955	8.8
Year of Study		
First	1903	25.9
Second	1910	25.3
Third	2044	25.4
Fourth	1943	23.4
Living Arrangement		
University residence	1254	15.3
Off campus with parents	3433	48.0
Off campus without parents	3072	36.7

TABLE II
Frequency of Drinking, Mean Weekly Alcohol Intake and Prevalence of Heavy Drinking (5-plus) During the Past 12 Months

	Total (n=7800)	Males (n=2884)	Females (n=4916)
Drinking Frequency			
Never	13.4 (11.1-16.1)	14.6 (12.4-17.2)	12.5 (9.7-15.8)
< Once/month	22.0 (18.9-25.4)	18.0 (14.8-21.6)	25.3 (21.9-29.1)
1-3 times/month	27.7 (25.7-29.8)	22.8 (20.7-25.1)	31.8 (29.3-34.5)
1/week	16.4 (15.0-17.8)	17.6 (16.0-19.3)	15.3 (13.5-17.3)
2-3 times/week	16.0 (13.5-18.9)	20.6 (18.2-23.2)	12.2 (9.8-15.1)
4+ times/week	4.4 (3.2-4.8)	5.6 (4.4-7.1)	2.6 (2.1-3.1)
Daily	0.5 (0.3-1.0)	0.8 (0.5-1.6)	0.3 (0.1-0.6)
Mean Drinks Weekly			
Total sample	5.60 (4.60-6.60)	7.51 (6.50-8.52)	3.99 (3.08-4.89)
Among drinkers	6.48 (5.41-7.55)	8.80 (7.62-9.98)	4.56 (3.63-5.49)
Prevalence of 5-plus			
Total sample	62.4 (56.4-68.1)	66.9 (61.2-72.2)	58.7 (52.2-65.0)
Among drinkers	72.1 (66.8-76.9)	78.4 (73.0-82.9)	67.1 (61.5-72.2)

Gender difference: Frequency of use, Wald $F(3,33)=31.01$, $p<0.001$; Mean drinks, total sample; Wald $F(1,11)=32.09$, $p<0.001$; Prevalence 5-plus, Total sample, Wald $F(1,11)=29.07$, $p<0.001$; Drinkers, Wald $F(1,11)=70.90$, $p<0.001$

transformed data. The raw results are presented since the substantive results of the two analyses did not differ.

Because our sample design employs unequal probabilities of selection and heavy clustering, Taylor series methods were used to estimate variances and related statistical tests. (Design effects for heavy drinking variables, which varied between 2 and 12, averaged 6.3.)

RESULTS

To provide some context to our results, we begin by describing the past year drinking patterns by gender. As seen in Table II, 86.6% of Canadian undergraduates report consuming alcohol in the past year, and 37% drank weekly. On average, students reported consuming 5.6 drinks per week (6.48 among past-year drinkers). Gender

differences are also evident, with men being more likely than women to drink at least twice per week (27.0% vs 15.1%) and to drink in greater quantities per week (8.8 vs 4.6 drinks among past-year drinkers). The percentage reporting a *5-plus* heavy drinking episode during the past 12 months was 62.4% (72.1% of drinkers) and varied significantly by gender.

More germane to the campus environment is the heavy drinking that occurs while students are enrolled in university, in our case the period since September. Table III shows the percentage of past-year drinkers consuming *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinks per occasion. In total, 62.7% of the drinkers reported *5-plus* drinking while 34.8% reported *8-plus* drinking at least once. The adjusted odds ratios show that four variables – gender, residence, academic and recreational orientation – are signifi-

TABLE III

Percentage Consuming 5-plus and 8-plus Drinks on a Single Occasion Since September, Past Year Drinkers

	%	% 5-plus since September (n=6359) (95% CI)	Adjusted Odds Ratio	%	% 8-plus since September (n=6351) (95% CI)	Adjusted Odds Ratio
Total Sample	62.7	(55.9 – 69.4)	—	34.8	(29.7 – 39.9)	—
Gender	***		***	***		***
Female	56.1	(48.8 – 63.2)	—	25.2	(21.1 – 29.7)	—
Male	70.6	(64.0 – 76.5)	1.75 ***	46.5	(40.8 – 52.5)	2.50 ***
Region	NS		NS	NS		*
British Columbia	58.6	(49.7 – 67.0)	0.76	35.2	(29.1 – 41.8)	0.89
Prairies	69.5	(56.1 – 80.3)	1.26	44.6	(33.9 – 55.7)	1.49
Ontario	60.2	(43.5 – 74.8)	0.84	33.2	(22.7 – 45.7)	0.90
Québec	58.5	(56.3 – 60.7)	0.73 *	27.9	(27.6 – 28.2)	0.65 **
Atlantic	73.9	(57.1 – 85.8)	1.70	39.5	(26.4 – 54.3)	1.28
Living Arrangements	*		***	**		***
University	70.3	(66.0 – 74.3)	1.53 ***	44.2	(39.8 – 48.8)	1.77 ***
Off campus w parents	59.7	(50.2 – 68.4)	—	32.3	(25.5 – 39.9)	—
Off campus no family	62.5	(55.8 – 68.7)	1.21	33.2	(27.7 – 39.3)	1.14
Year	NS		NS	NS		NS
First	65.0	(59.9 – 69.8)	—	35.9	(31.4 – 40.7)	—
Second	63.5	(56.7 – 69.8)	0.99	36.0	(31.1 – 41.1)	1.06
Third	62.0	(54.8 – 68.7)	0.93	33.9	(28.3 – 40.0)	0.97
Fourth	60.1	(49.2 – 70.1)	0.82	33.3	(26.5 – 40.8)	0.92
Academic Orientation	NS		**	NS		**
Low	63.6	(55.9 – 70.7)	—	36.2	(29.9 – 43.0)	—
Medium	60.3	(55.0 – 65.4)	0.71 **	32.3	(28.7 – 36.1)	0.74 *
High	60.9	(50.6 – 70.3)	0.57 **	27.3	(22.2 – 33.0)	0.49 **
Recreational Orientation	***		***	***		***
Low	54.2	(45.4 – 62.7)	—	27.4	(21.8 – 33.8)	—
Medium	67.7	(61.2 – 73.6)	1.83 ***	38.0	(33.3 – 42.9)	1.63 ***
High	83.0	(80.4 – 85.3)	4.33 ***	54.8	(50.9 – 58.7)	3.23 ***
Academic Hours (weekly)	**		NS	***		***
1st quartile	66.0	(59.0 – 72.4)	—	40.6	(34.7 – 46.7)	—
2nd quartile	63.9	(55.3 – 71.6)	0.94	35.1	(27.2 – 43.9)	0.82
3rd quartile	60.9	(56.5 – 65.2)	0.84	31.1	(27.6 – 34.9)	0.71 *
4th quartile	57.2	(47.9 – 65.9)	0.68 **	27.2	(23.5 – 31.2)	0.53 ***

Notes: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

TABLE IV

Frequency of Consuming Five or More Drinks and Eight or More Drinks on a Single Occasion Since September, Among Past Year Drinkers

	Mean 5-plus since September (n=6359)			Mean 8-plus since September (n=6351)		
	Mean	(95% CI)	b	Mean	(95% CI)	b
Total Sample	4.7	(3.8 – 5.6)		1.9	(1.4 – 2.3)	
Gender			***			***
Female	3.2	(2.3 – 4.1)	—	1.0	(0.6 – 1.3)	—
Male	6.7	(5.7 – 7.6)	3.05 ***	3.0	(2.4 – 3.6)	1.79 ***
Region			0.06			0.57
British Columbia	5.2	(3.9 – 6.4)	-0.17	2.0	(1.3 – 2.8)	-0.22
Prairies	6.3	(3.7 – 8.8)	1.21	2.9	(1.3 – 4.5)	0.82
Ontario	4.4	(2.5 – 6.2)	-0.51	1.6	(0.8 – 2.4)	-0.41
Québec	3.6	(3.2 – 4.0)	-1.42 **	1.3	(1.1 – 1.4)	-0.77 **
Atlantic	5.7	(3.2 – 8.1)	0.89	2.5	(0.6 – 4.5)	0.59
Living Arrangements			***			***
University	6.7	(5.6 – 7.8)	2.59 ***	2.8	(2.1 – 3.5)	1.3 ***
Off campus w parents	4.0	(3.0 – 5.0)	—	1.5	(1.1 – 2.0)	—
Off campus no family	4.7	(3.5 – 5.9)	1.01	1.9	(1.1 – 2.6)	0.46 *
Year			NS			NS
First	5.0	(3.9 – 6.1)	—	1.9	(1.4 – 2.5)	—
Second	4.8	(3.9 – 5.7)	-0.01	1.9	(1.4 – 2.4)	-0.01
Third	4.4	(3.3 – 5.5)	-0.33	1.7	(1.1 – 2.3)	-0.16
Fourth	4.8	(3.5 – 6.1)	-0.08	2.0	(1.3 – 2.8)	0.08
Academic Orientation			***			***
Low	5.0	(4.0 – 6.1)	—	2.0	(1.5 – 2.6)	—
Medium	4.2	(3.5 – 4.8)	-1.34 **	1.6	(1.2 – 2.0)	-0.65 **
High	3.5	(2.0 – 5.1)	-2.60 **	1.0	(0.5 – 1.5)	-0.16 ***
Recreational Orientation			***			***
Low	3.3	(2.6 – 4.0)	—	1.2	(0.9 – 1.5)	—
Medium	5.5	(4.1 – 6.9)	2.16 ***	2.2	(1.4 – 3.1)	1.02 **
High	8.3	(7.1 – 9.4)	4.64 ***	3.7	(3.0 – 4.5)	2.36 ***
Academic Hours (weekly)			***			***
1st quartile	5.9	(4.8 – 6.9)	—	2.5	(1.9 – 3.1)	—
2nd quartile	4.6	(2.8 – 6.4)	-1.07	1.8	(0.9 – 2.7)	-0.58 **
3rd quartile	4.0	(3.3 – 4.7)	-1.50 *	1.5	(1.1 – 1.8)	-0.84 *
4th quartile	3.4	(2.9 – 3.9)	-2.34 ***	1.2	(1.0 – 1.4)	-1.20 ***

Notes: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

cantly associated with both *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking. Regarding gender, the odds of *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking are respectively 1.75 and 2.5 times higher among men than women. Living arrangement also shows sizeable variation with students living in residence being more likely to consume *5-plus* (OR=1.53) and *8-plus* (OR=1.77) drinks than students living with their parents.

The logit regression shows that academic and recreational orientations, as well as time devoted to academic work, were significantly associated with both *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking. Generally, heavy drinking declined with increasing academic orientation and academic hours and increased with increasing recreational orientation. Compared to those with low academic orientation, the likelihood of *5-plus* drinking was 29% lower (OR=0.71) among those with moderate academic orientation and 43% lower among those with high academic orientation (OR=0.57). As well, compared to those with low recreational orientation, the likelihood of *5-plus* drinking was 1.83 times higher among those with moderate recreational orientation and 4.33 times higher among those with high recreational orientation. Similar associations were also found for *8-plus* drinking. Academic hours are generally inversely associated with both *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking. This is especially true for *8-plus* drinking, in which the odds ratios show a clear reduction in *8-plus* drinking with every quartile increase in number of academic hours.

The analysis also shows that region is significantly associated only with *8-plus* drinking. Students in Québec universities are significantly less likely to report *8-plus* drinking compared to the average student (OR=0.65). This contrast is also noticeable for *5-plus* drinking, although the overall region effect is not significant at the $p<0.05$ level. The only variable unrelated to both *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking is year of study.

While most students engaged in some heavy drinking while in university, more compelling is the frequency of heavy drinking. As seen in Table IV, on average, drinkers reported consuming *5-plus* drinks per occasion 4.7 times since September, and *8-plus* drinks 1.9 times. Generally the same factors that predict prevalence of

heavy drinking also predict the frequency of heavy drinking. Five variables are significantly related to the frequency of both *5-plus* and *8-plus* heavy drinking: gender, living arrangements, academic orientation, recreational orientation, and academic hours.

Males reported twice as many heavy episodic drinking occasions than did females (6.7 and 3.2 times for *5-plus* drinks; and 3.0 and 1.0 times for *8-plus* drinks). For both *5-plus* and *8-plus* drinking, those living on campus reported significantly more heavy drinking than did those living with parents (6.7 vs 4.0 and 2.8 vs 1.5, respectively). As well, those living off campus without parents also reported slightly more *8-plus* drinking than did those living with parents (1.9 vs 1.5). Again, both heavy drinking measures were negatively associated with academic orientation and positively associated with recreational orientation. *Five-plus* and *8-plus* heavy drinking declined from 5.0 to 3.5 occasions and from 2.0 to 1.0, respectively, among those with low vs high academic orientation and increased from 3.3 to 8.3 and from 1.2 to 3.7, respectively, among those with low vs high recreational orientation. Also evident is a significant inverse association between heavy drinking and academic hours. *Five-plus* drinking declined from 5.9 episodes among those in the lowest quartile hours to 3.4 among those in the highest quartile, and *8-plus* drinking declined from 2.5 to 1.2 episodes. Region and year of study did not show significant group effects, although the region contrasts again showed below-average frequencies among those attending Québec universities.

DISCUSSION

Although all survey findings are bounded inherently by both sampling and non-sampling errors, we believe that our data reasonably represent Canadian undergraduates. First, although there were no means to compare respondents to non-respondents, an analysis of early versus late responders indicated no significant differences for the major demographic factors and for drinking patterns, with the exception that late responders, who had a longer exposure period, reported more heavy drinking episodes. Second, a comparison of under-

graduates drawn from the 1996 National Population Health Survey revealed no significant differences for sex, age and frequency of alcohol use. And third, the correlation between mean student completion rates by university and rates of heavy drinking was nominal and non-significant ($r=-0.14$; $p=0.61$).

This study has shown that heavy drinking is highly engrained in Canadian undergraduates' drinking patterns. Most students are drinkers and roughly two thirds of them reported at least one *5-plus* drinking episode and one third an *8-plus* drinking episode during the initial 8 to 12 week period at school. On average, drinkers reported *5-plus* drinking roughly once every two weeks (4.7 times/8-12 weeks) and *8-plus* drinking once every month (1.9 times/8-12 weeks). Our results indicated that heavy drinking is more prevalent and more frequent among men and among students living in university residences, and that heavy drinking increased with the importance attached to recreational activities and decreased when students reported being more academically oriented. However, no association between heavy drinking and year of study was evident. Finally, undergraduates in Québec were less likely to drink heavily than those in the rest of Canada.

The fact that men are more likely than women to be heavy drinkers and drink heavily more often is a recurring finding for the general population as well as for college students.^{15,16} However, we must note that because our definition of heavy drinking was identical among both men and women, we might be underestimating the impact of female heavy drinking given some biological differences.⁷ Thus, we should not conclude that heavy drinking among women is not a health issue worthy of concern by campus services.

Our results highlight the importance of individual experiences of university life on heavy drinking. Students who place more importance on recreational activities and those who reside in student residences are more likely to drink heavily than other students, whereas those attaching more importance to academic activities are less likely to do so. Consistent with previous results,^{14,17,18} these findings suggest a pattern of social integration into university life associated with heavier alcohol intake.

However, we cannot ignore the possibility of a self-selection bias in which heavy drinkers are attracted to events or locations that are heavy drinking milieus. Longitudinal data would be needed to clarify the causal relationships of these data.

Finally, students attending university in Québec seem less likely to drink heavily, despite a higher drinking prevalence and greater availability of alcohol in Québec. This might reflect a different drinking culture or might be related to the different school system in Québec, which has CEGEP as an intermediate institution between high school and university.

The results suggest that universities may be in a position to affect the rates of heavy drinking by its students through targeted interventions. For example, by focusing on men, on students who live in residences, and by trying to get students more involved in the academic parts of the university community, heavy drinking may be decreased.

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RÉSUMÉ

Objectif : Décrire la prévalence et la fréquence des accès de forte consommation d'alcool chez les étudiants universitaires.

Méthode : Les données proviennent de l'Enquête sur les campus canadiens, une enquête nationale réalisée par la poste au cours de l'automne 1998 auprès d'un échantillon aléatoire de 7 800 étudiants de premier cycle de 16 universités.

Résultats : Dans l'ensemble, 62,6 % et 34,8 % des étudiants déclarent avoir pris respectivement cinq verres ou plus et huit verres ou plus par accès de consommation au moins une fois au cours du semestre d'automne. En moyenne, les buveurs déclarent avoir consommé cinq verres ou plus à cinq reprises environ au cours du semestre d'automne, et huit verres ou plus à près de deux reprises. Les groupes déclarant les taux les plus élevés sont les hommes, les étudiants vivant en résidence universitaire, ceux faiblement orientés vers les activités scolaires et ceux fortement orientés vers les loisirs.

Conclusion : Cette étude montre que la consommation abusive d'alcool est fortement ancrée dans les profils de consommation d'alcool des étudiants universitaires canadiens de premier cycle, et que ce comportement est associé à de multiples facteurs. Ces facteurs peuvent être utilisés pour élaborer des mesures préventives ciblées.