

## Driving Under the Influence Laws, Party Culture and College Students: Results from a New Orleans University

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess awareness, attitudes and experiences regarding DUI laws among college students from the University of New Orleans (UNO). The sample consisted of 261 UNO students ages 18-30 (mean age 20.6). A 14-item questionnaire was used to collect data via central location intercept interviews. Results: Results were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics, frequencies and Pearson's 2x2 Chi-Square analysis. DUI arrest was reported by 1.9% of the participants. Nearly 35% of participants reported they drove a vehicle when they had too much to drink in the 30 days prior to completing the survey. Blood alcohol knowledge was reported by only 6.5% of respondents. The results revealed that 63.5% of frequent binge drinkers drove a vehicle when it was known they had too much to drink. Alternatives to DUI behavior for frequent binge drinkers and educational programs explaining DUI laws and consequences need to be further explored.

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### Introduction

Alcohol use among college students continues to be an area of concern among health professionals. Heavy alcohol use was found to be higher among college students ages 18-22 than their non-college counter parts (NHSDA, 2001). In 2000, binge drinking; two weeks prior to the survey was reported by 46.5% of the college students surveyed (CORE, 2000). An increase in alcohol consumption is related to an increase in the consequences and problems associated with alcohol, College students who drink heavily on frequent occasions are 21 times more likely to experience at least five alcohol related problems (Hingson et al., 2002). Additionally, binge drinkers experience more alcohol related problems than non-binge drinkers (Wechsler et al, 2001). For college students with access to vehicles, impaired driving is a consequence of alcohol consumption (Perkins, 2002).

According to college students, drinking and driving is the most commonly reported alcohol-related health risk (Hingson et al., 2002). It is estimated that college students ages 18-24 are

responsible for 31% of the traffic and unintentional injuries experienced by the 18-24 year old US population (Hingson et al., 2002). The 1995 National College Health Risk Behavioral Survey reported that 27.4% of surveyed college students drove a vehicle one or more times after drinking alcohol during the 30 days prior to taking the survey (Douglas et al., 1997). In 2000, The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that drivers between the ages of 21 and 24 had the highest intoxication rate for fatal crashes (NHSDA, 2000). The following year, 2.1 million students between the ages of 18-24 drove under the influence of alcohol (Hingson et al., 2002). For binge drinkers, the statistics on drinking and driving are elevated. Driving after drinking alcohol was reported by 41 % of frequent binge drinkers (Wechsler et al., 1999). The data on drinking and driving indicate a need for programs specifically targeted for this population.

Previous work indicates past approaches to reduce alcohol-related fatalities have been largely unsuccessful (Turrissi and Jaccard, 1992).

However, prevention, early intervention programs and specific deterrence laws have been effective in reducing the number of alcohol related problems such as drinking and driving among the college population (NIAAA, 1995; Hingson, 1996).

Driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) laws setting Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) limits are designed to deter and reduce drinking and driving among an entire population of drivers (Hingson, 1996; Toomey and Wagenaar, 2002). However, these DUI laws can act as a deterrent only to the extent that people know them (Kenkel and Koch, 2001). An understanding of the levels of awareness, attitudes and experiences regarding DUI laws among this population is essential to the development of prevention and intervention strategies.

Policies regarding the Minimum Legal Drinking Age are the most studied alcohol policy (Wagenaar and Toomey, 2002). Few studies have evaluated the effects (if alcohol policies on drinking and resulting problems among college students (Toomey and Wagenaar, 2002). However, published works regarding DUI law awareness among the college population was limited.

The purpose of this study is to assess awareness, attitudes and experiences regarding DUI laws among college students from the University of New Orleans (UNO). This population is unique due to several characteristics of the university and the city in which UNO is located. The university is described as a commuter campus where approximately 9% of the university's 17,014 students live in residence halls and the student population is considered to be non-traditional, due to the average age of students being 26 (Institutional Research, 2001). The city also possesses some unique features of its own. Nicknamed "The Big Easy", New Orleans is an urban environment known for Mardi Gras and liberal liquor laws. Alcohol consumption in the parking lots and driveways of establishments is allowed during carnival parade season (City Code of the city of New Orleans, 1995). Also, there are no laws restricting the times in which

alcohol is served. Therefore, bars are allowed to serve alcohol 24 hours a day. Lastly, at the time of data collection daiquiri shops (venues serving popular frozen mixed alcoholic beverages), have drive through service and bars often provide "to go cups" for travel while drinking alcohol.

This study uses an urban university sample to answer the following questions: 1) What do college students know about the current legal Blood Alcohol Limit? 2) Are college age frequent binge drinkers driving under the influence of alcohol?

### **Methods**

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the university's human subjects committee. A power sample was also calculated (DSS Research, September 2000 resulting in a desired sample size of 260. Criteria for participation in this study was limited to students currently enrolled at UNO. Respondents that completed the questionnaires on campus outside academic facilities were classified as currently matriculated at the University of New Orleans and therefore eligible for participation on this study.

Participants were recruited via central location intercept interviews. These interviews were conducted over a three week period in the following high traffic areas: the main library; campus University Center; a dining facility and food mart; a coed residential building and an academic building where classes are held. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants prior to survey administration. The interviewer also explained the confidentiality of the responses to each participant prior to the survey.

### **Questionnaire**

A 14-item questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was adapted from CORE Alcohol and Drug Survey and The Student Alcohol Questionnaire (SAQ). The questionnaire included: five questions on demographic information; three questions assessing alcohol use and DUI activity in the 30 days prior to taking the survey; one question each on alcohol use during, the week prior to the

taking the survey and knowledge of the current legal blood alcohol limit in Louisiana and concluded with four questions regarding attitudes towards DUI. For the purposes of this study, a drink was defined as 12oz. beer, 12oz wine cooler, 4oz, glass of wine or a shot of liquor (mixed or straight) (Wechsler et al., 2001). Knowledge of the legal blood alcohol content limit was measured by responses to two questions: "Do you know the amount of alcohol you can have in your blood (also know as Blood Alcohol Concentration) to be arrested for DUI in Louisiana? If yes, what is it?" The given responses fell into one of the following categories: Yes (answered yes and gave correct legal BAC), Incorrect (answered Yes and gave incorrect legal BAC) and No. These responses were later recoded into a dichotomous Yes (same as previous category) or No (combined previous incorrect and no categories) for cross tabulation analysis.

Participants were asked, "Think about last week, how many times have you had five or more drinks in a row?" Wechsler et al. defined frequent binge drinking as binge drinking three or more times in the past two weeks (2001). Based on this definition frequent binge drinking was defined as binge drinking; two or more times in the past week. For analysis purposes, responses to this question were also later dichotomized into either frequent binge drinker or non-frequent binge drinker classifications.

Participants were asked their opinions on DUI laws. Five possible responses ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" utilizing a five point likert scale. To determine legal drinking age, participants were asked to write their age in years. Because the target population ranged from age 18 to 30, age was also dichotomized later. Legal drinking age was coded for respondents aged 21 to 30 and underage was coded for those aged 18-21.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was entered and verified for errors. Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 10.1. Significance level was set at 0.05. Frequencies,

descriptive percentages and chi-squares for significance testing were conducted.

### **Results**

The sample consisted of 261 UNO students ages 18-30 (mean age 20.6). The demographic characteristics of the sample are provided in Appendix A.

Because of the largely non-traditional student population at UNO, the age range of 18-30 was chosen to include ample representation of these students. A total of 13 surveys were omitted due to missing age data or those with ages outside of the targeted range (18-30).

### **Alcohol Usage, BAC Knowledge and DUI Arrests and Opinions**

The collective results of: alcohol usage, binge drinking, frequent binge drinkers, knowledge of the current legal blood alcohol content, and DUI arrest behavior and opinions are summarized in Table 2.

Alcohol use in the 34 days prior to the survey was indicated by 69.2% of the participants. Approximately 40% of respondents had at least one binge drinking episode in the week, prior to the survey. Blood alcohol knowledge was reported by only 6.5% of respondents, incorrect responses were given by 34.6% of the respondents. The data revealed that more than half (58.8%) of the respondents were unaware of the current legal BAC. DUI arrest was reported by 1.9% of the participants. Nearly 35%, of participants reported they drove a vehicle when they had too much to drink in the 30 days prior to completing the survey. Of the participants that indicated they drove a vehicle when they knew they had too much to drink, 89% of them were within the 18-24 age range. Frequent binge drinker accounted 28.4% of the participants while 71.6% were non-frequent binge drinkers. The summary of agreeing opinions regarding DUI laws and penalties are reported. For "DUI laws are fair", "the penalties for DUI are strict" and "it is not okay to drive after having several drinks" the responses of 35.6%, 14.2% and 43.3%, respectively were reported. Agreement to "It is not okay to drive while drinking" was reported by 54.8% of those surveyed.

Table 3 examines legal BAC knowledge, DUI experiences and frequent binge drinking according to legal drinking age and underage respondents. Results indicate that 36% were of

legal drinking age and 64% were under the legal drinking age. The Pearson's 2x2 Chi-Square was conducted. Only knows legal BAC with age was found to be statistically significant.

Table 2  
Alcohol Usage, BAC Knowledge and DUI Arrests and Opinions

Content Area	Frequency	Percent
<b>Alcohol Usage</b>		
Used alcohol at least once in the past 30 days	180	69.2
One or more binge drinking episode in the past week	104	39.8
Frequent binge drinker	74	28.4
<b>BAC Knowledge</b>		
Yes	17	6.5
Incorrect	90	34.6
No	153	58.8
<b>DUI arrest and behavior in the past 30 days</b>		
DUI Arrest	5	1.9
Drove when knew had too much to drink	91	34.9
<b>DUI Opinions</b>		
DUI laws are fair	93	35.6
It is not okay to drive while drinking	143	54.8
It is not okay to drive after drinking	113	43.3
DUI penalties are strict	37	14.2

Table 3  
Knowledge of legal BAC limit, DUI experience and Frequent Binge drinkers by legal drinking age

	Legal Age (%)	Under Age (%)	Chi Square
Don't know legal BAC	34.2	65.8	6.424**
Drove when had too much alcohol	50.5	49.5	12.807*
Frequent binge drinkers	41.9	58.1	1.548**

\*significant at <.001 level; \*\*not significant (p>.05)

**Discussion**

The overall results indicate in the 30 days prior to the survey one or more binge drinking episodes was reported by 39.8% of the respondents. This is consistent with the findings of previous national studies. Studies conducted by Wechsler et al. (2001) and CORE (2000) found binge drinkers to comprise 44% and 46.5%, respectively of their sample.

Approximately 2% of respondents were arrested for DUI in the previous 30 days. Driving a vehicle after knowingly having too much to drink was reported by 34.9% of the participants which is slightly higher than the 27.4% reported in the 1995 National College Health Risk Behavioral Survey, but lower than the 48% of UNO students that reported driving a car under the influence of alcohol, indicating an overall

reduction in DUI behavior among students at this institution.

One goal of this study was to answer the question: What do college students know about the current legal Blood Alcohol Limit? The results reveal that 63.5% of frequent binge drinkers drove a vehicle when it was known they had too much to drink. This suggests that college students who drove under the influence of alcohol were more likely to be frequent binge drinkers.

A second goal was to establish the knowledge level of the legal BAC. Since a search for previous studies examining knowledge of the law yielded no results prior to this 2002 study, was no test value for comparison. Only 6.5% of the participants knew the current legal BAC limit, indicating that an overwhelming majority are not aware of laws designed to deter DUI behavior.

#### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. There was a relatively small sample of 261 students at one university. Cultural elements and environmental factors such as the urban setting, party culture and atmosphere and relaxed alcohol policies of the city in which the university resides are also limitations of the

study. The questionnaire was self-reported, therefore increasing the potential for socially desirable responses. Lastly, the time frame in which the survey was administered is a limitation. Surveys were administered the week before, week of and week following Halloween in 2002. Since this study was held in the midst of a popular holiday, responses may not be typical of normal drinking activity and DUI behavior.

#### **Implications**

More than half of frequent binge drinkers drove a vehicle when they knew they had too much to drink. This suggests that alternatives to DUI behavior for frequent binge drinkers need to be explored. Additionally, intervention campaigns focusing on the reduction of DUI behavior for frequent binge drinkers require further development. The low level of BAC knowledge found in this study suggests that intervention and educational programs on drinking activity should include an explanation of DUI laws, how DUI designations are determined and the consequences of DUI law violations. Additionally, policy makers should revisit current laws and mandate awareness campaigns when changing DUI policy. Further research on the effectiveness of DUI laws on behavior deterrence and knowledge of legal consequences need to be explored in future studies.

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## Appendix A

### Participant's Demographic Information

<b>Demographic Information</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	116	44.4
Female	145	55.6
<b>Greek Status</b>		
Greek	12	4.6
Non-Greek	248	95.4
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian	156	59.8
African-American	52	19.9
Hispanic	19	7.3
Asian	14	5.4
Other	18	6.9
<b>Student Designation</b>		
Freshman	115	44.1
Sophomore	60	23
Junior	39	14.9
Senior	35	13.4
Grad Student	7	2.7