



UPDATED FOR 2003 ESPAD AND 2003 MTF SURVEYS

Youth Drinking Rates and Problems: A Comparison of European Countries and the United States

Introduction

Among Americans there is a commonly held perception that American young people drink more frequently and experience more alcohol-related problems than do their European counterparts. This perception, in turn, is often utilized as argument for various changes in U.S. alcohol policies and prevention initiatives, including elimination of minimum drinking age laws and development of programs that teach “responsible” drinking to young people.

Do European young people drink less and experience fewer problems than their American counterparts? Until recently data did not exist to easily answer this question, but new research demonstrates that this is not the case. In fact, in comparison with young people in the United States,

- A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days;
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having five or more drinks in a row; and
- A great majority of the European countries have higher intoxication rates among young people than the United States and less than a quarter had lower rates or equivalent rates to the United States.

Based on this analysis, the comparison of drinking rates and alcohol-related problems among young people in the United States and in European countries does not provide support for elimination of U.S. minimum drinking age laws or for the implementation of programs to teach responsible drinking to young people.

Do young people from Europe drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States?

This question is important because it often is raised in the context of the stricter minimum drinking age laws in the United States. Although the implementation of the uniform minimum drinking age of 21 and the more recent enactment of zero tolerance laws have reduced drinking by young people and saved thousands of lives (e.g., Hingson, Heeren, & Levenson, 2002; Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 1994; Voas, Tippetts, & Fell, 1999; Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002; Harford, Wechsler, & Muthén, 2002), these policies have come under attack as contributing to irresponsible styles of drinking (e.g., Hanson, 1990; Engs, 2001; Ford, 2002; Hanson, 2002; Hanson, 2004; NYRA, 2002). Commonly, European countries are held up as examples of where more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes, in turn, may foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. It often is asserted that alcohol is more integrated into European, especially southern European, culture and that young people there learn to drink at younger ages within the context of the family. As a result, it is further asserted that young Europeans learn to drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States.

This report addresses the question of whether young people in Europe actually drink more responsibly than those in the United States. Data for this paper come from the 2003 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and the 2003 United States Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF).

European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD)

The ESPAD survey collected data in 2003 from 15- to 16-year-old students ($M=15.8$) in 35 European countries. The data were obtained using anonymous self-administered in-school surveys. Sample sizes ranged from 555 (Greenland) to 5,110 (Germany). The samples were designed to be nationally representative in each case.¹ Because not all questions were asked in all countries, the data reported here are based on somewhat fewer than 35 countries. A detailed report on the methods and findings from the ESPAD survey is available (Hibell, Andersson, Bjarnason, Ahlström, Balakireva, Kokkevi, & Morgan, 2004).

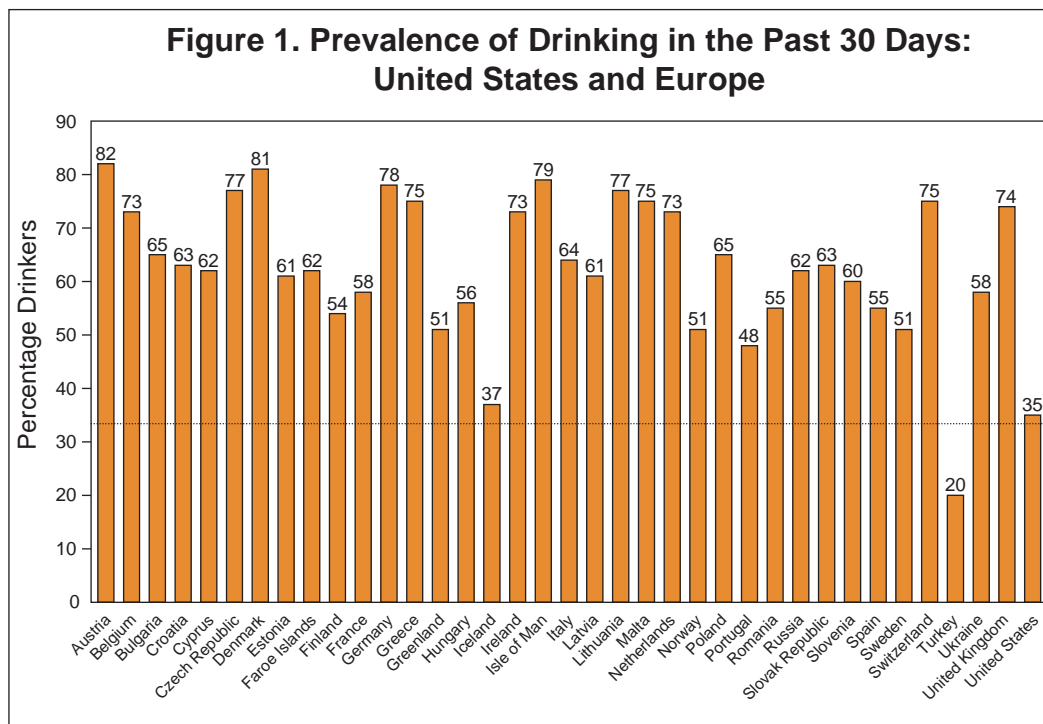
Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF)

The MTF survey is conducted annually among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the United States. The samples are designed to be nationally representative of students in those grade levels. The data reported here are for the 10th grade sample because it represents the same age group that was

included in the ESPAD surveys. The 10th grade MTF survey comprises an anonymous self-administered questionnaire given in the school setting. The 2003 MTF survey included 18,500 10th graders. Detailed descriptions of the MTF methods and findings may be found on the Internet (<http://monitoringthefuture.org/>) or in a series of publications available from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (e.g., Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2004).

Comparability

The questionnaire for the ESPAD survey was closely modeled after the MTF survey. Most of the questions from the two surveys map closely onto one another. One notable difference is in the heavy episodic or binge drinking question (i.e., “how many times have you had five or more drinks in a row?”). Specifically, the ESPAD survey asks this question in terms of the last 30 days, whereas the MTF survey asks about the previous 2 weeks.



Sources: 2003 ESPAD Survey and 2003 Monitoring the Future Survey

¹The representativeness of the survey in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom is somewhat uncertain because of a relatively large number of non-participating schools or classes, non-enrollment, or skewed gender distribution. However, the results of the surveys from these countries are deemed to be sufficiently representative of students born in 1987 (Hibell et al., 2004).

Results

Prevalence of Drinking in Past 30 Days

Figure 1 shows the percentage of young people in 35 European countries and the United States reporting that they had at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage during the past 30 days. These 30-day prevalence rates are often used as an indicator of the number of current or regular drinkers in a population. In the 2003 MTF survey, 35 percent of 10th graders reported that they had a drink in the past 30 days. It is clear from Figure 1 that the United States is a low consumption country by European standards. With the exception of Turkey (20%), every European country in the ESPAD survey had higher prevalence rates. In most cases, the rates of current drinking far exceeded those observed in the United States. Iceland (37%) and the United States had essentially equivalent prevalence rates on this measure.

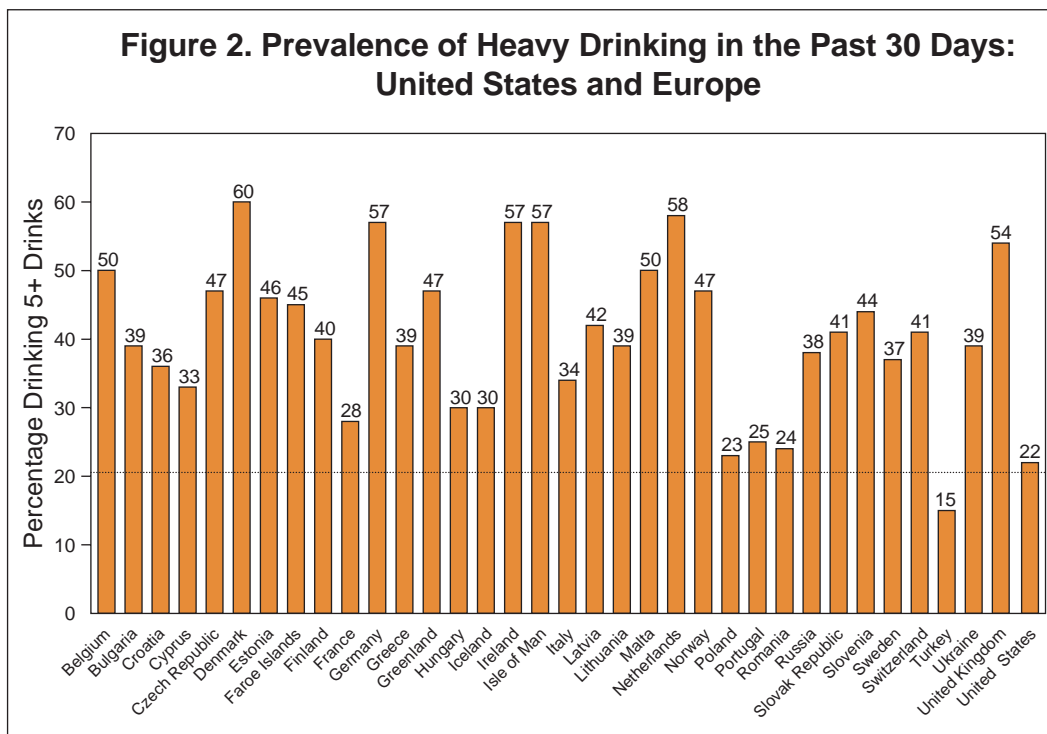
Prevalence of Heavy Drinking (Having Five or More Drinks in a Row)

Although the data in Figure 1 show that fewer American adolescents are current drinkers than is the case for a vast majority of European countries, what is not clear is if the patterns of drinking are such that European adolescents are more at risk for problems. It may be, for example, that more of them drink, but do so moderately in a family context. Consuming five or more drinks in a row is one measure of heavy episodic or “binge” drinking that is frequently used. This style of drinking is known to be associated with in-

creased risk for a number of problems including DUI, fighting, truancy, and involvement in criminal activities such as theft, burglary, and assault (e.g., Shaffer & Ruback, 2002; Wechsler, Molnar, Davenport, & Baer, 1999). The prevalence of binge drinking from the ESPAD and MTF surveys is shown in Figure 2. If the early socialization to drinking that is assumed to be typical of Europe is such that it fosters responsible drinking, then we would expect to see much lower rates of binge drinking there than in the United States. Contrary to these expectations, U.S. adolescents show lower prevalence rates for drinking five or more drinks in a row than most European countries in the ESPAD survey. In many cases, the percentage of young people reporting drinking five or more drinks in a row is considerably higher than that for the United States. Only Turkey (15%) has a substantially lower rate than is seen for the United States (22%). It should be noted that the rates for the United States are lower than those for Italy (34%) or Greece (39%), countries that could be considered typically southern European. Data for Austria and Spain are missing.

Intoxication

Another measure of problematic drinking is intoxication. Unlike the measures of binge drinking, the items addressing intoxication were identical between the ESPAD and MTF surveys. Thus, direct comparisons can be made with cer-



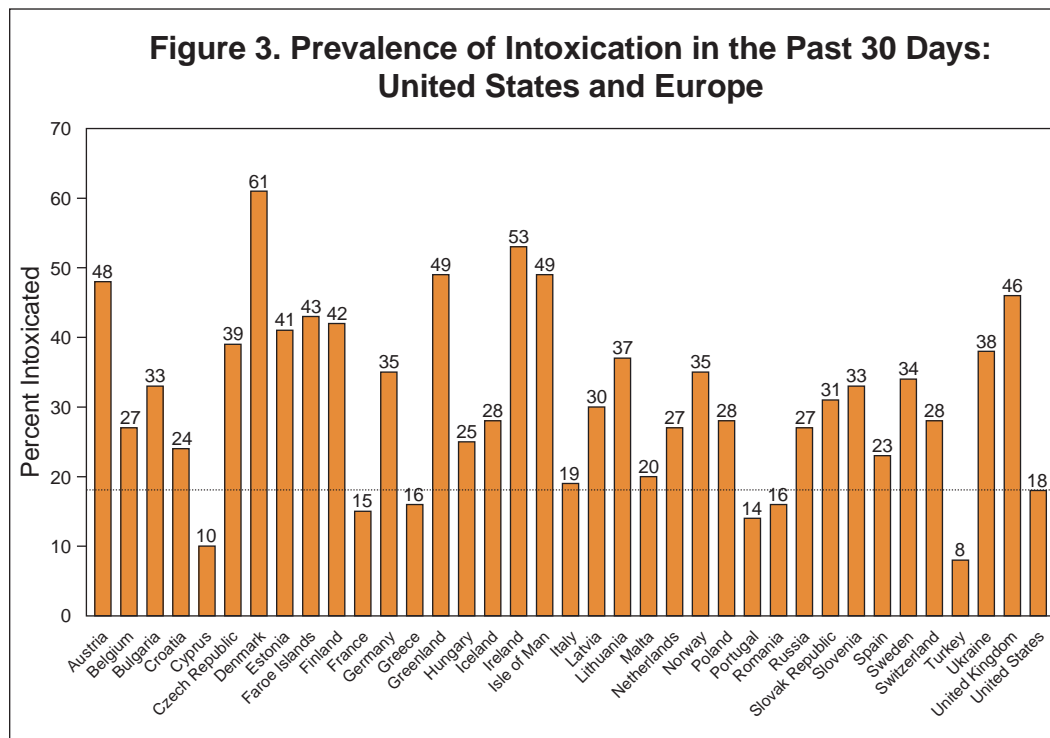
Sources: 2003 ESPAD Survey and 2003 Monitoring the Future Survey

Summary

Recent data from representative surveys provide no evidence that young Europeans drink more responsibly than their counterparts in the United States.

- A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries in the survey report drinking in the past 30 days.
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having five or more drinks in a row compared to U.S. 10th graders. Only for Turkey did a lower percentage of young people report this behavior.
- A great majority of the European countries in the survey had higher prevalence rates for self-reported intoxication than the United States, less than a quarter had lower rates, and less than a quarter had rates that were more or less the same as the United States.

tainty. As with binge drinking, intoxication is associated with a wide variety of personal and social problems. To the extent that the more liberal policies and attitudes toward drinking in Europe contribute to a more responsible drinking style among adolescents, one would expect to find lower rates of intoxication among young Europeans. Figure 3 displays the 30-day prevalence rates for self-reported intoxication for European and American adolescents. As with binge drinking, adolescents from the United States show a moderate rate of intoxication (18%) compared with their European peers. The United States is somewhat higher on this measure than some countries (e.g., Cyprus, France, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Turkey), substantially lower than others (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Ireland, Isle of Man, United Kingdom), and essentially equivalent to still others (e.g., Italy, Malta). Only for Turkey and Cyprus are the prevalence rates substantially lower than for the United States. There is no evidence that the stricter laws and policies regarding drinking by young people in the United States are associated with higher rates of intoxication. Equally, there is no evidence that the more liberal policies and drinking socialization practices in Europe are associated with lower levels of intoxication.



Sources: 2003 ESPAD Survey and 2003 Monitoring the Future Survey

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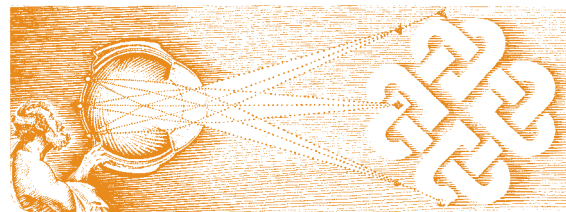
Strategies to Reduce Underage Alcohol Use: Typology and
Brief Overview (Spanish)

Prepared by

Pacific Institute

FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

In support of the
**OJJDP Enforcing the
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Published May 2005

This guide was written by Joel Grube, Ph.D., Prevention Research Center, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, in response to a request from the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free.