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Disturbing Finding on Young Drinkers Proves to Be Wrong

By TAMAR LEWIN

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After several news organizations reported a finding that under-age drinkers consumed a quarter of the nation's alcohol, the widely respected antidrinking organization that issued the finding acknowledged that it had not applied the usual statistical techniques in deriving that number, which would then have been far smaller.

Indeed, the government agency on whose data the finding was based said that by its own analysis, the actual figure for the proportion of alcohol consumed by teenagers was 11.4 percent.

The study, "Teen Tipplers," was issued by Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, whose president, Joseph A. Califano Jr., was secretary of health, education and welfare under Jimmy Carter. Based on the data for teenagers, which were not inaccurate when applied to that subgroup, the report estimated that five million high school students, or 31 percent, engaged in binge drinking at least once a month. That is, they consumed five or more drinks in a row.

But it was the 25-percent-of-all-alcohol finding that was the headline on the news release that accompanied the 145-page report, and the one featured by CNN, The Associated Press and other news organizations, including the Web site of The New York Times. NBC also reported the 25 percent figure but added that the liquor industry and the government contended that the real figure was more like 11 percent. Yesterday evening, The A.P. and other news organizations began correcting the original figure.

The Columbia center said it had derived the data from the Household Survey on Drug Abuse, a yearly poll of 25,500 people, conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

That survey includes nearly 10,000 people age 12 to 20, an oversampling intended to ensure that there would be enough data from young people to make the data statistically valid. So young people made up almost 40 percent of the survey, although they make up less than 20 percent of the population. In estimating their share of alcohol consumption, the center did not adjust the data to account for the oversampling.

"It's very unfortunate," said Sue Foster, the center's vice president and director of policy research. "We didn't reweight the data. But we think the 11.4 percent number is way too low, since there's so much underreporting."

What is beyond dispute in government studies is that teenage drinking remains a serious problem. Although alcohol consumption by teenagers dropped sharply in the 1980's, when states raised the drinking age to 21 from 18, that decline has leveled off since the mid-1990's. From the 1950's to the 1990's, boys drank considerably more than girls, but that gender gap has all but disappeared.

The sex-specific drinking data come from different government surveys, with teenagers reporting higher rates of drinking in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in schools by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, than they do in the annual National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, conducted in homes. But both surveys show that teenage girls' drinking habits now mirror those of teenage boys.

"The latest findings show no difference between teenage girls' drinking habits and teenage boys,'" said a spokeswoman for the C.D.C.
In the most recent school-based survey, 41 percent of the girls and 40 percent of the boys reported drinking alcohol in the last month.

Almost half the teenagers 14 to 18 have tried the new akopops — fruit-flavored malt-based alcoholic beverages with names like Hard Lemonade, Smirnoff Ice, Skyy Blue, Tequiza and Hooper's Hooch. These drinks are particularly appealing to the young because of their sweet taste. Teenagers were three times more likely to know about these drinks than adults, and 14- to 16-year-olds preferred them to beer.

While teenagers drink less frequently than adults, they tend to drink larger, more dangerous amounts at one time. The study found that at whatever age teenage boys and girls begin to drink, they almost always continue to drink as they get older.

The household survey found that while the proportion of teenagers who engage in binge drinking has declined, the gender gap has narrowed. In 1998, 6.6 percent of girls and 8.7 percent of boys 12 to 17 reported binge drinking, compared with 11 percent of the girls and nearly 19 percent of the boys a decade earlier.

In an increasingly egalitarian society, it is perhaps not surprising that what was mostly a boys' misbehavior would spread to girls. Or that treatment centers would be seeing more young girls.

"Historically, you'd see a few girls here and there, but rarely was there a waiting list," said David Rosenker, vice president of adolescent services at the Caron Foundation, a Pennsylvania residential treatment center with 12 beds for girls and 24 for boys. "In the past two or three years, though, we've seen maybe a 30 percent increase in girls, and now there's consistently a waiting list. So we're adding four more beds for girls."

Natalie, 17, a senior at a Brooklyn private school who attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, remembers the first time she got drunk: she was 12 and in charge of the bar at her grandmother's New Year's party.

"I made this rum punch, and no one was drinking it, so I decided I would drink it," she said. "I was dancing around, and everyone was laughing, and I remember it boosted my confidence a lot that everyone was paying so much attention to me. I think I always thought of alcohol as sort of a girl thing, a thing for girls who didn't want to be goody-goodys."

At 13, Natalie and her two best friends drank together. By 14, Natalie was drinking heavily. She was also using drugs and getting in real trouble. The low point, she said, was finding herself on the Lower East Side, drinking gin out of a McDonald's coffee cup, when a homeless man who had overdosed on heroin died right in front of her.

"I don't want to drink ever again; I know where drinking takes me, and it's not pretty," said Natalie, who went into treatment at 14 and has been sober for three years, regularly attending Thursday night meetings in a young people's AA group called Never Had a Legal Drink.

In many ways, Mr. Rosenker and other experts said, Natalie's story is typical of girls with alcohol problems. Among the common factors were that her first alcohol came from her family, that others in the family had been problem drinkers — in her case, a grandmother who is a recovering alcoholic — and that she quickly began mixing alcohol use with drugs.

Natalie says there is no stigma over drinking in her high school world. "Everyone drinks," she said, "it's socially accepted."