

COVID-19 cuts into college students' drinking

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Credit: Rutgers Center of Alcohol & Substance Use Studies

When college campuses closed in the spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the quantity of alcohol consumed by students decreased significantly if they went from living with peers to living with parents, according to a new report in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Leaving home for college is often associated with increases in [drinking](#), and campus closures in spring 2020 formed "the perfect natural experiment" to study changes in drinking behaviors when living situations changed abruptly and unexpectedly for many students, according to lead researcher Helene R. White, Ph.D., distinguished professor emerita with the Center of Alcohol & Substance Use Studies at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

But according to this new study, it might not be just the watchful eye of parents that led to the decrease in quantity of alcohol consumed.

"Drinking is a [social behavior](#) for college students, and without social interaction students are less likely to drink heavily," White says. "Living with parents may especially interfere with social

interaction with peers and thereby be protective against heavy drinking."

For their research, White and colleagues surveyed 312 emerging adults—mostly [college](#) juniors and seniors—approximately two months after COVID-19 campus shut-downs in spring 2020. They asked students about their living situations before and after their schools stopped in-person learning, categorizing students into three groups: (a) living with peers before and after closure, (b) living with parents before and after closure and (c) living with peers before closure but with parents after.

The investigators also asked about students' typical weekly drinking before and after closure. From these responses, White and colleagues tallied the number of days of drinking per week, the total number of drinks consumed weekly and the maximum number of drinks consumed in any one day.

Student [alcohol](#) users who moved from living with peers to parents significantly decreased the number of days they drank per week, from 3.1 before closure to 2.7 after. However, those who remained with peers significantly increased drinking days per week from three to 3.7, and those remaining with parents increased from two to 3.3 per week.

Similarly, the total number of drinks per week for students who moved home went from 13.9 to 8.5. Those continuing to live with peers proceeded to drink essentially the same amount (10.6 drinks per week before compared with 11 per week after closure), whereas those who continued living at home drank almost three drinks per week more (6.7 weekly before versus 9.4 drinks per week after closure).

Those who moved from living with peers to living with parents also saw a decrease in the maximum number of drinks in a day—a maximum of 5.4 drinks

per day before closure to 2.9 after. But also seeing a decrease were those who remained with peers (4.4 versus 3.7) and those remaining with [parents](#) (3.5 versus 3.2) from before to after campus closures.

"[C]ontext is an important correlate of pandemic-related drinking," the authors conclude. "The COVID-19 pandemic is a time of increasing [social isolation](#)," which, for [college students](#) who move home, "provides fewer social opportunities for drinking."

More information: White, H. R., Stevens, A. K., Hayes, K., & Jackson, K. M. (2020). Changes in alcohol consumption among college students due to COVID-19: Effects of campus closure and residential change. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81, 725–730. [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2020.81.725](#)

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