



The effects of binge and problem drinking on problem behavior and adjustment over the life course: Findings from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Prior research has documented linkages between alcohol use and crime and drinking and adverse life circumstances, but this evidence has largely been gleaned from cross-sectional studies or studies conducted over brief time periods.

Methods: In recognition of these limitations, the current study relies on prospective longitudinal data from 411 South London males who are participants in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) to evaluate the prevalence of binge and problem drinking typologies (e.g., juvenile only, adult only, and juvenile and adult binge and problem drinking; ages 18–48) and the relationship of these typologies to non-violent and violent offending over the life-course (e.g., ever convicted for either a non-violent and/or violent offense over ages 10–50) and adult adjustment problems into late middle age.

Results: Results suggest that binge and problem drinking typologies are significantly related to both forms of offending and that these drinking behaviors are associated with a number of adult adjustment problems into late middle age, particularly for adult only and juvenile and adult binge and problem drinkers.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the importance of evidenced-based alcohol prevention and intervention efforts initiated early on in the life-course.

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He was extremely unhappy and discouraged and at this time began to drink again, so that after a period of years free of liquor and of the commission of any other offenses which were the result of drinking, Philip returned to his old ways (Glueck and Glueck, 1943 [1976]).

Research has long documented an association between substance use/abuse and criminal behavior (Costello, Anderson, & Stein, 2014; Exum, 2006; McMurrin, 2013; Özbay, 2008; Wiczorek, Welte, & Abel, 1990; Yu, 1998; Yu, Evans, & Perfetti, 2004, 2006; Zhang, Wiczorek, Welte, Colder, & Nochajski, 2010). Studies consistently find that individuals who engage in criminal acts also consume alcohol and illegal substances, and many had been drinking at the time of the offense (Collins, 1981a; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996; Greenfield, 1998; Lipsey, Wilson, Cohen, & Derzon, 1997; Nilsson, Estrada, & Bäckman, 2014; Richardson & Budd, 2003; Roizen, 1997). Roizen (1997) noted that for certain offenses, such as homicide, up to

86% of offenders had been under the influence during the commission of the crime. In addition, a large portion of those arrested have tested positive for some substance. For example, the most recent Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Program report found that, across research sites, between 62% and 83% of adult male arrestees tested positive for alcohol or drugs in their system (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2014). Similarly, the use and abuse of alcohol has been linked to negative life outcomes, such as unemployment (Graham et al., 2011; Mullahy & Sindelar, 1996) and a greater incidence of injuries (Taylor et al., 2010; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994) and mental health disorders into early adulthood (Hill, White, Chung, Hawkins, & Catalano, 2000).

Despite the very strong pattern of associations between (heavy) alcohol use and both antisocial behavior and negative consequences, debate exists surrounding its meaning (Carpenter, 2007; Lipsey et al., 1997; White, 2014). In particular, alcohol use and abuse may be causally related to offending and poor social outcomes, but the relationship may be spurious, attributable to a third factor (e.g., impulsivity or deviant peers) that causes both (Costello et al., 2014; Gibson, Schreck, & Miller, 2004; Piquero, Gibson, & Tibbetts, 2002). Also, alcohol use and

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offending may be symptoms of the same underlying theoretical construct such as antisocial personality (see Farrington, 1991; West & Farrington, 1977). Alternatively, negative social outcomes may spur alcohol abuse, perhaps as a way to cope with the stress of failure (Agnew, 1992; Newcomb & Bentler, 1989). While laboratory studies suggest that alcohol consumption leads to increased aggression (Chermack & Giancola, 1997; Collins, 1981a; Duke, Giancola, Morris, Holt, & Gunn, 2011), the longitudinal relationship between problem drinking and crime is less well understood, with the effects of problematic drinking at different stages of the life-course still understudied (Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2013; Chassin et al., 2010; Feldstein Ewing, Filbey, Loughran, Chassin, & Piquero, forthcoming; Hill et al., 2000), especially in community-based samples followed into late middle adulthood (see Laub & Sampson, 2003).

In this study, we examine binge and problem drinking in adolescence as well as adulthood in relation to later criminal offending and negative life outcomes (e.g., unemployment, poor relationships). We focus on problematic drinking, rather than simply consuming alcohol, in order to isolate the effects of consuming large quantities of alcohol over short periods of time (see Fagan, 1990). To do so, we use data from one of the world's longest longitudinal studies of a community sample of South London males followed into late middle age, the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. Thus, our study allows us to examine binge and problem drinking at various stages of the life-course and whether that behavior predicts adverse outcomes well into late middle-age. Specifically, this provides one of the longest of these types of investigations to date, which is useful to determine whether the link between problematic drinking and negative life outcomes is short-term or reverberates over the life-course. Importantly as well, we examine this link controlling for important early childhood individual and environmental risk factors that may be implicated in any spurious relationship between problematic drinking and negative life outcomes.

Alcohol, binge drinking, and crime

Overview of alcohol use in the US and abroad

Binge and problem drinking are major social issues in the US and abroad. Definitions vary, but binge drinking typically refers to the amount of alcohol consumed at one sitting or night whereas problem drinking refers to the number of drinks an individual engages in per week. Binge drinking typically is defined as five or more drinks at one sitting, or a drinking episode that results in a blood alcohol concentration level of .08 g/dl,¹ while problem drinking is defined generally as the number of drinks per week (e.g., 15 per the Centers for Disease Control).² As Wechsler and Nelson (2001; p. 289) put it, "Alcohol use is a complex behavior. No single measure will capture all the relevant aspects of alcohol use." Thus, having more than one indicator of alcohol use may be beneficial in studying its effects.

Binge and problem drinking are widely prevalent in the U.S. and abroad. According to the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), in 2013, over 80% of U.S. respondents aged 12 or older had tried alcohol. Among those aged 12 and older, 23% had engaged in binge drinking in the past month, and 6% had engaged in "heavy use" (five or more drinks at one time, more than 5 times a week) (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration). The vast majority of binge drinkers are male (81%), and rates are highest for young adults (aged 18–25), which is the life-transition often associated with such behavior (Naimi et al., 2003). The World Health Organization (2007) reports that individuals across the world, on average, consume 6.2 l of alcohol (about 1.6 gal) per year. Eastern Europe and Central Asia report higher levels (including what the World Health Organization calls "hazardous drinking") than the US. In terms of binge drinking, data collected by Patton and colleagues indicated that North America,

Ireland, and Austria had the highest rates at roughly 30% of youth aged 15 engaging in such behavior within the last month (Patton et al., 2012). Within Europe, the UK has "one of the highest levels of binge drinking" (Emslie, Lewars, Batty, & Hunt, 2009).

The social consequences of drinking

While drinking alcohol is considered normative for many social occasions, binge and problem drinking come at a social cost. Concern about these consequences have been at the heart of "prohibitionist" movements in the US and Europe that were meant to curb or remove alcohol from the social landscape. Estimates of the impact of "excessive drinking" (a combination of binge and heavy drinking) suggest that such behavior may lead to costs up to \$223 billion per year across the US, with over 70% of those costs attributed to binge drinking (Bouchery, Harwood, Sacks, Simon, & Brewer, 2011). These costs incorporate healthcare, accidents, damage, and crime. Research indicates that alcohol abuse is also costly across the world. In the UK, costs associated with alcohol "misuse" have been estimated to be around £25.1 billion per year (Twigg & Moon, 2013).

Excessive alcohol use has been examined in the context of numerous negative consequences, with a particular focus on the effects on health and behavior such as crime. The link between alcohol use and crime was one of the earliest made in the criminological literature. Writing in the late 19th century, Lombroso, claimed "Alcohol...is a cause of crime, first, because many commit crime in order to obtain drinks, further, because men sometimes seek in drink the courage necessary to commit crime, or an excuse for their misdeeds; ...it is by the aid of drink that young men are drawn into crime" (Collins, 1981a, p. xvi). Research on the association between substance use and crime has confirmed that alcohol has the strongest and most substantial link with crime, particularly with violence or aggression (Fagan, 1990; Mullahy & Sindelar, 1996; Valdez, Kaplan, & Curtis, 2007).

Studies have shown that a large percentage of crimes are alcohol-related (Collins, 1981a; Greenfield, 1998; Fergusson et al., 1996; Lipsey et al., 1997; Nilsson et al., 2014; Richardson & Budd, 2003; Roizen, 1997). Alcohol use appears to be slightly more likely to be associated with violent, rather than property, crimes (Carpenter, 2007; Felson & Staff, 2010; Fergusson & Horwood, 2000; Welte & Miller, 1987), which is supported by inmate surveys. For example, the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities found that 36.8% of state inmates were using alcohol during violent crimes while 29.1% were using alcohol during property offenses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Specifically, approximately 25% of violent crime victims report that the perpetrator was drinking at the time of the crime (Greenfield, 1998). The association is particularly stark with domestic violence and homicide (Leonard, 2005; Mullahy & Sindelar, 1996; Parker, 1995; Rossow, 2001). Estimates indicate that 30–80% of homicides involve alcohol to some extent (Roizen, 1997; US Department of Health & Human Services, 2000; Wolfgang, 1958). A recent meta-analysis of 23 studies estimated that 48% of homicide perpetrators had been drinking during their offense (Kuhns, Exum, Clodfelter, & Bottia, 2014). The link between alcohol use and crime, particularly violence, appears in individual level as well as macro-policy-level studies (Heaton, 2012; Parker & Auerhahn, 1998; Rossow, 2001).

Research has generally tended to focus on violence as a consequence of excessive alcohol use (Felson, Savolainen, Aaltonen, & Moustgaard, 2008). As Welte and Miller (1987, p. 314) state, "The reasoning underlying much of the discussion of the alcohol-crime link is that while crimes against property are utilitarian and 'rational', crimes of violence are the result of a loss of self-control. Alcohol should, therefore, play a much more important role in the genesis of crimes of violence because of its disinhibiting qualities." This consequence is likely due to the presumed pharmacological/biological effects (Pernanen, 1981; White, Lee, Mun, & Loeber, 2012; Xue, Zimmerman, & Cunningham, 2009). Research—particularly laboratory research—has shown that increases

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