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# Youth alcohol use and risky sexual behavior: evidence from underage drunk driving laws

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## Abstract

Recent research calls into question previous methods for estimating the relationship between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior among youths [Rashad, I., Kaestner, R., 2004. Teenage sex, drugs and alcohol use: problems identifying the cause of risky behaviors. *Journal of Health Economics* 23, 493–503]. This paper provides new evidence on this question by using reductions in heavy alcohol use among underage males induced by state adoption of very strict age-targeted “Zero Tolerance” drunk driving laws. I estimate reduced form models of the effects of Zero Tolerance laws on state gonorrhea rates by age group and race over the period 1981–2000, controlling for state and year fixed effects and state-specific time trends. I find that adoption of a Zero Tolerance law was associated with a significant reduction in gonorrhea rates among 15–19-year-old white males, with no effect for slightly older males age 20–24 whose drinking behavior was unaffected by the tougher policies. I find mixed effects for white females and no significant effects for blacks. While not conclusive, these results suggest an important role for alcohol use in risky sexual behavior among young men.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers across disciplines generally agree that an important relationship exists between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior among young adults.<sup>1</sup> Identifying more precisely how these behaviors are related has proven difficult, however. One explanation is that alcohol use *causes* youth to be riskier with respect to sexual behavior. For example, some studies have shown that alcohol use reduces social inhibition, leading people to engage in behaviors from which they would otherwise abstain. There are, however, alternative explanations that are consistent with a strong positive association between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior but that do not imply a causal role for alcohol use. For example, some individuals may simply have unobserved preferences for a wide variety of risky behaviors, including alcohol use and sexual activity. Understanding whether and to what extent alcohol use causes individuals to engage in risky sexual behavior has important implications in many policy debates, including: alcohol control, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. For example, if alcohol use truly does cause riskier sexual behavior, then there may be justification for an expanded role for more restrictive government alcohol control policy.

Economists have used a variety of methods to provide evidence on the relationship between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior. One recent approach taken by researchers in this field involves estimation of the reduced form relationship between the price of alcohol — usually beer taxes — and some measure of sexual behavior such as the state gonorrhea rate. A statistically significant coefficient on the beer tax — which is presumed to reduce alcohol consumption — is taken as suggestive evidence for a causal relationship between alcohol consumption and the outcome variable of interest. Indeed, Chesson, Harrison, and Kassler (henceforth CHK) use state panel data on STD rates over a 16-year period and estimate that increases in the beer tax are associated with statistically significant reductions in a state's gonorrhea rate for 15–19-year-old males after controlling for state and year effects.<sup>2</sup>

Other researchers have used individual level data on youth drinking and risky sexual behavior in an attempt to disentangle causality. Grossman and Markowitz (2002) use data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and find that heavy use is associated with reductions in condom and birth control use among teenagers. Rees et al. (2001) use ADHealth data and find that the bivariate probit estimates are uniformly smaller than the OLS estimates, indicating little or no causal relationship between alcohol use and risky sexual activity. Sen (2002) uses NLSY97 data and instruments alcohol use with policies such as state beer taxes. She finds that alcohol use causes young

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I mean “risky” sexual behavior as it relates to sexually transmitted diseases (e.g. condom use, multiple partners, etc.). Others have used “risky” sexual behavior to refer to activity that results in unintended pregnancy. The two ideas are obviously related but distinct (birth control pills, for example, are risky in the former sense but not in the latter sense).

<sup>2</sup> A similar empirical strategy was used by Dee (2001b) who considered the effect of increases in state Minimum Legal Drinking Ages on age-specific birth rates and found evidence supporting a causal relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual activity for black females.

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