



BURRELLE'S

2
..xzo.. 91 XX.... T8

Study confirms college student perceptions of campus drinking rates are inaccurate

4160 B
Newton, Mass. — The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention today announced the results of a new national study confirming that college students overestimate the amount of alcohol consumed by their peers. Education Development Center, the parent organization of the Higher Education Center, is conducting the Social Norms Marketing Research Project (SNMRP), a \$4-million study funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). This research replicates several other studies demonstrating wide misperceptions of college students of drinking on campus.

The Survey of College Alcohol Norms and Behavior was administered to 300 randomly selected students at each of the 18 participating schools in the SNMRP. Follow-up mailings, reminder postcards, and reminder telephone calls generated a response rate of 53.4 percent (2,801 respondents).

Results of baseline data from the SNMRP clearly show that students overestimate the degree of drinking among their peers across different measures of alcohol use:

Seven out of ten (69.2 percent) students incorrectly estimated that their peers consume more drinks per week than is actually the case. The mean number of drinks consumed per week reported by all students in the study was 4.73 (median = 1.00), yet the mean number of drinks students perceived their peers to drink per week was 9.01 (median = 7.50).

Nine out of ten (89.2 percent) students incorrectly estimated that their peers consume more drinks when they party than is actually the case. The mean number of drinks consumed when students party was 3.35 (median = 3.00), yet the mean number of drinks students perceived their peers to drink at parties was 6.54 (median = 6.00).

This same pattern of results was found at each of the 18 participating schools.

These new results confirm over a decade of research demonstrating that students misperceive

drinking levels among peers on their campuses. Researchers Wes Perkins and Alan Berkowitz first determined in 1986 that students regularly overestimate the extent to which their peers are supportive of permissive drinking behaviors. They also found that this overestimation predicted how much individuals drank. Later research has shown the same basic pattern of results at dozens of campuses nationwide.

"Since that initial article appeared, scores of other published articles and research reports from individual campus evaluation studies have demonstrated this tendency of students to overestimate peer drinking and permissiveness," states Wesley Perkins, professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and a leader in the development of social norms research. "Whenever studies simultaneously include comparable measures of actual and perceived attitudes and amounts consumed, this is the typical result. We have also found a large overestimation in perceptions of how often students drink in a study of one hundred colleges and universities nationally and have found inflated perceptions of heavy drinking compared to actual norms among young adults in a statewide population. Now this latest study by the SNMRP confirms the prevalence of this pattern among students based on many drinking measures and on several campuses while using a consistent survey method across schools."

Recent data published in the *Journal of American College Health* from the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study appear to show that students' estimates of "binge drinking" levels on their campuses are "close to" the actual rate of drinking measured by the study. "The College Alcohol Study is the only published study that contends there is no general overestimate of drinking behavior among college students," states William DeJong, director of the Higher Education Center. "We need to take a closer look at the methodology used in this study to examine why these results contradict all previous research."

Data collected in the SNMRP study inform an

emerging and promising approach to campus alcohol prevention termed social norms marketing. The underlying idea is that college students think much more drinking occurs among their peers than is actually the case. As students attempt to fit in and be accepted, they may drink to excess, perhaps drinking to levels they believe their peers are reaching.

Colleges using social norms marketing launch a media campaign to correct students' perceptions of how much their peers drink. The expectation is that when students have a more accurate perception of norms on campus, they will be motivated to drink less. Campuses employing the social norms approach have witnessed correlated decreases of as much as 20 percent in rates of high-risk drinking. Education Development Center's SNMRP is currently conducting a scientifically rigorous experiment to test the effectiveness of social norms marketing campaigns.

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention serves as the national resource center for institutions of higher education concerned with reducing alcohol and other drug use. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the center offers training, technical assistance, publications, and other information to assist those who want to take an active part in changing the environment in which students make decisions about alcohol and other drug use. The Higher Education Center is based at Education Development Center, Inc., an internationally known educational research and development organization located in Newton, Massachusetts.

For additional information, contact the center by phone (800-676-1730) or through the Internet (HigherEdCtr@edc.org) (<mailto:HigherEdCtr@edc.org>).

The Center's website (www.edc.org/hec) (<http://www.edc.org/hec>) provides one-stop shopping for alcohol and other drug prevention in higher education.