

Youth Drinking Rates and Problems: A Comparison of European Countries and the United States

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Introduction

Among Americans there is a commonly held perception young people in European countries are introduced to alcohol in a cultural context that reduces heavy and harmful drinking. The idea is often expressed that because the drinking age in the United States is 21, much higher than in European countries, young people miss out on the opportunity to learn to drink within family settings where moderate drinking is the norm. They believe, therefore, that American young people drink more frequently, binge drink more, and experience more alcohol-related problems than do European youth. This perception, in turn, is used as argument for changes in U.S. alcohol policies and prevention initiatives, including lowering the minimum drinking age and development of programs that teach responsible drinking to young people.

Do European youth actually drink less and experience fewer problems than their American counterparts? Research demonstrates that this is not the case. In fact, in comparison with young people in the United States,

- A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days;
- A majority of the European countries have higher intoxication rates among young people than do youth from the United States; and
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having been intoxicated before the age of 13.

Based on this analysis, the comparison of drinking rates and alcohol-related problems among young people in the United States and in European countries does not provide support for lowering the U.S. minimum drinking age or for the implementation of programs to teach responsible drinking to young people.

Do young people from Europe drink more responsibly than young people from the United States?

This question is important because it is often raised in the context of the stricter minimum drinking age laws in the United States. Although the implementation of the uniform minimum drinking age of 21 and the more recent enactment of zero tolerance laws have reduced drinking by young people and saved thousands of lives (e.g., Cook, 2007; Shults et al., 2001; Wagenaar, & Toomey, 2002), these policies have come under attack as contributing to irresponsible styles of drinking. . . Sometimes, European countries are held up as examples of where more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes, in turn, may foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. It is asserted that alcohol is more integrated into European, and especially southern European, culture and that young people there learn to drink at younger ages within the context of the family (Room, 2004). Supporters of this argument frequently claim that the higher legal

drinking age in the US makes alcohol an attractive “forbidden fruit” and forces young people to drink in risky and unsupervised situations (Frantz, 2004). As a result some believe that young Europeans learn to drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States.

This report addresses this question using data from the 2007 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and the 2007 United States Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF).

European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). The ESPAD survey collected data in 2007 from 15-16 year old students ($M = 15.8$) in 35 European countries. The data were obtained using anonymous self-administered in-school surveys. Sample sizes ranged from 393 (Monaco) to 9,981 (Italy). The samples were designed to be nationally representative in each case.¹ The list of all the countries included appears in Table 1 below. Also included in the table is an indication of the drinking ages in each country (where that can be determined). A detailed report on the methods and findings from the ESPAD survey is available (Hibell et al., 2009).

**Table 1: Countries included in full ESPAD Study:
Minimum Purchase Age**

Country	Age	Country	Age
• Armenia	16	• Italy	16
• Austria	16	• Latvia	18*
• Belgium	15	• Lithuania	18*
• Bulgaria	16*	• Malta	16
• Croatia	18*	• Monaco	NA
• Cyprus	NA**	• Netherlands	16***
• Czech	18	• Norway	18***
• Denmark	18	• Poland	18*
• Estonia	18	• Portugal	18
• Faroe Isl.	NA	• Romania	NA
• Finland	18	• Russia	21
• France	16	• Slovak Rep.	18*
• Germany	16	• Slovenia	18
• Greece	18*	• Spain	16
• Greenland	NA	• Sweden	18
• Hungary	18*	• Switzerland	14***
• Iceland	20*	• Ukraine	21*
• Ireland	18	• UK	18
• Isle of Man	NA	• US	21

*Data available only for minimum purchase age

**Data not available

***Minimum drinking age for beer/wine only; older age requirements for spirits

¹ The representativeness of the survey in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom is somewhat uncertain because of a relatively large number of non-participating schools and classes.

In order to simplify the presentation of the results of the survey, data are presented here only for what have been defined by the National Geographic Society as Western European countries. These include the countries most likely to be compared to the U.S.

Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF). The MTF survey is conducted annually among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the United States. The samples are designed to be nationally representative of students in those grade levels. The data reported here are for the 10th grade sample because it represents the same age group that was included in the ESPAD surveys. The 10th grade MTF survey comprises an anonymous self-administered questionnaire given in the school setting. The 2007 MTF survey included 16,398 10th graders. Detailed descriptions of the MTF methods and findings may be found on the internet (<http://monitoringthefuture.org/>) or in a series of publications available from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (e.g., Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2008).

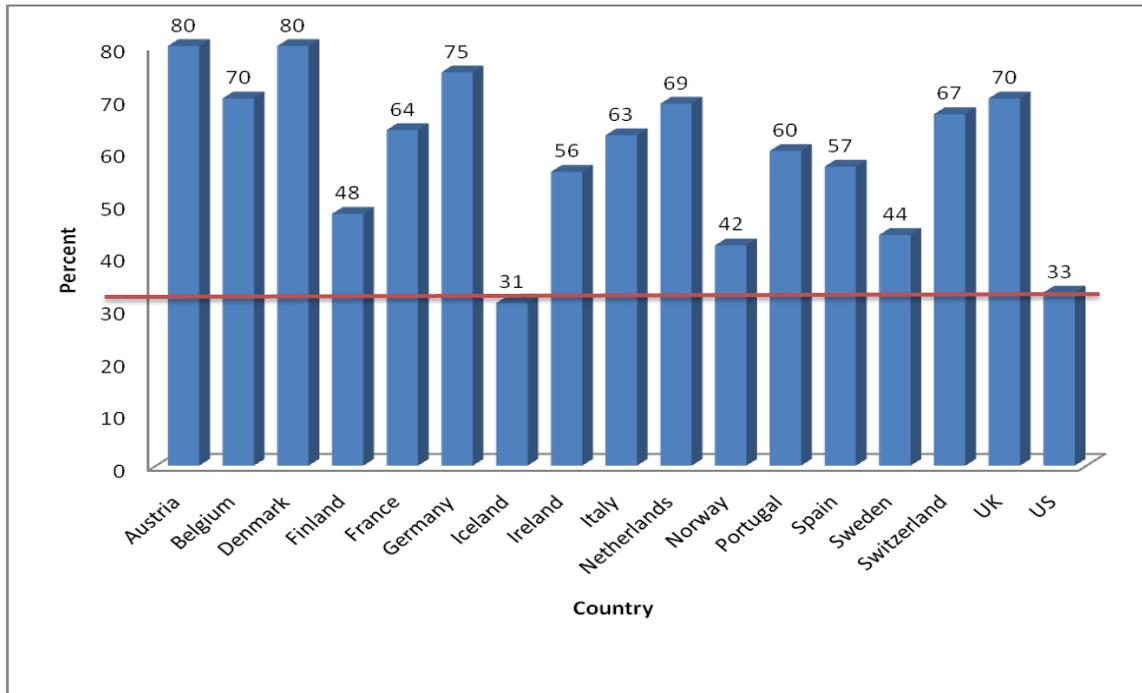
Comparability. The questionnaire for the ESPAD survey was closely modeled after the MTF survey. The questions from the two surveys map closely onto one another.

Results

Prevalence of drinking in past 30 days

Figure 1 shows the percentage of young people in 16 European countries and in the US reporting that they had at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage during the past 30 days. These 30-day drinking rates are often used as an indicator of the number of current or regular drinkers in a population. In the 2007 MTF survey, 33% of 10th graders reported that they had a drink in the past 30 days. It is clear from Figure 1 that the US is a low consumption country by European standards. The rate of current drinking among US youth is lower than that for any of the countries in this study with the exception of Iceland.

Figure 1: Percent of 15-16 Year Olds Reporting Drinking in the Past 30 Days

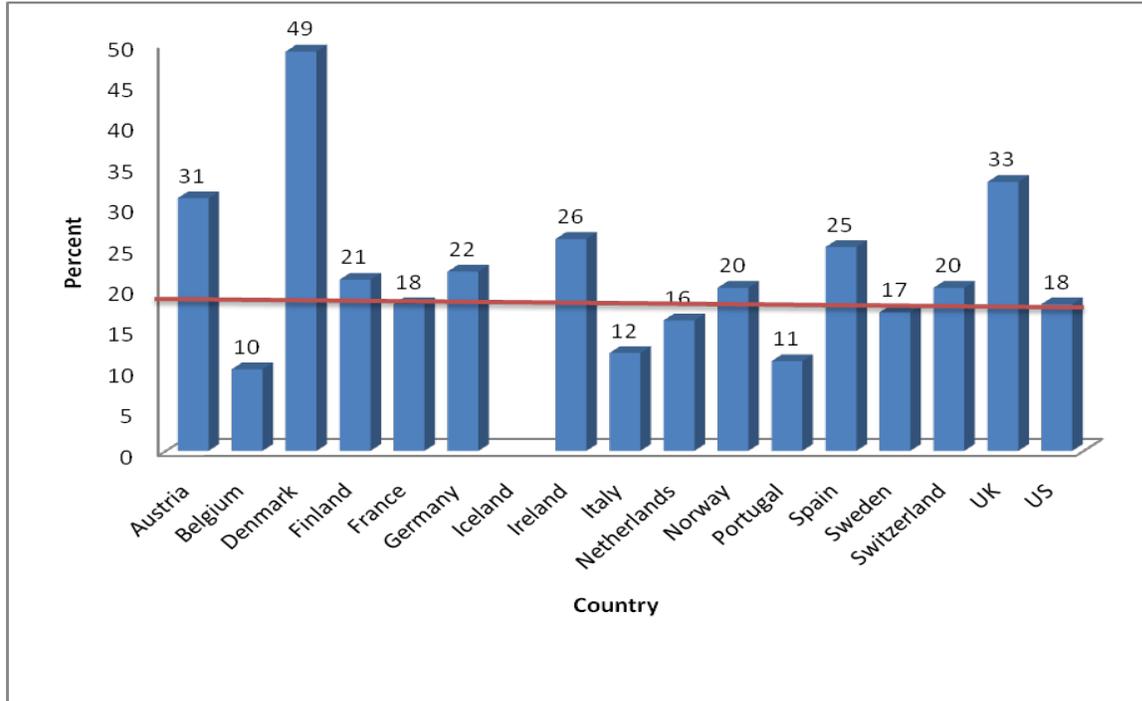


Intoxication

The data in Figure 1 show that fewer American adolescents are current drinkers than is the case for all but one of the Western European countries. But what about risky drinking? Do European young people drink more moderately in a family context, as many Americans believe? If the early socialization to drinking that is assumed to be typical of Europe is such that it fosters responsible drinking, then we would expect to see much lower rates of intoxication there than in the US.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of 10th graders in Europe and in the US who report having been intoxicated in the past 30 days. US adolescents show *equal or lower* rates for intoxication than do adolescents from most European countries in the ESPAD survey. Nine out of the 15 European countries reporting here have intoxication rates that are higher than in the US (18%). In some cases, the percentage of young people reporting having been intoxicated in the past 30 days is considerably higher than that for the US. For example, Denmark (49%)¹, United Kingdom (33%), and Austria (31%) have substantially higher rates of intoxication. There is no evidence that the stricter laws and policies regarding drinking by young people in the US are associated with higher rates of intoxication. Equally, there is no evidence that the more liberal policies and drinking socialization practices in Europe are associated with lower levels of intoxication

Figure 2: Percent of 15-16 Year Olds Reporting Intoxication in the Last 30 Days²

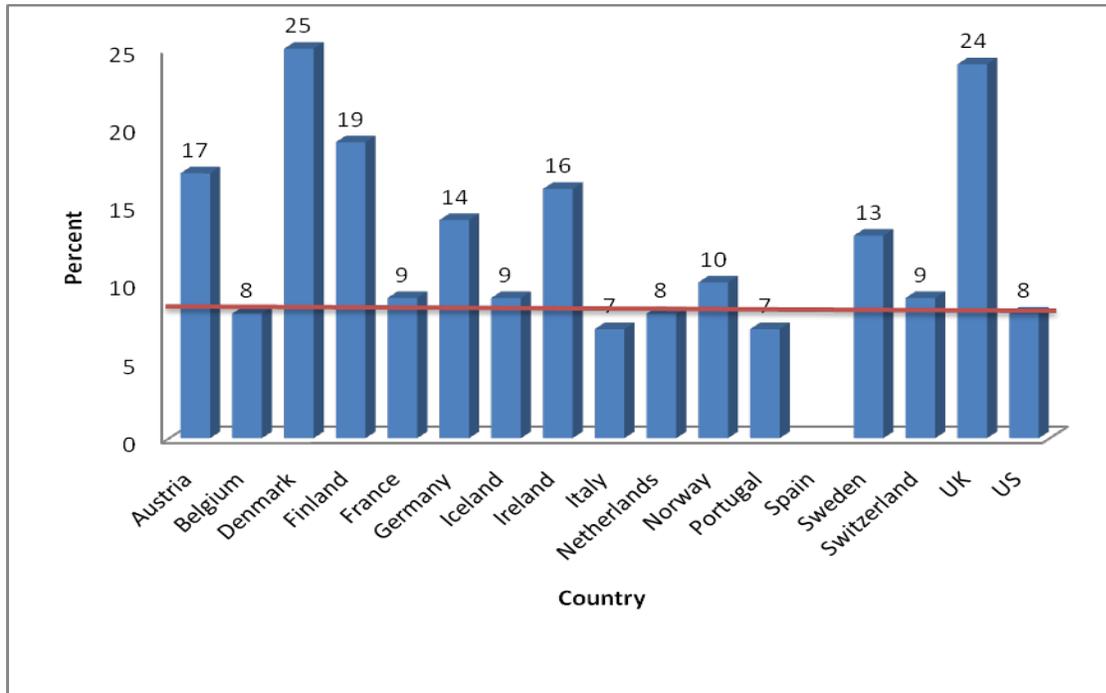


Intoxication before Age 13

Not only do youth in the majority of European countries report a higher prevalence of intoxication, they also are more likely to report intoxication before age 13. Of the Western European countries included in this analysis, only Italy and Portugal (each at 7%), report a slightly lower prevalence of intoxication before age 13 than the US (8%) (Figure 3). This finding is important because early onset of drinking alcohol, and especially early onset of regular or heavy drinking, is known to be highly associated with later problems and risk of dependency. Studies have consistently shown that youth who start drinking and heavy drinking at a younger age are at significantly greater risk for a range of alcohol problems, including car crashes, drinking and driving, suicidal thoughts and attempts, unintentional injury, as well as drug and alcohol dependence later in life (e.g., Dawson, Goldstein, Chou, Ruan, & Grant, 2008; Ehlers, Slutske, Gilder, Lau, & Wilhelmsen, 2006; Hingson & Zha, 2009; Hingson, Edwards, Heeren, & Rosenbloom, 2009; Hingson, Heeren, & Edwards, 2008).

² Data on this question not available for Iceland.

Figure 3: Percent of 15-16 Year Olds Reporting Intoxication before Age 13³



Summary

Recent data from representative surveys provide no evidence that young Europeans drink more responsibly than their counterparts in the US.

- A greater percentage of young people from all of the European countries except Iceland report drinking in the past 30 days.
- A majority of the European countries included in this study have higher intoxication rates among young people than the United States and about one third of the countries have equal or lower rates to the United States; and
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having been intoxicated before the age of 13.

³ Data on this question not available for Spain.

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