

Is Alcohol Related to Rioting? An Exploration of College Student Attitudes

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Abstract

This research reports on college students' attitudes regarding alcohol abuse and rioting and beliefs about university- and community-based environmental management strategies to quell riotous behavior. Using a primarily qualitative research technique, the researchers explored attitudes toward recent rioting at a northeastern Big Ten University using a 16-item questionnaire containing mostly open-ended items. A selected sample of 150 students majoring in education or health and physical education was chosen, 139 of whom volunteered to participate. Most students expressed beliefs that heavy alcohol use and rioting were linked; however, many rejected paternalistic approaches such as strict enforcement or countermeasures. Opinions toward increased police enforcement to reduce rioting among these respondents were fairly evenly divided, although many forceful responses opposing police enforcement were noted, especially regarding the use of tear gas, perceived limiting of personal freedoms, and characterization of police as intimidating. Respondents characterized the most recent public disturbance at this university as a "riot," or a wild party that "grew out of control." Only a small minority of respondents indicated they had participated in the most recent of three disturbances. Implications regarding the role of health educators to promote university- and community-based alcohol abuse prevention coalitions are discussed.

Introduction

In 1998, numerous media sources began reporting that alcohol-fueled rioting was a growing social problem among college-age students (Reisberg). As a result, the body of research literature linking high-risk drinking to multiple physical, emotional, and academic problems among college students (Engs, Diebold, & Hanson 1996; Migneault, Velicer, Prochaska, & Stevenson, 1999; U.S. Department of Health

and Human Services, 1997; Wechsler, Lee, Hall, Wagenaar, & Lee, 2002; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002) has expanded to include rioting (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Universities are increasingly using countermeasures, referred to as "environmental management," as a means to curb high-risk drinking and related problems. Environmental management involves the policy, educational, and legal efforts by many institutions of higher education to counteract problems associated with high-risk drinking (DeJong et al., 1998; DeJong, 2001).

The U. S. Department of Education (2000) recently described alcohol-related rioting as becoming both commonplace and geographically diverse. Consider the following examples: (1) 2,000 Michigan State students rioted to oppose a ban on drinking at a popular tailgating location, (2) a five-hour rampage was ignited at Washington State University by students opposed to bans on alcohol during fraternity social functions, (3) Plymouth State College reported that 500 angry students burned furniture and pelted police with rocks during the students' annual spring fling, (4) 1,500 Pennsylvania State University students toppled streetlights, smashed windows, lit bonfires, and turned over cars following a summer arts festival, (5) the University of Tennessee police deployed pepper spray to disperse a riotous crowd during a year's end fraternity party, and (6) Ohio University students rioted in opposition to losing one hour of drinking time when bar owners complied with Daylight Saving Time (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Environmental management strategies often are in conflict with student beliefs about personal rights to socialize, consume alcohol excessively, and relax, because students generally do not associate alcohol use with rioting and violence. In fact, students cited in Reisberg's 1998 Chronicle of Higher Education report argued against stricter police enforcement, stating: "It feels awkward to have all those police officers around - students see it as a violation of their rights to have a good time." Or that, "Students are just tired of being busted on - everybody in college is 18 and older. We're all adults, and we don't need someone to tell us we can't drink alcohol" (p. A 47). Regardless, the Gebhardt, Kaphingst, and DeJong (2000) case study of a university campus-community coalition to control alcohol-related problems off-campus documented the advantage of using environmental management. The authors noted how a coalition offset problems associated with high-risk alcohol consumption, citing "declines in the number of off-campus noise ordinance reports filed by the police and the number

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of calls to a university-maintained hotline for reporting off-campus problems" (Gebhardt, et al., p. 211).

The Wagenaar, Gehan, Jones-Webb, Toomey, and Forster (1999) report of a randomized 15-community trial documenting a community-based preventive intervention to change policies and practices of major community institutions showed significant reductions in the likelihood that alcohol establishments would serve alcohol to those under the minimum legal drinking age. On the other hand, Lewis's (2001) opinion-editorial argued against strict policy enforcement stating, "Although zero tolerance policies are being enacted on campuses nationwide, they may not be the most effective means of creating safer and healthier environments for students" (p. 39). Instead, Lewis (2001) theorizes:

In our society, the risks of binge drinking are being widely reported in the news; in fact, they are nothing new. The history of alcohol excess by college students began at the turn of the 19th Century at Harvard University with the celebration of Washington's Birthday (p. 40).

Method

A survey of a selected group of university students was conducted to assess their beliefs about heavy alcohol use and rioting as well as opinions about the university's environmental management strategies to quell riotous behavior.

Participants

A convenience sample consisted of 150 students pursuing Elementary Education certification, or Health and Physical Education certification, and who were enrolled at a Big Ten University during Fall Semester 2001. These students were required to take a three-credit health pedagogy course prior to being certified to teach Elementary Education, or Health and Physical Education.

Procedures

The investigators first conducted a literature review on alcohol-related rioting to inform the development of a pilot questionnaire. Next, a 16-item draft questionnaire was formatted to include 10 open-ended items measuring alcohol beliefs and alcohol-related rioting attitudes, and six closed-ended alcohol-related behavior and demographic items. The researchers did not intend to establish reliability during the fieldwork phase. Nevertheless, the pilot questionnaire was examined for face validity (Litwin, 1995; McKenzie & Smeltzer, 2001) by both the researchers and several undergraduate students. Specifically, researchers invited three undergraduates enrolled at the same university to review the questionnaire with regard to its readability, relevance, and overall practicality. These three volunteers were instructed to read each item carefully, respond, and comment on the questionnaire's wording, tone, phrasing, meaning,

and readability. These volunteers noted that the questionnaire's content seemed reasonable and that wording was nonthreatening, although one volunteer suggested revising the demographic item measuring residential location to include the phrase "during the academic year" to clarify on-campus versus off-campus and summer versus regular academic year. The instrument was revised accordingly and an application to proceed with a second pilot test was submitted to the university's Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS) for formal review. Following OPHS approval, all of the 150 students were invited to complete the questionnaire entitled, "Pilot Study: Student Perceptions of Alcohol-Related Rioting," during a regular class session in exchange for extra course credit. Figure 1 shows the 16 items contained in this piloted questionnaire.

Of the 150 students who comprised the sample, a total of 139 students volunteered to participate in the study. The rate of participation was 92.6%. Most participants were women (80.1%; n = 111), Junior (51.4%; n = 71) or Senior (39.1%; n = 54) class standing, Caucasian (94.5%; n = 120), reporting Grade Point Averages of A (50%; n = 69) or B (37.0%; n = 51) level, and residing off-campus (80.5%; n = 103).

Results

The researchers reviewed all responses, determined whether responses reflected either positive or negative direction, and categorized the verbatim responses for commonality with regard to an identified theme, topic, subject matter, argument, or premise. These responses are presented in Table 1 through Table 5. It is important to note that because respondents could note numerous responses within an open-ended question, proportions within subcategories could exceed 100%. When values exceeded 100%, only the raw numbers are expressed (e.g., n =) within the subcategory.

Beliefs About Excessive Alcohol Use and Rioting

The overwhelming majority (91.0%; n = 122) of respondents agreed that excessive alcohol use increases the risks for rioting among college students, as shown in Table 1. The reasons given included "impairment" and "getting carried away." For example, of the 122 respondents who believed excessive alcohol use increases rioting risks, nearly half (n = 58) affirmed that alcohol increases the risks for rioting on the premise that "inhibitions are reduced," "decision making is impaired," and that "everything is a joke." Likewise, 31 respondents said that people "do stupid things," "want to belong to a group," or "act immaturity," thereby increasing the risks for rioting. A similar number (n = 28) of respondents believed that alcohol increases rioting risks, stating that people get "carried away," "out of control," "crazy," "aggravated," or "violent." The following verbatim responses depict respondents' views of alcohol use in relationship to rioting at this university:

Pilot Study: Student Perceptions of Alcohol-Related Rioting

Directions: Please read the following questions and write your responses in the space provided below, or circle the best response as it applies to you.

1. What do you think makes up the components of a successful night of drinking?
2. Do you feel that excessive alcohol use increases the risks for rioting among college students?
3. Why or why not?
4. Do you feel that the violent crime rate at the university would decline if there were less alcohol consumption on campus?
5. Would greater police enforcement of the university's Alcohol and Other Drug policies reduce the number of violent crimes on campus?
6. Why or why not?
7. Would the three riots have occurred if the students had been drinking less alcohol?
8. Why or why not?
9. How do you feel about the increased police presence that is designed to offset the likelihood of alcohol-induced rioting (e.g., greater police presence, emptying county jail to make room for expected rioters, use of tear gas)?
10. How would you characterize the disturbances? (e.g., riot, revolution, wild party; or other, please specify):
11. Were you involved in the Spring Semester 2001 disturbance following the major basketball-sporting event? (No or Yes)
12. What is your gender? (Female or Male)
13. What is your current year in school? (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, 9th Semester or Higher)
14. What is your grade point average? (<2.00, 2.00-2.49, 2.50-2.99, 3.00-3.49, 3.50-3.99, or 4.00)
15. Which of the following best represents your race? (White; Black/African American; American Indian; Eskimo; Asian/Pacific Islander; Cuban; Mexican, Mexicano, Mexican American; Chicano; Other Latin American or other Spanish)
16. Where do you reside during the academic year? (Off-campus, On-campus)

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- Yes, I do believe that excessive alcohol use does increase risks of rioting. Many, who are drunk, claim that they don't/didn't know what they were doing.
 - Yes, it increases the likelihood but is not the sole factor of rioting. Alcohol impairs your ability to think straight and make appropriate decisions.
 - Yes, because having a buzz or being very drunk makes students less concerned about the effects of the behavior and more focused on the "now." So if people start acting stupid in the street, others join and it gets out of control eventually.
 - Yes, I believe there is so much obvious underage drinking that occurs, more enforcement could stop this.
 - Yes, I think many people drink because they feel confident they won't get caught. If the policies were enforced, I think there would be less [sic] violent crimes related to alcohol and drug use.
 - Possibly. I think, however, it could cause more problems because students will sneak around and do anything they can to drink if they want to. The more you tell a college student 'you can't do that,' the more they want to.

Attitudes Toward Strict Policy Enforcement to Prevent Rioting

Table 2 shows that nearly two-thirds (62.3%; n = 86) of respondents believed that strict enforcement of alcohol policies would not reduce violent crimes on campus. Primarily, respondents noted the limited value of strict policy enforcement in their responses, such as "students will drink anyway or find other ways to drink," "you can't police everybody and students will drink in unpatrolled areas," and "more laws will give incentive to rebel." Only one-fourth (27.5%; n = 38) of all respondents believed that greater enforcement of university alcohol policies would reduce the number of violent crimes on campus. The following quotes represent a sampling of student attitudes:

- No, because no matter what, people always find a way to drink if they really want to.

Opinions About Greater Police Presence to Offset Future Rioting

As shown in Table 3, when asked to express their beliefs regarding the increased presence of police to offset rioting, approximately one-third (33.1%; n = 46) of respondents noted central themes supporting enforcement, such as "it is good," "we need it," and "best to be cautious." Slightly more than one-fourth (26.6%; n = 37) of respondents agreed that the police presence "helps to keep things under control," and "might deter rioting." Nevertheless, over one-fourth (28.1%; n = 39) of respondents did not support the greater police presence, arguing, "police initiate some of the problems," "it adds fuel to the fire," "they spray tear gas for no reason," "measures are too extreme," and "it may encourage rioting."

Table 1

Alcohol Increases Risks for Rioting

Response	n	%
1. Disagrees: No, there are more factors than drinking involved in rioting (n=6) No, students would riot anyway (n=4) No, alcohol does not make many people violent/alcohol relaxes people (n=2) No, students were showing support/anger (n=1) No, rioting depends on the situation (n=1) No, all of the 20,000 student rioters could not have been drunk (n=1)	12	9
2. Agrees: Yes, reduced inhibition/impaired decision making/can't think straight/lose rationale/ everything is a joke (n=58) Yes, people: do stupid things while under the influence/act differently/do things they would not normally do/want to belong to a group/are immature (n=31) Yes, people get: carried away/out of control/crazy/aggravated/violent (n=28) Yes, people feel: invincible/powerful and bold/invisible/brave (n=13) Yes, having a tendency to follow others (n=8) Yes, can use it as an excuse (n=2) Yes, and there are other issues that affect rioting other than alcohol (n=1)	122	91
Total	134	100

Note. Respondents could identify multiple reasons for their beliefs and therefore only the total number within the subcategory (i.e., disagree or agree) is presented.

Frequently cited arguments concerning the issue of police enforcement to reduce rioting included:

- I think this definitely had a positive impact on declining the likelihood of a riot. Just this past month when the university won its first football game many people crowded into the canyon. Nothing happened because the police were there waiting with tear gas in hand. I think people have learned their lesson now.
- I think it's a little harsh yet the protection is needed for the safety of the community as a whole.
- Bad. Last year during a riot, I was walking through the area (not drunk, not even participating in the riot) and I was sprayed directly in the face with tear gas. I just think they are taking it too far.
- I feel that I am being violated. The police on horses are a little much. They ride around and stare down all students like we are all their enemies.
- I think that the police actually start some of the rioting. When they are up in everyone's faces and threatening to use tear gas and force, that makes people mad—especially drunk people. They cause some of the violence themselves—they overreact.

Belief That Recent Riots Were Fueled By Alcohol

Attitudes toward excessive alcohol use as related to recent rioting are shown in Table 4. Nearly half (48.9%; n = 67) of all respondents agreed that rioting would not have occurred if less alcohol were consumed, adding, that "it may have been less serious" (n = 30), that the university simply "has a lot of school spirit" (n = 20), or that "it [riot] was a planned event" or part of "tradition." Slightly more than one-fifth (21.9%; n = 30) of respondents agreed that less alcohol would have reduced the likelihood of rioting, while 18.2% (n = 25) of all respondents said they were unsure. Respondents noted a mixture of opinions regarding whether riots would occur if less alcohol were consumed, as shown below.

- Yes – the riot might still have occurred, but I doubt it would have gotten as out of control without alcohol. Adrenaline got them to the canyon. Alcohol got them out of control.
- Yes – people were talking about the riots days before the game even occurred. They would have done it whether we won or lost, whether drinking or not.
- Probably. I think it still would've happened, it just would've been less crazy – more in control. You do

Table 2

Beliefs Regarding the University's Strict Enforcement of Alcohol Policy

Would Policy Enforcement Reduce Violent Crimes?		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
1.	No: Students will drink anyway/numbers are small/will find other ways to drink (n=38) More laws will give more incentive to rebel/more reasons for drinking (n=20) You can't police everybody/students will find unpatrolled areas (n=25) Alcohol is not the issue, there are many other things (n=8) Police are not effective/nobody respects police/crime will happen anyway (n=6) Police would become more of an enemy/more police equal more angry students (n=4) Students don't think they will get caught (n=3)	86	62.3
2.	Yes: Police presence reduced prevalence of drinking (n=11) Students are drinking more because there is no enforcement (n=9) The more people get caught the less will drink (n=6) Students do not want to throw away their college career (n=5) Risks have gone down since enforcement (n=1) People will always drink and there will always be consequences (n=1)	38	27.5
3.	Unsure/Don't know	14	10.2
Total		138	100

Note. Respondents could identify multiple reasons for their beliefs and therefore only the total number within each subcategory is presented.

dumb things that sound "cool" when you're drunk
- like light and throw flaming paper!

- No. It really doesn't matter how much beer they drink. Right now riots are kind of a tradition. I hate to say that.

Depiction of Recent Public Disturbances

Table 5 illustrates how these respondents described or best characterized the public disturbances that had occurred within the past year. Over half (53.1%; n = 69) called it a riot, while nearly one-third (30.3%; n = 40) felt it was a "wild party," "partying," or "being crazy or out of control." Quotes, which capture thematic beliefs, are as follows:

- Anytime there are that many people and that much destruction you are dealing with a riot.
- I think that they are riots plain and simple. I think it is a bunch of drunk [sic] people who think it's fun to destroy everything in sight because they can't do that when sober.
- A wild celebration until police pepper sprayed students and invoked a minor riot/disturbance.
- Wild party: I don't think people were smashing into stores and stealing VCR's, so it wasn't a riot. I think it was school pride. Arts Fest a few years back was a riot.

Involvement In Most Recent University Riot

Finally, participants were asked to share whether they had physically participated in the most recent public disturbance during Spring Semester, 2001. Table 5 shows that only a minority (11.6%; n = 16) of respondents had participated or inadvertently become involved in the riot.

Discussion

Prior to discussing the research findings, several limitations of the research should be noted. First, the study was limited in that it was one of convenience. Second, the sample was composed primarily of women. Third, the majority of respondents did not participate in the alcohol-related rioting at this university; therefore, the following discussion is limited to those who responded and should not be generalized.

The finding that an overwhelming majority of respondents (91%) believed alcohol use increases risks for rioting is intriguing in that nearly two-thirds (62.3%) also were opposed to strict policy enforcement to reduce rioting. In fact, many of our respondents believed that police countermeasures actually contributed to rioting, a finding that concurs with reports by the U. S. Department of Education (2000). It is possible that respondents viewed environmental management as being "paternalistic, harsh,

Table 3

Beliefs Regarding Greater Police Enforcement to Reduce Rioting

Would greater police enforcement reduce rioting behavior?

Greater Police Enforcement Reduces Rioting	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Positive Viewpoint:						
1. Enforcement is good/we need it/good to be cautious and prepared	46	33.1	93	66.9	139	100
2. Keeps things under control/might deter rioting/cuts down likelihood of rioting	37	26.6	102	73.4	139	100
3. It is necessary/they have the right/it's OK	10	7.2	129	92.8	139	100
4. Great/step in the right direction	7	5.0	132	95.0	139	100
5. The university needs to get its name back	1	0.7	138	99.3	139	100
Negative Viewpoint:						
1. Police initiate some problems/adding fuel to the fire/they spray (tear gas) for no reason/tear gas is extreme/ may encourage rioting	39	28.1	100	71.9	139	100
2. A little overboard/overreaction/pretty hostile/too much/ harsh/unnecessary	22	15.8	117	84.2	139	100
3. Don't like it because it makes me feel unsafe/makes us look bad/annoying	9	6.5	130	93.5	139	100
4. It's a joke/they don't do anything/it's not effective/ it does not solve the problem	7	5.1	130	94.9	137	100
5. It limits students' freedom/intimidates/would be more effective to curtail drinking	7	5.1	132	95.0	139	100
6. Sensible drinking is better	3	2.2	136	97.8	139	100
7. Better to get to the root of the problem	3	2.2	136	97.8	139	100
8. They should not let things get out of hand	1	0.7	138	99.3	139	100

and adversarial" because programs designed to prevent future rioting focused on alcohol misuse and target the entire student body, not the minority of those who participated in the riots. The earlier research of Engs and Hansen (1989) is salient to our findings that countermeasures actually create a "reactance motivation." That is, when students who perceive their rights and freedoms (e.g., being "rowdy, wild, and drunken") are suppressed by environmental

management, these countermeasures may inadvertently produce reciprocal reactions among students thereby leading to additional rioting.

One mechanism to prevent rioting is for health educators to become instrumental in university-and community-coalition building. Ideally, this campus-community team would be composed of business owners; off-campus residential interest groups; students; university

Table 4

Perceptions Regarding Alcohol Related Violence

Riots Would Occur if Less Alcohol Were Consumed		<i>n</i>	%
1.	No: It would not have been as serious (n=30) We have a lot of school spirit/it was planned/tradition (n=25) People celebrate with or without alcohol/alcohol had nothing to do with the riot (n=20) Sometimes people do stupid or crazy things (n=5) No way to tell for sure, a few people started it and others followed (n=3) Troublemakers are always around (n=1) The fighting set off the riot (n=1)	67	48.9
2.	Yes: Alcohol was the main cause (n=7) Drunken people lose capability to use logic and judgement (n=7) "Liquid courage"/more aggressive nature/exaggerated behavior (n=3) People would have been aware of consequences (n=4) Students would have know their actions were not proper and controlled actions (n=5) Alcohol makes students regret their actions (n=1)	30	21.9
3.	Unsure/Don't know	40	29.1
Total		137	100

Note. Respondents could identify multiple reasons and therefore only the total number within each subcategory is presented.

administrators; medical, legal, and psychological professionals; researchers; and health educators. As documented by the "Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol" project by Wagenaar and colleagues (1999), this approach has been successful and should serve to motivate health educators in future programs for institutions of higher education. In particular, the success of the community mobilization project noted above is attributed to the fidelity with which its nine program planning strategies were employed: (1) allowing adequate time to obtain consensus, mobilize citizens, and influence local policy; (2) working with communities that have established alcohol control policies; (3) researching and clearly understanding the issue; (4) recruiting and building support to optimize working relationships; (5) employing "multiple packaging" for the issues, [e.g., present underage alcohol use as a public health issue to medical workers and as a family issue to parents and care givers]; (6) avoiding premature action so as not to alienate potential allies; (7) cultivating ownership; (8) responding to the problem promptly; and (9) celebrating the achievements. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) recommends a similar approach, adding that consensus building must recognize influences such as "student traditions and norms," "security and police services," "community relations," "media," "available student assistance," "campus community layout," "parents," and

"institutional leadership." The document *Rites of Spring: Exploring Strategies for System Change* can inform the health educator how best to initiate consensus building and is available on-line from The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention's website at: www.edu.org/hecl/.

Our exploration into the alcohol-related rioting beliefs of university students leads to the following four recommendations for health education research and practice. First, health educators should consider the very real likelihood that a "reactance motivation" can happen, especially if alcohol-related riot prevention programs are planned, implemented, and evaluated in the absence of student input. This is especially true if the student body interprets that they have lost rights and freedoms to socialize and relax while using alcohol. Second, the successful health educator will expect divergent groups (e.g., students, university administrators, and police) to identify distinctly separate goals during the consensus building processes: (1) students may expect alcohol-related social opportunities to relax and enjoy time away from class and studying; (2) administrators are likely to value civility, safety, and compliance with university policy; and (3) police must serve to maintain order and enforce university, community, and state laws. Third, the effective health educator will be expected to validate these various goals and strive to promote

a dialogue of shared interests: moderate alcohol use, campus-community safety, and effective community organization. The researchers recommend that health educators review DeJong and colleagues (1998) and the U.S. Department of Education (2000) documents as a first step for successful coalition building. Fourth, the replication of this research among similar populations in different settings could assist health educators in recognizing their campus and community's risk for alcohol-related rioting; and to create campus community coalitions and environmental management strategies most feasible for their communities.

Conclusions

These results demonstrate the attitudes toward alcohol-fueled rioting among a selected group of respondents who were enrolled in a university where recent rioting existed. This information can be useful for health education professionals in understanding and appreciating how personal beliefs and behavioral choice lead to adverse events in university campus-communities. While these data are not definitive, two conclusions emerged. First, respondents believed that heavy alcohol use indeed increased riotous behavior at this university; however, they opposed environmental management strategies and declared them to be inflammatory to student rights and needs for leisure time entertainment. Second, the decision to either passively (e.g., "I was simply walking by the scene and got tear gas sprayed in my eyes") or actively (e.g., "more laws give more reasons to rebel") engage in rioting were important distinctions to this group of university students. That is, some respondents noted being present at the riot was a mere chance occurrence, while others felt it was clearly a planned event, or was becoming a school tradition. This information can assist health educators to recognize the interrelationships between college students' alcohol-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors; and the importance to employ suitable university and community-based environmental strategies to prevent rioting.

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