

CDC study: Excessive alcohol use accounts for one in eight deaths among working-age Americans

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One in eight deaths of Americans aged 20 to 64 in the years 2015–19 were the result of injuries or illness caused by excessive alcohol use, according to a new study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The study, published Tuesday in *JAMA Network Open*, found that people of working age accounted for nearly two-thirds of the annual average of 140,000 alcohol-related deaths in the US.

The years of the pandemic have seen excessive alcohol use and related deaths rise since the period studied by the CDC. According to a research letter published in *JAMA* in May, alcohol consumption and related harms increased by more than 25 percent between 2019 and 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers studied average daily alcohol consumption among more than 2 million respondents to the 2015–2019 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a CDC health-related telephone survey, adjusted using national per capita alcohol sales to correct for underreporting. Blood-alcohol concentrations were used to assess partially alcohol-attributable deaths. Mortality data were from the CDC's National Vital Statistics System.

The CDC defines excessive alcohol use as 8 or more drinks per week for a woman or 15 or more drinks per week for a man. Binge drinking is defined as consuming 4 or more drinks on an occasion for a woman or 5 or more drinks on an occasion for a man.

Alcohol continues to take a progressively heavier toll on older age groups. However, its effects are more evident among younger people who are less likely to die of other causes. The CDC study found that for the 20 to 34 age group, a staggering one in four deaths was

attributable to drinking; for those ages 20–49, it was one in five deaths. People in their 20s, and younger, are more likely to binge-drink.

The study estimated the average number of deaths from excessive alcohol use relative to total deaths among adults aged 20 to 64 years, both overall and by sex, age group, state and as a proportion of total deaths. Five percent of all-cause deaths were attributable to excessive alcohol use, the research found.

The three leading causes of these deaths were alcoholic liver disease, other substance overdoses in addition to high blood alcohol levels and motor vehicle traffic crashes. Other causes of illness and death from excessive alcohol use include polyneuropathy, cardiomyopathy, liver cirrhosis, chronic hepatitis, pancreatitis, hypertension, stroke and a variety of cancers.

In a cross-sectional study of 694,660 average deaths per year, the study estimates that excessive alcohol consumption between 2015 and 2019 accounted for 12.9 percent of total deaths among adults aged 20 to 64 years, 20.3 percent of deaths among adults aged 20 to 49, and 25.4 percent of deaths among adults aged 20 to 34.

Among men, 6.8 percent of the 1,429,008 estimated annual all-cause deaths were attributable to excessive alcohol use. Among men ages 20–34, 27.4 percent were attributable to excessive alcohol use. Among women, 3.2 percent of the 1,363,877 all-cause annual deaths were attributable to excessive alcohol use, but this rises to 20.4 percent in the 20–34 age group.

In other words, alcohol abuse is claiming the highest percentage of lives among young workers and new parents. The three leading causes of these excessive

alcohol-attributable deaths for both men and women ages 20 to 34 were substance overdose in conjunction with high blood alcohol levels, motor vehicle accidents and homicide.

Among US adults ages 20–49, the percentage of deaths attributable to alcohol abuse was generally higher in the country’s West, upper Midwest and the Northeast, and generally lower in the Southeast.

The highest percentage of alcohol abuse attributable deaths among those aged 20–34 was in New Mexico, where it accounted for 33.3 percent of deaths. This was followed by South Dakota, at 30.6 percent, and the nation’s capital, Washington D.C., where it accounted for 30.5 percent of total deaths.

The stunning findings in this latest study on deaths from excessive alcohol use are in line with other figures showing the rising toll from “deaths of despair,” which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the proliferation of fentanyl, the highly potent and deadly synthetic opioid.

Deaths from drug overdoses in 2021, the second year of the pandemic, neared 108,000, fueled by an ever-worsening fentanyl crisis. Since the CDC began collecting data two decades ago, overdose deaths in the US have surpassed a shocking 1 million. Prior to the pandemic, the US was already suffering from a surge of deaths from suicides, overdoses and gun violence.

The official number of deaths attributed to the coronavirus pandemic—1,065,571 according to the latest CDC figures—is a vast undercount. It takes into account only those death certificates that list COVID-19 as the cause of the death. The increase in deaths from alcohol and substance abuse is an indication of social stresses that existed in the US long before the pandemic and have only been exacerbated by it.

The relationship between the coronavirus pandemic and alcohol and substance abuse is a complex one, but one thing is certain: the social inequality, economic distress and accompanying alienation of large numbers of people in capitalist society have been aggravated over the past three years in America and around the world.

A provisional report from the CDC earlier this year estimated that life expectancy fell for the second year in a row in 2021, dropping by 0.9 years. The decline was 1.8 years in 2020, for a two-year total of 2.7 years. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced US life expectancy

at birth to 76.1 years, the lowest level since 1996 and the largest two-year reduction since 1923, in the wake of World War I and the 1918 flu pandemic.

Undoubtedly, government policies forcing workers into COVID-infested factories and children and teachers into unsafe schools under these conditions have contributed to the increase in drug- and alcohol-related illnesses and deaths.

The criminal policies of the government, under both Trump and Biden, are responsible for the deaths and suffering of millions in the pandemic. A rational and scientifically sound response to the pandemic is an alien concept to the corporations and their political representatives as they seek to increase the profits of the wealthy amidst this social misery.

An answer to the scourges of addiction and substance abuse cannot be separated from a socialist response to the pandemic, which necessitates a revolutionary mass movement led by the working class to rebuild society on socialist foundations, including the establishment of socialized medicine to address society’s medical and social ailments.



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