



Decreased Alcohol Use Over Time among Air Force Recruits



Chase A. Aycock¹, Marc A. Patience¹, Indika Mallawaarachchi², Robert C. Klesges², Rosemary Estevez Burns¹, Gerald W. Talcott²,

¹Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center, Joint Base-San Antonio Lackland; ²Public Health Sciences Department, Center for Addiction and Prevention Research, University of Virginia

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official views or policy of the Department of Defense or its components.

Introduction

Alcohol use in the US military has been declared a “public health crisis,” with 37.3% of service members endorsing past-month binge drinking (5 or more drinks per sitting for men; 4 or more drinks per sitting for women). Excessive alcohol use accounts for more than 95,000 deaths each year and is associated with impairment in workplace productivity among military personnel. Fortunately, results from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health have shown reduction in binge drinking for 18 to 25-year-olds from 2016 to 2019. Mean scores on the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT) have also been decreasing for young adults across a number of international studies. The purpose of the current study is to investigate recent trends of alcohol use in a young adult military population and determine if observed consumption trends align with the civilian population drinking trends.

Methods

From 2016 to 2020, we administered anonymous AUDITs to 58,307 Airmen who reported drinking prior to the beginning of Air Force Technical Training as part of an ongoing population-level intervention to prevent alcohol-related problems. AUDIT scores were summarized using median, interquartile range (IQR); mean, standard deviation (SD), and were compared using Kruskal-Wallis test.

Results

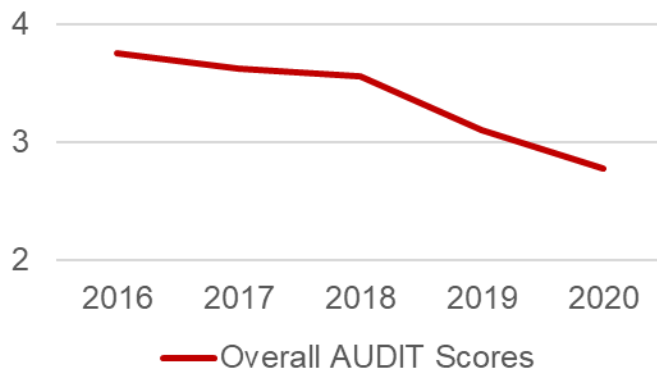


Figure 1. Mean AUDIT Scores for entire sample.

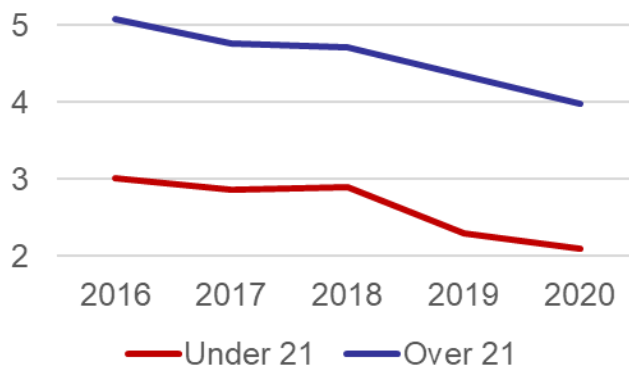


Figure 2. Mean AUDIT Scores by age.

Results Continued

Across all 5 years, the median AUDIT score was 5 (IQR: 3, 8); mean 6.15 (SD: 4.7). Results indicate that anonymous, self-reported drinking as measured by the AUDIT scores decreased over time, with mean AUDIT scores decreasing from 6.67 in 2016 to 5.65 in 2020 ($p < 0.001$); median decreases from 6 (IQR: 3, 9) to 5 (IQR: 2, 8). Mean AUDIT scores were significantly different between age groups, with the mean score for under 21 being much higher compared to mean score for over 21 (6.7 (SD: 5.1) vs 5.7 (SD:4.3), $p < 0.001$); median scores were 6 (IQR: 3,9) vs 5 (IQR: 3,8).

Discussion

These findings suggest that the overall trend in alcohol consumption has decreased among new recruits to the Air Force and appears to reflect secular trends in the reduction of alcohol use. These small yet significant decreases in anonymously administered AUDIT scores is meaningful: given the high prevalence of binge drinking among young military service members, it is encouraging to see any reductions in AUDIT scores. Although the trend reflects lower levels of problematic drinking, these changes are small and unlikely to actually decrease problems related to alcohol. Clearly, more work is needed to help prevent problematic drinking. Further understanding of the factors that may be affecting young adult alcohol use can inform prevention efforts in this high-risk population.