

# Early Alcohol Use, Rural Residence, and Adulthood Employment



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# **Early Alcohol Use, Rural Residence, and Adulthood Employment**

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# Executive Summary

## Study Purpose

Early onset of alcohol consumption may increase the risk of physical disease and psychological disorders. The relationship between alcohol consumption during youth/early adulthood and subsequent employment is not fully known. With fewer opportunities for corrective intervention, the consequences of abusive drinking during youth or young adulthood may be greater for rural residents. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether alcohol use in youth and early adulthood was more likely to result in adverse employment outcomes among youth living in rural areas than urban youth. The study draws information regarding youth alcohol use patterns and adult employment from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – 1979, which has been following a panel of young persons recruited in 1979 for more than 20 years. Rural was defined as living outside any Metropolitan Statistical Area. In the analysis, residence was defined as the area where the person resided in 1982-1984, when the drinking behaviors occurred.

## Key findings

### *Drinking behaviors in youth/early adulthood*

- Drinking during youth and early adulthood was common in the early 1980's. Nearly half (47.6%) of respondents reported drinking before age 18, and 55.3% reported binge drinking.
- Generally speaking, drinking behaviors did not differ significantly between rural and urban residents. One in five respondents (19.7%) in 1984 reported alcohol dependency related aggression (DRA) symptoms, and 23.5% alcohol dependency related loss of control (DRLC) symptoms. One in ten respondents (9.7%) indicated that drinking affected their school or work performance.
- Rural youth surveyed in 1979-1983 were as likely as their urban counterparts to start drinking before the age of 18, binge drink before 18, and report that work or school was impacted by drinking. Rural youth were more likely to report 3 of 11 dependency-related symptoms: arguing heatedly while drinking, difficulty stopping drinking once begun, and loss of memory while drinking, but did not differ on other measures.

### *Employment outcomes*

- In unadjusted analysis, respondents who lived in rural areas in 1982-1984 were as likely as those who lived in urban areas in youth to report being employed in 1998. Of those employed, respondents who lived in rural areas during youth reported lower overall quality of employment in 1998 than urban respondents. Specifically, rural respondents were more likely to earn less than 125% of the federal poverty level, work more hours per week, earn irregular compensation (contracts, tips, and commission), and not receive health benefits.
- Multivariable logistic regression compared employment outcomes in 1998 across four groups, defined based on drinking behavior in 1982-1984: rural early-onset

drinkers, rural later-onset drinkers, urban early-onset drinkers, and urban later-onset drinkers. Characteristics of the individual and his or her community in 1998 were held constant in this analysis. The relationships among residence, drinking behaviors, and employment quality showed no fixed pattern. For example, irregular compensation was associated with rural early-onset drinkers, rural residents with DRA or DRLC symptoms, and rural binge drinkers respectively; however, it was also associated with urban binge drinkers and rural youth whose drinking does *not* impact work or school. These findings suggest that residence does not affect the relationship between early drinking behaviors and the quality of employment in adulthood. Rural residence does not provide added risk or protection to the effects of drinking during youth on adulthood employment.

### **Recommendations**

Urban and rural youth share pressures from multiple sources to engage in risky behaviors. Present findings, regarding behaviors from twenty years ago, parallel analysis of more recent data concerning teen exposure to violence and drug abuse, which was found to be as high or higher in rural areas when compared to urban and suburban settings (Mink, Moore, Johnson, Probst, 2005). Reducing youth drinking and thus its potential effects on long-term employment status requires multiple simultaneous approaches. Programs geared towards youth that address drinking or drug prevention, enforcement of appropriate behavior and, when necessary, recovery from alcohol or drug problems must be available to rural as well as urban youth.

- Prevention: Rural school systems should partner with health care providers, mental health service providers, and community based advocacy groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving to ensure that all rural schools have alcohol and drug prevention education programs in place.
- Intervention and Enforcement: Public safety officials in rural communities should pair with local healthcare institutions, mental and drug abuse service agencies, and community advocacy groups to implement linked educational and enforcement programs directed at youth.
- Treatment: Rural school districts should pair with state and local mental health and substance abuse service providers to ensure adequate referral and treatment for youth with suspected alcohol or drug problems. Creative options for overcoming cost and distance barriers, such as tele-therapy, should be explored.

### **Future Research**

- The apparent tendency for rural youth to exhibit higher alcohol dependence symptoms needs to be explored more fully. Factors such as environment, availability of alcohol, activity and leisure activities, income, and social influences may all affect rural youth differently than urban youth, leading to a higher rate of alcohol dependence.
- Further analysis needs to be done on the link between early onset of drinking and quality of employment among rural residents. Other factors, such as educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and economic infrastructure need to be taken into account. Even though this analysis did not find a significant link between early onset of drinking and income, the stability of income may be important.