

ALCOHOL RED ALERT

THERE ARE MORE DEATHS EACH YEAR FROM ALCOHOL THAN IN THE ENTIRE OPIOID EPIDEMIC, AND IT'S BEHIND MORE CRIME THAN ALL DRUGS COMBINED.

By Temma Ehrenfeld

Jennifer grew up with a single mother who was “drunk all the time,” she says. “She’d drive drunk and get lost in a field and couldn’t find the road. That’s scary for the kid in the car.” Those experiences kept Jennifer sober until she was 39, and on the streets.

For the last eight years, she’s managed on a pint and a half of vodka, mixed with Sprite, from 9 a.m. to midnight, every day. With her caustic wit and storytelling gift she makes enough panhandling to pay for her \$7-a-day habit—people like me bring her a new bra, books, medication and food and hand over a \$20 when she really needs it. This week, four kids beat her up while she was sleeping in the park, so she’s sipping her vodka straight to manage the pain.

“Alcohol is the worst drug of all of them,” she says—and the data backs her up.

When liquor stores were defined as essential businesses during the COVID-19 shutdowns in New York and other states, people joked about quarantinis—but in fact, alcohol is essential when withdrawal can trigger hallucinations and tremors and send you to an overburdened emergency room. A recent spurt in alcohol sales suggests drinking rose during the pandemic. But it’s been rising for decades. Drinking is, in fact, the third-leading preventable cause of death in the United States, behind tobacco and sedentary living. “There are more deaths every year from alcohol than in the entire opioid epidemic,” notes Keith Humphreys, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford who served as a senior policy adviser on drug policy for President Obama. And even though alcohol is legal, it “accounts for more

crime than all the drugs put together,” he told the Stockholm Criminology Symposium in 2019.

Half of Americans Drink

More people overdrink than you might think. In a 2018 government survey, more than a quarter of American adults said they had a binge-drinking day in the past month. Some 20 million American adults may have alcohol use disorder. Researchers have concluded that the safest amount of alcohol to drink is zero—even that much-publicized nightly glass of wine to protect your heart isn’t a good bet—and more than half of us drink every month.

Although heavy drinking is still largely a male problem, women are drinking more in the United States, which alarms public health officials who note that women are more sensitive to alcohol and its related cancers. Drinking is also up among Americans age 50 and up. As the population ages, if older people drink more, we’ll see more alcohol-related falls and the like. Already alcohol-related visits to emergency rooms and hospitalizations are up. The number of yearly alcohol-related deaths doubled between 1999 and 2017, according to an analysis of death certificates, which tend to understate the problem. People die of liver damage and overdoses, often along with other drugs. They die of chronic pancreatitis, drownings, falls, car crashes and suicides.

Secondhand Alcohol Damage

Because alcohol is legal, few people understand that it is the drug that most hurts bystanders—and by a lot. In the United States, you hear about drunken driving, but less about how alcohol plays into violent crime, including rape. When British researchers scored 20 drugs, they totaled up social costs—each drug’s contribution to health care, social services and prison. On a 100-point scale, alcohol got a score of 72, beating heroin, at 55, and crack cocaine at 54. More than 40 of those



points came from harm to others, twice the number for heroin and crack. Tobacco, with a score of 26, got less than 10 points for harming others, despite the talk about “secondhand smoke.” The numbers show that we really should be talking about “secondhand alcohol abuse.”

⬆️ You are at greater risk of alcoholism if you start drinking young, if your parents were alcoholics or if you suffer from a mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

A similar study in the Netherlands also concluded that alcohol and tobacco were drastically the most harmful drugs in use. Then the lead authors from these studies joined forces and created an expert panel, which in 2015 reached roughly the same conclusions. This time on a 100-point scale, alcohol did even worse on harm for others—with a score of 50 points and 20 more when you added in harm to drinkers. Heroin was a distant second.

The Strong Case for More Regulation

When another international group of experts spent three days analyzing



If alcohol interferes with your life, your relationships or your performance at work, you may be more than a social drinker—you might have a problem.

A MODERATE DRINKER STICKS TO NO MORE THAN **7 DRINKS A WEEK** OR 1 DRINK IN A SITTING.

drug policies, they voted for more regulation and government control around the world for alcohol. The United States now has a patchwork of

regulation inherited from the post-Prohibition period, which varies from state to state. Although the public has heard that the “noble experiment” of

Prohibition failed, that’s too simple: Judged by its goal of cutting liquor consumption, it was a huge success. Liquor became scarcer and drinking stayed low for the next 30 years. But then it turned up, and we now drink about as much as we did in 1910.

The British are ahead of us—after government estimates found that 39 percent of violent crime is committed under the influence, in May, courts were authorized to order that offenders who commit “alcohol-fueled crimes” wear ankle monitors for up to 120 days that assess signs of alcohol in their sweat, a kind of “sobriety tag.” The move follows successful pilot projects in London and elsewhere.

In South Dakota, the 24/7 Sobriety Project required people arrested or convicted of alcohol-related crime to wear a monitoring bracelet or take two Breathalyzer tests a day. After five years, repeat DUI arrests dropped 12 percent—and domestic violence arrests dropped 9 percent, according to a RAND study. Deaths dropped slightly as well.

The U.S. statistics for alcohol-related crime are very old, going back to a 1998 publication reporting (as in Great Britain) that some 40 percent of people incarcerated for violent crimes had been drinking during the offense. Why would this be? Drunken people have lower inhibitions and some become more aggressive. Drinking also increases your chance of being a victim. Data from Illinois between 2005 and 2009 also showed that about 40 percent of homicide victims tested had alcohol in their blood when they died.

Calculating the Cost for Baltimore

A new study, published in the *Journal of Urban Health* in March, estimates that health and safety problems linked to alcohol cost the city of Baltimore about \$2.04 per drink.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Boston University point out that public officials might see estimates of certain

ABOUT HALF OF ALL ADDICTION COUNSELORS ARE PEOPLE IN RECOVERY.

harms like alcohol intoxication deaths or alcohol use among suicide and homicide victims but they may not see the whole picture, which requires a careful backward look.

The Baltimore city government spent \$61 million in 2013 on direct costs like health care, police, ambulances and special education for children born to drinking mothers—the same year the city had a \$48 million budget deficit.

Only half of Baltimore adults drink, but 17 percent were binge drinkers. In 2013, Baltimore prisons housed 894 persons who committed alcohol-attributable crimes, at a cost to the city of \$13,331 per day.

The number of Baltimoreans who died from alcohol-attributable causes in 2013—276 people—exceeded deaths in the city from breast cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Senior author David Jernigan from the Boston University School of Public Health observed, “We know which policies work to reduce these costs. Higher taxes on alcohol could help it pay for itself and reduce consumption.”

There are many ways governments could limit the harm alcohol causes. As individuals, we also know what to do. You can go dry. You can leave your car keys with a designated driver. Even in the midst of COVID-19, you can maintain social contacts because isolation may make it tough not to drink alone. The facts are out there, and it’s always up to you.

Free and open to all, Alcoholics Anonymous boasts more than 2 million members in 180 nations and more than 125,000 groups.



PATH TO SOBRIETY

➤ People who have been consuming lots of alcohol may need a week or more of medically supervised detox—with doctors to provide medication for severe symptoms like hallucinations and convulsions. The next step might be a residential or intensive day program. Residential programs are best for people who don’t have family support, a regular living situation or a job—or who have been unable to get and stay sober with other treatments. In either arrangement, you’re likely to speak with counselors trained in motivational enhancement therapy—designed to make you want to change your life—and cognitive behavioral therapy, which helps you see and change the thinking that triggers unwanted behavior. When you leave you’ll often be referred to Alcoholics

Anonymous (AA) groups in your community. Is this combination of professional therapy and AA ideal? Actually, AA alone may be fine, says professor Keith Humphreys, who was part of a team that evaluated AA for the Cochrane Library. Psychologists and psychiatrists may distrust therapy that doesn’t require their expertise, he notes. “I was skeptical of it at first before I learned about the data that supports it,” he said in an email. In the 2020 Cochrane review, Humphreys and two other researchers identified 27 rigorous studies, covering more than 10,500 participants in all, which compared the AA model to a different kind of therapy. They concluded that AA is the most effective path to continuous abstinence over a year, two years

and three. AA won across groups—veterans, young and old, male and female. It’s true that some patients balk at the belief system behind AA’s famous 12 steps (the first step is accepting your inability to control drinking, the last becoming a sponsor of a new member). Influenced by a popular Christian group, AA’s founding members in 1935 included the term “God” or “higher power” in six of the 12 steps. Fans point out that you can interpret “higher power” as you please and the program can work for people of all religions or atheists. Even if you skip Alcoholics Anonymous, alcohol treatment ultimately involves some peer support, including help from counselors who have been there themselves. And it’s hard to avoid the concepts of the 12 steps, which have influenced most addiction programs in the U.S.