

# SEXUAL ASSAULT AND ALCOHOL:

## WHAT THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE TELLS US

### RECOGNIZE THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ASSOCIATION

*Alcohol use does not cause sexual assault, but it can be a major contributing factor.*<sup>1-10</sup>

- Research studies have found that about half of sexual assaults on college campuses involve a situation in which the perpetrator, the victim, or both were consuming alcohol.<sup>1-5</sup> Sexual assaults were more likely to occur in settings where alcohol was consumed (e.g., parties, bars).<sup>11-13</sup> Potential perpetrators seek out such settings as a way of finding vulnerable individuals. Alcohol should be seen as a risk factor for—not a cause of—unwanted sexual advances and other forms of sexual assault.

*Sexual assaults involving alcohol more often occur among individuals who know each other casually as acquaintances, rather than among individuals in romantic relationships.*<sup>3,14-16</sup>

*Alcohol consumption is associated with aggression and loss of inhibition.*<sup>9,17</sup>

- Several decades of research have demonstrated that alcohol can increase the likelihood of intimate partner violence.<sup>2,17</sup> When a relationship situation is potentially dangerous, alcohol can be seen as “adding fuel to the fire.” Alcohol might increase sexual arousal, disinhibition, and aggression among perpetrators; heavier drinkers also have personality characteristics that are associated with perpetration (e.g., antisocial behavior, orientation toward impersonal sex).<sup>13</sup> Perpetrators might also use alcohol as a means to justify their behavior or diminish their level of responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

### REDUCING ALCOHOL USE IS ONE PIECE OF A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO REDUCING SEXUAL ASSAULT

*Reducing underage and excessive drinking among college students is good practice to promote the safety and health of students.*

- Excessive alcohol consumption among college students is a contributory factor for unintentional injury risk, fatalities, and sexual assault.<sup>18-21</sup> Alcohol use is related to the risk for sexual assault in the way that icy sidewalks can contribute to falls: People can fall on a dry sidewalk, but the presence of ice increases a person’s susceptibility for experiencing a dangerous fall. Similarly, sexual assault can and does occur without alcohol consumption by the perpetrator or victim, but the presence of alcohol increases a person’s susceptibility for experiencing a sexual assault.

*Eliminating stigma around alcohol-involved sexual victimization is essential to support victims.*

- Victims who were drinking at the time of a sexual assault report high levels of distress, self-blame, and negative reactions from others.<sup>1,9,16,22</sup> They often fear they will not be believed or will be blamed. Support services must be comprehensive and help victims overcome the traumatic aftermath of victimization, regardless of whether the victim was drinking.

*Reducing alcohol use through individual- and environmental-level interventions is an important component of a comprehensive campus strategy to reduce sexual assault.*<sup>23,24</sup>

- A recent experimental study compared the risk for completed rapes among female participants who were randomly assigned to a resistance training program (which included targeting excessive drinking) or to a control group.<sup>24</sup> After one year, 5.2% of the women who received the training experienced a rape vs. 9.8% of the control group. Attempted rape was also significantly different at one year between the groups (3.4% vs. 9.3%).
- Helping potential victims to be less susceptible to assailants is only one part of the solution. To address sexual assault comprehensively, approaches must recognize the complex causes of violence against women and men, encourage bystanders to intervene, provide guidance regarding healthy relationships early in life, and reduce alcohol availability.<sup>24-28</sup>

**Perpetrators are legally and morally responsible for their actions.  
Data on alcohol and sexual assault can empower potential victims.**<sup>1,3,14,15</sup>

Learn what else you can do to reduce excessive drinking and sexual assault on your college campus by visiting  
[www.marylandcollaborative.org](http://www.marylandcollaborative.org)

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