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Report confirms state's status as leading U.S. in binge drinking

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MILWAUKEE — When he gives lectures on how alcohol harms Wisconsin communities, Dr. Paul Moberg starts by showing an editorial cartoon he calls “sobering.”

The 1994 cartoon by Green Bay Press-Gazette cartoonist Joe Heller shows University of Wisconsin-Madison mascot Bucky Badger in front of a blackboard bearing a series of ignominious state rankings: Wisconsin leads the nation in binge drinking and in percentage of adult drinkers.

“Hello,” the caption says, “My name is Bucky and I have a drinking problem.”

Apparently little has changed — 13 years later, the state is still No. 1 in those categories.

“Wisconsin has a very serious set of problems related to alcohol use,” said Moberg, a senior scientist in population health sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “And this has been going on for a long time.”

Moberg was a lead researcher on a report released Monday by the UW Population Health Institute. It tells a familiar story.

Wisconsin has the highest rates in the nation for high school student and underage drinking. Forty-nine percent of high school students drink, while 39 percent of those under 21 do.

About 2,100 Wisconsin residents die annually from accidents or diseases related to alcohol or drug use, and almost \$190 million in public funds are spent on related hospitalizations and treatment.

The figures are based on the most recent data

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Quick read

- **Alcohol culture:** A report released Monday by the University of Wisconsin-Madison shows the state continues to lead the nation in a number of alcohol-related categories, including binge drinking and adult drinkers.
 - **Nothing new:** Researcher Paul Moberg said the report provides a snapshot that will help state officials figure out how to spend federal money aimed at fighting alcohol- and drug-related problems.
 - **Changing norms:** Mothers Against Drunk Driving executive Kari Kinnard said the problem isn't a lack of money but deep-seated norms in which residents accept and tolerate alcohol abuses.
- The Associated Press

How Wisconsin ranks

A report released Monday by the Population Health Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison shows the state continues to be one of the nation's worst when it comes to alcohol abuse.

But Wisconsin's rates of drug abuse are, in many cases, equal to or better than national rates.

Here's a look at how the state compares to the nation, using the most recent figures available:

- **Alcohol-related motor-vehicle deaths (2005):** Wisconsin, 6.7 per 100,000 residents; U.S., 5.7 per 100,000 residents.
 - **Reported rates of driving after drinking among high school students (2005):** Wis., 14 percent; U.S., 10 percent.
 - **Alcohol use among adults (2005):** Wis., 68 percent; U.S., 56 percent.
 - **Drug-related deaths (2004):** Wis., 6.4 per 100,000 residents; U.S., 8.7 per 100,000 residents.
 - **Marijuana use among high school students (2005):** Wis., 16 percent; U.S., 20 percent.
- **Source:** University of Wisconsin-Madison Population Health Institute
— The Associated Press

available for each category, either from 2005 or 2004.

The numbers didn't surprise Kari Kinnard, the state executive director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

"It's disappointing and frustrating but sadly, it's not a shock," she said. "What we really need to do is change the accepted norms and not tolerate these kinds of behaviors."

The report did have some good news. The portion of high school students who began drinking before age 13 decreased to 24 percent in 2005 from 29 percent in 1997. The 2005 figure was 2 percentage points better than the national average.

Also, the number of high school students who reported using marijuana in the previous 30 days was 16 percent in 2005, 5 percentage points lower than in 1997.

The state mirrored the nation in terms of how frequently other illegal drugs were used.

Researchers expected most of these results, but Moberg said the data would help state officials figure out how to spend federal money intended to combat alcohol- and drug-related problems.

"This report is part of an effort to take another snapshot of the current level of problems, so it could be used to set priorities that are contemporary," Moberg said.

In terms of fighting drunken driving, Kinnard said the state needs to improve all three tools: education, treatment and punishment.

"A lot of this is going to come back to our state legislators," she said. "They need to be listening to a majority of people — we don't want our children drinking alcohol, we don't want people driving impaired on the roadway, we want to make a change."