



Since 1993, **women's colleges** have seen a
125% increase in frequent binge drinking

SPRING BREAK: A student partying on a Daytona Beach hotel balcony attempts a "beer bong"

WOMEN ON A BINGE

Many teen girls are drinking as much as boys. More college women regularly get drunk. Is this a case of girl power gone awry?

By JODIE MORSE

LISA DIEBOLD, 22, HAS TWO GOALS FOR HER SENIOR year at Syracuse University: "Learn how to drive a stick shift, and drink a guy under the table." The pert advertising major has nearly mastered her first objective. She now darts about the hilly campus in her white Volkswagen Golf. The second is giving her a bit more trouble. One Friday night, after drinking close to two pitchers of beer, she had a screaming fight with her boyfriend and put her fist through the rear window of her car. And then there are a handful of evenings she can recall only in flashes.

But the setbacks have not deterred her. On a recent blustery night, she and five of her closest girlfriends, dressed in unseasonable short sleeves, downed cocktails and took shots of "buttery nipples," a syrupy blend of butter-scotch schnapps and Baileys Irish Cream. It was a Tuesday during midterm exams, but they closed down the bar anyway. "You don't want to be that dumb girly girl who looks wasted and can't hold her liquor. I know it's juvenile, but I've had boys comment how impressed they are at the amount of alcohol I've consumed," Diebold explains. "To be able to drink like a guy is kind of a badge of honor. For me, it's a feminism thing."

For Syracuse administrators, it's frightening. Last year twice as many women as men—one or two each weekend—were rushed to the local hospital owing to acute intoxication.

“They associate drinking with **power**, and they think that if they

Some suffered from alcohol poisoning and needed a stomach pumping; others had fractured bones after drunken tumbles. A handful sought treatment for sexual assault. “Our women are drinking one for one with men, but they’re coming in much more damaged,” says Dessa Bergen-Cico, the university’s associate dean of students. “We’re seeing a real role shift going on here.”

Throughout the 1990s, it was mainly frat boys who generated headlines for waking up hazed and dazed in the ER—if they woke up at all. In recent years, however, some colleges have found a new cause for concern: young women who drink as dangerously as, if not more so than, their male classmates. This development invites a raft of knotty questions. Why are today’s girls and young women, who are also getting arrested more and doing more drugs, behaving more like boys in so many reckless ways? Do they simply feel freer to be themselves? Or does the sassy, self-confident girl-power generation feel it must show up guys everywhere, including at the bar?

Since 1999, some 16,000 men but more than 19,000 women have requested screening for alcohol abuse at federally funded day-long clinics held each spring at about 400 colleges. Individual schools have found their own

gauges for the trend. At the University of Vermont, for instance, the average blood-alcohol level of drunken women treated at the hospital is now .20–10% higher than that of intoxicated men and more than twice the legal limit of .08. Counselors at Stanford University have observed an uptick in women who had “regretted sex” while drunk. And at Georgetown University there has been a 35% rise in women sanctioned for alcohol violations over the past three years. “Here on the front lines, we’re very worried about this,” says Patrick Kilcarr, the director of Georgetown’s Center for Personal Development. “Women are not just drinking more; they’re drinking ferociously.”

And the problem is not limited to universities in big cities with lots of dance clubs or schools where Greek life sustains the campus culture. Heavy drinking has also surged at all-women colleges in the past decade, according to a study being published this week in the *Journal of American College Health*. The research, by Henry Wechsler of the Harvard School of Public Health, shows that between 1993 and 2001, all-women colleges saw a 125% increase in

frequent binge drinking, defined as consuming four or more drinks in a row, three or more times in the past two weeks. Wechsler has also found that during those same years, there was a threefold increase in the number of women who reported being drunk on 10 or more occasions in the previous month. Among women who drank, there was a 150% increase in “unplanned” sexual activities, date rape and sexual assault. To be sure, women at single-sex schools still drink less than those on coed campuses, and both populations drink less than men. But, says Wechsler, “by drinking heavily, these women are definitely putting themselves at greater risk.”

The new statistics are startling enough on their own, but they come on the heels of a report last month by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University that found that girls as young as ninth-graders were just as likely as boys to report drinking alcohol. Back in 1991, 22.4% of 10th-grade girls and 31.4% of 10th-grade boys reported binge drinking. By 1999 the girls had narrowed the gender gap to within two percentage points of their male classmates.

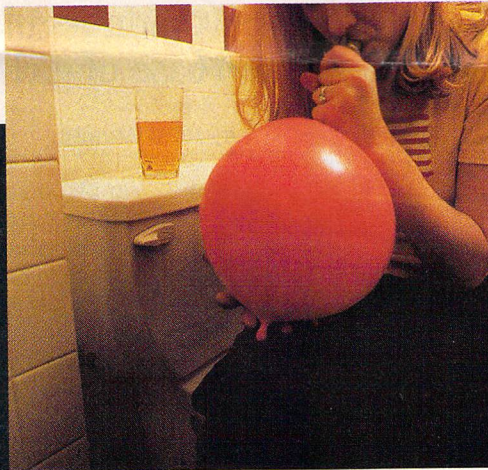
Science, which has long focused on the effects of alcohol on men and boys, has been playing catch-up as well. Simple observation

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT HOUSTON—CORBIS SYGMA; ROB CURTIS/SUN JOURNAL—AP

THE GENTLER SEX?

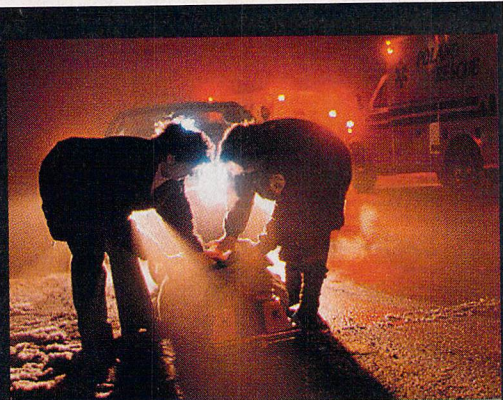
Young men are still more likely than young women to get arrested, crash their cars or fight in school. But while men’s rates of risky behavior are falling, women’s are either holding level or rising—a sign, experts say, that male-oriented prevention and treatment programs need to change.

—By Amanda Bower



Drugs Today’s **15-year-old daughters** are **15 times** as likely to be using illegal drugs as their mothers were. **Marijuana** is far and away the most popular teen drug.

In a national survey, almost 10% of girls ages 12 to 17 said they had used illegal substances in the past month; by the time they’re in the 18-to-25 age bracket, it’s 16%. For most substances, boys and girls use at similar rates. But girls ages 12 to 17 are more likely to abuse psychotherapeutic drugs such as Valium. They are also more likely to have used inhalants—such as air freshener, glue, paint or cooking spray—in the past month. A total of 6.2 million American girls and women have risked brain damage and death by “huffing” these common household products to get high.



Dangerous driving

Women’s **fatal traffic accidents** have increased **30%** since 1982, compared with a **decrease** for men of **8%**.

Although drivers ages 15 to 20 have dramatically reduced their alcohol-related fatal traffic accidents, the number of girls involved in other deadly crashes has increased since 1982 while it has fallen for boys. The likelihood that a 16-year-old girl will have an accident has increased almost 10% since 1990—and cars with two or more teens inside are twice as likely to crash as cars in which a teen is driving solo.

drink like a guy, they will be like a guy.77

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT HOUSTON—CORBIS SYGMA; PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY BETSIE VAN DER WERF—GETTY IMAGES

tells us that women tend to get drunk more quickly than men. Now we're learning precisely why: women's bodies have a higher ratio of fat to water, so alcohol is less diluted when it enters the bloodstream. They also have lower levels of an enzyme that helps break down alcohol. Emerging research shows that liquor also corrodes women's bodies more quickly. As adults, women tend to develop liver disease 10 to 15 years earlier than men, even if women consume only a fraction of the daily alcohol that men do.

Among teenagers, boys who abuse alcohol become rowdy and randy, but studies show girls are more likely to become depressed. They also become susceptible to sexual assault and sexually transmitted diseases. Perhaps most troubling, evidence is mounting that girls who begin drinking in their early teens have a greater chance than boys do of eventually becoming alcoholics.

"Girls have a whole constellation of medical problems surrounding alcohol," says Dr. Duncan Clark of the Pittsburgh Adolescent Alcohol Research Center. "We would anticipate that rates of alcohol abuse will ultimately

equalize between men and women. That's a perverse kind of equality."

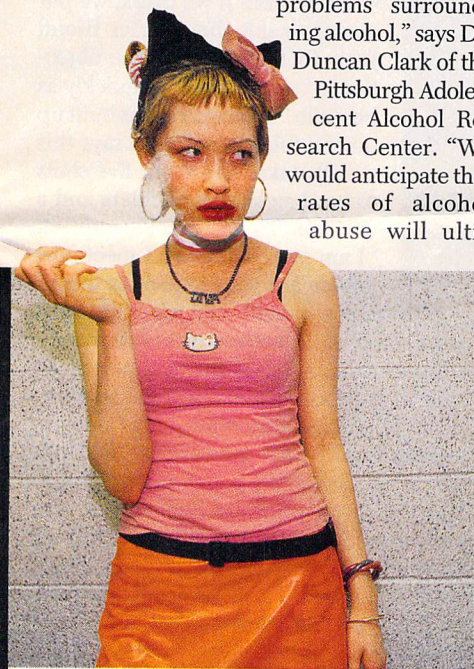
But while some health educators are already whispering of an epidemic, other researchers, armed with different data, contend that young women aren't closing the gap at all. Indeed, in Wechsler's study, while frequent binge drinking rose slightly more for women than men on all campuses, an increasing number of women reported abstaining from alcohol altogether. Critics claim that although it may seem that women are suffering more alcohol-related problems, the number of reports may be rising because researchers, who for years did not ask about unplanned pregnancies or sexual assault, are finally posing relevant questions. And then there's the theory that today's young women simply feel more comfortable raising their hands and admitting they drink.

Drinking has always had an uneasy relationship to women's freedoms. In Colonial America, women owned taverns but were frowned on for frequenting them. By the late 19th century, women, sick of tending to inebriated men in their midst, banded together to form the temperance movement. It was one of the first times women had a strong political platform, and many were soon using it to lobby for other freedoms, including suf-

frage. Yet drinking retained a special stigma. Not only did women do most of their drinking privately in homes or apartments, but they were also loath to publicly admit drinking too much. (When Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in the late 1930s, only one of its 100 members was a woman.) The sexual revolution of the '60s went a long way toward ushering women's drinking—along with so much else—into the open. So did liquor companies, which began targeting women with ads in the mid-'70s.

Today, of course, you can't pick up a fashion magazine without seeing splashy liquor ads picturing women sipping themselves into various states of rapture. "Get in touch with your masculine side," instructs a recent Jim Beam ad, which depicts a woman puffing on a cigar. Flip on an episode of *Sex and the City*, and you are likely to catch Carrie Bradshaw and her friends blithely tossing back candy-colored cocktails at a downtown bar. But it's not only thirtysomethings on TV who persistently overindulge. On a recent episode of the Fox sitcom *Undeclared*, several college coeds go out to a bar, where one woman gets so drunk, she flashes her breasts. And Britney Spears recently starred in the film *Crossroads*, in which a trio of teens indulge in a spirited drinking session after raiding a motel mini-bar.

It's no wonder that girls today are four times as likely as their mothers to begin drinking by age 16. Molly, 23, of Little Rock, Ark., was just an adolescent when

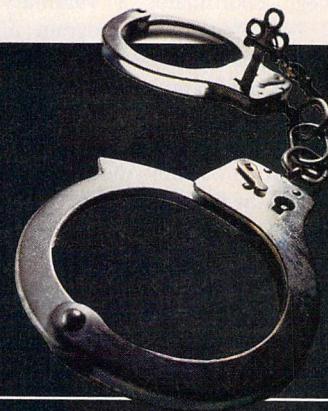


Smoking Almost 30% of high school senior girls smoked in the past month—an increase since 1992, when 26% said they lighted up.



Fighting One in ten high school girls was in at least one physical fight at school in the past year.

Boys still fight more than girls, but their rate of violence at school has fallen steadily since 1993, while that of girls has stayed virtually the same. Experts say the schools' violence-prevention efforts have been male focused, concentrating on controlling boys' impulsive behavior and bullying. Girls' fights need a different approach to address their more emotional causes.



Violent crime Since 1991 the number of women arrested for aggravated assault has increased a staggering 46%, to 53,088 in 2000. The number of men arrested decreased 9.5%.

More than 2 million women—some 600,000 of them juveniles—commit a violent offense each year, and some three-quarters of their victims are women. Criminal-justice advocates say up to 85% of women convicted of violent crimes are victims themselves of physical and sexual abuse; 43% are drug addicts or alcoholics; 40% suffer from parental absence or neglect; and perhaps 1 in 10 has a mental-health problem.

Ten years ago, health officials thought they were winning the war on smoking. The proportion of high school senior girls who smoked had dropped from 40% in 1977 to 26% in 1992. But according to the Surgeon General, it rocketed back up to 35% in five years, undoing much of the progress that had been made. Now almost one-quarter of 10th-grade girls say they have smoked in the past 30 days.

The most **worrisome outgrowth** of young women's shifting drinking patterns is a **perceived shift** in their **sexual activities**

she began entertaining fantasies of how "it would be glamorous to be ... sitting on the beach in Miami with a long cigarette, drinking martinis." She first got drunk at 13, when a girlfriend urged her to drink wine coolers. Indeed, research has shown that girls often begin drinking not to impress boys but to endear themselves to other girls. In a study published last year of more than 1,000 Maryland sixth-graders, girls were twice as likely as boys to succumb to peer pressure to drink. The reason? While boys at that age bob among social groups, girls have already cleaved into powerful cliques. "Girls see a group of girls and are looking to try on their behaviors," says the study's author, Bruce Simons-Morton, a researcher with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

But it doesn't take long for the keeping-up-with-the-boys impulse to kick in. Elizabeth D'Amico of the University of California at San Diego coordinates a voluntary alcohol-intervention program in five San Diego high schools that have seen drinking rise among girls in recent years. The lunchtime discussion sessions are popular with girls—many boys prefer to air their views anonymously over the Web. "One of the main things they talk about is being at a party where their boyfriend hands them a beer, and feeling like, if he is drinking, then they have to drink it," says D'Amico. Lee Saltz, a consultant to the prevention and intervention program in the Los Angeles public schools, hears the same thing from the growing number of girls she counsels. "Equality is part of it," she explains. "We've been working very hard to get [girls] to that point: Yes, you can do math. Yes, you can play football. And yes, you can drink."

Women carry those chirpy mantras with them to college. "They are no longer confined by the stereotypical notions of femininity," says Devon Jersild, a journalist who talked with college-age women for her book *Happy Hours: Alcohol in a Woman's Life*. "They associate drinking with power, and they think that if they drink like a guy, they will be like a guy." At the University of Colorado at Boulder, where frequent binge drinking among women rose 67% between



GRIG BLANKENHORN—HBO

SEX AND THE SCENE: The cocktail-quaffing stars on HBO's hit show are role models

1993 and 2000, women routinely brag of matching men in alcohol consumption. Sarah, 21, describes a "keg stand"—two friends suspend you by your ankles over a keg, and you guzzle as much cheap beer as quickly as you can—and beams: "There are girls who can go longer than guys!" It's not just other girls who are keeping track either. "Here, if a girl gets drunk, it's, 'You're awesome,'" says Don Groves, who graduated from the university in December. "Girls don't have to sit home and wait for their boyfriends, because they drink more than their boyfriends."

Often women drink to meet those boyfriends in the first place. According to Sharon Wilsnack, a professor in the neuroscience department at the University of North Dakota who has tracked the drinking habits of 1,800 women over the past 20 years, 60% of all drinkers said they felt less inhibited about sex. That was certainly true on a recent night at a bar near Syracuse University. The scene was at first reminiscent of a junior high school dance, as men

and women self-consciously drank and chatted in separate huddles. As the night wore on, the groups slowly mingled and paired off. "That's pretty much the way it goes," observes a male bartender. "The girls that came in a group have left with guys."

Wilsnack says she has heard again and again from college women that they drink to "get in a party mood." This bears up even at Mount Holyoke College, an all-women school in South Hadley, Mass., a town so tiny it has but one bar. No matter. Before dances, women simply tend bar in their dorm rooms. "We are really shy when we go out. We are not confident," says freshman Chandrika Christie. "But if we drink, we put ourselves out there." Her friend Jenn Richardson says the objective is "to get drunk as quickly as possible." Richardson has built up quite a tolerance, so she says this usually takes her about five shots of hard alcohol, two ciders and a cocktail. The unshocking result: "I am more talkative, I meet new people, and yes, I remember them."

To public health officials, the most worrisome outgrowth of young women's shifting drinking patterns is a perceived shift in their sexual activities. Reliable statistics on sex are always hard to pin down, especially when the question is, "Did you get drunk and have a one-night stand?" But health educators at high schools are concerned by the stories they are hearing from students like Devon, a ninth-grader from Richmond, Va. Girls drink, she says, so they can "do stupid slutty things and hook up with as many guys as they want."

Then there is the obvious danger of disease. A study of high school alcohol-dependent students published this month by the Pittsburgh Adolescent Alcohol Research Center found that 1 in 5 girls was infected with the herpes virus. Drunken women also suffer disproportionately from rape and sexual assault. "[Women] walking back to campus intoxicated wear a neon sign on their back: Mug me. Victimize me," says Georgetown's Kilcarr. Packaged like that, the antidrinking message has some bite. But for much of the past decade, many colleges have aimed their prevention cam-