



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

## Prisoners and Alcohol

January 1983

This is the third in a series of bulletins based on the 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities. A bulletin on inmate use of drugs is in preparation and others are planned for the future. Public-use computer-readable data tapes for both the survey and the companion 1979 Census of State Correctional Facilities are available from the Criminal Justice Archives and Information Network of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Further information can be obtained by writing CJAIN, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106.  
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Almost a third of all inmates of State prisons in 1979 said they had drunk very heavily just before they committed the offense for which they were convicted. Twenty percent of the inmates said that they drank very heavily every day the entire year before they entered prison. About 16% had at some time been enrolled in an alcohol treatment program. Habitual offenders and persons convicted of assault, burglary, and rape were more likely to be very heavy drinkers than other prisoners. Whites, American Indians, and inmates 18 to 25 were especially likely to be very heavy drinkers.

These findings are based on the 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities conducted in November of that year.<sup>1</sup> The surveyed inmates were questioned about their drinking habits during the year before they went to prison and about drinking they may have done just prior to the offense that sent them there.

inmate drinking habits: (1) How often they drank during the year preceding their incarceration. (2) How much they usually drank. (3) Their own assessment of their degree of intoxication when they had finished drinking. Each drinker was asked to characterize himself as "relatively sober," "feeling good," "pretty loaded," or "very drunk."

To measure the amount consumed, all alcoholic beverages were converted to their equivalent in pure alcohol (ethanol). The group characterized as "very heavy" drinkers had consumed 4 ounces of ethanol—the equivalent of eight cans of beer, seven 4-ounce glasses of wine, or nearly 9 ounces of 80-proof liquor. This level of consumption would almost certainly produce severe intoxication if consumed within a limited time. Indeed, 65% of all inmates who usually consumed at least 4 ounces of ethanol in a typical drinking session characterized themselves as "pretty loaded" or "very drunk" when they stopped.

**Measures of drinking**

Three measures were used to assess

<sup>1</sup>The survey consisted of personal interviews with a stratified random sample of 12,000 inmates in State prisons across the Nation. It was conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the Census Bureau.

**Inmates' drinking vs. others'**

Information about the general public's consumption of such large quantities of alcohol is not available. However, it is possible to compare prisoners with persons in

the general population who abstain, who consume less than an ounce of ethanol, and who consume an ounce or more.<sup>2</sup> Consuming less than an ounce of ethanol is usually regarded as moderate drinking.

Almost half of the inmates—but only a tenth of all persons age 18 and older of the general population—drank an average of an ounce of ethanol or more daily. In contrast, a sixth of the inmates and a third of the general population abstained from all alcohol.

Males, whether in prison or not, were much more likely than their female counterparts to drink an ounce or more of ethanol (see table 1). At the higher level of drinking the difference between the inmates and the general population was greater for women than for men: men in prison were roughly three times as likely as men in general to consume an ounce or more of ethanol daily. Women in prison were over five times more likely than women in general to consume that much. The drinking habits of inmates and of the general population are about the same for 18- to 34-year-olds (the ages of most inmates) as they are for all age groups.

Table 1. Drinking habits of the U.S. population 18 and over and of State prison inmates, by age and sex, percent distribution<sup>1</sup>

Average ounces of ethanol consumed per day <sup>2</sup>	Men				Women			
	All ages		Ages 18-34		All ages		Ages 18-34	
	In-mates	General	In-mates	General	In-mates	General	In-mates	General
0.0 oz. <sup>3</sup>	17%	25%	18%	14%	34%	40%	35%	25%
0.01-0.99 oz.	36	60	35	69	44	56	42	70
1.0 or more oz.	47	14	47	17	22	4	23	5

NOTE: Percentages may not add to totals shown because of rounding.  
<sup>1</sup>Ages for the general population are shown for 1979 (NIAAA, Alcohol and Health, 1981). Ages for inmates are shown for the time of admission to prison; 83% of the inmates were admitted in 1976 or later.  
<sup>2</sup>Ethanol is pure alcohol; an ounce is roughly equivalent to 2 12-ounce cans of 9-proof beer, 1-3/4 4-ounce glasses of 26-proof wine, or 2 ounces of 80-proof liquor.  
<sup>3</sup>Did not drink during the year prior to the current offense or, in the case of the general population, the year prior to interview.

<sup>2</sup>One ounce of ethanol is equal to 2 cans of beer, 1/2 glasses of wine, or 2 ounces of 80 proof liquor.

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### Habitual drinking patterns

Roughly a third of the inmates said they drank daily during the year before prison. A third said they drank heavily (4 ounces of ethanol or more). A third said they were "pretty loaded" or "very drunk" by the time they stopped drinking (see table 2).

Naturally there was quite a bit of overlap between these groups: almost two-thirds of the daily drinkers were very heavy drinkers. Half of the daily drinkers were "pretty loaded" or "very drunk" when they finished drinking. Two-thirds of the heavy drinkers were "pretty loaded" or drunk when they finished drinking.

These findings show an excessive pre-prison involvement with alcohol on the part of great many inmates. While some persons may have inflated the amount of alcohol consumed, it seems less likely that they exaggerated the frequency of drinking or the degree of their intoxication. Even allowing for some exaggeration of drinking habits, it is clear that alcohol has played a major role in the lives of many prison inmates.

### Characteristics of very heavy drinkers

This role was particularly marked in the pre-prison lives of whites and of American Indians and Alaskan Natives. Half the whites and two of every three of the latter group drank very heavily (4 ounces of ethanol or

Table 2. Drinking pattern of inmates<sup>1</sup>

Characteristic	Number	Percent
Total	274,564	100.0
Frequency of drinking		
Abstained	49,775	18.1
Less than once a month	12,186	4.4
About once a month	8,560	3.1
3 or 4 times a month	12,234	4.5
1 or 2 times a week	59,884	21.8
3 or 4 times a week	26,886	9.8
Nearly every day	14,357	5.2
Every day	89,801	32.7
Not available	881	0.3
Amount of alcohol consumed <sup>2</sup>		
Abstained	49,775	18.1
Light to heavy (less than 4 oz. of ethanol)	124,404	45.3
Very heavy (4 oz. or more of ethanol)	99,570	36.3
Not available	815	0.3
Degree of drunkenness <sup>3</sup>		
Abstained	49,775	18.1
Relatively sober	50,708	18.5
Feeling good	87,886	32.0
Pretty loaded	41,135	15.0
Very drunk	43,986	16.0
Not available	1,074	0.4

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding.

<sup>1</sup>Drinking experience is for the year prior to current offense.

<sup>2</sup>Amount of ethanol (pure alcohol) consumed during typical drinking session.

<sup>3</sup>Self-perception of level of intoxication reached at end of typical drinking session.

more). Only one in every five black prisoners had been such very heavy drinkers (see table 3).

Women inmates were only half as likely as the men to drink daily or to drink very heavily. These differences held true for both blacks and whites.

Persons imprisoned before reaching age 18 represent only 2% of the prison population. They usually drank less often and in lesser amounts than persons who were in the 18-25 age group when they entered prison; nonetheless, they got "very drunk" with the same frequency. Among blacks, the frequency of drinking increased but the degree of drunkenness steadily decreased with age. Among whites the frequency of drinking remained stable after age 18, although the amount consumed during a drinking session peaked in the 18-25 age span.

The drinking of Hispanics and non-Hispanic prisoners prior to incarceration did not differ substantially. The percentages of abstainers and of those who got very drunk were the same for each group. Hispanics drank somewhat less frequently but were somewhat more likely to be very heavy drinkers than others.

Other findings about pre-prison drinking patterns:

- Divorced persons were more likely than others to drink very heavily.
- Persons who had attended college were less likely than those with less education to be heavy drinkers.
- Employed persons were somewhat less likely than the jobless to be abstainers but were also somewhat more likely to be daily drinkers.

### Drinking patterns by offense

Two-fifths of all persons convicted for rape, assault, or burglary had been very heavy drinkers in the year before they went to prison. The proportion of all other offenders who had been very heavy drinkers fell between these groups and persons convicted of drug offenses. Drug offenders had the lowest proportion of very heavy drinkers and the highest proportion of abstainers—each one out of four. Rapists as a group were least likely to be abstainers; only 1 in 10 drank no alcohol in the year before incarceration.

### Drinking just prior to offense

Self-reporting about drinking just prior to the offense is no more likely to be completely accurate than self-reporting about drinking habits during the entire year prior to prison. It could even lend itself to self-serving attempts to minimize the offense by presenting alcohol as a mitigating circumstance. However, in the 1979 survey, inmates were asked about their usual drinking habits before they knew they would be asked about their drinking immediately prior to the offense. The responses on amount consumed and degree of intoxication just prior to the offense are so strikingly similar to their general drinking habits that each tends to confirm the other.

Almost half the inmates said they had

<sup>3</sup>The number of American Indians in the survey was too small to analyze by age or sex.

Table 3. Drinking patterns of inmates by percent with each characteristic<sup>1</sup>

Characteristic	Number	Percent		
		Abstained <sup>2</sup>	Light to heavy <sup>2</sup>	Very heavy <sup>2</sup>
Total	274,564	18	45	36
Degree of drunkenness				
Very drunk	43,986	0	16	84
Pretty loaded	41,135	0	32	68
Feeling good	87,886	0	65	35
Relatively sober	50,708	0	92	8
Frequency of drinking				
Every day	89,801	0	35	65
Nearly every day	14,357	0	50	50
3 or 4 days a week	26,886	0	60	40
1 or 2 days a week	59,884	0	70	30
3 or 4 days a month	12,234	0	77	24
About once a month	8,560	0	84	16
Less than once a month	12,186	0	88	12
Age at admission				
Under 18	6,412	29	45	26
18-25	139,251	18	43	39
26-34	81,533	19	47	34
Over 34	46,501	15	50	34
Sex				
Male	263,484	17	45	37
Female	11,080	34	47	18
Race				
White	136,296	13	37	50
Black	131,329	24	55	21
American Indian <sup>3</sup>	5,440	11	25	64
Other	1,499	40	37	23
Marital status				
Married	61,420	20	47	33
Widowed	6,248	18	52	30
Divorced	46,314	14	43	43
Separated	18,168	18	47	35
Never married	142,414	19	45	36
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	25,816	18	38	43
Non-Hispanic	248,748	18	46	36
Education at admission				
Not high school graduate	196,047	18	44	38
High school graduate	50,359	19	46	35
Some college	28,158	19	56	25
Income in year prior to current offense <sup>4</sup>				
None	2,218	70	45	25
\$1-\$9,999	84,014	16	45	40
\$10,000 and over	41,779	17	47	36
Employment in year prior to current offense				
Employed	192,800	16	47	37
Not employed	81,005	23	43	34
Number of prior convictions <sup>5</sup>				
None	13,925	18	56	25
1	13,069	21	47	32
2-4	29,046	21	47	32
5 or more	25,493	18	40	42
Current offense <sup>6</sup>				
Violent	157,742	18	47	35
Homicide	48,041	16	51	33
Assault	17,216	14	41	45
Rape	16,460	10	48	41
Robbery	68,324	22	44	34
Other violent	7,701	15	49	36
Property	85,562	18	43	40
Burglary	49,223	16	41	43
Forgery or fraud	11,505	22	46	32
Larceny	13,018	22	47	31
Other property	11,815	16	39	44
Drugs	19,420	24	48	28
Public order	10,982	17	46	37

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding. Numerical totals for a variable may not add to the grand total, i.e., 274,564, due to non-response or to omission of one or more categories, e.g., non-drinker; rate of non-response for the variables shown did not exceed 0.4%.

<sup>1</sup>Drinking experience is for the year prior to current offense.

<sup>2</sup>Very heavy drinkers consumed 4 or more ounces of ethanol at a typical drinking session during the year prior to current offense; light to heavy drinkers typically consumed less. Abstainers did not drink during the year prior to current offense.

<sup>3</sup>Includes any Eskimos and Aleuts.

<sup>4</sup>To minimize the effect of inflation upon income figures, only inmates admitted to prison after November 1977 are included.

<sup>5</sup>To minimize the effect of age upon comparisons of numbers of prior convictions, only inmates age 26-34 at time of admission are included.

<sup>6</sup>Offense for which an inmate was incarcerated.

been drinking just prior to their offenses. Given their drinking habits during the year prior to confinement, this is no more than would be expected on any particular day. More than three-fifths of those drinking just before the offense drank very heavily and nearly three-fifths became "pretty loaded" or "very drunk." Rapists and assaulters were most apt to be drinking prior to the offense; forgers and larcenists the least.

### Drinking environment

The half of the inmate population that had been drinking just before the crime were drinking with others, most likely drinking beer, were most likely drinking it in a bar and on the average had been drinking for more than 4 hours (see table 4).

The inmates usually drank with others in the year prior to their offense, so the fact that almost all had company in their pre-crime drinking may not be especially significant.

Although bars were frequent pre-crime drinking sites, so were home, a friend's home, and a car. More than a quarter of the pre-crime drinkers reported drinking in cars and a sixth did some pre-crime drinking in the street. The inmates didn't particularly stay put during their drinking. Possibly as many as two-fifths of the inmates did their drinking in more than one location. This is not surprising considering how long these drinking bouts lasted. Although the average session lasted for more than 4 hours, over 40% had been drinking for more than 5 hours and more than 20% had been drinking for longer than nine. Over 80% of the persons who had been drinking between 5 and 9 hours had been drinking heavily (consuming 4 or more ounces of ethanol); 90% of the persons who had been drinking for more than 9 hours had consumed that much.

### Alcohol treatment programs

Inmates who drank during the year preceding prison were asked if they had ever been in a treatment program; inmates who had done no drinking were not asked. Consequently, some successful graduates of treatment programs may not be reflected in the survey data.

Four-fifths of the drinking inmates (those who drank during the year prior to prison) had never been in an alcohol treatment program (see table 5). Presumably, many of these were moderate drinkers for whom alcohol did not present a problem. However, seven-tenths of the habitually very heavy drinkers (4 or more ounces of ethanol) had never been in an alcohol treatment program either.

Examining the one-fifth ever enrolled in a treatment program reveals that a fourth of them had been enrolled in more than one program and that a seventh (or 3% of the total number of drinkers) were enrolled in treatment programs at the time of their offense. In fact, more than two-thirds of those ever enrolled in alcohol treatment programs had been drinking very heavily just before their offense.

### Habitual offenders drank heavily

Persons over 25 but under 35 years of age

are in the upper half of the prison-prone years. These persons are likely to have established firm patterns with respect to both drinking and crime. Among inmates in that age bracket, habitual offenders (prisoners who had five or more prior convictions) were more likely than persons with fewer convictions to have been very heavy drinkers. More than two-fifths of these career offenders drank very heavily during the year prior to their offense compared to a fourth of those with no prior convictions.

### Crime and drinking

The 1979 Inmate Survey was the first attempt to measure the drinking habits of prisoners on a nationwide basis. It established a greater degree of involvement with alcohol than had generally been anticipated.

The fact that one inmate out of every four drank very heavily on a daily or near daily basis in the year before incarceration indicates an alcohol problem of staggering size. If the same were true of today's prison

Table 4. Inmates' drinking just prior to current offense, by selected characteristics and amount drunk.

Characteristic	Number	Percent	
		Light to heavy	Very heavy
Total	129,444	38	62
Hours spent drinking			
Less than 1	12,150	92	8
1-2	32,192	62	38
3-4	25,547	34	66
5-8	29,550	19	81
9 or more	27,330	11	89
Not available	2,675	52	48
Alcoholic beverage			
Beer	85,735	36	64
Wine	26,181	35	65
Liquor	73,679	23	77
Other alcohol	1,415	18	82
Drinking setting			
Home	37,310	31	69
Friend's home	35,875	31	69
Bar	51,207	32	68
Car	36,889	28	72
Restaurant	2,566	32	68
Street	21,113	30	70
Workplace	0	0	0
Elsewhere	29	0	100
Current offense <sup>1</sup>			
Violent	78,905	40	60
Homicide	24,399	44	56
Assault	10,099	38	62
Rape	9,419	35	65
Robbery	30,817	40	60
Other violent	4,171	37	63
Property	39,774	32	68
Burglary	24,859	29	71
Forgery or fraud	3,678	41	59
Larceny	5,123	39	61
Other property	6,114	32	68
Drugs	5,244	54	46
Public order	5,150	45	55

NOTE: The totals for alcoholic beverage and drinking setting exceed the number of inmates drinking just prior to the offense because an individual could have drunk more than one type of beverage and been in more than one setting; rate of non-response for the variables shown did not exceed 0.3%.

<sup>1</sup>Offense for which an inmate was incarcerated.

inmate population, we would be discussing nearly 94,000 individuals.

The relationship between alcohol consumption just prior to the crime and the crime itself has not been sufficiently explored by these data. It is tempting to point to very heavy drinking (again, the equivalent of at least 8 cans of beer, 7 glasses of wine or nearly 9 ounces of 80 proof liquor) as the proximate cause of many crimes since 30% of the offenders admitted to such large consumptions just prior to their offense. The survey strongly suggests however, that for many offenders these are typical daily drinking levels.

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Table 5. Inmates who drank during the year prior to current offense, by drinking patterns and alcohol treatment programs

Characteristic	Total	In program at time of offense		Programs ever enrolled in		
		Yes	No	None	One	Two or more
Total drinkers	224,789	6,118	216,910	180,690	33,001	9,983
Frequency of drinking						
Total	224,789	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Every day	89,801	63	39	36	56	68
Nearly every day	14,357	8	6	6	7	8
3 or 4 days a week	26,886	8	12	12	11	8
1 or 2 days a week	59,884	16	27	29	19	10
3 or 4 days a month	12,234	2	6	6	3	2
About once a month	8,560	1	4	4	2	2
Less than once a month	12,186	2	6	6	2	3
Typical amount of alcohol consumed year prior to current offense						
Total	224,789	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Very heavy (4 or more oz. of ethanol)	99,570	75	44	39	67	80
Light to heavy (less than 4 oz. of ethanol)	124,404	25	56	61	33	20
Amount of alcohol consumed just prior to offense						
Total	224,789	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Very heavy (4 or more oz. of ethanol)	79,804	64	35	30	57	68
Light to heavy (less than 4 oz. of ethanol)	49,639	17	22	23	21	18
Not drinking then	94,314	19	43	47	22	14
Typical degree of drunkenness year prior to current offense						
Total	224,789	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Very drunk	43,986	41	19	16	32	40
Pretty loaded	41,135	25	18	17	25	25
Feeling good	87,886	27	40	41	32	28
Relatively sober	50,708	8	23	25	11	8
Degree of drunkenness just prior to offense						
Total	224,789	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Very drunk	45,518	44	20	16	35	43
Pretty loaded	31,235	14	14	13	20	16
Feeling good	31,702	13	14	14	15	16
Relatively sober	20,433	9	9	9	9	10
Not drinking then	94,314	19	43	47	22	14

NOTE: Numerical totals include an insignificant proportion (not more than 1%) for which data were not available. Percent detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding.

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