

TRENDS IN NEIGHBORHOOD DRINKING CHARACTERISTICS IN THE U.S., 1964-1970

In 1964 interviews were completed with 2746 adults (aged 21 and over) constituting a representative sample of the U.S. population (except Hawaii and Alaska). The interviews were conducted in 100 clusters which were composed of neighborhoods of a few blocks in the cities and a few square miles in the countryside. In 1970, approximately 5½ years later, a new sample of 2552 persons aged 18 and over (about 5% under 21) were interviewed in a sample drawn from the same 100 neighborhoods. The first study was primarily concerned with drinking practices, and its results have been reported in American Drinking Practices (Cahalan, Cisin, and Crossley, 1969); the second, conducted by Ira Cisin and associates, was primarily concerned with the use of all kinds of psychotropic drugs, but included a few questions on the use of alcohol (Mellinger et al., 1974).

At the level of the individual respondent, of course, these data enable us to compare only the distributions of a given behavior at the two points in time. The only change we find out about is net change, and we have no idea whether or not there have been substantial shifts in individual behavior in both directions, resulting in a much smaller net change. At the level of the neighborhood, however, we are able to measure changes in the distribution of patterns in both directions, as well as the net change. We are thus able to get some insight into shifts in the contextual patterns of drinking over time.

For the present, a trichotomized measure of drinking behavior will be the focus — whether the respondent has drunk at all in the past year, and whether the respondent has drunk 5 or more drinks at one sitting within the past year. In substance, these two cutting-points were established comparably in the two surveys; however, in form the surveys differed fairly considerably, so that interpretations involving trends need to be treated with caution. In 1964, abstention was established by the respondent's reply of "never" or "less than once a year" when asked how often he drank each of beer, wine, liquor, and all alcoholic beverages combined. In 1970, abstention was established by a response of "none, did not drink in the past year" to the

question, "During the past year, when you drank any alcoholic beverage — that is, wine, beer or liquor — how many drinks did you usually have at one sitting?" In 1964, "high maximum" (drinking 5 or more drinks at a sitting) was established if the respondent answered "once in a while" or more often, rather than "never," when asked how often he drank as many as five or six glasses each of wine, beer and liquor. In 1970, "high maximum" was established by a response indicating drinking five or more drinks on the occasion in the last year when the respondent "had the most to drink."

At the level of individual behavior, 33% reported abstention in 1964, and 31% in 1970. For "high maximum" drinking, 22% reported such a pattern in 1964, but 33% in 1970. If taken at their face value, these figures suggest that the increases in per capita consumption of alcohol reported from U.S. sales figures for this period have been primarily due to heavier drinking by those already drinking, rather than to conversion of abstainers to drinkers (see Room & Beck, 1974, for fuller data on individual trends).

To characterize the neighborhoods, we use here the same cutting-points on the distribution of drinking patterns used in Problem Drinking Among American Men (Cahalan and Room, 1974), although the cluster-scores are devised in a slightly different fashion. A "dry" cluster is one in which 50% or more of the respondents are abstainers, while in a "wet" cluster 33% or more are "high maximum" drinkers. "Medium" clusters are those filling neither the "dry" nor the "wet" criterion. (No cluster in either sample filled both criteria, though this is theoretically possible.)

Table 1 shows the relationship between the dryness/wetness measure in 1964 and in 1970 for the 100 clusters. Just as extreme shifts between abstention and heavy drinking are rare at the individual level (Room, 1972, Table 2), so they are also rare at the level of the neighborhood. Shifts into and out of dryness, in fact, are not overly common, and are more or less balanced between the two directions. The number of American neighborhoods where abstention is the norm does not seem to dwindle with any great rapidity.

*Drinking and Drug Practices Surveyor 14 (March 1979),
pp. 13-15*

Shifting into and out of wet status is considerably more common, and overwhelmingly the pattern is a shift from medium in 1964 to wet in 1970. Even more dramatically than for the individual data, this shifting suggests that relatively wet milieux are becoming wetter, so that 55% of the clusters are wet by 1970.

TABLE 1

U.S. Clusters, 1964 vs. 1970 Cluster Wetness

	1964			Total
	Dry	Medium	Wet	
1970				
Dry	16	5	0	21
Medium	4	17	3	24
Wet	3	34	18	55
Total	23	56	21	100

If we split the U.S. into the "dryer" and "wetter" regions, on the basis of historical and present-day patterns (Cahalan and Room, 1974), we find that the tendency for clusters to become wetter (among those not already wet) is stronger in the wetter than in the dryer region, but that this is primarily attributable to the hard core of continuing abstaining neighborhoods in the dryer region (Table 2). For 1964 medium clusters, the two regional categories show little difference in the tendency to become wet clusters.

Splitting the data by urbanization into three categories — cities (at least 50,000 population), towns (2500 to 50,000), and rural (under 2500) — we find change in neighborhood wetness, particularly increasing wetness, to be more common in the two urban categories than in the rural category, whether the comparison is of 1964 dry or medium neighborhoods (Table 3).

Of the neighborhoods whose wetness could increase, two-thirds did so in the cities and towns, but only one-third did so in the rural category. The changes were heaviest in the wet-region towns for clusters which were in the medium category in 1964 (9 out of 11 changed to wet in 1970) and in the dry-region

cities (5 out of 7 which were medium in 1964 changed to wet in 1970).

Per capita consumption statistics have tended to show a greater proportional increase in consumption in dry than in wet states (see Room, 1974). These data tend to suggest that the increase during the 1960s was concentrated in the growing urban areas of the dryer region.

TABLE 2

U.S. Clusters, 1964 vs. 1970 Cluster Wetness, by "Wetter" and "Dryer" Regions

<u>Wetter Regions</u>			
	1964		
	Dry	Medium	Wet
1970			
Dry	2	2	0
Medium	2	12	3
Wet	1	24	14

<u>Dryer Regions</u>			
	1964		
	Dry	Medium	Wet
1970			
Dry	14	3	0
Medium	2	5	0
Wet	2	10	4

The two studies compared here were conducted near the beginning and the end of a period, about 1962-1971, when U.S. per capita consumption of alcohol rose steadily to almost one-third more than consumption levels in the 1950s (Noble, 1978, Table 3). An earlier report (Room and Beck, 1974) has shown that according to survey self-reports of consumption, this increase resulted primarily from heavier drinking among drinkers rather than from net increases in the proportion of the population drinking. This pattern differed from that in Nordic countries which, like the U.S., had strong abstaining traditions and where per capita consumption also rose in the 1960s and early 1970s. In Finland, Sweden and Norway, at least, the proportion of

TABLE 3

U.S. Clusters, 1964 vs. 1970 Cluster Wetness
by Urbanization

Cities

	1964		
	Dry	Medium	Wet
1970			
Dry	1	1	0
Medium	1	6	3
Wet	0	15	11

Towns

	1964		
	Dry	Medium	Wet
1970			
Dry	3	0	0
Medium	1	4	0
Wet	2	11	6

Rural

	1964		
	Dry	Medium	Wet
1970			
Dry	12	4	0
Medium	2	7	0
Wet	1	8	1

abstainers apparently fell considerably in this period (Mäkelä, 1978). The present analysis suggests that the stability of U.S. abstention rates at the individual level reflects the solidity of group norms on abstention in the traditionally dryer areas of the country, notably in the rural areas of the southern and prairie states. In rural areas, in fact, the proportion of neighborhoods which were dry (i.e., a majority of adults abstained from drinking) held steady in the two surveys. On the other hand, the increase in per capita consumption was reflected in a considerable increase in the proportion of urban and wetter region neighborhoods where at least a third of the adults sometimes drank relatively heavily. This tipping toward heavier drinking was especially concentrated in the urban areas of the dryer regions. The historical split in the U.S. between wetter and dryer

regions thus tended to be refocused instead onto a widening gap between the cities and the countryside in the traditionally dryer regions. This trend set the stage for the battles over liberalization of alcohol controls which have occurred in the 1970s in many of the traditionally dryer states.

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