



RESEARCH BRIEF #114

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Spending Time Socializing in Bars Increases the Risk of Heavy Drinking

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KEY FINDINGS

- In rural areas, bars, pubs, and taverns can serve as important spaces for social connection, however, use of them is associated with greater risk of heavy drinking.
- Individuals who spend a significant amount of time socializing in bars, pubs, and taverns are at the highest risk of heavy drinking.
- Shifting the main focus of bars, pubs, and taverns away from alcohol consumption to spaces that facilitate social connection may help to preserve these spaces while also reducing the health and safety issues created by heavy drinking.

Bars, pubs, and taverns can provide important spaces for creating and maintaining relationships in a community.¹ This is especially true in rural areas where social infrastructure may be limited.² However, bars, pubs, and taverns can also facilitate and normalize alcohol misuse – a health behavior linked to numerous poor health outcomes, including increased risk of alcohol-related mortality.³⁻⁴ This may especially be the case in rural communities, where other social venues and activities are limited.

This brief uses data from the 2022 Rural Health and Engagement Survey to 1) determine if going to a bar, pub, or tavern at least once in an average week is associated with heavy drinking among rural working-age adults (ages 18-64), and 2) determine if the amount of time spent socializing with others in a bar, pub, or tavern is also associated with heavy drinking.

Spending Time in Bars, Pubs, or Taverns Increases the Risk of Heavy Drinking

Respondents who went to bars and spent 11 or more minutes there were significantly more likely to report heavily drinking in the past two weeks compared to those who did not go (see Figure 1). Specifically, those who spent 11-30 minutes in a bar, pub, or tavern

at least once in an average week were over 5 times more likely to report heavy drinking. Further, those who spent over 30 minutes there were nearly 4 times more likely to report heavy drinking than those who did not go to bars. This finding affirms the role that bars, pubs, and taverns play in facilitating and normalizing alcohol misuse.

Rural Adults Who Socialize in Bars, Pubs, and Taverns have the Highest Risk of Heavy Drinking in the Past Two Weeks

In addition, compared to those who did not go to a bar, pub, or tavern in an average week, the odds of heavy drinking were highest for those who spend most or all of their time at the bar, pub, or tavern socializing, followed by those who spend some of their time socializing, and then those who spend very little of their time socializing. These findings highlight the elevated risk for heavy drinking among those who are the most social within bars, pubs, and taverns.

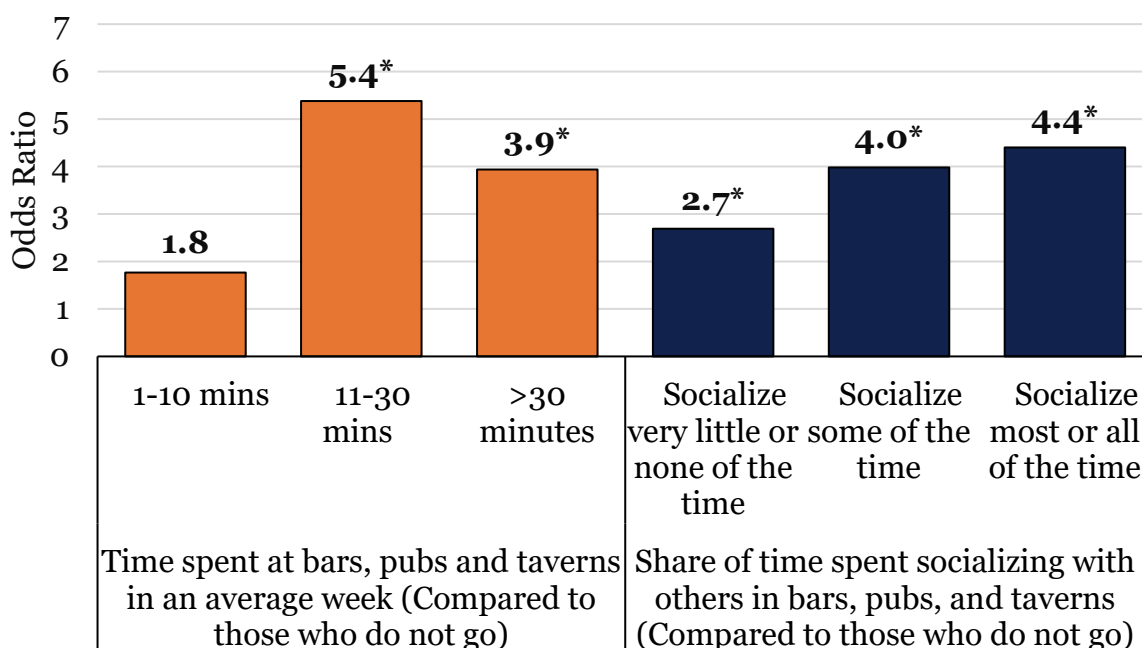


Figure 1: Odds of Heavy Drinking by Use of Bars, Pubs, and Taverns in an Average Week among Rural Working-Age Adults (ages 18-64) (compared to those who do not visit these establishments), 2022

Data Source: Rural Health Engagement Survey, N=1,135, 2022. Models controlled for sex, age, income, relationship status, if children were present in the home, and COVID-19 hesitancy.

*Indicates a relationship that was statistically significant (p<.01).

How Can Rural Communities Expand Alternative Spaces for Social Connection?

Community leaders should focus on expanding and supporting alternative, alcohol-free places where adults can gather and connect. Through public-private partnerships, local leaders could work with businesses to use public spaces more efficiently. For example, a coffee shop with daytime hours could open as a sober bar in the evening. Partnerships with local schools, arts organizations, or nonprofit organizations could offer alcohol-free live music or movie nights in local parks as alternative gathering spaces.

For rural communities with limited or declining social infrastructure, bars, pubs, and taverns may be one of the few remaining places for social connection. Shifting the main focus of bars, pubs, and taverns away from alcohol consumption to spaces that facilitate social connection may help to preserve these spaces while also reducing the health and safety issues created by heavy drinking. This could include encouraging alternative and appealing non-alcoholic beverages and expanding menu options to shift the focus from alcohol to meals.

Data and Methods

We used data from the Rural Health and Engagement Survey, which is a cross sectional survey of 1,135 working age (18-64) adults who live in rural counties in the U.S. collected in 2022. Logistic regression models were used to predict if respondents drank heavily (i.e. >7 drinks per week for women and >14 drinks per week for men) in the past two weeks, measured using the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) definition. Use of bars, pubs and taverns was measured by first asking participants, in an average week, how much time they spent in a bar, pub, or tavern. Response options included: I don't go to a place like this, 1-10 minutes, 11-30 minutes, and more than 30 minutes. Those who indicated that they go were also asked how much of their time in the bar, pub, or tavern they spend talking with others. Response options included (they do not talk to others, 1-10 minutes, 11-30 minutes, and more than 30 minutes. All models controlled for sex, age, income, relationship status, if children were present in the home, and COVID-19 hesitancy. Additional details about RHES can be found in <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103153>.

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