

Abstract

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) are the traumatic events that children go through in their first eighteen years of life (Lee & Chen, 2017). This study examined the association between college students' adverse childhood experiences and their alcohol use. Based on a sample of 124 students, this study was conducted in a public liberal arts university in the Northeastern region of the country during spring 2019. The top three reported ACE's included : (1) having parents with mental illness/depression, (2) parental divorce (3) lived with someone with drinking problem or someone who used street drugs. We found that parental divorce, mental illness & domestic violence in the households, as well as not feeling loved and supported were associated with college alcohol use. This study has important implications for research and practice for working with college students who cope with traumatic events.

Literature Review

Consistent positive correlation between ACE and alcohol use

- Patock-Peckham & Morgan-Lopez (2010) found that for men, rejection from their father led to more alcohol related problems. Antisocial behaviors in men were linked to mother rejection and father overprotection which led to increased alcohol use. For women, neglect from one's mother was found to be a direct link to alcohol-related problems.
- Individuals who experience psychological abuse are more likely to develop alcoholism (Filov, Raleva, Peshevska, et. al., 2014).
- Loudermilk & Loudermilk (2018) concluded that adults who experienced household abuse were 30% more likely to binge drink.
- Shwandt (2013) found that emotional abuse was the main predictor for alcohol dependence severity and physical abuse in childhood had only a moderate effect on the severity of alcohol dependence.
- Dube, Miller, Brown, Giles, Felitti, Dong, & Anda (2006) suggested that the initial age of alcohol use was associated with ACE for youth aged 15-17. However, in this study we did not know if ACE was related to the frequency or amount of alcohol use.

Methods

The research site & sample:

Surveys were handed out in person at a public liberal arts college in Connecticut, but most of our respondents came from the online survey distributed on Facebook.

Sample & Sampling:

The sample included 124 college students. We used availability sampling method to recruit respondents on campus and online for three weeks during Spring of 2019.

Measurement:

IV: Adverse childhood experiences (ACE score)

-We asked 15 close-ended questions on nine different types of ACE's. This questionnaire was modified from a 10-question ACEs questionnaire (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2006).

-ACE score: Total questions answered yes equals the ACE score, which is the number of ACEs a person has experienced.

DV: College student's alcohol use

We asked 5 questions to measure alcohol use, including the frequency ((Never, monthly, weekly, daily), quantity (how many drinks they have in one setting) and if they use alcohol to cope negative emotions.

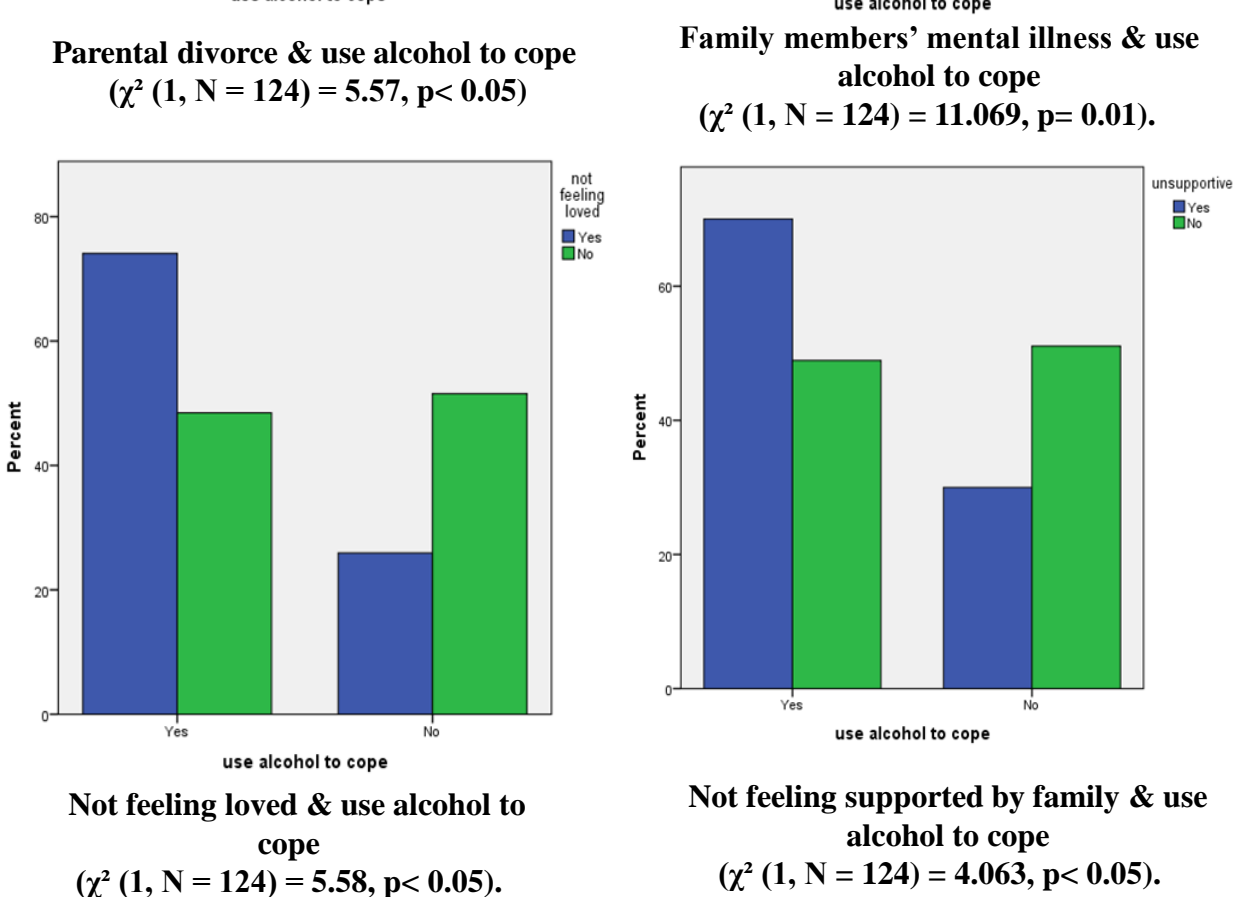
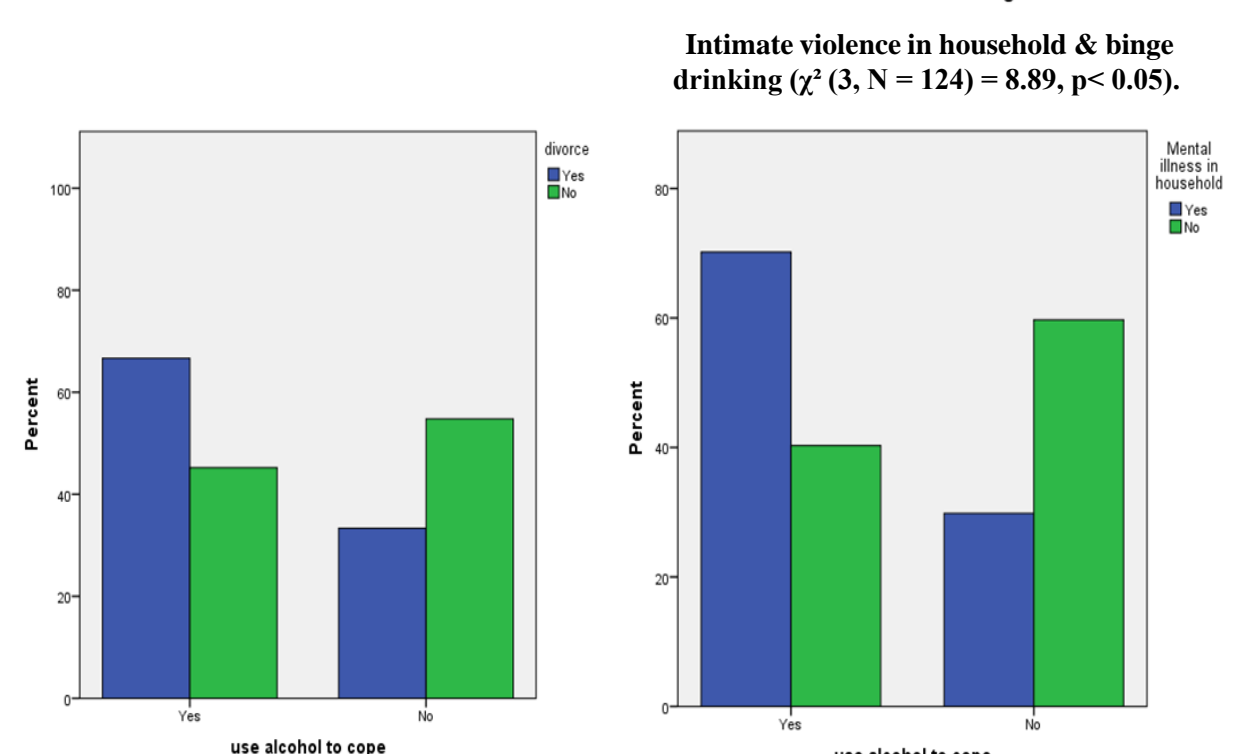
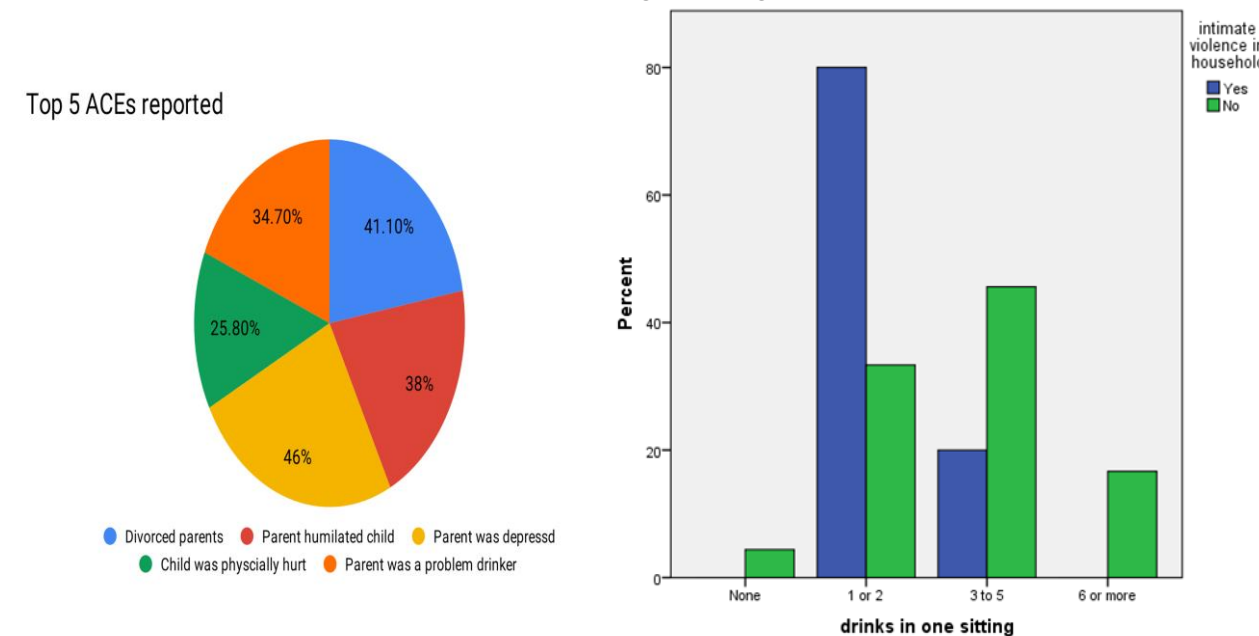
Analysis Plan:

- We used Pearson's Chi-Square test to analyze the relationship between ACE's and alcohol use, including the total ACE score (breaking down into three categories) and also by each ACE and each alcohol use behavior.
- SPSS 21 version was used to analyze data.

Results

Descriptive Results:

- The sample consisted of 83.9% Caucasian/White respondents, 83.1% female respondents, and over half of respondents were juniors in college (63.7%). The average age is 21 years old (SD=3.7).
- Top three ACE's** reported included the following: (1) Parents with mental illness/depression, (2) Parental divorce (3) Lived with a problem drinker or someone who used street drugs. The average reported ACEs score in the study was 2.87 (MIN/MAX=0-12).
- Significant results:** Five individual ACEs were found to be associated with alcohol use among college students:



Discussion & Implications

- Our study shows that college students' alcohol use is linked to: **(1) parental divorce (2) mental illness (3) not feeling loved (4) not being supported (5) domestic violence.** Our results are consistent with prior studies that emotional abuse (neglect, rejection, etc.) is associated with alcohol use.
- We did NOT find family member's drinking affected college students' alcohol use.
- Based on our findings, we suggest that social workers in secondary school settings raise awareness particularly among children who experience these kinds of ACEs. More programs such as Big Brothers & Big Sisters could be provided to nurture at-risk children in a loving and supportive school environment to mitigate the impact of parental divorce and domestic violence.
- The prevalence of drinking among college students also merits more studies. Our findings showed that **more than 50% of college students had a weekly drinking habit, engaged in binge drinking in one setting and used alcohol to cope with negative emotions.**
- Colleges could also provide more preventive programs for college students to learn more positive coping strategies with childhood traumas and stress.

Limitations

- The reliance of self-report on ACE's and alcohol use might have **social desirability bias.**
- Non-random sampling bias:** Only the students of one liberal art college were surveyed on a non-random sampling, therefore our results are not generalizable to all college students.
- Most of our respondents were Caucasian students, future studies should recruit more underrepresented students to have a better representativeness of student body.
- Short period of time to collect data (3 weeks).

References

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