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## When Getting Drunk Is Cheap

By [Tara Parker-Pope](#)

Matthew Staver for The New York Times Do bargain drink specials affect college drinking patterns? Anyone who has spent time around a college campus knows that the local bars offer drink specials to entice the party crowd.

Alcohol researchers from the University of Florida and San Diego State University decided to gauge how the drink specials influence the quantity of alcohol consumed. The findings will be published in the November issue of [Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research](#).

Bar owners claim bargain drinks simply attract customers to the establishment, but that the low prices don't spur patrons to drink more. But alcohol researchers believe many drinkers, particularly young drinkers, are sensitive to price. If they have \$10 to spend they will buy two, \$5-dollar drinks or five, \$2-dollar drinks, depending on what the drink special is.

In the latest study, the researchers examined the relationship between price and drinking level by collecting data on 495 men and 309 women leaving seven bars near a university campus. The bar patrons were given breath alcohol concentration tests and also told researchers what they drank and spent during their time at the bar.

Beer, wine and spirits all have different levels of ethanol, so the researchers calculated the cost per gram of pure alcohol. So a man in the study who spent \$5 for five 12-ounce bottles of 4.2 percent beer ended up consuming about 56 grams of ethanol — at a cost of 9 cents per gram.

The researchers found that the higher the cost per gram of ethanol, the less intoxicated

bar patrons were upon leaving the establishment. The study showed that the least intoxicated bar patrons paid, on average, \$4.44 for 14 grams of ethanol. Patrons with the highest level of intoxication had paid \$1.81 for the same amount of pure alcohol.

The association between cost of the drink and amount consumed was strong. For every \$1.40 hike in drink price, the bar goer was 30 percent less likely to leave the bar legally drunk.

The data show that drink specials likely do entice college students to drink more than they would consume if prices were higher. Researchers noted that college students are more sensitive to price reductions than older drinkers, who typically have more disposable income.

In the college bar district where the study was conducted, the bars typically offered “all-you-can-drink” deals for \$5 to \$7. The data suggest that the bar patrons studied were drinking on a limited budget. The vast majority of drinkers (87%) spent less than \$20 on alcohol for themselves at bars. The median amount spent was \$9 (\$10 for males, \$7 for females). Over 25% of men and women in the study spent exactly \$5 for all of their alcohol that evening.

“These findings do warrant a discussion about the unintended consequences of cheap alcohol, especially among the price-sensitive college student population, which has a well-documented history of alcohol-related problems,” said Ryan J. O’Mara, graduate research fellow at the University of Florida.