

What excessive drinking costs the United States

An independent update of the 2010 national estimate to 2021 • Model v1.0 • Not a CDC estimate

\$420.2B Total cost, 2021 (modernized estimate)	\$179.1B Paid by government (42.6% of the total)	\$2.81 Per standard drink (was \$2.05 in 2010)	\$1,266 Per US resident (was \$807 in 2010)
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The finding

Excessive drinking cost the United States roughly **\$420.2 billion in 2021**, up from the \$249 billion estimated for 2010. Applying the original framework without correcting for changes in how the underlying data are collected gives a higher figure, \$473.6 billion. The plausible range across all our assumptions is \$376.7 billion to \$539.4 billion. Government — meaning taxpayers — bore about two dollars in five.

Inflation explains less than half of the increase. Simply adjusting the 2010 figure for rising prices would give \$309.5 billion. The rest is a real increase in harm, concentrated in deaths and in chronic alcohol-related illness.

What changed, and what it means for prevention

- Alcohol-related death roughly doubled. Deaths where alcohol was the direct underlying cause rose from 25,700 in 2010 to 54,300 in 2021 — a category whose medical definition did not change over that period, so this increase is real, not a measurement artifact.
- The harm moved from acute to chronic. Binge drinking stayed roughly flat and underage drinking fell 41%, while alcohol use disorder and liver disease climbed steeply. Prevention aimed at single drinking occasions is addressing a smaller share of the problem than it was in 2010.
- Underage drinking is a prevention success story. Its share of total cost fell from 9.7% to 5.4% — the clearest improvement anywhere in the model.
- Federal alcohol research funding fell in real terms. The NIAAA appropriation grew 20% while general prices rose 24% and medical prices rose 35%, over a period in which the burden roughly doubled.
- Two thirds of the cost is lost productivity, not medical bills — healthcare is about a tenth. Framing alcohol harm as a healthcare cost problem understates it roughly sevenfold.

Where the cost falls

Category	2010	2021	Change
Lost productivity	\$179.1B	\$316.2B	+77%
Other costs — justice, crashes, fire, property	\$41.6B	\$57.4B	+38%
Healthcare	\$28.4B	\$46.6B	+64%

How confident should you be

This is a scenario range, not a statistical margin of error. Two components — lost workplace productivity and premature death — make up about 70% of the total, and both rest on federal data series that changed how they measure between 2010 and 2021. We corrected for the part of that change we could measure and disclosed the part we could not. 2021 was also a pandemic year: alcohol deaths ran high, incarceration and driving ran low.

LANGUAGE THAT IS SAFE TO USE Say: "An independent analysis updating the framework behind the CDC-supported 2010 estimate finds that excessive alcohol use cost the United States about \$420.2 billion in 2021." Do not say: "CDC estimates that excessive drinking now costs..." CDC has not published or endorsed this figure. Never add together: the binge (\$357.1B), underage (\$25.6B) and pregnancy (\$6.8B) figures. They overlap — the same dollar appears in more than one.
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Full methodology, all 26 cost components, the source crosswalk, the quality-assurance register and state-level results are in the accompanying methods memorandum and model workbook.