

Substance Use Among Intercollegiate vs. Club Athletes

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 26 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more.

Student-athletes are a unique subpopulation given both academic and athletic demands. Therefore, resources designed for the average college student often lack effectiveness for student-athletes, which can have detrimental consequences on their mental and physical well-being, and impact them both on and off the field. The student-athlete population was not being captured effectively within the standard MACHB. The Missouri Athlete Wellness Survey (MAWS) was designed and implemented in the Fall of 2024 among 12 campuses. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), mental health, and sport-specific factors have on student-athlete well-being. By creating this specific assessment, participating campuses were able to gain beneficial health and well-being data about their student-athlete population. As an outcome of the implementation, campuses have developed a better understanding of the needs of their student-athletes and are able to provide more effective programming related to student-athlete health and wellness. This brief will include substance use data among individuals involved in athletics.

Background

Student-athlete alcohol use has been associated with social motives and attitudes around conformity.^{3, 4} Athletes who experience an injury exhibit substance use behaviors.^{1, 7} Transition/retirement experiences for athletes have been described as distressing and leading to substance use and poor mental health outcomes.² Research has shown that risky health behaviors are more common among students involved in athletics vs those not involved.^{6, 9} Involvement in athletics can range from intercollegiate to intramural. The comparison of risky health behaviors between intercollegiate and club athletes remains under-researched. This brief will focus on substance use among intercollegiate athletes

vs. club athletes (Intercollegiate athletes N = 775; Club athletes N = 370).

Alcohol Use

When looking at 2024 MAWS data, a series of questions are asked regarding alcohol and binge drinking behaviors. Students were asked if they have consumed alcohol in the past 12 months. In 2024, 55% of intercollegiate athletes reported consuming alcohol in the past 12 months, and 68% of club athletes reported consuming alcohol in the past 12 months. Students were also asked about binge drinking behaviors (binge drinking is defined as a pattern

of drinking that brings a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 g/dl or above, which typically means consuming 4+ drinks for women and 5+ drinks for men in a 2-hour period at least once in the past two weeks). Among intercollegiate athletes, 21% reported binge drinking at least once in the past two weeks and 32% of club athletes reported binge drinking at least once in the past two weeks. Table 1 illustrates the top negative consequences students experienced as a result of drinking alcohol.

Table 1: Top Negative Consequences of Alcohol Use Experienced At least Once

	Intercollegiate Athletes	Club Athletes
Had a hangover	30%	43%
Vomited	22%	30%
Experience a "blackout" memory	14%	21%
Missed class	7.1%	18%
Been hurt or injured	5.9%	13%

Table 2 illustrates some contributing factors when making the decision consume less or not drink alcohol. The top reason for intercollegiate athletes was not wanting to negatively impact athletic performance (51%) (club athletes - 24%). Additionally, 27% of intercollegiate athletes drink less or don't drink because of rules set by coaches and/or the team (club athletes - 5.0%). When asked if they would drink more if they didn't play their sport, 24% of intercollegiate athletes report that they would drink more compared to 8.6% of club athletes. This highlights the important role that sport plays in intercollegiate athletes' lives. In some ways, high level sport might be a protective factor for alcohol related behavior. However, it's important to understand how behaviors/attitudes related to alcohol behavior could change depending on certain factors (e.g., sport-related transitions, injury, social motives/attitudes around conformity).

Table 2: Contributing Factors to Drinking Less or Not Drinking Alcohol

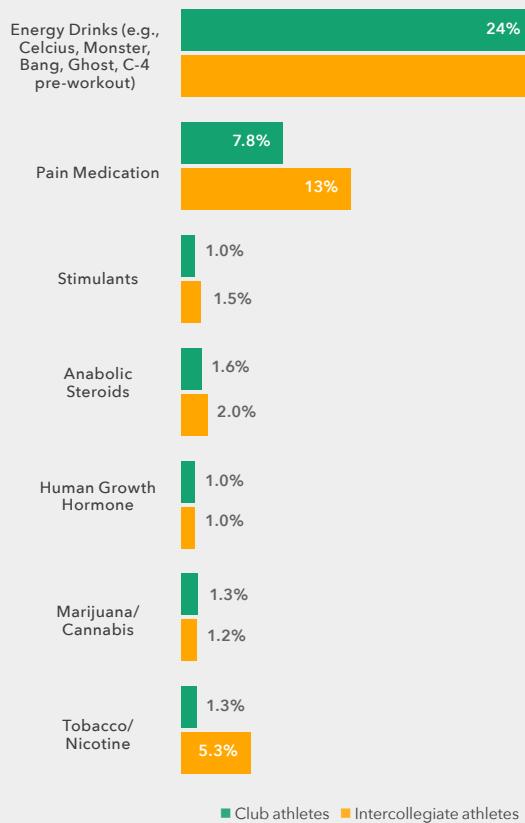
	Intercollegiate Athletes	Club Athletes
Don't want to negatively impact athletic performance	51%	24%
Not in the mood/no interest	43%	47%
Academic obligations	35%	43%
Chance of getting sick or having a hangover	31%	39%
Strict enforcement of alcohol laws	28%	28%
Rules set by coach or team	27%	5.0%
High cost of drinks/alcohol	26%	44%
Potential of doing something I will regret later	21%	25%
Being a designated driver	20%	29%
Health/Calories	24%	30%

Marijuana/Cannabis and Other Substance Use

Students are asked if they have used marijuana/cannabis in various forms including edibles, derivatives, and ALL other types of marijuana/cannabis products. Fifteen percent (15%) of intercollegiate athletes reported using any method of cannabis in the past 12 months. In comparison, 29% of club athletes reported use in the past 12 months.

Another question is asked regarding various other substances and if they have thought about using any of the substances to prepare for practice and/or enhance performance. Chart 1 looks at substances students have thought about taking.

Chart 1: Thought About Using Substances to Prepare for Practice and/or Enhance Performance



Sport-Specific Factors and Substance Use

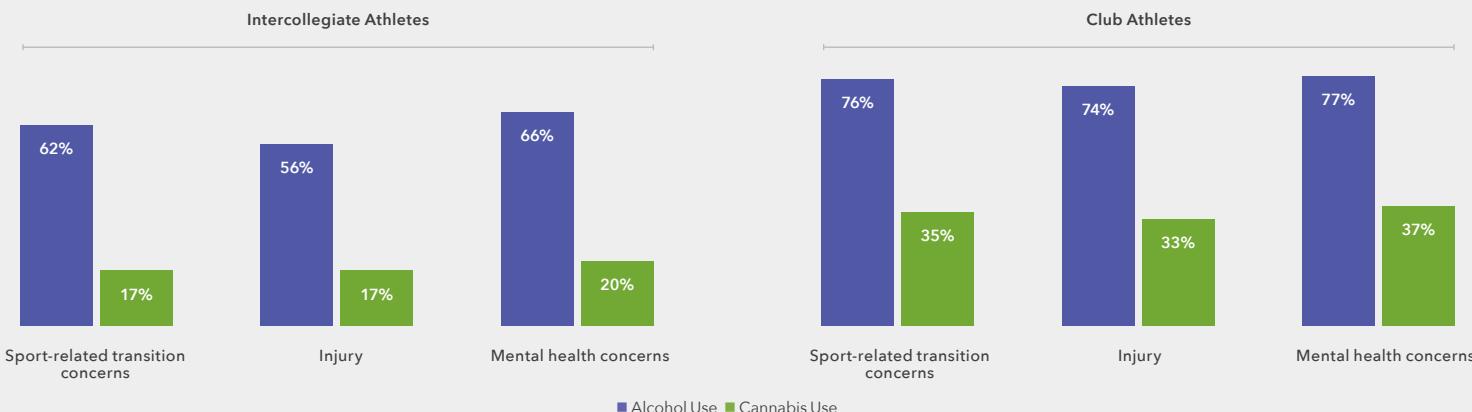
Compared to intercollegiate athletes, club athletes who have been injured in the past year, experienced at least one mental health concern, have concerns around transitioning out of college sport, have higher rates of alcohol and cannabis. Results are illustrated in Chart 2. Further research is needed to examine these relationships more in depth. One theory could

be the extent to which coaches form team dynamics and relationships, and set rules, expectations, and consequences around substance use.⁸ Intercollegiate athletics may have more targeted resources to address sport-specific concerns than club athletics due to factors such as finances/funding. Additionally, intercollegiate athletes might use substances less even when faced with challenges due to overall pressure in sport, being on scholarship, and/or attitudes around substances negatively impacting performance. It's important to note that those who didn't experience an injury, do not have concerns around sport-related transitions, and have not experienced a mental health concern all endorsed less substance use—this applies for both intercollegiate and club athletics.

Summary

Results from the 2024 MAWS survey show that students involved in club athletics exhibit more substance use behaviors than those involved in intercollegiate athletics. Research has shown that involvement in athletics is a risk factor for risky health behaviors substance use behaviors and those involved in athletics are more likely to engage in risky health behaviors than those not involved in athletics. However, the degree to which one is involved should be taken into consideration. High level sport in the collegiate setting may be a protective factor for substance use whether that's due to expectations or rules that coaches set around substance use, education around the effects of substance use on

Chart 2: Sport-Specific Factors and Substance Use



performance. Additionally, according to MAWS data, for those who are already involved in a sport, but endure experiences that may impede involvement (e.g., injury, mental health) endorse higher rates of substance use than those without these experiences. It will be important to continue to monitor these factors and explore ways to address these risky health behaviors in the context of sport-specific factors and increase support for students involved in athletics.

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