

One-fifth of this occupation has a serious drinking problem

By **Christopher Ingraham** February 5

America's lawyers have a serious drinking problem, according to [a new report from the American Society of Addiction Medicine](#).

More than 20 percent of licensed attorneys drink at levels that are considered "hazardous, harmful, and potentially alcohol-dependent." That's three times higher than the rate of problem drinking among the general public.

These numbers come from a survey of over 12,000 American lawyers, funded by the [Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation](#) and the [American Bar Association](#). Male lawyers had higher rates of problem drinking than women, 25.1 percent compared to 15.5 percent. The highest rates overall were among lawyers under 30 (31.9 percent) and junior associates at law firms (31.1 percent). That's driven partly by younger Americans' tendency to be heavier drinkers in general, but it also could be a reflection of the stresses caused by trying to move ahead in a highly competitive field.

The factors driving lawyers' heavy drinking are "a rare confluence of high risk variables," said study lead author Patrick Krill in an interview. He's the director of the [Legal Professionals Program](#) at Hazelden Betty Ford. The fact that lawyers warrant their own specialized treatment program gives some sense of the prevalence of substance abuse issues in that field.

Lawyers tend to "prioritize success and accomplishment over things like balance, personal well-being, health, etc.," wrote Krill, himself a former lawyer, in an email. "You put them through a training (law school) where they are taught to work harder, play harder, and assume the role of a tough, capable and aggressive professional without personal weaknesses or deficiencies."

And the field tends to reinforce these tendencies. "Heavy drinking, lack of balance and poor self-care are entirely normalized," Krill said. "That's the behavior that young lawyers see being modeled all around them, and throughout the profession."

Lawyers aren't necessarily unique in these traits. Other high-stress, high-performing fields, like [medicine](#), tend to prioritize them as well. But the extent of the drinking problem among lawyers is unique, according to the survey. On one measure based solely on the quantity and frequency of alcohol use, lawyers had double the rate of problem drinking that doctors did.

The study also found a shockingly high rate of depression -- 28 percent -- among American lawyers. Among the general public, only 8 percent experience a bout of depression in a given year, [according to the CDC](#).

"Studies have shown that most lawyers are pessimists (either by nature or by training) which can be psychologically taxing and inconsistent with healthy coping skills," Krill wrote.

The study notes the "pervasive fears surrounding their reputation" that many lawyers identify as a barrier to getting treatment, despite working in a field with relatively good access to mental health and substance abuse services.

Fixing this will require "a sea change within the culture of the profession," Krill said. "The profession has an obligation to take better care of its members, even if that means sacrificing some billable hours to do it."

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Christopher Ingraham writes about politics, drug policy and all things data. He previously worked at the Brookings Institution and the Pew Research Center.

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