

Study: Students Studying Abroad Get Drunker, Do New Drugs

You should worry more about diarrhea than assault while traveling.

By: Natalie Kitroeff

Studying in a foreign country can make people more mature, self-confident, and even employable, research has shown. It also can lead people to take potentially dangerous risks, including trying new drugs, a new study suggests.

The survey, released on Wednesday by On Call International, a firm that provides risk management services to Americans traveling abroad, shows that young people may be tempted to heighten their alcohol intake while in another country. The company surveyed 1,000 current or recent students who studied in a foreign country while in college. Half the respondents who said they drank alcohol said they drank more while abroad. Eleven percent said that while at school in a foreign country, they were more likely to “black out,” losing memory during a bout of drunkenness.

Twenty-nine percent of the people surveyed said they had used drugs while studying abroad, and 11 percent said they tried a drug for the first time during this period. This doesn't necessarily mean that students are doing more drugs than they would have at home. A survey conducted by the University of Michigan in 2014 found that 39 percent of college students had tried drugs in the previous 12 months.

It is generally unclear whether studying abroad is more dangerous for Americans than staying on campus would be. In Minnesota, where state law requires colleges to report on major incidents involving students studying abroad, fewer than 1 percent of 10,000 students who traveled in the 2014-2015 academic year were hospitalized. The Forum on Education Abroad, a nonprofit that facilitates foreign study programs, found that the most common incidents involving American students abroad related to illness. The sickness students were most likely to report: diarrhea. In fact, there were more cases of gastrointestinal maladies than aggravated assaults, robberies, and deaths combined.

A 2012 survey of young women who had recently studied abroad found that they were at greater risk of being sexually assaulted while traveling. The authors told Inside Higher Ed that women may be unfamiliar with host cultures and have an easier time getting alcohol, which can make them a target. The sample in the study included just 218 women, all from one college, which might limit the findings' broader relevance. On Call International, which produced the latest survey, has a stake in the question because it sells emergency services to travelers.

If you ask organizations interested in promoting study abroad, travel comes with few downsides and can make young people more productive, open, and effective. The Institute for the International Education of Students, which offers study abroad placements in 21 countries, found that—compared to all U.S. college graduates from 2006 to 2011—students who participated in the organization's foreign programs were almost twice as likely to be employed and were earning \$7,000 more. The vast majority of the 1,000 IES alumni surveyed, 84 percent, told the organization that studying abroad made them more tolerant, adaptable, and better at communicating in English and other languages. After all, even diarrhea can build character.

