Research in economics and sociology has extensively examined how socioeconomic status—particularly income—relates to alcohol consumption. Over the past two decades, studies have explored whether wealthier communities drink more alcohol, how drinking levels vary on a per-person basis with income, and whether preferences for beer, wine, or spirits differ by income group. Overall, alcohol use tends to rise with income: higher-income individuals and regions have higher rates of drinking participation and moderate consumption (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012; Galea et al., 2007). However, the relationship is nuanced. While affluent groups often drink more in total and prefer certain beverage types, heavier problem drinking is disproportionately observed in lower-income groups (Pollack et al., 2014). Below, we summarize key findings, contradictions, and gaps in the literature on income and alcohol use in the U.S. (2005–2025), focusing on economic and sociological perspectives.

Higher Income Communities and Total Alcohol Consumption

Multiple studies indicate that geographic areas with higher median household income tend to have higher overall alcohol consumption. Wealthier states and neighborhoods generally report more alcohol use per capita and a greater share of the population that drinks. For example, a CDC survey of U.S. adults found that the prevalence of binge drinking increased steadily with income, reaching the highest levels among those earning above $75,000 (CDC, 2012). Similarly, a multilevel study in New York City observed that neighborhoods with the highest median incomes had the highest prevalence of alcohol use and more frequent drinking occasions, even after controlling for individual demographics (Galea et al., 2007). These patterns align with economic theory that considers alcohol a normal good—as income rises, people can afford to drink more (Gruenewald et al., 2014).

Income and Per Capita Alcohol Use

Looking at per-person consumption, research also finds a positive income gradient in moderate drinking. Wealthier Americans are more likely to drink at all, and they tend to drink more frequently on average (CDC, 2012; Patrick et al., 2012). National survey data show that higher household income correlates with greater quantity and frequency of alcohol use, including occasional heavy episodic drinking (Pollack et al., 2014). For instance, young adults from high-income family backgrounds consume alcohol more often than their lower-income peers, and those from families with greater wealth have higher rates of monthly binge drinking (Patrick et al., 2012).

However, this does not mean that lower-income groups never drink. Instead, the data suggest a polarization: poorer communities often have more non-drinkers, but a subset of individuals who do drink may consume heavily.

Heavy Drinking and Alcohol-Related Problems in Low-Income Groups

A consistent paradox in the literature is that high-income populations exhibit more moderate alcohol use, whereas low-income populations suffer more from heavy drinking and its consequences (Pollack et al., 2014). Studies find that although affluent individuals are likelier to drink (in moderate amounts), severe alcohol misuse is concentrated among socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. The CDC study mentioned above illustrates this paradox: even though binge-drinking prevalence was highest in the top income bracket, those binge drinkers with the lowest incomes had the greatest frequency of binges and drank the most per occasion (CDC, 2012).

Correspondingly, epidemiological analyses have found lower income and neighborhood poverty associated with higher rates of alcohol-related problems like dependence and hospitalization (Karriker-Jaffe, 2011). Sociologists have noted this SES paradox as a form of health disparity: wealthier Americans enjoy alcohol in ways less likely to lead to injury or addiction, whereas the stresses and constraints of poverty can foster patterns of more hazardous drinking (Pollack et al., 2014).

Beverage Preferences by Income Level

The types of alcoholic beverages consumed also vary with income and social class. A 2024 national study (37,000+ U.S. drinkers) found striking differences in beverage choice by education and income (Cook et al., 2024). Lower-income and less-educated adults are significantly more likely to favor beer and spirits, while higher-income, highly educated adults prefer wine (Cook et al., 2024). This aligns with long-observed cultural patterns: wine drinking in the U.S. is often associated with higher social class and affluence, whereas beer has historically been the beverage of choice for working-class drinkers.

Contradictions and Research Gaps

While the general trends are clear, some contradictory findings and unresolved questions remain:

Mixed Evidence on Area Poverty and Consumption: Not all studies agree on how disadvantaged areas influence drinking. Some community-level analyses have found that neighborhood poverty correlates with lower overall alcohol use (Karriker-Jaffe, 2011), while others report higher rates of risky drinking behaviors in those same areas.

Micro vs. Macro-Level Patterns: The association between income and alcohol can differ by the scale of analysis. At the state or city level, higher income clearly predicts more alcohol use on average (Gruenewald et al., 2014). However, at a very local neighborhood level, the pattern may invert.

Limited Exploration of Cultural Mediators: Sociological research suggests that the link between income and alcohol is mediated by culture, norms, and policies. Education often accompanies income and independently influences drinking habits.

Conclusion

In summary, economists and sociologists broadly find that wealthier Americans and higher-income regions consume more alcohol per capita and have higher drinking prevalence (CDC, 2012; Galea et al., 2007). Alcohol use appears to increase with socioeconomic position, but heavy and problematic drinking shows an inverse relationship with income, disproportionately affecting the poor (Pollack et al., 2014).

Future studies could clarify how income gains or losses directly influence drinking and examine how social and cultural contexts moderate the income–alcohol relationship.

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