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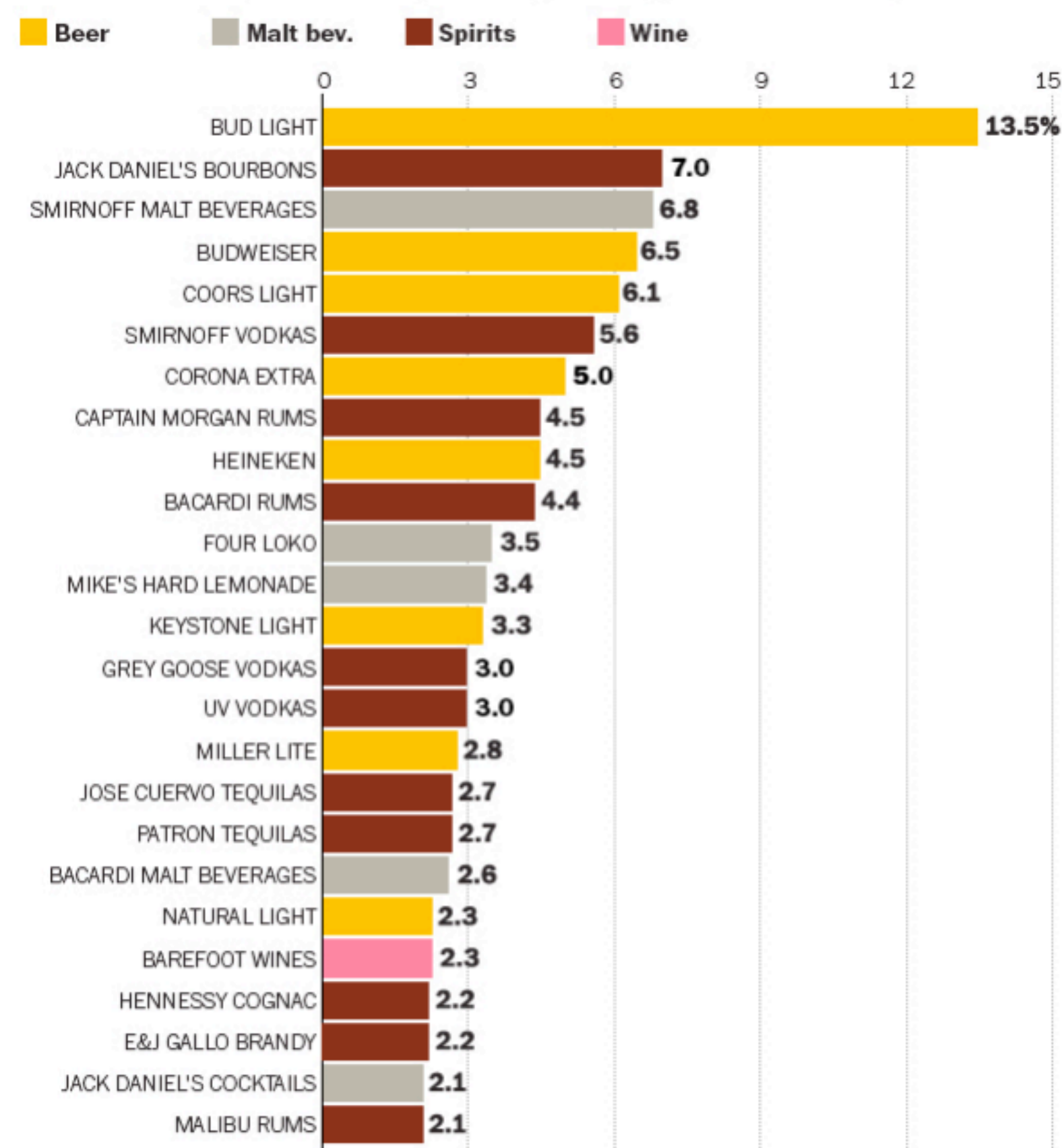
What underage drinkers drink when they binge drink

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BY ROBERTO A. FERDMAN June 13 at 10:37 AM

What the kids are binge drinking these days

Percent of 13 to 20-year-olds who reported binge drinking at least once with a particular brand.





SOURCE: "Beverage- and brand-specific binge alcohol consumption among underage youth in the US", Journal of Substance Abuse, May 2014
 GRAPHIC: The Washington Post. Published June 13, 2014


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Beggars can't be choosers, but they can have strong, brand-driven alcoholic preferences.

A study undertaken by public researchers found that underage drinkers not only have a knack for drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, but they're also pretty picky about which branded alcohols they do when they do over-drink. The study found that underage drinkers are more loyal to brand names than they are to anything else.

"The most important finding is that the phenomenon of binge drinking among our youth is extremely brand specific," Dr. Michael Siegel, professor at Boston University School of Public Health and one of the study's authors, said in an interview. "For the first time we've found the brands that are most responsible for binge drinking among our nation's youth."

The study, by researchers at Boston University and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, found that binge drinking among young people is highly prevalent, with 67 percent of all drinks consumed by youth aged 13 to 20 done so as part of binge drinking episodes.

And their brand preferences are clear: Leading the charge is Anheuser-Busch's Bud light, which nearly 14 percent of those surveyed reported having drunk in excess at least once, followed by Jack Daniel's bourbons, which some 7 percent reported having drunk, Smirnoff malt beverages, which 6.8 percent reported having drunk, Budweiser, which 6.5 percent reported having drunk, and Coors Light, for which the percentage was 6.1 percent. The 25 most cited brands are an eclectic group of beers, vodkas, whiskeys, rums, malt beverages, and even cognacs.

The list of the most popular alcohol brands among America's heavy-drinking youth might appear somewhat disjointed at first glance. Some of them, after all, are difficult to comprehend—Jack Daniel's bourbons, for one, is significantly more expensive than other lower shelf whiskeys, and yet ranks as the second most popular brand across all spirits and beers. But there's actually a reasonably clear thread that could be tying them all together: millions upon millions of dollars in marketing.

"Why are these brands the most popular? Is there something in their marketing? There could be messages in their marketing efforts that are encouraging the use of these not just by youths but also in excess," Siegel said. "We need to take a closer look at the marketing practices of these larger brands."

The top 25 brands accounted for over 46 percent of all binge episodes across the nearly 900 alcohol brands included in the study.

Alcohol use among middle and high school students has been falling in recent years, [according to the National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH), but a large swath of high school students are still illegally finding and downing their fair share of booze, and a surprisingly high percentage of those are doing so excessively—roughly 51%, according to the study. What's more, underage drinking is still tied to [hundreds of thousands of hospital visits](#) each year.

Currently, national and state-level policies aimed at curbing underage drinking are more focused on the point of purchase and consumption than on the time of potential indoctrination that precedes them. A deeper delve into what drives underage and excessive drinking, as well as the combination of the two, could help inform sounder policies and restrictions on marketing practices that encourage both illegal and irresponsible imbibing.

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