

Alcohol

Youth and the drinking culture of New Zealand

BACKGROUND

Alcohol use among youth is not a new issue and has been for some time, a cause for social concern. But what is alarming, is that despite all efforts to reduce the use of alcohol in youth, recent research is suggesting that young people in New Zealand are beginning to drink more frequently and consume higher amounts of alcohol than has been seen in the past (Ministry of Justice, 2007). Research in New Zealand suggests that the majority of teenagers between the ages of fourteen and seventeen years (88%) have at least tried alcohol, and of those ‘trialers’, the majority (91%) claim to be current drinkers (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC), 2005). Although, these figures are lower than those seen in previous years (ALAC, 2005), what is of increasing concern, is the increasing proportion of teenagers engaging in risky or ‘binge drinking’ behaviour. In 2003, the ALAC Youth Drinking Monitor found that almost half (48%) of all current drinkers between the ages of fourteen and seventeen had consumed five or more alcoholic beverages during one drinking session, at least once within a two week period. This figure was up from thirty-five percent in the previous year (ALAC, 2005). This has important implications, not only for the young people involved but also for their families and society, as research has shown that it is the amount of alcohol consumed rather than the frequency of consumption, that is implicated in many of the negative consequences associated with alcohol use (see Oei & Morawska, 2004 for a summary).

In addition to the amount of alcohol consumed, the location and environment in which adolescent drinking typically occurs has been highlighted as contributing to the risk of alcohol related harm. Specifically, adolescent drinking is usually unsupervised and so their safety is not monitored (McBride, Farrington, Midford, Meuleners, & Phillips, 2003; Ministry of Justice, 2007). Not only do young people have a lower tolerance for the effects of alcohol, they also have less experience and lack the decision-making skills necessary for dealing with the potentially hazardous circumstances that may arise in situations involving alcohol (Ministry of Justice, 2007).

THE ‘LEGAL DRINKING AGE’ DEBATE

Since New Zealand’s drinking age was lowered in 1999 from 20 to 18, there have been numerous calls in the media, public arenas and Parliament to raise it once more. There is a body of evidence on the effects of alcohol in teenagers (and indeed in people in their early twenties) such as, drunk driving and road

accidents, violence and aggression, suicidal risk, unplanned and unsafe sexual activity, and various forms of delinquent behaviour (Belcher & Shinitzky, 1998; Oei & Morawska, 2004; Peele, 2006).

There are some indicators which suggest that areas of youth health have been negatively affected by lowering the drinking age. Some of these effects have been investigated, but there have been few attempts to quantify any of these effects in New Zealand and it is not clear whether conclusions can be drawn. In its 1999 paper supporting the lowering of the drinking age, The Ministry of Youth Affairs acknowledged that the move would likely have adverse effects for some young people. One of the few attempts at quantifying the effect of the drinking age on car crash rates was undertaken by Kypri *et al.* (2006). They argue that, had the New Zealand drinking age been kept at 20 years, fewer alcohol-related crashes involving 15- to 19-year-olds would have occurred – based on a slower decrease in crash rates among this age group compared with others. However, Ministry of Transport (2008) data for the period from 1985 to 2007 indicates that the proportion of fatal accidents involving 15- to 19-year-old motorists has not increased since 1999. Similarly, the proportion of crash-related injuries across the same period has not seen a significant increase. Beyond such crash statistics, little is known of other effects that the change in drinking age may have had.

In 2010, the New Zealand Law Commission produced a review of laws around the sale and supply of liquor. Their recommendations on the drinking age were for a ‘split purchase age’, whereby the minimum age for purchasing alcohol would be 18 years for on-license venues (e.g. bars) and 20 years for off-license venues (e.g. liquor stores and supermarkets). The logic behind this recommendation was that it “...should help reduce the supply of alcohol to people under the age of 18 by older friends, while still allowing 18 and 19 year-olds the freedom to drink in the supervised environments of on-licence premises.” (Law Commission, 2010).

While it is possible to see negative consequences of the lowered drinking age, it is useful to consider these within the wider societal context of alcohol. The example set by parents and other influential figures is often different from that expected of young people. In addition alcohol is frequently portrayed in mass media advertising in a positive light. Hence, young people are given different and often contradictory information about alcohol. Considering this, it is unsurprising that these factors result in young people behaving irresponsibly with alcohol.

AN ADULT DRINKING CULTURE

While society often focuses on the negative consequences of youth drinking, it can be easily forgotten that young people model their behaviour on what they see around them; and in New Zealand there is a widespread cultural acceptance of drinking. While adult behaviour concerning alcohol consumption is

not homogenous, many adults in New Zealand set an example of excessive drinking, which influences young peoples' behaviour.

Following Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1981) Bio-Ecological Model and Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, young people's behaviour and development is a reflection of the social structures around them. The influence of family and other influential adults on youth is particularly important. There has been extensive international research on the role of parents in influencing drinking behaviours. Key influences have been identified as: parenting practices, parents' own drinking behaviour, family conflict, and parental supply of alcohol (Yu, 2003; van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, Dekovic, & Van Leeuwe, 2005). Williams and Hine (2002) found that parental attitudes mediated adolescents' views and behaviour regarding alcohol. They concluded that adolescent perceptions of alcohol could be shaped by targeting parental behaviour or by buffering adolescents from factors which influenced risk-taking attitudes, rather than directly targeting the adolescents' behaviour.

THE MASS MEDIA

Alcohol products are portrayed frequently through the media in advertising, promotions and sponsorship. Only a small amount of advertising around alcohol frames excessive consumption as a problem, such as the 'it's not what we're drinking, it's how we're drinking' campaign from the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC). The vast majority of advertising is undertaken by producers or marketers of alcoholic beverages with the goal of selling their product, and is thus especially positive. Further, there are frequent portrayals of alcohol use in programming which may be positive, neutral or negative. A New Zealand study by McGee, Ketchel and Reeder (2007) revealed that in 2004, alcohol was featured on average once every nine minutes on free-to-air television. Neutral and promotional portrayals outnumbered critical portrayals of alcohol by 12 to 1.

This alcohol advertising is noticed by youth, and evidence suggests this encourages drinking. Connolly, Casswell, Zhang, and Silva (1994) used longitudinal data from Dunedin to demonstrate that exposure to television advertising for alcohol, and recollection of that advertising was positively correlated with the level of alcohol consumption. This was particularly strong with young men and beer advertising. Recollection was negatively correlated with beer consumption in young women; however television watching was positively related to consumption of wine and spirits for young women.

As each portrayal of alcohol in the media is different, generalisations cannot be made about how the media portrays alcohol. However, as alcohol is portrayed frequently, it is constantly being presented to young people, emphasising the centrality of alcohol in society.

YOUTHLINE'S POSITION

Youthline takes the position that:

1. Setting a legal age at either 18 or 20 is arbitrary. The effects of drinking alcohol are not limited to people under the age of 20.
2. Young people learn their behaviour from society. In order to solve what is perceived to be a youth drinking problem, we must address the adult drinking problem. If adults model appropriate use of alcohol, this will impact positively on young people's perceptions and behaviours.
3. The media plays an important role. The media presents an image of society that influences young people. How the media chooses to portray issues such as alcohol will have a bearing on how young people behave. The media therefore must take responsibility for presenting a fair and balanced view on the use of alcohol.

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