

Underage Drinking: Is Pricing the Only Solution?

By Julie Leenane

Youth Category: Age 12 – 14

Underage drinking is a growing problem in Ireland, and around the world. But is raising the price of alcohol really a solution?

No, it isn't. Picture the scene – a teenager in a tracksuit pays an older boy to buy drink for him. That tracksuit is designer, his runners expensive. This kid has more than enough pocket money to buy alcohol at an increased price and no-one's going to stop him.

Or, a teenage girl in heels and a short dress on her way out to a disco. Before she leaves, she makes a stop at the cupboard on top of the kitchen units. That night, her father wonders where his six-pack of beer got to. He shakes his head and dismisses it, there's no way his precious darling is out drinking.

There are always ways around paying for alcohol, and all raising the prices is going to do is make it look more enticing. The more you emphasize that something is forbidden, the more a teenager is going to want it. Its human nature to want what isn't allowed, raising prices isn't going to change that.

It seems that underage drinking is more of a parenting issue than a pricing problem. If children's parents aren't willing to make sure their teenagers aren't out drinking, then what progress can be made?

Parenting issues are always the most difficult to solve, especially concerning a problem as widespread as underage drinking. The only thing that can be done is to publicly encourage parents to put their foot down and stop things. But, for the parents that will not or cannot do this, all that can be done is to inform teenagers of the effects of drinking. If details of the effects of alcohol will shock young people into not drinking underage, then all objections must be waved aside. I don't think protecting young people from the knowledge of what's out there is going to help – but telling them what can happen may prevent them from abusing alcohol. If a teenager is aware of what could happen to them, they may decide that drinking is not as cool and fun as their peers may say it is. There's no point lecturing a teenager on the dangers of alcohol if you're not going to be blunt about telling them what has happened to teenagers who go out, get wasted and get found by the wrong people.

There's no-point in saying alcohol is dangerous without clarifying how. Sometimes, frightening young people is the only way to get through to them, the only way to ensure they make an informed decision about alcohol. If they know that, because of drinking, they could end up in serious trouble or worse, they may take a more mature approach. If they don't, then that's their own fault. It reaches a point where no-one, not parents, not teachers, nor the government, can do anything else. If a young person is that determined to get their hands on alcohol, they will.

Raising prices won't help. Teenagers will continue to acquire alcohol without too much difficulty and knowing Ireland's drinking culture, all you're going to get is a crowd of angry adults, annoyed at having to pay more for their Friday night beer.