

Underage Drinking – Is Pricing the Only Solution?

By Roisin Kelly

Youth Category: Age 15 – 17

Underage drinking has become a massive problem in Ireland in recent years with teenagers as young as thirteen regularly trying alcohol as a means of social inclusion. But just how aware are teenagers of the effects of alcohol, the memory loss and the dreaded hangover, but also the long term effects. Is pricing the only solution to this problem? Boys will be boys and girls will be girls but there is no excuse for this type of behaviour. Teens don't have the kind of drug education required before they embark on a lifetime of drinking alcohol. Will they listen to their parents or will pricing the alcohol be the only way to stop them. Will it stop them at all?

Many teens now see alcohol as a social booster, giving them confidence for a night out and enabling them to *have more fun*, sometimes resulting in serious injuries and even deaths. There are age limits for reasons, many teenagers see this age restriction as annoying or pointless but why would it be there, if there was no reason for it to be? Prolonged drinking can result in damage to the liver, cancer, dependence on alcohol, substance abuse and early death. With teenagers drinking before they should they are allowing themselves to jump into this descending spiralling effect of alcohol. Teenagers shouldn't drink before eighteen as they are still growing until then; alcohol stunts growth and kills brain cells. Teens may be very aware of alcohol around them but many have no idea the serious effects it has on them.

Recent studies have shown that one in five parents believe that it is acceptable for teenagers to drink alcohol before they turn eighteen. According to 2007 statistics, teenage girls drink more than boys, with 28 percent of them saying they had been drunk in the previous month compared to 24 percent of males. With more girls drinking than boys the issue of sexual abuse is more significant. Over half the population believe that there is nothing to do to help this problem but 30 percent of the population said they would drink less in order to discourage underage drinking.

The government's answer to this increase in underage drinking is to raise the price of alcohol. They may see this as a solution but in reality it won't help the situation much. Teens are prepared to spend money on drink in order for them to get drunk, teenagers don't stop at one drink, they drink until they're drunk: immobilised and with no sense of judgment whatsoever. Pricing alcohol may mean that they can physically buy less alcohol than they had before but it doesn't eliminate drinking completely. This is where the government may have succeeded, they may have cut back the amount of alcohol that underage teenagers drink but does this eliminate underage drinking completely?

No. The result of this pricing of alcohol means that teens turn to buying cheaper brands, without paying any attention to the alcohol content of these new brands. They don't know what effect this different drink will have on them, they could, unknowingly be drinking twice as much as they had before, resulting in very serious consequences. Teens are drinking the

same amounts of beer, wine or spirits that they were before but having these different brands means that they don't know how their bodies will react to this and what their limits are with these cheaper brands.

Pricing alcohol may also lead to teens stealing it from their houses, more readily than they would have done so before. Stealing from their houses often means teens are mixing various spirits together in order to get the usual quantity they would have. This dangerous mixing of drinks leaves teens extremely drunk on nights out, sometimes ending in hospitalisation and death.

The Rand Report found that Ireland was one of six countries in the EU where alcohol has become over 50% more affordable than it was in 1996. Alcohol prices in Ireland are falling while average prices are rising. According to CSO figures, alcohol prices fell by 1% in Ireland between September 2010 and September 2011, while average prices rose by 2.6%. At current prices, a woman can meet her weekly limit of safely drinking alcohol for just €6.30 while men can reach their limit for just under €10.

Pricing alcohol to limit the underage drinking is an obvious solution to the problem but not one that will work in the long run. If they want to drink they will. No matter how they get it. Whether that be buying cheaper, unknown substances or stealing from their home or even supermarkets and off licences. This problem has become prevalent in recent years but just how will we put an end to it?