

Underage Drinking: Is Minimum Pricing the Only Solution?

By Amy Lewis

Youth Category: Age 18 – 20

Meet our hypothetical teenager: 16-year-old Julie. It's Saturday afternoon and Julie is getting ready to go to the local teenage disco tonight. Her tan is done, her hair is flawless, she just needs to pack her handbag before she leaves. Make-up? Check. Money? Check. Vodka? Check.

This example will only shock the minority of readers and perhaps, that is the real dilemma. Alcohol is a large part of our culture and as a result, underage drinking has become widely accepted amongst the public as "the norm". The 2007 *"European Schools Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs"* (ESPAD) among European 15 and 16-year-olds, showed that 44 percent of Irish girls and 42 percent of boys reported binge-drinking in the last month. Over half reported being drunk at least once by the age of 16.

While binge drinking seems like harmless fun to those on the path to adulthood, it can have detrimental effects on their physical and mental wellbeing. Teenage invincibility is virtually null in the face of alcohol and we have statistics to prove it. Between 1995 and 2004 in Ireland, there was an increase of 29 percent in the number of girls under 18 discharged from hospital for alcohol related conditions and an increase of 9 percent for males under 18.

"Illnesses that were, in the past, associated with a lifetime consumption of alcohol are now being seen in young people," says Sean Byrne, DIT lecturer in economics and author of the HSE report on *"Alcohol-Related Costs to Society"*. *"Liver cirrhosis was a disease found among older men who consumed large amounts of spirits over a period of time. It's frightening to see that is becoming increasingly common among adolescents."*

It's undeniable that underage drinking is a serious problem in Ireland but the question on how to solve it remains to be answered. Minimum pricing of alcohol is one controversial suggestion that has been extensively covered in the media recently; this method outlines the lowest price an alcohol product can be sold at based on the number of units it contains. Róisín Shortall, Minister of State at the Department of Health, is a strong supporter of this solution, feeling that it will help to tackle both underage and adult alcohol abuse. In an interview with the Irish Times this year, Ms. Shortall said that *"young drinkers are very price-sensitive"* and mentioned the *"direct correlation between price and levels of consumption."*

Sean Byrne emphasizes this relationship by saying, *"Given the incredibly cheap beer available in supermarkets, it's now possible to get drunk on pocket money."*

However, while minimum pricing will restrict the availability of cheap alcohol, it won't put an end to underage drinking. In fact, in 2011, the Youth Drug and Alcohol Service in Dublin (YoDA) conducted a study of alcohol consumption among 34 alcohol abusers aged between 14 and 18 and found they were more likely to buy branded alcoholic products than their cheaper competitors. Seemingly, if young people really want alcohol, they will find a way to obtain it, regardless of the cost to their health or their bank balance.

The central idea around tackling adolescent drinking should not be '*stop the kids from drinking*' but '*stop the kids from WANTING to drink.*' Education is needed to tackle underage demand for alcohol; this is a need that hasn't been met. While, the Department of Education and Skills delivers the Social Personal Health Education (S.P.H.E.) programme at primary and secondary level, the rising level of underage drinking portrays its failure to provide sufficient levels of alcohol education. A 2007 study carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre in N.U.I. Galway surveyed secondary school students and discovered that only 49 percent regarded S.P.H.E. as an important subject. The report also highlighted the difficulty that teachers have when it comes to finding time for the class.

Nicole, a 15-year-old student from Dublin, agrees that adolescents receive little education about alcohol: "*We get more education about smoking and sex than drinking.*"

Adequate education in the home is also a necessity. Many parents allow their teenagers to consume alcohol at home in an effort to promote responsible drinking. Róisín Shortall has criticised this method as foreign studies have shown that this type of supervised alcohol consumption led to an increase in alcohol use by the time children reached their late teens. Instead, children should be taught about the health problems associated with drinking, while being encouraged to take part in more beneficial activities.

"*We are a nation of binge drinkers,*" says Seán Byrne. This can't be denied; drinking is something that we Irish are good at. But instead of teaching our children how, why and when to drink, how about we begin to teach them how, why and when they shouldn't, both inside and away from the classroom.

Sources

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