

## Underage Drinking – Is Pricing the Only Solution?

By Clare O’Beara

Adult Category: Age 21 and over

Society frowns on underage drinking, which leads to risky behaviour, but sends mixed messages about alcohol to young people, including advertising and sports sponsorship. An ever-increasing number of schoolchildren report having been drunk, which increases to 90% at third level.

Today’s pocket money may be twenty to fifty euro a week and there is little incentive to save, with interest rates below one percent on deposit accounts. The more expensive alcohol is made, the more some youngsters will draw from their income or progress to riskier behaviours such as not eating before drinking. Many young people see experimenting with alcohol as a natural part of growing up and would benefit more from sensible information such as alternating with soft drinks than from being told not to drink at all.

In an effort to curb alcoholism, the Norwegian government greatly increased the price of alcohol. Winters there are still long, dark and bitterly cold, so Norway now has impoverished alcoholics, as well as customers who nurse one drink all evening. Reuters recently reported that Nordic countries have evidence of twice as much risky alcohol-related behaviour as Western European countries.

Suzanne, a small business owner, was never interested in drinking or smoking. *“My classmates spent all their money on Saturday nights. I had money put aside to finance my start-up and I was able to get driving insurance as a non-drinker. This gave me a sizeable discount when it mattered most, before I had a no-claims bonus. As I would be on the road a lot I considered it safer not to drink anyway.”*

Those Irish people who like a glass of wine in the evening as a stress-reliever in the face of the recession are penalised every time the government raises alcohol duty and tax. These people are already paying substantial taxes and are not buying a vintage wine to hand it over to teenagers.

The accessibility of alcohol is another factor. Supermarkets, some newsagents and filling stations as well as pubs and off-licences would protest any curbing of their sales. Age cards are a necessity as today’s sixteen-year-old young man may be over six foot tall. A recent court case however saw compensation given to a customer whose girlfriend had just been refused service on the grounds that she looked under twenty-one. He took exception to being refused service himself because he was buying for someone who might be underage and brought the matter to court.

The attitude of society is hugely important in influencing young people. In Arizona under 21s are strictly forbidden alcohol, because most young people have driving licences due to distances and a lack of public transport. The rationale makes sense to everyone so the ban gains almost total support.

Public campaigns against underage drinking can do more harm than good. One recent advert showed a young boy saying *"You can always find someone to buy you drink,"* with a sly grin. The day after it aired, three youngsters hung around outside a Raheny off-licence and asked a customer to buy them drink. He informed the proprietor and the following evening a Garda stood outside the shop.

Some young people claim that they drink because they have nothing else to do. *"I was horse mad,"* Cliona recalled, *"and all my money went on keeping my horse and entering competitions. If I was given money for my birthday I bought new tack. I would have considered a night's drinking to be a total waste. Parents say horses are expensive, but isn't it better to be bringing home trophies than falling drunk in a gutter?"*

Mature student Ellen resents the cost of non-alcoholic drinks. *"I pay two euro for a small cup of indifferent, lukewarm coffee. It works out cheaper to buy a glass of cider than lemonade."* A tax on soft drinks introduced to fund the Boer War was only removed during the nineties and a proposed sugary foods tax for health reasons would hit many minerals.

Advertising is rife. A webmail homepage today carries a banner ad for beer, just above where one clicks to access email. Not only are ads ubiquitous, they are well financed. For decades the Irish policy has been that models in drink ads have to be over twenty-five and look over thirty, but models say drink ads pay best.

Drink is still associated with some sports. International showjumpers Eddie Macken and Paul Darragh were once sponsored by a tobacco firm. They named their horses after cigarette packets and besides money, received free cigarettes. A less likely scenario for 2012 could hardly be imagined, yet the showjumping industry thrives. Perhaps it is time to send alcohol advertising and sponsorship the way of cigarettes.