

Underage Drinking – Is Pricing the Only Solution?

By Paul Lang

Adult Category: Age 21 and over

In modern Ireland there is a high level of underage drinking and resultant anti-social behaviour like public disorder and aggressive confrontations. What's even more alarming though is the general attitude of Irish people to just accept this social norm of minors drinking in the park with their friends.

Worryingly the Health Research Board's report on people treated with an alcohol problem in Ireland shows this trend is growing. There was a *"145% increase in new cases aged under 18, from 109 cases in 2005 to 267 cases in 2010"*. Teenage drinking can worsen both physical and emotional problems so why do teenagers feel the need to drink in the first place? They drink because they are curious, want to be accepted and belong, and in some cases it makes them feel older.

Drinking has become a fabric of Irish society. One only has to look at the recent St. Patrick's Day Festival to highlight just how much we love to party. As a proud student of History, it saddens me to see what Paddy's Day has become. It has become an institution in Irish society where both the young and old value the alcohol part of Paddy's Day more than the actual celebration of our great Irish culture.

Perhaps though in 2012 that is what modern Irish culture is. Going out and getting "locked", complaining about everything. It's no surprise then that teenagers would copy their parents' example, drinking to forget their problems. Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health, Dr. Tony Holohan, stated the *"average per capita consumption of pure alcohol increased from 11.9 litres in 2010 to just under 12 litres (11.97) last year"*.

He argued that setting a minimum price per gram of alcohol to stop drink promotions would buck this trend. *"If a minimum price of 7 cents a gram was legislated for here, a 500 ml can of beer with an alcohol content of 4 per cent would have to cost at least E1.40, he said, or a 750 ml bottle of wine with an alcohol content of 13 per cent would be priced at a minimum of E6.82."* Licensed owners though have a right to sell their goods at an affordable price to generate good business. It is a positive move but is it not more society's fault for their own short comings and need for alcohol?

The Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland advised that setting a minimum price for alcohol is contrary to the EU Internal Market. This could cause legal issues for the Irish State, and drain on financial resources just to set minimum prices for alcohol. It seems redundant to me, plus Ireland is already the highest in Europe for alcohol prices, but yet the problem of underage drinking remains a strong issue.

The ABFI stated that the alcohol sector is a major industry for Ireland, providing over 60,000 jobs, generating E2 billion in tax revenue and key international export. This strengthens my point that alcohol is the cornerstone of Irish society and raising the price isn't going to stop young kids from stealing their parents' liquor. Some alternative ways to prevent underage

drinking is introducing mandatory national identity cards, developing better facilities for young people and educating kids and parents about alcohol.

In Canada there is a bold method being used to crack down on the sale of alcohol to minors. Any establishment caught selling alcohol to minors must pay a severe fine, and highlight their shame for breaking the law. They even use undercover underage "agents" to help in stings and leave many licensed establishments embarrassed. This tactic could significantly lower the sale of alcohol to minors throughout Ireland. It would force businesses to be more vigilante and socially aware to the effects of underage drinking.

The Canadian Minister Rich Coleman stated that compliance rates for private licensed liquor stores *"improved from the '30-percentile' a few years ago to 80% for private licensees"*. That's a dramatic change that we should aim for. If we did take a tougher approach like that shown by the Canadian Government it could help encourage more teenagers to develop their minds and not waste it on alcohol.

More importantly though, I think the older generation need to look at themselves in order to help the younger generation flourish. In Irish society there is an overwhelming peer pressure at social events to consume alcohol. It is this peer pressure by the older generation to go out and have a drink that transcends down towards the younger generation.

Parents should take a more active role in their child's life and encourage them to be the best that they can be and not laugh off a teenager drinking in a field with his friends just because you did it 20 years earlier. Parents need to teach their kids the risks and more importantly that moderation is the trick to a good drunk.