

ALAC SUBMISSION TO YOUTH PARLIAMENT SOCIAL SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO HOW YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BEST BE SUPPORTED TO BE SAFE WITH ALCOHOL

Summary:

- A range of legal and other changes are needed
- Young people suffer greater harm from alcohol
- Alcohol harm is not only a youth problem, therefore improving overall drinking environment will benefit young people too
- Young people and their peers, families and communities can help to lead change in the way New Zealanders drink.

A list of recommendations follow.

Introduction

It is the submission of the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand that in order for young people to be properly supported to be safe with alcohol, there are many changes, regulatory and non-regulatory, that can be made to provide an environment that encourages and supports the safe use of alcohol and minimises alcohol related harm.

The Alcohol Advisory Council (ALAC) is an independent Crown Entity. ALAC has statutory responsibility to encourage and promote moderation in the use of alcohol, the reduction and discouragement of the misuse of alcohol, and the minimisation of the personal, social, and economic harm resulting from the misuse of alcohol.

ALAC's vision is a New Zealand drinking culture that supports the moderate use of alcohol so that whanau and communities enjoy life free from alcohol related harm.

Harm

Alcohol is linked to a range of diseases, such as chronic health problems, mental health disorders and several cancers. Alcohol can also affect fetal development and contributes to death and injury, including falls, drowning and motor vehicle crashes.

Young people are affected disproportionately by alcohol related harm.

Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 are more likely than older drinkers to suffer a range of adverse consequences from their own or other people's drinking. These consequences include unprotected and unwanted sex, violence, assault, arrests and motor vehicle crashes.

Young people aged 18 to 29 account for a large proportion of hospital presentations for alcohol related injuries, alcohol related offending and alcohol use disorders. In addition, early initiation into drinking can have adverse effects on physical and cognitive development and increases the risk of later alcohol-use disorders and other mental health problems.¹

Young people in context

The Youth Parliament discussion paper '*Inquiry into how young people can be supported to be safe with alcohol*' outlines Youth 07 data that found 50 percent of 13 year olds have tried alcohol, and that by age 16, three quarters of young people say they 'currently' drink. Of those who currently drink, 58 percent of 16 year olds report drinking weekly or more, and 80 percent say they have 3-4 drinks or more in a usual drinking session.²

Between 1995 and 2004 the proportion of young people who reported drinking more than six drinks on a typical occasion increased for all ages between 14 years and 19 years.³

Drinking excessively is one of a range of risky behaviours typically experienced, to varying degrees, by young people as part of growing up. No-one should find this surprising - heavy drinking and drinking to intoxication are both persistent features of New Zealand's drinking culture. New Zealand's young people live in a world where alcohol is ever-present, and heavy drinking is the norm.

Total alcohol consumption rose between 1998 and 2008, decreasing slightly in 2009.⁴ One in five drinkers aged over 12, and nearly half of drinkers aged 12 to 24 usually drink more than four standard drinks on a single occasion. Nearly one in three people who drink, drink on average more than two drinks a day – including a quarter of drinkers age 35 to 64.

Supporting Young People

In ALAC's view it is not simply a question of supporting young people to make safe decisions around their use of alcohol, but rather of promoting an environment where the moderate and safe use of alcohol keeps all New Zealanders safe. If the collective population-wide attitude to alcohol is improved, then the attitudes and experiences of young people will improve too.

The Law Commission report '*Alcohol in our lives – curbing the harm*' proposes an extensive package of measures that would make a significant difference to alcohol related harm in New Zealand. Included in the proposals are specific measures aimed at reducing the impact of alcohol on young people, not just from their own drinking, but

¹New Zealand Law Commission (Wellington 2010) *Alcohol in our lives – curbing the harm*; 251-252

² *Inquiry into how young people can be supported to be safe with alcohol*

³ Ibid, 66

⁴ Ibid 68

also from others drinking. It is important that we recognise that wider social and economic contexts and dominant cultural values set the big picture within which young people grow up.

Changing the environment through regulation

From our research, ALAC knows the increased availability and access to alcohol has become a major contributor to alcohol related harm. Interventions are needed to reduce availability, such as establishing nationwide trading hours, tightening the criteria for who may hold a licence to sell alcohol, and making it possible to attach conditions to that licence. Conditions may include requirements such as the provision of free drinking water, requiring plastic drinking vessels, limiting the number of serves per person and other measures intended to help manage the drinking environment. There should also be greater opportunity for communities to have a say about how and where alcohol is sold in their neighbourhoods.

ALAC considers that there is a case to increase the retail price of alcohol to reduce the incidence of heavy sessional drinking. Research shows that the young and heavy drinkers are particularly sensitive to price.⁵ We are also concerned about the effects of advertising and other promotional activity. Research shows that alcohol advertising contributes to the early onset of drinking and increases the amount young people drink.⁶

Young people tell us that they are targeted by advertising and sponsorship. It is ALAC's policy position that advertising and sponsorship should eventually be phased out, and more immediately that measures should be taken to ensure that advertisements do not appeal to youth, and youth exposure to advertising should be minimised.

ALAC has long advocated that the legal purchase age for alcohol should be 20. It should be an offence for any person to supply alcohol to a person under the age of 18 without the consent of a parent or guardian, and any person supplying alcohol to young people should be required to supervise the consumption of the alcohol.

Raising the minimum purchase age can reduce youth drinking and alcohol related harm. Research indicates that young people aged 14 – 18 years have increased consumption since the purchase age was lowered in 1999.⁷ Research also finds increases in emergency department admissions for intoxication, increases in alcohol involved motor vehicle crashes and disorder offences among young people since the purchase age was lowered in 1999.

⁵ Reference

⁶ Reference!

⁷ ALAC (2002) The Minimum Legal Age for Purchasing Alcohol

New Zealand's legal limit for blood alcohol content when driving should be zero for young people and 50mg/100ml for adult drivers. There is a strong body of research showing these legal limits would save lives.

ALAC supports the need for development of effective, accessible treatment across the spectrum of care (primary health to specialist intensive alcohol and drug services) and available in schools and other educational environments. Early intervention in the young person's setting reduces barriers to accessing health services and ensures positive outcomes will be maximised.

Brief intervention is a technique used to help reduce [alcohol misuse](#). It works by getting people to think differently about their alcohol use so that they begin to think about or make changes in their alcohol consumption. There are clear gaps in the delivery of brief interventions in primary health settings and in the integration of alcohol treatments into youth one stop shops and general practice. There is good evidence that early identification and brief advice in primary care is effective at reducing hazardous consumption of alcohol.

ALAC supports the development of a comprehensive plan for alcohol treatment, and believes there is a need for alcohol and other drug assessment and treatment to be taken into account during sentencing for all convictions.

ALAC's Youth Action Plan

Not all the changes that would make a difference to young people being safe with alcohol require regulatory change. Communities and young people themselves have a very important role to play.

ALAC believes it is important to support young people to make informed choices. We will do this by:

- working to ensure young people have good information and support to make informed decisions about drinking
- helping young people who choose to drink do so in a way that keeps them safe and reduces the risk of harm to themselves and others.

ALAC would like to see young people supported by positive role models:

- enabling whanau and peers to support young people through role-modelling safe and responsible drinking
- supporting young people to make health choices including the choice not to drink

ALAC believes young people should be supported and encouraged to participate in change. We are aware that young people want to, and can, lead a change in the way New Zealanders drink.

We want to ensure that interventions work for young people. Overall, policies and interventions to reduce alcohol harm will be effective for young people when they are

informed by robust evidence and knowledge. Young people, whanau and practitioners should be supported in evaluating efforts to reduce alcohol harm.

ALAC works with both central and local government and non-government agencies to help build healthy futures for young people, their families and communities. ALAC is also working with young people and their whanau to assist with creating healthy futures.

We believe it is important that young people are surrounded by healthy environments and messages. In our view, legislation and other forms of regulation must help to minimise the availability, access and other forms of youth exposure to alcohol. Producers and sellers of alcohol should adopt socially responsible practices that minimise youth exposure to alcohol and alcohol promotion. Tertiary and training institutions, workplaces, sports clubs and other settings with large numbers of youth must actively support and encourage abstinence or drinking safely in moderation. ALAC undertakes activities with these outcomes in mind.⁸

Conclusion

Alcohol is the cause of great harm in New Zealand today. While young people do suffer more than their share of alcohol-related harm, helping only individual young people to be safe is an insufficient response. The way in which alcohol is sold, promoted, and consumed in this country has been called into question by the Law Commission. ALAC supports measures that will help to change the drinking culture and encourage the safe use of alcohol by all of us.

Recommendations

ALAC recommends the Youth Parliament Social Services Select Committee agree that the following changes should be adopted:

- regulatory changes such as:
 - hours
 - density
 - advertising
 - purchase age
 - price

- changing the culture of drinking in NZ so that young people
 - make informed choices
 - are supported by positive role models
 - participate in creating change
 - ensure that interventions work for young people
 - Government and non-government organisations work together for benefit of young people

- early intervention and treatment

⁸ ALAC Youth Action Plan available at <http://www.hadenough.org.nz/>
ALAC.135005v1

- early intervention is available in schools and other settings
- primary health is supported to detect problem drinkers provide brief advice
- young people who engage with the criminal justice system are assessed and receive specialist help where appropriate