



14 May 2010

Members
Social Services Select Committee

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

The Social Services Select Committee has been asked to conduct an inquiry into “how young people can be supported to be safe with alcohol”. This paper has been prepared to assist the committee with its examination. Issues are identified and possible lines of inquiry are provided for the Committee to consider. The Committee may also wish to raise these matters with the witnesses who have been asked to appear before the Committee to give evidence on this inquiry.

New Zealanders’ attitudes to alcohol

Most New Zealanders regard alcohol as a natural adjunct to socialising. In the most recent survey of New Zealanders’ use of alcohol and drugs, over 80 per cent of the population reported consuming alcohol in the past 12 months (Ministry of Health 2009).

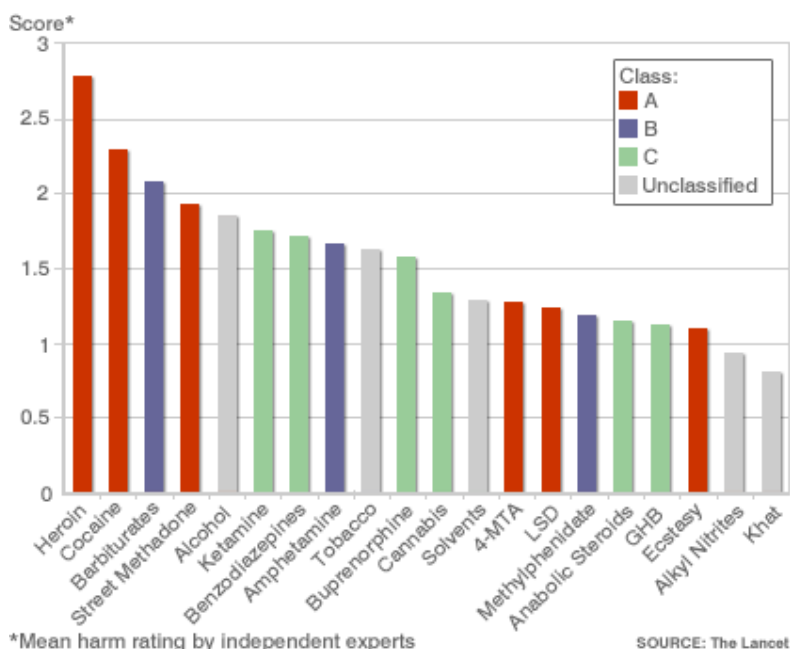
Young New Zealanders are introduced to alcohol at an early age. Almost 40 per cent of 13 year olds report being “current drinkers”, according to Youth’07 data (Auckland University 2008). The extent to which drinking is normalised during the formative years of adolescence is seen in the steady increase of regular drinking that occurs between the ages of 13 and 18. By age 17, 75 per cent of young people report being “current drinkers” and 30 per cent drink once a week or more.

This normalisation of regular drinking reinforces the impression that alcohol is relatively harmless. Over a third of young people think it is “okay to use alcohol regularly”. In comparison, less than 20 per cent think it is “okay to smoke regularly” and only 10 per cent think it is “okay to use cannabis regularly” (Auckland University 2008).

Alcohol’s place in the spectrum of harmful drugs

In 2007, British scientists published a list of the most commonly used legal and illegal drugs in order of their harmfulness. On this list, alcohol ranked 5th behind heroin, cocaine and barbiturates; tobacco ranked 9th and cannabis ranked 11th.

Drugs ranked in order of harm*



*Nutt D. King LA. Saulsbury W. Blakemore C. Development of a rational scale to assess the harm of drugs of potential misuse. *The Lancet* 2007; 369: 1047-1053

In New Zealand, as in the United Kingdom, the legislative approach to alcohol bears little relationship to its classification on the spectrum of harm. This has been recognised by the New Zealand Government in its commissioning of a “first principles” review of liquor laws by the New Zealand Law Commission - <http://www.lawcom.govt.nz/> - and the current drafting of new legislation governing the consumption, sale and promotion of alcohol.

Young people’s vulnerability to alcohol

New research into the development of the brain between late childhood and early adulthood has indicated that the adolescent brain may be particularly susceptible to damage from alcohol. Evidence suggests that alcohol affects young people’s short-term and long-term cognitive functioning and may even affect the brain in ways that could lead to future alcohol dependence (Galson 2008). These findings are now being incorporated into advice and guidelines around safe levels of alcohol consumption for young people. New Australian guidelines recommend that children under the age of 15 years do not drink alcohol at all, and that for young people aged 15–17 years, the safest option is to delay starting to drink as long as possible (National Health and Medical Research Council 2009).

Young people’s use of alcohol

New Zealanders’ experience of alcohol starts early. According to Youth 07 data, 50 per cent of 13 year olds have tried alcohol, and drinking on a regular basis increases throughout the school years. As was noted earlier, by age 16, three quarters of young people say they “currently” drink.

Of those who currently drink, 58 per cent of 16 year olds report drinking weekly or more, and 80 per cent say they have 3-4 drinks or more in a usual drinking session.

Among all age groups, the highest level of heavy drinking occurs among 18 to 24 year olds. The 2007/08 Survey of Alcohol Use in New Zealand found that 33 per cent of males and 16 per cent of females in this age group consume large amounts of alcohol at least once a week (Ministry of Health 2009).

On a positive note, the rates of binge drinking among secondary school students appear to have declined between 2001 and 2007. (Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks in one 4 hour period.) The Youth'07 Survey found 34 per cent of students reporting binge drinking, compared with 40 per cent in 2001. This may suggest that many young people have already picked up on the messages about the risks of binge drinking.

Law changes that are likely to support safer drinking among young people

There is clear evidence that reducing the number of liquor outlets, restricting the hours of sale, increasing the age at which young people can buy alcohol and raising the price of alcohol are effective ways of reducing the harm caused by alcohol consumption (Toumbourou et al 2007).

The Law Commission's report includes recommendations in each of these areas. The Government has signalled (at the time of writing) that its proposed new legislation will limit the hours and places that alcohol can be sold and consumed, but that it will not raise the tax on alcohol, nor will it place restrictions on alcohol advertising or sponsorship. The issue of raising the alcohol purchasing age will be debated as the draft Bill goes through the Select Committee stage.

Effectiveness of alcohol and drug education

Classroom-based alcohol and drug education in schools is largely ineffective according to analyses of research findings in this area (Stewart-Brown 2006). Telling young people that alcohol and drugs are harmful may raise their awareness, but, as the evidence shows, is unlikely to change their behaviour. Young people learn by example, and while the culture around them normalises and condones excessive consumption, it may be unrealistic to expect change.

Programmes that have better chances of success are those that are based in communities, where community action and engagement is a central part of the initiative. In New Zealand, young people have taken the lead in a number of such community-based projects, as the section below illustrates.

Young people taking the lead in changing the culture

In many parts of the country, young people are taking the lead in developing healthier communities, where alcohol and drugs play a less destructive role in people's lives.

In Glen Innes, the Eastside Youth Network and the Glen Innes Health Project have been working together to reduce the number of liquor stores in the neighbourhood. They have been collecting people's stories about the impact alcohol abuse has had on their lives and have compiled a submission based on these to present to the Justice Select Committee. Their work has recently won them an Auckland City Council Community Safety Award.

In Clendon, young people led a hikoi to protest against the proliferation of liquor outlets in their neighbourhoods. Because of their initiative, the whole community began to demand a greater say in the local Council's planning and decision making processes.

Thousands of students around the country are involved in SADD – Students Against Driving Drunk. This active initiative has regional co-ordinators, a Facebook site, and provides resources for every secondary school in New Zealand.

The successful “Smokefree” social marketing campaign that has young people talking to young people [*Smoking: not our future*] illustrates the power of peer to peer advertising. The potential for “by young people for young people” campaigns to change attitudes to alcohol has yet to be explored.

Overseas initiatives to change drinking cultures

United States

In the United States, the Surgeon General has issued a “Call to Action” to reduce underage drinking on college campuses. He has been asking colleges to consider how they can foster “a culture in which alcohol does not play a central role in college life or the college experience” (Galson 2008). He suggests a number of ways a college can do this:

- By providing appealing, alcohol free locations (coffee houses and food courts) where students can gather with their friends to socialise or study
- By expanding opportunities for students to make spontaneous social choices that do not involve alcohol (frequent alcohol free late night events; extending hours of student centres)
- By providing alcohol free student accommodation
- By eliminating alcohol sponsorship of athletic events
- By removing alcohol advertising from student publications
- By restricting the sale of alcohol on campus or at campus facilities
- By increasing access to brief motivational counselling and treatment as appropriate.

Australia

The Australian Government has allocated \$50 million to initiatives to combat binge drinking among young people. A significant proportion of this funding is going to community-based initiatives. An example is a two-year project to engage 600 Kangaroo Island young people in a peer mentoring project. 35 peer mentors will share their new knowledge at 90 weekend music, dance and film events over the two year period. Other initiatives include funding for small communities to help them provide more sporting and cultural activities for their young people, and funding to enable young people to come up with their own solutions to dealing with alcohol-related problems in their communities.

Report to the House

The Committee is required to report its findings on this inquiry to the House. The purpose of your report is first to inform the House and encourage debate. In doing so your report should reflect both the oral and written evidence the Committee received, the issues the Committee considered in-depth, and the views of the members. From these, the Committee should develop conclusions and recommendations to the Government.

Susan Wauchop
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Youth Parliament 2010
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Members may wish to ask:

- The Government has already signalled changes in a number of areas of legislation relating to access to alcohol. Are there other areas where you think it needs to regulate?
- Is it reasonable to expect that young people carry the main burden of the culture change around the use of alcohol that the Law Commission and the Government is attempting to put into effect?
- Some people would say that we don't need to be doing anything more, given that the rates of binge drinking among young people seem to be dropping. What is your view on this?
- How can young people take the initiative in reducing alcohol related harm? Can they act as circuit breakers in our culture of binge drinking?
- What are your views on alcohol advertising and sponsorship?
- What kind of initiatives are New Zealand's tertiary institutions taking to change the culture around alcohol on their campuses?

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