

Report Documents Severity of Underage Drinking Problem

On Wednesday, the National Academy of Sciences, responding to a request of Congress, delivered a report on the impact of underage drinking. Included in the report is a strategy to address this national crisis.

The report is a welcome contribution to the public's understanding of the proportions of this public health, economic, and ethical issue in our country. Underage drinking is often either trivialized or glamorized. However, when underage drinkers ingest 20 percent of the beer consumed in this nation, the outcomes are not trivial or glamorous. The report documents what underage drinking really is: America's most devastating youth drug problem.

Data supplied by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention implicates alcohol in the three leading causes of death among young people: traffic crashes, homicides and suicides. It is also a key factor in non-lethal violent crimes perpetrated by and upon youth. The NAS estimates the financial burden of underage drinking is more than \$58 billion annually. No one has found a way to estimate or quantify the emotional costs.

The strength of this report comes not only from its thorough presentation of the problem, but also from its extensive list of recommendations for action. Presented here are some of the major rubrics of possible interventions followed by my own editorial comments.

National Adult-Oriented Media Campaign: Every ounce of alcohol that is consumed by an underage drinker passes from an adult hand. It is up to adults to understand their role in the problem and remedy their own involvement.

Partnership to Prevent Underage Drinking: Youth do not relate to alcohol in a vacuum. Surrounding each underage drinker there is a TV, a movie, a family, a

community, and probably a church on a nearby corner. No one has the luxury to point a finger. Each sector must view others as allies in the effort.

Alcohol Advertising: It is difficult to advertise to a 21 year old and not also get that message to a teenager. Studies have shown that 12-17 year olds are more likely to see TV ads for beer or ale than for jeans, gums or sneakers. In fact, it is easy to conclude that the alcohol industry actually targets this underage population. The report suggests reasonable restraints to these practices.

Entertainment Media: Not only can media outlets be more selective in the kinds of advertising they accept, they can be more vigilant in the portrayal of underage drinking. Parents would do well to help monitor and work for change in this area, as well.

Limiting Access: State and local authorities should be given more resources to adequately enforce existing alcohol laws. Internet sales should be regulated better. Policy makers should consider the whole environment of youth, tightening up policies from graduated drivers licenses to beer keg registration.

Youth-Oriented Interventions: Funding is needed immediately to study effective youth interventions. The focus of most of this work will be on college campuses, where the mix of legal and underage population is the most pronounced.

Alcohol Excise Taxes: Alcohol is cheaper, adjusting for inflation, than it was in the 1960's. Simply put, alcohol is not paying its fair share of the tax burden. In addition, studies have indicated that youth use less when the cost of beer goes up only slightly.

Community Interventions: It is this area that the church could best step up to its potential. We have a God-given mandate to protect our children. Much research suggests that age of first use is a good predictor of later abuse. Anything a church can do to delay a child's first encounter with alcohol is the right and good thing to do.

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The NAS report is long, detailed, and thoughtful. However, it is not particularly dynamic. The report does not present an image of “ground-zero” power. It does not invoke a passion that the mere mention of 9/11 produces. It does serve to inform and remind us of a crisis as threatening to our national health as terrorism.

No one should wait to do something until someone else changes. Each of us has access to an underage drinker or a potential one. Given the gravity of the problem presented in the NAS report, now would be a good time to respond to that one.

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