

Alcohol and licensing policy could be changing the habits of young drinkers

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In a new report published online today in the January issue of *Addiction*, researchers question whether current licensing policies have contributed to a rise in the phenomenon of "pre-drinking" amongst young people.

"Pre-drinking" or "pre-gaming" involves planned heavy drinking, usually at someone's home, before going to a social event, typically a bar or nightclub. As defined by young people themselves (see online dictionary of slang at www.urbandictionary.com) pre-drinking is "[the] act of drinking alcohol before you go out to the club to maximise your fun at the club while spending the least amount on extremely overpriced alcoholic beverages".

The authors see pre-drinking as symptomatic of a "new culture of intoxication" whereby young people are drinking with the primary motive of getting drunk. Recent research suggests that a large proportion of young people pre-drink and that pre-drinkers are more likely to drink heavily and to experience negative consequences as compared to non-pre-drinkers. Pre-drinking often involves the rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol which may increase the risk of blackouts, hangovers and even alcohol poisoning. It may also encourage the use of other recreational drugs such as cannabis and cocaine as drinkers are socialising in unsupervised environments.

The authors argue that the policy of banning drink promotions or specials such as "happy hour" in bars and clubs may have the unintended consequence of encouraging young people to drink cheaper alcohol in

private settings before going out, especially when heavily discounted alcohol is offered in shops and supermarkets. The authors also point out that while later closing times have been justified as a way of reducing problems associated with large numbers of young people being on the street after bars and clubs close, they may encourage private drinking to precede rather than follow public drinking, producing different social dynamics and possibly increasing the potential for violence and other alcohol-related problems.

To discourage or reduce pre-drinking, the authors suggest a comprehensive strategy including:

- Developing policies that reduce large imbalances between on and off premise alcohol pricing
- Attracting young people of legal drinking age back to the bar for early drinking, where alcohol consumption is monitored by serving staff and drinks are served in standard sizes
- Addressing young people's motivations for pre-drinking, including being able to socialize with friends and saving money – for example bars might expand their social function and create an attractive atmosphere for more intimate socialising
- Forming effective strategies to reduce planned intoxication – for example policy and programming could be aimed at changing drinking norms and promoting moderation

Lead author Dr. Samantha Wells, a researcher at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Canada says, "Many young bar-goers have found a way to avoid paying high alcohol prices in bars: they pre-drink. And we have begun to see that this intense and ritualized activity among young adults may result in harmful consequences. Therefore, we need to look closely at the combined impact of various policies affecting bars and young people's drinking and come up with a more comprehensive strategy that will reduce these harmful styles of drinking among young

people."

Source: Wiley

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