

# LIGHTHOUSE NOW

2015-07-22

## Questioning the culture of drinking

by Michael Lee



The first of a three-part series on the use, and abuse, of alcohol in our area.

If you ask the average Nova Scotian what they plan on doing over the weekend, chances are it involves liquor.

We use it when kicking back after work, when meeting up with friends, at barbecues, bars, celebrations and graduations.

We welcome alcohol into our social circles knowing it can be part of a good time but also part of a bad one.

Alcohol is an integral part of our lives, its presence normal and widely accepted, despite its potential negative consequences.

The reality is Nova Scotians are among the heaviest drinkers in Canada.

Rates of heavy drinking - defined as four or more drinks per occasion for women and five or more for men - have been consistently above the Canadian average for many years.

Per capita consumption has also risen, and with every generation Nova Scotian children are having their first drink at a younger age, with the average now at around 13 years old.

"And I have a problem with that," said Bridgewater councillor Wayne Thorburne. "It's not acceptable at any standard."

Nova Scotia has a culture of drinking. Is it a problem?

The consensus among health experts and law enforcement is a resounding yes. Alcohol is a problem here in Nova Scotia.

LighthouseNOW recently sat down with Todd Leader, director of community-health programs for the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA); Staff Sgt. Jean-Guy Richard, district commander of the Lunenburg County RCMP; John Collyer, chief of the Bridgewater Police Service; and Councillor Thorburne, who chairs the Bridgewater municipal alcohol project committee, to discuss the effects of heavy drinking in Lunenburg County and across the province.

Their work in alcohol abuse prevention stems from the Municipal Alcohol Project (MAP), a collaboration among community members from Bridgewater, Antigonish and Wolfville who provided statistical and anecdotal evidence to highlight the issue of heavy drinking in their towns.

These localized reports were presented to the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities in 2011, and by 2013 a provincial forum in Truro saw many more undertake the MAP approach.

With many issues to tackle, one thing has become increasingly problematic for Leader - the number of youth drinking today.

The 2012 Nova Scotia Student Drug Use Survey showed alcohol (49 per cent) as being one of the most commonly used substances among students in grades 7, 9, 10 and 12, second only to caffeinated energy drinks (64.3 per cent).

This number far outweighs statistics for the use of cannabis (34.7 per cent), cigarettes (13.2 per cent) and non-medical pain pills (11.7 per cent).

Half of Grade-12 students in Nova Scotia who reported consuming alcohol also said they drink heavily at least once a month, and the gap between the rate of drinking by young women in high school and their male counterparts is shrinking.

Bridgewater's municipal alcohol report, "In Our Words," brings some fairly shocking anecdotes to light.

It contains stories of children left alone and being sexually abused by family and non-family members and of young people trading sex for alcohol.

While these represent some of the more extreme examples, Chief Collyer said other situations simply don't make the news.

A number of years ago, incidents involving fights and alcohol plagued high school dances.

It reached the point where schools wouldn't host a dance unless police were present.

As for crime, Collyer said it's difficult to put an exact figure on how much is alcohol related.

"It could be as tenuous as somebody may have a domestic violence issue. They may have an anger issue and they may not actually drink during that particular incident but they are like that because they grew up in a home with an alcoholic. Alcohol is part of that cause. It's a long sort of chain, but there is a cause and effect, and these things just don't come out of nowhere."

As for drinking and driving, alcohol-related motor-vehicle accidents and deaths continue to happen, but what Staff Sgt. Richard has seen is a cause for worry.

He said he has processed over 200 impaired drivers during his time as a breathalyzer technician, including those who had died from an alcohol-related accident or through alcohol poisoning, but the latest numbers have been "off the scales."

The blood-alcohol limit for drivers is 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood, but Richard said he's seen numbers in the range of 500 to 700 milligrams.

"I know I couldn't sit down and achieve that number," he said, adding that the highest numbers are usually attributed to people of university age.

"And that's not something that I would've seen earlier in my service."

Despite concerning figures and increased rates of abuse, the damage alcohol causes is often overlooked in favour of headline-grabbing stories about prescription drugs, especially after a spate of deaths in 2013, said Collyer.

But as he later noted, "Alcohol was involved in a number of those," even though prescription drugs are perceived to be a bigger problem.

“We do have an issue with prescription drugs, but by far the biggest issue is alcohol and the harms that come from overuse of alcohol or misuse of alcohol.”

And as Leader discussed later in the conversation, the reason for that lies in three factors: price, availability and advertising.

Thank you for printing this article from [lighthousenow.ca](http://lighthousenow.ca). Subscribe today for access to all articles, including our archives!