

LIGHTHOUSE NOW

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Nova Scotia's culture of drinking

by Michael Lee



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

Today's youth, particularly those in Nova Scotia, are drinking more than ever.

Todd Leader, director of community health programs for the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA) in Bridgewater, has looked at three potential reasons for this, and he believes they're the main causes of the increase: price, availability and advertising.

Youth, he said, tend to be price sensitive and are more likely to buy products with a higher alcohol content in their search for the "quickest, cheapest drunk."

"So our price structure, generally speaking, actually promotes drinking of higher-alcohol-content products."

Next, a "good times" attitude is projected by arenas and convention centres and plastered on cups and shirts.

But Leader also believes drinking habits are established early due to the amount of advertising kids are exposed to.

"It's targeting the next market, the next generation of customers," he added.

"Because people become brand loyal once they reach a certain age, they tend to not change brands of what they drink."

The chief of the Bridgewater Police Service, John Collyer, has certainly seen first-hand how successful these marketing campaigns have been.

It's not uncommon for him to find beer sold in either a cheap large bottle or a small easily concealable one.

In either case, the relative alcohol content is high.

"Those aren't being marketed towards adults. They're really not," he said.

"The reality is, why make them so small? For convenience."

And beverage companies won't admit to targeting a younger audience either, said Collyer.

"I mean, you got Caramilk coolers. Who is that targeting?" said an exasperated Leader. "Think about it."

The proliferation of agency stores has also increased the availability of alcohol.

Agency stores are operated by retailers in communities too small to support a regular Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation (NSLC) outlet.

On its website, the NSLC defines an agency store as complementing its services "by making the purchase of beverage alcohol more convenient in rural areas."

The relative ease of purchasing alcohol can largely be attributed to this push as outlined in the NSLC's annual report for 2009-10, where it refers to "an aggressive strategy to improve service to smaller communities."

The same report shows that between 2005 and 2010, 47 new agency stores opened, representing a 588 per cent increase.

The most recent directory of agency stores, last updated in July 2014, lists 57 in operation.

Meanwhile, the 2013 report of the Municipal Alcohol Project (MAP) on municipal policies cites a strong link between the density of retail outlets and violent crime, chronic disease and alcohol-related death.

"It doesn't make sense," said Collyer, who's somewhat dismayed by the science.

Meanwhile, stores can also sell the equipment needed to make homemade liquor. "It's a scary trend," he said.

"Unfortunately, I think we're chasing the dollar and going in the opposite direction."

As banks, service stations, post offices and mail outlets disappear, Bridgewater councillor Wayne Thorburne couldn't help but notice the irony in the whole situation.

"The things that people need the most they're taking away."

Even though the drinking culture has been around for a long time, Leader said the difference lies in the "science of advertising."

"There are no mistakes in television advertising. You're not going to pay millions of dollars for a 30-second ad to run. You know exactly who is watching that particular show, how old they are, how many there are, how much they make, what their race is. You know all that before you place your ad."

It's the "illusion of good corporate citizenship," involving concepts like "responsible drinking," that Leader says were established by the alcohol industry. But he said the phrase is meaningless.

"Everybody drinks responsibly if you ask them."

And the growing indifference of parents is certainly not helping.

Back when school dances got out of hand, Collyer adopted a zero-tolerance policy for students caught drinking.

Rather than being charged, a student went through a restorative justice program with his or her parents and school.

A number of kids, as mentioned in the MAP report for Bridgewater, saw this as a joke, as did their parents.

Instead of engaging in constructive conversations, Collyer found himself butting heads with parents who dismissed the process altogether because they couldn't bear to see their child, who may have been an honour student or a star athlete, cry.

"And they would rather say, 'Just give him a ticket so he can go in and plead guilty,' than sit there and actually talk about what happened, why it was wrong and what you're going to do to make up for that harm."

Adding to his growing frustration around graduation time, Collyer routinely met parents who were seemingly unaware of the civil liability they faced for letting their underage kids drink at parties.

"If somebody dies out of that party, if you don't control what happens and somebody gets hurt or dies, God forbid, then your liability as an adult is huge. But there are parents that continually take that on and think it's good parenting."

Leader had several concerns with this permissive approach, calling it a "misconception" and contrary to a strong body of international evidence.

Countries that adopt this approach, often in Europe, Leader said, have far more chronic disease and death due to earlier drinking behaviours.

"Having an age limit that is enforced to keep kids from starting too early is absolutely the best in terms of reducing the overall harms in society."

No matter the solution, the costs, both financially and in terms of lives lost, are becoming too much to handle.

"How many fewer trips to the hospital would there be?" said Staff-Sgt. Jean Guy Richard, district commander of the Lunenburg County RCMP. "How many more hospital beds would be open?"

On average, 3,000 Nova Scotians are in the hospital every year due to alcohol, which adds up to 42,000 hospital days.

By 2002, the province was spending an estimated \$419 million annually on the health, social and economic costs related to the harm caused by alcohol.

That's compared to \$591 million in alcohol sales this year.

"So from a business point of view, it doesn't make sense," said Collyer. "It really just doesn't make sense."

The necessary balance, said Leader, is enacting proper regulation, as is done with other harmful things in society such as tobacco or guns, without stopping sales.

"That seems to be an appropriate place to draw the regulatory line, regardless of sales, unless we're going to say the sales are more important than upholding what we've already established as a protection for our kids."

There are hard choices to be made. Hopefully, this can be made easier through continued enforcement, good government and busting what Leader calls the "myth of addiction."

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