



AUGUST 2013 NEWSLETTER

Don't break a successful regulatory system; the Australian example

There is currently a push to get rid of regulations on the sale and serving of alcohol, but rushing into these kinds of changes can have unintended consequences. If we take the example of Australia, we can see how difficult it can be to re-regulate when problems occur. Today, the US compares favorably with most developed countries in terms of lower youth drinking and moderate consumption among adults. This won't continue if we scrap many of our effective regulations. (http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/en/index.html)

In Australia, during the 1970s and '80s, the drinking age was lowered to 18. Currently, there is a movement in the state of Victoria, and other places, to increase the drinking age to 21. (https://www.facebook.com/pages/21-Be-There-MLDA-Project-21/180876748626206?hc_location=timeline) One reason is scientific evidence on the continuing development of the prefrontal cortex of the brain beyond the age of 18. This part of the brain, which is responsible for thinking about the future, problem solving, modulation of emotions, etc. is not fully developed at 18 and can be stunted if affected by alcohol. (http://www.hhs.gov/opa/familylife/tech_assistance/etraining/adolescent_brain/Development/prefrontal_cortex/) Advocates give the example of how much more alcohol is consumed by teens in Australia than their counterparts in the US, who must wait an additional 3 years to drink legally. They also give the example of the decrease in traffic fatalities among 18-21 year olds when all US states moved to 21 as the minimum legal drinking age.

Australia has a serious problem with alcohol fueled violence that some believe could be alleviated by shorter serving hours. First responders see 70,000 non-domestic, alcohol related assaults per year. Police say that 70% of their street work is related to alcohol overuse, sometimes with several officers dealing with just one intoxicated, combative person. On weekends, emergency rooms can be full of patients with alcohol related trauma, especially facial and head wounds. A group of first responders and healthcare professionals started a coalition to put pressure on legislators and to educate the public about the number of police calls and emergency room visits fueled by overconsumption of alcohol. Last Drinks (<http://lastdrinks.org.au>) is made up of police officers, paramedics, nurses and doctors who see the results of alcohol-fueled violence first hand-- and are sometimes themselves victims of assault by the people they are trying to help. They give the example of a successful pilot program in Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia; where 14 formerly problem establishments now close at 3:00 am instead of 5:00 am. Certain drink specials that encourage over-consumption

are no longer allowed. Alcohol-fueled assaults declined by 35% from 2008 to 2011, and the violence did not seem to be spilling over to other nearby areas, as was predicted by some that were skeptical about the program.

Based on this success, another trial of restricted hours was started in Melbourne. Unfortunately, the bar industry group, the Australian Hotels Association, opposed it and when 25% of licensed venues took legal action to stop the restrictions, the trial was ended after only 6 months. This illustrates the difficulty of trying to dial back regulations once an industry has gotten used to doing business a certain way. According to the Australian Hotel Association, their industry generates between \$11 and \$14 billion dollars a year, with a majority of sales from alcoholic beverages. (<http://aha.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AHA-National-Policy-Platform-2013.pdf>) But some ask whether the taxes and fees paid by licensees actually cover the costs to society.

All of this points to keeping regulations in place unless it can be demonstrated that there will be no adverse impact on public health and safety. While the U.S. stacks up favorably among other developed nations, too many people are killed or injured annually. As Mothers Against Drunk Driving reminds us, "Every 53 minutes on average, someone is killed in a drunk driving crash (9,878 people in total in 2011). Every 90 seconds, someone is injured because of this entirely preventable crime."

