

青少年飲酒狀況的研究

A Study on the Alcohol Drinking Habits Among Youth in Hong Kong

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SUMMARY REPORT

1. Introduction

According to the observations of youth workers in Hong Kong, the consumption of alcohol is increasing among young people. Concurrently, data from the Tuen Mun Alcohol Problems Clinic shows that nearly 80% of patients start drinking before they reach the age of 20. Doctors point out that youth alcoholism receives little or no initial attention, resulting in the fact that many patients only seek medical help after they have already developed severe physical and social problems. In spite of this being a problem with profound implications, there are few surveys on the prevalence of drinking habits among youth in Hong Kong.

Through a territory-wide opinion survey of young people, and 18 in-depth case studies, we hope to increase our understanding of the issue. The study aims at exploring the extent of youth drinking, their attitudes towards drinking and their awareness of the dangers associated with alcohol abuse. We will also solicit their opinions on legislative control over the sale of liquor. Interviews with medical practitioners and related academics will also be conducted. In this way, we hope to be able to provide a comprehensive analysis in order to make suitable suggestions towards reformulating policies and services in the future.

2. Methodology

Both a qualitative case study and a quantitative survey are employed for this study. The qualitative case study is conducted through in-depth case interviews among youth that have been drinking for more than one year. An interview guideline with open-ended questions is directed to solicit respondents' opinions towards their drinking patterns,

their attitudes and awareness of the dangers associated with alcohol abuse. A total of 18 in-depth case interviews were conducted from late February to March, 2000. The quantitative survey was conducted by telephone from 23 to 26 February, 2000. A total of 506 people, aged 15 to 29, were successfully interviewed. The success rate is 51.8%, whereas the standard error is within 2.6%. The analysis contains a synthesis of both the qualitative and quantitative data from the respondents and from an extensive review of the literature.

3. Discussion

3.1 The trend of underage drinking is increasing. More than 20% of underage respondents admitted that they had drunk alcohol. Some research from overseas found that the younger the drinking age, the greater the chance of becoming dependent on alcohol. Alcohol consumption among young people in Hong Kong is a cause of concern.

The telephone poll showed that a total of 37% of respondents admitted that they had drunk alcohol three months prior to the survey. Among the 102 underage respondents, 20% admitted they had consumed alcohol.

With respect to the age of first time drinkers, 22% of respondents said that they started drinking before they reached the age of 18. Slightly more than 10% of respondents claimed to have begun drinking before the age of 15.

With reference to a study conducted in the United States, research from a sample based on nearly 43,000 interviews found that, "Young people who began drinking before age 15 were four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who began drinking at age 21".¹ It showed that the younger a person is when he/she starts drinking, the greater the chance of developing a dependence on alcohol. The consequences of underage drinking should not be underestimated, as the effects are far-reaching. The assessment of alcohol consumption among

¹ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "Age of Drinking Onset Predicts future Alcohol Abuse and Dependence", 14 Jan 1998.

youth is particularly important because such statistics and data can identify current problems, while also being able to predict future trends.

It is noted that in Hong Kong, the trend towards drinking alcohol among young people is increasing. The Narcotics Division conducted two surveys in 1992 and 1996 respectively on drug use among students of secondary schools and technical institutes. The surveys found that the proportion of students surveyed admitted drinking alcohol within 30 days of the survey, had increased from 14.5% in 1992 to 25.8% in 1996 - an 11.3 percentage point increase².

3.2 Youth being exposed to environments where access to alcohol is easy.

According to the Dutiable Commodities (Liquor) Regulations, no licensee shall permit any person under the age of 18 years to drink any intoxicating liquor on any licensed premise³. However, the telephone poll survey found that it was not difficult for underage respondents to gain access to alcoholic beverages. Among the 102 underage respondents polled more than 20% admitted they had been able to drink alcohol. Some respondents claimed that they usually drank alcohol at “pubs”, “restaurants”, or “Karaoke Bars” and nearly half of them claimed that they spend money on drinking. The findings suggest that the enactment of the ordinance is neither enforced nor rigorous.

Nevertheless, the poll survey showed that respondents were not unsatisfied with the existing Ordinance. 72% of respondents supported prohibiting the selling of alcohol to persons below the age of 18. Among them, 55.3% said that it was because drinking was harmful to young people. However, 24.6% of respondents disagreed with the Ordinance. Among them, the largest proportion (43.2%) stated that it violated personal freedom.

² Narcotics Division “1996 Survey on Drug Use among Students of Secondary Schools and Technical Institutes”, Government Secretariat, HKSAR Government.

³ Hong Kong Law Chapter 109B Regulation 28 “Dutiable Commodities (Liquor) Regulations”.

3.3 The receptive attitude of respondents to alcohol consumption was quite high. They generally believed that this behaviour was an enhancement of their social interactions and health conditions. Drinking alcohol was part of their lives. Some respondents believed that they had control over their consumption of alcohol, indicating that their vigilance alone was not sufficient.

The poll survey revealed that 77.2% of the 185 respondents who consumed alcohol, drank with their friends. It appeared that respondents who drink with “friends who drink” are 32.3% more in number than respondents who drink with “friends who do not drink”.

From the result of the poll survey, 74% of the 184 respondents who consumed alcohol agreed that "drinking can enhance social interaction", and 61.6% of the respondents agreed that a "moderate amount of alcohol is good for health". Moreover, 52.7% of the respondents agreed that "Males should learn drinking". In addition, 68.8% and 49.0% of the respondents respectively agreed that ones "drinking capacity can be trained" and "one who drinks can know when he/she is drunk."

In short, most of the respondents have a high level of acceptance towards drinking, but did not indicate a similar alertness to its effects.

3.4 Drinking may have far-reaching harmful consequences.

Among the respondents who consumed alcohol, 20.4% of them claimed that they either drank frequently or once a while. Within this group, however, the percentage of having been drunk reached 47.3%. To a certain extent, this reflects an “infrequent but high volume” drinking pattern among the youth.

In fact, according to the case study, some respondents confessed to health problems like stomach-aches, headaches and liver disease. Other than illness and disease, drinking can also cause accidents resulting in injury. For example, a respondent broke her leg when she fell down the stairs while drunk and had to stay in hospital for six months.

Some respondents admitted that they became inattentive and were easily distracted, which in turn affected their studies and job performance as they were reported to be absent from school and work. Others were also found to have lost their self-control while drunk and ended up hurting themselves or getting involved in fights.

Drinking also results in deteriorating relations with family members. One respondent had numerous confrontations with his family members over the issue of drinking, while another had an unplanned sexual encounter while drunk, which resulted in divorce.

There is a general under-estimation among youth about the harmful effects of drinking.

3.5 The phenomenon of alcohol consumption while unhappy poses a psychological danger to drinkers.

Although experts believed that it was not easy to set up an absolute standard to identify a “problematic alcohol drinking model”, it was widely agreed that young people should be reminded that drinking alcohol when not feeling well could lead to future alcohol abuse.

The poll survey found that 185 respondents had consumed alcohol. Among them, 61% admitted that they drank alcohol because of unhappiness. This finding is alarming.

In the qualitative survey, some respondents also acknowledged that their drinking was related to unhappiness. They tended to consume more alcohol to escape from the pressures of reality and to relieve emotional problems, viewing alcohol as a way out. This is a hazardous way of drinking, which could lead to future alcohol abuse. It is important to pay attention to emotional problems of youth and to enhance their problem solving abilities.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Government Authorities should show more concern to the trend of underage drinking.

The study demonstrated that the trend of underage consumption of alcohol was increasing. Various medical resources and literature found that the younger the age of drinking, the greater the chance of developing a dependency on alcohol. Moreover, the consumption of alcohol adversely affects academic performance, health conditions and social life. Some types of behaviour, spontaneously enhanced by alcohol, such as sexual inhibitions, disobedience to law and order and traffic accidents, all require a high price to be paid, suggesting that the trend of underage drinking deserves serious attention.

In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health concentrated on anti-smoking strategies. Similarly, the Narcotics Division, which was supposed to handle an anti-alcohol drinking campaign, put its efforts into drugs and tobacco education, thereby limiting its focus on the issue of drinking.

Hong Kong has its own unique social and culture background. Overseas measures that tackle underage drinking cannot be fully applied in Hong Kong. However, as this issue has the potential to be a big problem with the drinking of alcohol becoming a part of the social lives of young people, the Federation suggests the departments concerned pay attention to the situation, taking measures from overseas as reference points to send a clear message to the youth that “alcohol is addictive”.

4.2 Collecting data to keep track of the problem.

The issue of alcohol consumption among youth touches on various policies. The departments concerned must keep a close eye on the development of this issue, in order to foresee possible problems and plan potential preventive measures. Currently, however, focused and comprehensive alcohol related statistics and data are scattered and

incomplete. This is an obstacle for maintaining a sound grasp on the issue or being able to accurately monitor developments.

The investigators of this study, who while making a request to the Hospital Authority for territory-wide statistics on alcohol-dependent patients, were told that there was no such comprehensive and standard computer system in the Authority to compile this kind of statistics, highlight this inadequate system. This clearly highlights the gap in the collection of data.

In respect to the effects of alcohol consumption on society, data and information about traffic casualties, family problems, crimes or suicide are dispersed in various departments. This hinders a serious evaluation process on the social costs and implementation of policy on controlling alcohol consumption.

4.3 To strengthen the preventive education.

The study made some alarming findings. For example, the receptiveness of respondents to drinking alcohol was relatively high. They believed that they could control their alcohol intake, but they lacked the ability to do so. Some respondents used alcohol as a crutch when they did not feel good. This emerges as a potential danger in developing a dependence on alcohol. Experts found that it was not easy to set up an absolute standard for “reaching a level of drunkenness” or a “problematic alcohol model”. Youth behaviour ran the spectrum from “avoiding touching alcohol” to “relying on alcohol”. In view of this, the Federation suggests the society and people concerned provide more preventive education to alert youth to the potential danger of drinking alcohol.

4.4 To review existing ordinances.

The poll survey found that underage respondents were exposed to an environment with easy access to alcohol, suggesting that there were problems over the implementation process of related laws.

However, the survey showed that respondents were not unsatisfied with the enactment of particular ordinance that targeted underage drinking. On the contrary, a majority of respondents agreed with prohibiting the selling of alcohol to young people. The Federation suggests the departments concerned to review the enforcement of the related ordinances.