

Underage Drinking: Let's Stop Playing Games and Work Together to Solve the Problem

Hair O' The Dog and other local liquor licensees have recently been subjected to repeated attempts by various local police agencies to entrap us into selling alcohol to underage police cadets and to minors acting as police agents. We are vigilant about checking identification, and are happy to say that we did not sell to the minor. However, our success does nothing to decrease our head-shaking at the futility of these sting operations.

Police sting operations, which have existed for decades, are woefully ineffective at stopping minors from getting alcohol. Why? Because **93% of minors who consume alcohol acquire it from sources other than retailers.** Most teen drinkers get alcohol from their own homes, from the homes of friends, or they get an adult to buy alcohol for them. So why do community organizations and police spend precious resources concentrating on what is in reality the smallest part of the problem?

We have a theory that **when things go badly, the public clamors for a simplistic explanation and an easy scapegoat.** In this case, sting operations are an attempt to convince the public that the problem is that greedy liquor retailers are selling booze to our kids! So teams of police officers head out (invariably on busy Friday afternoons) with their oldest-looking cadet, insert him into a busy store or bar, and then try to catch an employee off-guard. "Hey look, we're doing something about the problem !"

This isn't solving crime. It is creating crime where none existed in the first place.

We're not saying that no liquor licensee ever sells to minors. What we are saying is that we don't believe that any licensee would do so intentionally, and that very few would do so recklessly. Virtually all liquor licensees are conscientious citizens (and parents) who take their responsibility to protect minors quite seriously.

The entire sting operation strategy does nothing to solve the actual problem, yet it does succeed in turning otherwise conscientious citizens and businesses into criminals. **This is counter-productive law enforcement.** But it's easy and cheap to do, and it provides the appearance that authorities are trying to solve the problem, so it persists.

Maybe instead of wasting tax dollars, diverting police from solving crime to creating it, and criminalizing people who are unfortunate enough to find themselves on the front lines in the struggle to discourage young people from harming themselves, we should instead try to focus on actually solving the problem.

The real solution to teen substance abuse lies in reducing underage demand for those substances, and not in hysterically flailing at a source of supply that accounts for just 7% of the problem. What we need is to address the problem at its most effective level: the underage drinker. **There is a very simple solution that would have profound effects on reducing underage drinking: Suspend the driver's license of any minor who is convicted of possession of alcohol for one year.** For a second offense, suspend the license until the minor reaches the age of 21. We're parents, and we know that there is nothing more sacred to teens than the driving privilege. We are quite certain that if teens knew that this privilege was at risk, they would overcome whatever urges they had to drink alcohol.

Police efforts would also be far more effective if they concentrated on tracking down the actual source of supply when they catch underage drinkers, rather than just creating artificial sources of supply as they do now. Parents and young adults who provide the overwhelming majority of alcohol to kids should face more vigorous prosecution and more serious sanctions.

If we want to solve this problem, let's stop playing games and let's get together and solve it.