

“Passive drinking” – the collateral damage from alcohol

Hans Olav Fekjær, Brussels 2.2.2010.

Descriptions of problems from alcohol consumption often focus on the health problems of many drinkers. These problems amount to a considerable public health problem. In the report “Alcohol in Europe”¹, published in Brussels in 2006 by the EU Public Health Program and the Institute of Alcohol Studies, the number of yearly deaths related to alcohol in EU was estimated to 166 000.

High numbers of deaths and diseases do, however, not necessarily call for strict regulation of the alcohol trade. In general, people tend to demand the right to take risks and live dangerously. Thus, we allow mountaineering, parachuting and other types of risky behaviour that mainly imply risks for oneself.

If the main problem from drinking is the drinker's potential harm to himself, the use may be seen as a strictly personal issue, an activity with which the society is not necessarily entitled to interfere. Alcohol control policy may be seen as reflecting a nanny mentality.

Whether a specific human activity mainly is dangerous for the health and well-being of the individual him/herself *or* is dangerous or troublesome for other people, has decisive consequences for the society's handling of the activity. The moral code was already expressed in the French Declaration of Human Rights in 1789, which stated that *"Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others."*

We all know that alcohol use may harm other people than the drinker. The Chief medical officer in Great Britain, Sir Liam Donaldson, recently coined the term “passive drinking” for these problems. In his latest annual report, he had a 22 pages chapter under the headline “Passive drinking”, and wrote that “Passive drinking is a term whose time has come”.

Population studies of the harm drinkers inflict upon other people is a rather recent topic of research, and so far, studies have only been performed in a few countries. However, the research findings are amazing, as I am now going to show you.

First, a study from Denmark, which only has 5.5 million inhabitants. I have converted the published percentages into the actual number of individuals.

All the numbers in the studies only applies to adults. We cannot perform population studies with children, so the number of suffering children will remain unknown.

Figure 2, 3 and 4.

The studies are different with different questions asked.

Some of the problems are small, like “kept awake”. But even when deducting minor problems, the problems drinkers inflict upon others are staggering.

The American survey also asked whether the problems had been experienced during life-time. I may mention that 24 % of American women had experienced family or marital problems

caused by other people's drinking during their life-time. That amounts to approximately 30 million women.

Within Europe, this kind of studies has so far only been performed in the Nordic countries. I look forward to see results from more EU countries. We might expect that relative to the high level of alcohol consumption, harm to others is somewhat less frequent in the Mediterranean wine countries, but that the numbers still will be rather large.

All these studies indicate that harm inflicted upon others is not merely a side problem, but is by far the most widespread problem related to alcohol use. And the studies show that harm to others is by no means limited to violence, traffic accidents and children, but is spread over a much broader spectrum.

It would be misleading to label this problem "alcoholism", because most of the individuals showing inconsiderate drunk behaviour are not daily drinkers. The main problem should more properly be labeled drunkenness, not alcoholism. Only a tiny proportion ever enter alcoholism treatment, so very little may be reduced by alcoholism treatment.

If we theorize freely, a method to reduce so-called "passive drinking" could be to make all people drink in moderation and not get drunk. The problem is that the drinking styles in different countries are taught and learned from generation to generation, and no alcohol researcher has ever claimed to know any method for effectively changing the drinking styles by governmental measures.

When there was a strong popular struggle against alcohol in several countries a hundred years ago, alcohol problems were conceptualized as inebriety or drunkenness, and the main focus was on drunk persons' inconsiderate behaviour towards others, especially the family. It is a striking fact that the struggle to reduce smoking and drinking has had moderate effect in the periods when the main emphasis has been on the danger of harming oneself. The struggle has been much more effective when the emphasis has been on harming others.

The recent study with American data I referred to, concluded that the publication of data on harm to others "could elevate political will for effective alcohol controls". The political will to protect innocent citizens against harassment and damage from others is far stronger than the will to protect people against their own behaviour. But the main reason for emphasizing drunk people's harm to others must be that this emphasis is simply the most correct one – so-called "passive drinking" is by far the most frequent problem related to alcohol use. And it hits a huge number of innocent people who are victimized without having chosen themselves the drinking and the related behaviour.

The individual's right to freedom does not include the right to inflict harm upon other people. Because the most prevalent problem with alcohol use is inconsiderate and rude behaviour, limiting the use is a very natural task for society, just like the strict regulation of weapons and motor car driving, because of the potential danger to other, inculpable individuals. The fact that probably a majority of drivers, weapon owners and alcohol users are careful and cautious, does not take away the need to regulate these activities in order to protect our innocent citizens.

Some problems from alcohol use in Denmark

Yearly deaths (estimate) ²	2 500
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Harassed/annoyed/damaged by drunk people, last year:³
(survey data)

Harassed in public	860 000
Harassed in private	430 000
Physically hurt	43 000
Damage of clothes etc.	86 000
Scolded out	903 000
Afraid of drunk person in public place	516 000
Kept awake	989 000
<i>At least three of the seven problems</i>	516 000
<i>At least one of the seven problems</i>	<i>Ca. 1 900 000</i>

Some problems from alcohol use in USA

Yearly deaths (estimate) ⁴	100 000
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Harassed/annoyed/damaged by drunk people, last year:⁵
(survey data)

Been a passenger with a drunk driver	7 260 000
Pushed, hit or assaulted	5 280 000
Family or marriage problems	7 480 000
Property vandalized	3 960 000
Motor vehicle accident	660 000
Financial trouble	2 200 000
<i>At least one of the six problems</i>	<i>20 020 000</i>

Some problems from alcohol use in Canada

Yearly deaths (estimate) ⁶	6 700
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Harassed/annoyed/damaged by drunk people, last year:⁷
(survey data)

Insulted/humiliated	5 040 000
Disturbed	6 240 000
Family problems	1 920 000
Victim of assault	1 680 000
Accident	240 000
Financial problems	480 000
<i>At least one of the six problems</i>	<i>10 800 000</i>

Some problems from alcohol use in Australia

Yearly deaths (estimate) ⁸	3 270
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Harassed/annoyed/damaged by drunk people, last year:⁹
(survey data)

Verbal abuse	4 169 000
Physical abuse	766 300
Put in fear	2 160 700

¹References:

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