Drinking and Crime

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Your discussion will be assisted by overviews of the crime problems caused by excessive drinking and of the preventive and treatment policies now being attempted.
Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol abuse is one of the nation's greatest health problems. It is also one of its most serious crime problems. Preventive medicine specialist Dr. George Vaillant, the latest to polls of the male population at some point in their lives who were under the influence of other drugs. A driver with a blood alcohol level of .15 to .20 is 18 times more likely to have a traffic accident than a sober driver. It is estimated that drunk drivers are responsible for approximately half of the 45,000 traffic deaths each year. About 60 percent of those killed in traffic accidents are alcoholics. They also kill approximately 9,000 pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and passengers each year. There are in addition hundreds of thousands of serious injuries and 7 million lost days due to drunk driving at the top of the list of serious crimes.

In the last decade the nation has seemingly awakened to the enormous destruction that drunk drivers wreak on us all. In large part the extraordinary efforts of anti-drinking highway pressure groups like Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) and Renovated Improver Drivers (RED) have brought about dramatic changes in the drinking practices of people in general and drivers in particular. In many states today, for example, the blood alcohol concentration of 10 percent or greater is no longer acceptable to the police. More and more new legislation is so restrictive that the average drunk driver seeking to avoid prosecution increasingly turns to drivers to special anti-drunk-driving task forces and programs.

The magnitude of drunk driving is frightening and staggering. There are approximately 2 million drunk drivers on the streets at one time. In the United States there are 120,000 arrests each year and one in 20 of these are alcoholics. Some studies indicate that of all traffic deaths each year, 45 percent are caused by drunk drivers.

What can be done?

Despite massive efforts by the medical and mental health community and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, there are no cures for alcoholism. The rate of cure from inpatient programs wavers no better from less expensive outpatient programs, a great percentage of alcoholics who are cured are reined by Alcoholics Anonymous. Some psychiatrists disdain the efforts of curing alcoholics in favor of dealing with "underlying" pathologies. "Other doctors regard alcoholism as a disease," possible, one with an element of genetic predisposition - which causes my real health, psychol­ogical, and interpersonal problems. These, said inbox, are not as prevalent as those that are alcoholics in their number or in their intensity. The need for alcohol abuse assume and counseling is not being, especially in jails and prison.

Alcohol Abuse

The widespread popularity of alcoholism is not a recent phenomenon. It is as old as history itself. The ancient Greeks and Romans used to drink alcohol to relieve stress and ease the pain of shortages. They also used it as a medicine to treat a variety of ailments. Alcohol was used as a religious sacrament and as a means to celebrate important events. Over the centuries, alcohol consumption has increased significantly, reaching its peak in the 1920s and 1930s.

Drinking and Crime

There is a close relationship between alcohol and crime, and there is good reason to believe that consumption of alcohol causes crime. The most obvious crimes in which alcohol plays a role are drink-driving and public drunkenness. But alcohol is also a factor in a large number of violent crimes and criminally.

1. Drink driving. On any weekend night, perhaps 10 to 20 percent of drivers on the road may be under the influence of alcohol. About half of all deaths on our highways are caused by alcohol-related drinking. In one recent year, about 15 million people were involved in accidents on our highways. About 500 people died as a result of drinking. In most of these cases, alcohol is a factor in the accident. In the last year alone, about 10,000 people were killed in automobile accidents in which alcohol was a factor. In the last year alone, about 750,000 people were arrested for drunken driving in the United States.

2. Public drunkenness. Public drunkenness is another drinking offense. In the 1960s and early '70s, there were major increases in the number of arrests for public drunkenness and violations of public order, violent crime and public drunkenness to a public health problem. In most areas across the country, public drunkenness has grown in recent years.

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Discussion Questions

1. Should people who commit crimes while intoxicated be dealt with more or less harshly than people who commit crimes while sober?

2. Does a solution for drunk driving depend upon a solution for alcohol abuse?

3. What should be done with a social drinker—who is not an alcoholic and who is ordinarily careful not to drink and drive—who does drive after drinking and kills a pedestrian?

4. How should public drunkenness be handled?

5. Should laws be passed—such as increases in the drinking age, increases in taxes on alcohol, or bans on "happy hours"—with the intent of discouraging alcohol consumption?

6. Should drunk drivers be jailed? If so, for how long?

This study guide and the video tape, Drinking and Crime, is one of 22 in the CRIME FILE series. For information on how to obtain programs on other criminal justice issues in the series, contact CRIME FILE, National Institute of Justice, NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or call 800-851-3430 (301-251-3550 from Metropolitan Washington, D.C.) and Maryland.