

Sobering news for Kiwi culture

The explanations are flying thick and fast in the wake of a study suggesting that the lower drinking age has contributed to higher teenage car crash rates, The Dominion Post writes in an editorial.

Hospitality Association chief executive Bruce Robertson says the rise in the teen crash rate cannot be blamed solely on lowering the drinking age from 20 to 18. Teenagers own more cars and are driving more than ever before.

Beer Wine and Spirits Council chief executive Nicki Stewart blames the increase on parents and friends who supply young people with alcohol rather than those who sell alcohol in supervised areas.

Both have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. Their members profit hugely from the sale of alcohol to 18 and 19-year-olds. They also benefit from inculcating the next generation of customers in New Zealand's drinking culture at a young age.

But the liquor industry is not solely responsible for the terrible toll alcohol takes on the young. New Zealand, in common with many Anglo-Saxon cultures, has an unhealthy attitude to alcohol that stretches from the football field to the boardroom. For many it is not enough to enjoy a cold beer after mowing the lawns, a gin and tonic after a day in the garden or a glass of wine with dinner. The purpose of drinking is to get drunk.

While that attitude persists, it will not matter what age the legal drinking age is set at; our young will continue to put themselves and others at risk. Children mimic the actions of their elders.

The study, by a group of researchers including Otago University injury prevention research unit director John Langley, found the proportion of 15-to-19-year-olds involved in alcohol-related crashes has increased significantly since the drinking age was lowered. It also states that teenage crash rates increased in the United States when the drinking age was lowered to 18 in the 1970s and fell when the legal age was lifted to 21.

This represents the strongest challenge yet to the purchase age here which will be reviewed by a parliamentary select committee next year.

There are a number of reasons to support the status quo including the incongruity of allowing 18-year-olds to vote, marry and go to war, but not allowing them to drink.

But if the liquor industry wishes to preserve its profits, it is going to have to do a great deal more than it has to foster healthy attitudes to alcohol.

It could start by instructing publicans not to challenge visiting sports fans to drink their pubs dry, as they did when the British and Irish Lions toured.

Others, including the police, also have a part to play. When the age limit was reduced, the police supported the change saying the introduction of ID cards for teen drinkers and the removal of the previous exceptions to the 20-year age limit would make the new regime more enforceable.

Now, they are among those calling for the limit to be increased to 20. They would be better served enforcing the law change they backed just six years ago. The ease with which those under 18 are able to buy alcohol from off-licences suggests enforcing the drinking age is a low priority for the police.

However, real progress is going to require change from all of us. Not till drunkenness becomes uncool will our young sober up.