

Crashes blamed on law change

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New Zealand's decision to lower the drinking age to 18 has resulted in an alarming increase in the number of teen car crashes, according to a United States study.

Alcohol was linked to "significantly more" crashes among 15 to 19-year-olds since the law was changed in 1999 to allow 18-year-olds to buy alcohol, the American Journal of Public Health says in an article to be published next month.

The findings have rekindled the political debate over restoring the drinking age to 20. Parliament will discuss the proposal when it resumes next year.

The study, which analysed traffic and hospital data, found crash rates since 1999 have increased by 12 per cent for young men aged 18 and 19 and by 14% for youths aged 15 to 17.

The results also highlight a disturbing increase in the number of young women involved in accidents.

Crash rates have risen by 51% for females aged 18 and 19 and by 24% for those 15 to 17.

The study's authors, who include Otago University injury-prevention research unit director John Langley, concluded that the increase in crash and injury rates could be attributed to New Zealand's softened drinking laws.

The study says road crashes are "only part of the total picture".

"This (drinking age) strategy should be considered along with other effective measures as a policy option.

"Given the early onset of drinking and the pervasiveness of drinking to intoxication in New Zealand adolescents, the health and social burden may be considerable," it says.

Labour MP Martin Gallagher, who has taken responsibility for a private member's bill to return the drinking age to 20, said the combination of easier access to alcohol and fast cars was "a potentially toxic and fatal mix" for young people.

He wanted to "zero in" on the under-18 age group, supporting analysis from the study that showed a "trickle-down effect" giving alcohol access to 15 to 17-year-olds.

Gallagher has replaced former Progressive MP Matt Robson as the bill's sponsor.

Gallagher is chairman of Parliament's law and order select committee, which will debate the proposal this year, and he plans to step aside as chairman for the hearings.

Transport Safety Minister Harry Duynhoven said yesterday that matters such as young people's ease of access to souped-up cars also had to be considered when the crash rate was discussed.

"Older high-performance Japanese cars are becoming more plentiful and cheaper, so there're more younger drivers driving them," he said.

Nearly a third of all crashes in New Zealand are linked to alcohol, and it is the biggest cause of serious road crashes among young people.

Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams said young women paid the highest price.

"Drink-driving crashes have been coming down overall as a population, but women of that age group (15 to 19) are not improving at all," she said.

Other figures showed that growing numbers of girls were being admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning.

The number of 10 to 14-year-olds admitted to hospital for toxic effects from alcohol doubled in the three years since the drinking age was lowered.

"We've been watching these trends for quite some years now and it's only going to take time for the costs to catch up," Williams said.

A national drinking study by Massey University's centre for social and health outcomes research and evaluation centre is expected to confirm such trends.

Williams said the group hoped to present the study to the parliamentary law and order select committee. --Dominion Post

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CAPTION:

Martin Gallagher Harry Duynhoven