

Easy access to booze for minors in Hong Kong

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Rachel Blundy, Emily Tsang and Sarah Zheng

In a Post experiment on Thursday night, a 13-year-old schoolgirl easily bought beers and spirits in five of the seven shops she visited in Yuen Long

Health officials are finally taking action against lax sales policies and the absence of an age limit for purchasing alcohol, which they blame for a spike in underage drinking in the city.

Access to alcohol in local shops is easy and legal for minors, as demonstrated in a test conducted by the Post. Although bars and clubs are prohibited from serving and selling alcoholic drinks to children, there is currently no such restriction for convenience stores.

Relying on a voluntary move adopted by major retailers to refuse the purchase of liquor by anyone aged below 18 has not proved effective.

In an experiment on Thursday night, a 13-year-old schoolgirl was instructed to pose as a customer and easily bought beers and spirits in five of the seven shops she visited in Yuen Long.

The girl was not asked about her age in the five outlets – two small groceries, two 7-Eleven convenience stores, and a ParknShop supermarket.

[Hong Kong children drinking alcohol as young as 10, study finds](#) [1]

They are among some major retailers in the city who have adopted a voluntary policy to verify the ages of customers before selling them alcohol.

But in the test, the girl was only questioned at one 7-Eleven and one Circle K store. Once they heard she was 13, staff members said they would not sell her the liquor even if she claimed to be making the purchase “for someone else”.

The results of the test echoed studies conducted by non-governmental organisations. Last year, youth charity KELY Support Group conducted a study in which teenagers were successful in buying alcohol in most shops, regardless of location or size, after visiting 100 stores across 12 districts.

To remedy the situation, the Food and Health Bureau revealed to the Post, the government is planning to introduce new legislation to restrict the sale of alcohol to anyone aged under 18.

“Restricting access to retailed alcohol is also one of the three ‘best buys’ recommended by the World Health Organisation for tackling the harmful use of alcohol,” a spokeswoman for the bureau explained.

“Having taken into account local situations and overseas practices, we consider it essential to enhance our effort to protect young people who are vulnerable to the harm caused by alcohol.

“The move has taken into account local situations and overseas practices.”

She explained that the proposed statutory regulatory regime will cover all forms of commercial sale and supply of alcohol, including over the internet. Vending machine sales will also be prohibited.

Sellers will also have to display signs stating that no alcohol may be sold or supplied to persons aged under 18.

According to the Narcotics Division of the Security Bureau in 2014/15, alcohol was the most popular drug among young people, with 56.2 per cent admitting to have tried it; 7.4 per cent of young people had smoked tobacco and 2 per cent had tried other drugs.

A government survey in 2014 found that 56.2 per cent of the city's students had tried alcohol, with 21.9 per cent aged 10 or below saying they had done so.

Last year, the Centre for Health Protection found 43.1 per cent of 1,630 of those polled had taken their first sip of alcohol before the age of 18.

Dr Regina Ching Cheuk-tuen, head of the centre's surveillance and epidemiology branch, warned the study showed a worrying rise in the proportion of students with binge drinking experience.

She noted that having the first sip of alcohol before 18 was associated with a higher frequency of binge drinking in adulthood.

[Hong Kong doctors want ban on sale of alcohol to under-18s](#) [2]

A study by the school of nursing at Polytechnic University last year also showed that some children in the city had their first experience with alcohol when they were as young as 10.

Children who drank were also 4.65 times more likely than their non-drinking counterparts to develop behavioural problems later, the study suggested.

Paediatrician Dr Chan Yee-shing, vice-president of the Medical Association, stressed that the harmful effects of drinking alcohol far outweighed its benefits, and that it was important to warn the public that there was no safe limit for alcohol – especially for youngsters.

University of Hong Kong public health professor Lam Tai-hing said the city's alcohol control - measures were lax compared with those of other developed countries and cities.

On the mainland, for example, the sale of alcohol to those under the age of 18 was banned in 2006. Japan and the United States set their legal drinking age at 20 and 21 respectively. In Singapore, other than setting the legal drinking age at 18, there are additional laws to ban shops from selling alcohol in public places between 10:30pm and 7am.

Lam, a top tobacco control advocate, criticised Hong Kong for falling behind in terms of its alcohol policy, despite being a world leader when it came to smoking laws.

"Underage drinking has become a real problem. I have seen it over many years," Allan Zeman, - chairman of the Lan Kwai Fong Group, said.

['Stronger regulations' needed as Hong Kong shops sell alcohol to children](#) [3]

"For tourists seeing this behaviour here, it sets a bad example and affects the image of the city."

He said the government had been inactive for too long and failed to treat underage drinking as a priority problem.

Last year, the Medical Association, the city's largest doctors' group, called for a ban on the sale of alcohol to minors to bring Hong Kong in line with normal practice across the developed world.

The group also proposed that alcohol packaging should carry health warning labels similar to those for cigarettes. The association said 77 per cent of the 1,003 people it polled supported banning the sale of alcohol to those below 18.

The Hong Kong Forum for Responsible Drinking said it supported any action taken by the government or other stakeholders to raise public awareness about underage drinking and reduce the risks.

Source URL: <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2064046/easy-access-booze-minors-hong-kong>

Links

[1] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2024468/hong-kong-children-drinking-alcohol-young-10-study>

[2] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/1964251/hong-kong-doctors-want-ban-sale-alcohol-under-18s>

[3] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/1936739/stronger-regulations-needed-hong-kong-shops-sell-alcohol>