

Young Cubans Seek Solace in Alcohol

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Rising rates of alcohol dependence among young people.

Luis is two years old and already drinking rum. Adults find it funny when he scampers over for a sip from their bottles, and local street drinker Rigoberto Santa Cruz boasts that Luis is already the biggest boozier in the neighbourhood.

Santa Cruz, who lives in Atare, a deprived quarter of Havana's Cerro municipality, believes that dipping babies' dummies in alcohol is just training them up for their future.

"None of them is going to be a doctor or lawyer... so they should prepare for the life that awaits them," said 46-year-old Santa Cruz, whose granddaughter is one of the neighbourhood band of child drinkers.

Cuba: Youth and the Bottle

Luis may be unusually young, but in a country where alcohol consumption is socially acceptable, it is not unknown for children to start drinking at an early age. Experts say this leads to heavy drinking among adolescents, who are vulnerable to peer pressure and have few other options for entertainment.

Serguei Iglesia from the University of Medical Sciences in Havana and the coordinator of You Decide, a campaign against alcohol abuse, says teenagers generally begin consuming alcohol at about 15. But Carmen Beatriz Borrego, a Cuban health ministry psychiatrist, puts the figure nearer ten years of age.

Yesnier, a 20-year-old from the Centro Habana municipality who now drinks every day, said that his first experience with alcohol was when he was 12.

"It was here in the neighbourhood... after two sips, I felt good. It truly made me forget all my problems," he said.

The young people interviewed for this report did not consider excessive consumption either irresponsible or risky. They saw it simply as an opportunity for escapism and harmless fun.

Every day at nightfall, young people gather on Havana's seafront promenade. After nine in the evening, the park on Avenue G in Velado starts filling up with teenagers, who come to share a bottle of rum or cartons of Planchao, packaged like juice and sold for the equivalent of one US dollar. Other cheap options include home-made rum sold in disposable cups for five pesos (around 20 cents) a time, plastic bottles of Ron del Punto rum, and La Flecha beer decanted into soda bottles.

Some limit themselves to binge-drinking at weekends, but experts say this too carries risks.

"When adolescents can't have fun without alcohol, that's high-risk consumption," Juan Emilio Sandoval, head of addiction department at the Society of Cuban Psychiatrists, said in an interview published by the official newspaper Granma.

According to Lisset Argota Mora, a toxicologist at the Mental Health Centre in Centro Habana who specialises in treating alcoholism, "People between 15 and 35 years old don't seek medical help.

Irresponsible consumption conspires against them asking for help.”

Since young drinkers find it difficult to accept they have a problem, the majority of patients seeking help at her centre are between 40 and 60 years old.

In some cases, it is only when young people turn violent that their families look for treatment.

“There are cases of young people with ‘pathological drunkenness’ whose families ask for medical help because of the aggression that alcohol consumption fuels,” Argota Mora said.

An official study carried out in Santiago de Cuba and published in the peer-reviewed Biomedical Journal in January 2013 found that alcohol-related violence caused more than 60 per cent of problems with the law. A police source in the Centro Habana municipality confirmed that the majority of arrests of young people for violent crimes were associated with “consumption of a drug, primarily alcohol”.

The source, who spoke to IWPR anonymously, said the highest rates of alcohol consumption in Centro Habana were in Colón and Sitios, at 90 and 81 per cent of the population.

Experts say rates of alcohol consumption among young people have been growing since the 1990s.

Alcohol, including sparkling wine, rum and beer, was sold indiscriminately during the “Special Period”, a period of economic crisis that followed the end of subsidies from the collapsing Soviet Union.

On the streets of Havana, two or three improvised seats grouped together are a sign of a local drinking spot. You can share the bottle as it is passed around as long as you know one or two of the regulars, regardless of your age or your ability to pay.

The Cuban Medical Magazine recently highlighted the problem of street drinking, concluding it was essential to address the custom of consuming alcohol in public spaces like parks, streets and buses.

Argota Mora agrees that banning drinking in public places and increasing the number of signs in bars and cafes warning of the dangers of alcoholism could help curb the problem.

In September, police started detaining people for drinking in public along Cristina Avenue in the Cerro municipality, fining offenders 100 pesos (four dollars) each.

Efforts to deter young people from drinking are having more limited success.

Argota Mora explained that the state healthcare system was implementing a preventive strategy based on retraining family doctors. These doctors are supposed to hold community meetings, with the support of state institutions like the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the local People's Councils, the Federation of Cuban Women and the National Association of Combatants of the Revolution.

Cuba also has a network of detoxification centres for alcoholics and a free and confidential anti-narcotics phone line.

However, these initiatives appear to be largely ineffective. People are either unaware of the prevention programmes, or else treat them with suspicion as they are supported by a government seen as repressive and intrusive.

Hanging around drinking on the streets still seems more appealing to youngsters than the chess games, football matches and embroidery, sewing and painting groups that the government promotes as alternatives in its prevention programmes.

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