

# Alcohol Abuse and Teens

By Religious News Service

In August, when President Jimmy Carter launched a campaign to "discourage all drug abuse" in the United States, he said he was also concerned to discourage "the excessive use of alcohol."

The presidential move came at a time when authorities in the field of alcoholism were expressing growing anxiety over the spreading alcohol abuse among teenagers and even among pre-teenagers.

At a Senate subcommittee hearing in late March, Dr. Ernest Noble, director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAA), reported that about 70 per cent of American high school students have tried alcoholic beverages, and that the number who became intoxicated more than doubled in the last 20 years.

About five million teenagers, or 21 percent of those surveyed reported consuming five or more drinks per occasion, Dr. Noble said, while nearly 30 per cent said they became intoxicated several times a year.

According to the NIAAA director, 45 per cent of young people now say they have been drunk at least once, against 19 per cent in 1957. He added that 12 per cent reported that they got intoxicated once a month, against 5 per cent who did so in 1957.

Further, said Dr. Noble, the average age at which young people have the first drink has dropped from 13.6 years in 1965 to 12.9 years in 1975.

Meanwhile, says Father James E. Royce, SJ, director of the Alcohol Studies Program at Seattle University, "parents seem incredibly oblivious of all of this, perhaps because their own drinking habits motivate them in subtle or unconscious ways to avoid facing the spread of alcohol abuse among youngsters."

In an article on "Alcohol — The Respectable Drug," in the April 1977 issue of the magazine *Columbia*, Father Royce points out that fifth- and sixth-grade teachers around the country "have reported classes where half the pupils bring bottles to school, drink during the noon hour, and show obvious signs of intoxication in the classroom."

"Much of the alcohol comes from the parents' own supply," the Jesuit says.

According to Dr. Robert Dupont, director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse, polydrug abuse, or the mixing of alcohol with one or more other drugs, has reached alarming proportions among young people.

A Boston study shows that drug use among teenagers is strongly related to alcohol use, with 90 per cent of "heavy" drinkers reporting use of marijuana.

The research conducted by Dr. Henry Weschler of the Medical Foundation in Boston was done in two cities near Boston and reported in January 1977 in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, published by the Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University.

Of the 1,715 students in junior and senior high schools surveyed, 16 per cent were classified as heavy drinkers, 38 per cent as moderate drinkers, and 46 per cent as light drinkers or abstainers.

Marijuana was found to be the most commonly used drug and had been tried by about 43 per cent of all the students, including 58 per cent of high school students and 19 per cent of junior high students.

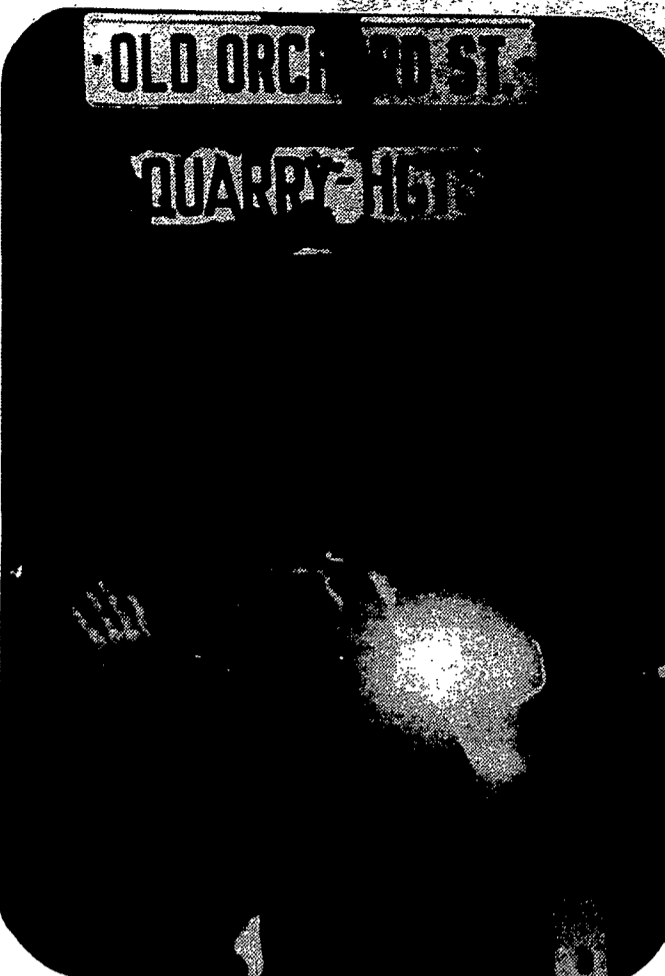
Of the 787 students classified as light drinkers, 9 per cent reported use of marijuana. This compares with 63 per cent of the 651 moderate drinkers and 90 per cent of the heavy drinkers who reported using marijuana.

The Weschler study also found a strong correlation between alcohol use and the use of amphetamines and barbiturates among the teenage heavy drinkers.

"Use of amphetamines and barbiturates, for example, was virtually non-existent among light drinkers, and was low (about 10 per cent) among the moderate drinkers," Dr. Weschler said. "However, nearly one-third of the heavy drinkers had used these substances."

An important factor leading to drug use and drinking by teenagers is the pressure of the peer group. Many teenagers begin to drink after being urged by their friends. Many have an almost paranoid fear of being left out.

Dr. George L. Maddox, in his book *The Domesticated Drug*, says, "Teenagers apparently do



A teenager guzzles from a wine bottle in New York City. The sight is becoming common as young people increasingly imbibe alcoholic beverages at earlier and earlier ages.

not participate in drinking so much for the effect as because they dislike being excluded from the group. Their fear of being left out supersedes that of running afoul of the law or being involved in an accident" (while driving after drinking.)

A similar conclusion was reached in a research study issued in August at Boys Town, Nebraska. The study, conducted by Dr. Ronald Akers, a sociologist, for the Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development, also disclosed that religious affiliation of young people is directly related to the use of drugs and alcohol.

The report said the "highest level" of drug and alcohol use was by youth with "no religious affiliation; those with the least usage were found to belong to "fundamentalist" religious groups.

The Akers study indicated that, despite peer pressures in many instances, informed parental instruction combined with consistent parental behavior can significantly reduce the incidence of alcohol and drug abuse among children.

Other studies have shown that many teenagers follow their parents' wishes in the matter of drinking, or not drinking, if the parents are consistent, reasonable and understanding.

Dr. Morris E. Chafetz, former NIAAA director, advocates that youngsters be given information and options so that they can responsibly decide, for themselves, what is right for them within their value systems.

For some young people, the decision to drink or not to drink can be reached through too much difficulty. As Gerald Schomp of the Florida Bureau of Alcoholic Rehabilitation has noted: "A lifetime of abstinence may be the result of family customs, religion, or community environment."

For most teenagers, however, the problem is not so much whether to drink, but when and how. In these cases, alcohol experts agree that parents can play a pivotal role in helping the children to develop the proper attitudes toward beverage alcohol.

Among guidelines given by experts are the following:

- Teach your child to drink responsibly by drinking that way yourself.
- Teach your child that a responsible drinker sets limits on his or her drinking as to time, place, and amount; that a responsible drinker **never** drinks to get drunk; that drinking a lot is **not** a sign of maturity.
- Teach your child that a responsible drinker does not use alcohol as an escape from reality or as a problem-solver.

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