

Teen Drinking Draws Attention of Lawmakers

By Religious News Service

Concern about increased teen-age drinking and alcoholism and alcohol-related traffic fatalities has moved more and more lawmakers across the nation to put the cap back on teen-age drinking -- at least legally.



Massachusetts -- following in the footsteps of Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and Montana -- recently became the sixth state in three years to raise its minimum drinking age.

Similar legislation was pending in mid-April in at least 19 other states from New England to Hawaii.

These moves represent a sharp reversal of the trend from 1970 to 1975, when 27 states lowered the legal drinking age from 21 to 18 or 19.

The Massachusetts statute, which went into effect April 17, raises the commonwealth's legal drinking age from 18 to 20.

"This law," said Gov. Edward J. King, "is a first step toward ending the devastating increase in highway deaths we have witnessed since the drinking age was lowered in 1975. It is also a first step toward halting the shocking rise in teen-age alcoholism."

Last December, Michigan raised its drinking age from 18 to 21. The Michigan law, like similar laws in other states, was advocated as a way of attacking an undisputed rise in teen-age drinking and of reducing an also undisputed increase in traffic accidents involving drunken teen-agers since the drinking age was lowered at the beginning of the decade.

Federal statistics, in addition, show that the rate of arrest for teen-agers on drunken driving charges rose 160 per cent from 1970 to 1975. Federal Bureau of Investigation figures for 1976, the most recent available, show that nearly 113,000 people under 21 were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol that year.

The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

puts the number of teen-age "problem drinkers" at 3.5 million and growing.

Passage of the Massachusetts statute left but 14 states where 18-year-olds could legally buy and drink all kinds of alcoholic beverages: Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

In nine other states and the District of Columbia, 18-year-olds can buy beer and wine, but not hard liquor.

The patch-work quilt of the legal drinking age around the United States underscores the clash of opinion about the issue.

The former Governor of Massachusetts, Michael S. Dukakis, who twice vetoed bills that would have raised the drinking age to 19, argued that the one-year hike would not cut teen drinking significantly, and in addition did not address the underlying social problems that fuel alcohol abuse among young people.

Reflecting the argument, "If they're old enough to vote, they're old enough to drink," Mr. Dukakis has also said that the benefit of the doubt should be given to young people for whom the age of majority is 18 for voting, military service, and other activities.

Officials in states where the drinking age is higher than 18, however, almost unanimously report that they are concerned about the availability of alcohol to the under-18 group. High school parties and dances, which are attended by young people aged 14 or 15 to 18, are frequently "wetted" by 18-year-old seniors in states where they can legally buy alcohol.

Proponents of higher drinking-age laws argue that legislation can help to break the "connection" through which younger teen-agers obtain easy access to liquor.

Critics of such laws contend that the measures will not reduce appreciably, if at all, either teen-age drinking or the liquor-related deaths involving teen-age drivers.

Regardless of what any one state does, say the

critics, teen-age drinking -- and drunk driving -- are likely to continue, since there are few areas more than a 30-minute drive from another state with an 18-year-old limit.

According to a recent U. S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study, social acceptance of drinking and driving is primarily responsible for an estimated 25,000 traffic fatalities a year and an economic loss of \$5 billion a year.

The GAO report said that lowered drinking ages in states, as well as the serving of drinks to people who are already drunk, are among the reasons that federal and state efforts to combat the problem of drunk driving during the last 13 years have not had a national impact.

Both sides of the drinking-age dispute are agreed that the problem of teen-age alcohol abuse will not be "solved" by legislation alone.

Both sides agree that the development of rational, consistent attitudes toward drinking -- or not drinking -- are desperately needed, and that in this development, parents play a pivotal role.

"Many, many of us assume the drinking patterns of our parents," observes Susan Maloney of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. That is why, she says, parents have a particular responsibility to provide the proper "role model."

For some parents, this role will be one of total abstinence, adopted often for religious reasons.

For others, it will be a model of moderate social drinking.

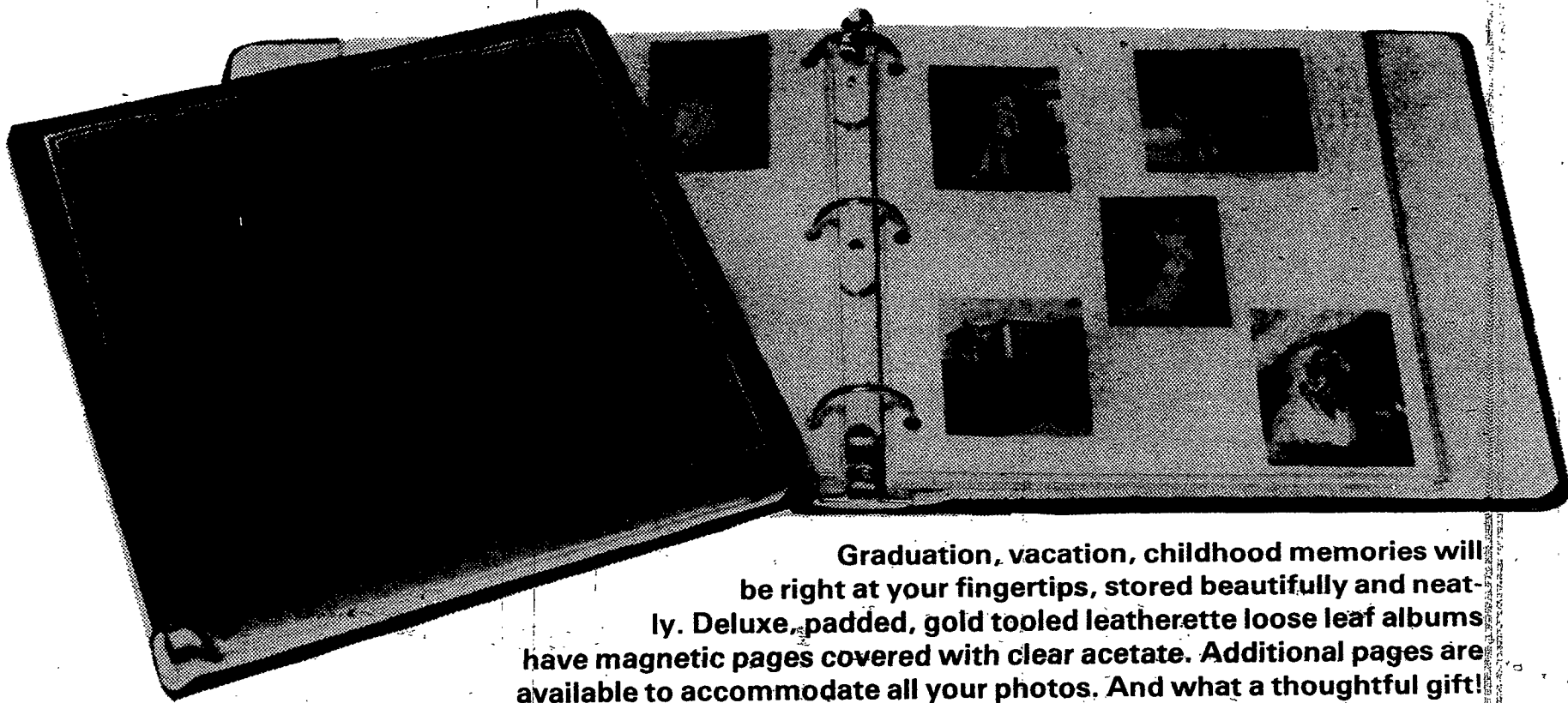
Alcohol experts are unanimous in their advice to non-abstinent parents:

-- Teach your child, by word and example, 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 large amount of alcohol 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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