



SOCIOECONOMICS

Battling Bacchus and human behaviour

In an effort to combat students' binge drinking, Stellenbosch University has banned alcohol within student residences, but this policy could have unintended consequences.

Human behaviour is difficult to predict – and even more difficult to control. We might think we know what to do to dissuade bad behaviour, but our good intentions could easily have the opposite effect, encouraging even worse behaviour. That's why economists and other social scientists have for long insisted that we test theories of human behaviour against real-world evidence.

There are several ways to do this. The most obvious is in a laboratory setting where all things are the same and the only difference between the treatment group and the control group is the thing you wish to test. But many policies simply can't be tested in a lab. Apart from policies that affect large groups (an interest rate hike or tax decrease), there are also individual behaviours we'd like to test, but it would be unethical to do so.

Imagine, for example, you want to know the effects of alcohol abuse on university students. Any attempt to conduct an experiment where half a group of students is requested to binge drink while the other half stays sober would, I imagine, struggle to get approval from an ethics committee.

Yet, that doesn't mean there's nothing we can do to study the effects of binge drinking. Often, observations from the real world are used and, with clever research designs, we can analyse not only the types of behaviour correlated to binge drinking, but also identify causes of such behaviour. Causal inference is important, because it allows us to know which policies will change (or nudge) behaviour towards better outcomes.

Binge drinking, in particular, is a hot topic on university campuses, in South Africa and globally. Its consequences are well-known: In the short run, it leads to blackouts, nausea and alcohol poisoning. It affects cognitive processing, which can lead to traffic accidents and unintended sexual behaviour; in his most recent book, *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell uses an infamous case on a US college campus to show how alcohol abuse and the campus environment interact to produce unbelievably high rates of sexual assault.

A 2017 study in *Psychology & Health* also notes many other long-term effects of binge drinking, including poorer academic performance, weaker brain functioning, weight gain, alcohol dependence and depression. There's no doubt that society will benefit if binge drinking is eliminated.

The question is how. At the start of the academic year, Stellenbosch University, in an attempt to curb binge drinking, announced a six-month ban on alcohol within university residences. No alcohol is permitted within campus residences. As management notes, it's a firm stand against alcohol abuse and its detrimental consequences.

One can understand their reasoning. Several terrible incidents related to alcohol abuse occurred on campus in 2019. Making it harder

for students to consume alcohol at home would seem like an obvious way to lower consumption.

But, as any social scientist worth their salt would know, things are never that simple. There are several reasons why prohibition may have unintended consequences.

The first issue, and perhaps most paradoxical, is that lower consumption is not necessarily good for society. The Stellenbosch rule – which, to be fair, is also true for almost any university campus in SA – ignores what has been called the 'Iron Law of Prohibition': When alcoholic beverages are prohibited, they will become more potent.

It's conceivable that instead of drinking several beers, in an attempt to avoid detection, students instead choose to buy and consume hard liquor in greater quantities. No need to hide a couple of six-packs when you can just have a bottle of tequila hidden behind the socks. While overall consumption may fall, alcohol intensity will in all likelihood increase. And access to hard

liquor – it's been shown – is strongly correlated with binge drinking.

Second, because the ban is only on university accommodation, it's highly likely that students will simply shift consumption from near their dorm room to far from it. Combined with increasing intensity, this behaviour outside the safe environment of their residence could lead to reckless (sexual, driving) behaviour or, worse, expose them to opportunistic criminals who roam the streets between the pubs and the residences.

One response would be to note that technologies like Uber would reduce the likelihood of traffic accidents, but even that would forget the prevalence of unintended consequences: Two studies published at the end of last year find that when Uber arrived in a US city, road deaths did decline, but simultaneously the city experienced an increase in binge drinking-related incidents. Knowing that Uber was an option, party-goers could now test the boundaries.

Perhaps management is correct. Perhaps a ban on alcohol consumption in residences reduces alcohol-related incidents. Even if it doesn't, a temporary ban would give them a stronger position to negotiate a long-term solution with student leaders.

But, if they're wrong, the unintended consequences could be more severe than the intended benefits. Prohibition could nudge students into drinking hard liquor more intensively, or shift incidents away from campus into town.

Battling Bacchus and human behaviour is difficult. What might seem like an obvious policy to curb bad behaviour, may, without good social science that accounts for the unintended consequences, have the opposite effect. ■

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