

Submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

By members of the Young People's Reference Group
of the Office of the Children's Commissioner



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The second-hand effects of alcohol on children and young people is important, but ignored. We believe it should be made aware of and openly condemned by the government for the sake of all children and young people in New Zealand. This issue is the focus of our submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children.

“What’s never focused on is the fact that young people are the victims...”
- Young Person, Green Paper Survey YPRG 2012

SUBMISSION ON THE GREEN PAPER FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Introduction

1. The Young People's Reference Group (YPRG) for the Office of the Children's Commissioner (the Office) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Government's Green Paper for Vulnerable Children launched by the Government.
2. The YPRG is a group of young people aged between 12 and 18 years from around New Zealand who provide advice to the Office of the Children's Commissioner.
3. As the YPRG for the Office, we have a responsibility to advocate for the interests, rights and welfare of all children and young people (under the age of 18 years) in New Zealand. Our work links in with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), which New Zealand ratified in 1993.
4. The second-hand effects of alcohol (also called "second-hand drinking") are what others suffer as a consequence from those abusing alcohol. The second-hand effects are in particular, damaging to children and young people. It is for these children who are vulnerable that the Green Paper can make a difference.
5. This submission is divided into two sections. Firstly this submission will provide comment on the second-hand effects of alcohol on children and young people (including using the answers to a survey which we sent out to New Zealand children and young people).

This includes:

- A detailed explanation of what the second-hand effects of alcohol on children and young people are (aided by statistics and examples)
 - How the second-hand effects of alcohol for children and young people undermine UNCROC
 - What impact the second-hand effects of alcohol has on New Zealand children and young people
 - How the second-hand effects of alcohol on children and young people is regarded in NZ
6. The second section of this submission contains recommendations to the Government and gives reasons why:
 - We need to be aware of the impact the second-hand effects of alcohol have on children and young people.
 - The second-hand effects of alcohol need to be openly condemned by the Government.

It also gives reasons why the second-hand effects of alcohol should be treated in a similar way to the effects of second-hand smoking and used as a marketing tool against heavy drinking.

The second-hand effects of alcohol and its impact on children and young people

The quotes in *italics* are responses from the second-hand drinking related survey we created and sent out to children and young people from around New Zealand.

Physical effects

- The most commonly identified physical effect is violence and abuse. New Zealand police statistics show alcohol as a factor in approximately 29 percent of family violence incidents attended by the Police. It is widely believed by Police that the majority of family violence incidents with alcohol involved are not reported to them.

“Kids get beaten, abused and killed because their parents are drunk”

- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and other disabilities are serious effects caused by mothers drinking whilst pregnant. These effects, which can stay with the child for life, include physical disabilities such as kidney and internal organ problems, skeletal abnormalities such as facial deformities, mental health disorders such as depression or obsessive compulsive disorder and alcohol and drug problems. FASD is estimated to affect 1 in 100 live births. However, recent studies of young school aged children suggest the prevalence is much higher.
- Another serious effect is poverty. This can occur when parents or caregivers spend too much money on alcohol and therefore cannot properly house, feed or care for their children. This means the second hand effects of drinking are contributing to the fact that 20 percent of children (one in five) under 18 live in households with incomes below the poverty line in 2010 (this rises to 25 percent when housing costs are taken into account).

“If adults waste their money on alcohol, they won’t have money to look after their families”

- Car crashes caused by drunk drivers are not a rare occurrence in New Zealand. Children are at serious risk of injury or even death when intoxicated drivers are on the roads (from 2008 – 2010, alcohol and / or drugs were a factor in 34 percent of fatal crashes, 22 percent of serious injury crashes and 12 percent of minor injury crashes).

Mental effects

- Children and young people's attitude towards consuming alcohol can be influenced by others' drinking. This is made evident by New Zealand's strong drinking culture, which has made some children think it's the social norm to drink extensively.

"When observing such behaviour, the child or young person may learn this is acceptable therefore compounding the issue for future generations"

- Children's education is compromised as a result of second hand effects of drinking. Inadequate support and help from parents who abuse alcohol can lead to such things as the lack of necessary school equipment such as stationary, uniforms and money for field trips; this can negatively impact the child's education.

Emotional effects

- Fear has a direct link to the impact of second-hand effects of drinking on children. This can be caused by alcohol-fuelled violence or neglect. This makes for an environment where a child or young person doesn't feel safe and secure.

"Alcohol places a darkness over the community"

- Due to parents drinking, children often miss out on parental support which is vital to their emotional stability.
- Lack of strong family support and good relationships in a child or young person's life can lead to depression and other mental illnesses. Already one in 10 adolescents experience a depressive episode in their lives.

"Kids are brought up believing that alcohol is more important than they are"

How do the second-hand effects of alcohol relate to UNCROC?

Many of the second-hand effects of alcohol undermine the rights stated in UNCROC. When people around children abuse alcohol, children are affected physically, mentally and emotionally. The Government has an obligation to uphold the rights of children by protecting them from the second-hand effects of alcohol.

Physical and mental effects

All children have the right to life. The Government should ensure that children can survive and develop healthily, according to Article 6 of UNCROC. However, the effects of alcohol abuse on children breach this fundamental right. Women who drink heavily while pregnant put their children at risk of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Articles 24 and 27 state that children should have the right to clean water, food and a clean environment so that they will stay healthy, as well as having a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. Many families end up spending so much money on alcohol due to an addiction to the drug, that they don't have enough money for food for their family. They may also live in poor housing conditions and not have enough money to fix this issue, affecting their health.

All children have the right to relax and play and join in a wide range of activities, says Article 31. Parents who abuse alcohol will often not have the time or energy to give their children opportunities for this. Children who have to look after themselves as their parents aren't responsible or attentive enough to do it for them have to develop a level of maturity beyond their age. Their environment does not permit them to develop, relax and play.

Government obligations

Article 18 is about how both parents should always consider what is best for each child, and that Governments should help parents by providing services to support them. This means the Government has a duty to provide alcohol treatment for parents with alcohol addictions so they can better care for their children.

The Government has an obligation to protect children from dangerous drugs and from activities that could harm their development. They should ensure that children are properly cared for, and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents. This is what Articles 19, 33 and 36 say. However, alcohol is a dangerous drug that many children are exposed to every day. Abusing alcohol impairs the ability of parents to care for their child as they are intoxicated or just not around for their children. It can lead to child abuse and neglect, affecting children physically, mentally and emotionally. It can affect their whole lives, all the way into adulthood. This infringes on all of these vital rights, which is why the second hand effects of alcohol on young people need to be addressed.

In Article 34 it says that the Government should protect children from sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often happens when the abuser is drunk, so to decrease sexual abuse rates, the Government should protect children from abusers of alcohol.

Article 39 is about how children who have been neglected or abused should receive special help to restore their self-respect. This is the Government's duty. Are we giving them that help or is that 'right' not being upheld for many children who suffer from the effects of alcohol abuse?

The rights that apply to all children in UNCROC are violated in so many ways because of the second-hand effects of alcohol. There are also many areas where the Government's obligation to remedy these infringements is not being fulfilled. The second-hand effects of alcohol need to be addressed in order for the rights of every child to be properly respected.

How the effects of second-hand drinking on children and young people are regarded in New Zealand

The term second-hand drinking and its effects on children and young people is new to many people. The results of our survey indicate that many young people have never heard this term or thought much about its impact, especially on children and young people in this country.

Only 10 percent of those surveyed said they were aware of the effects of second-hand drinking through either media messages or education in schools.

The main points made by the majority, who were not aware of the effects, were commonly based around these themes:

- The advertisements on alcohol do not specifically talk about the second hand effects of alcohol, especially on those under 18.
- There was more talk about the effects of alcohol on the drinker and not the effect on those around them.
- In campaigns about child abuse and domestic violence there was rarely a clear link shown to alcohol abuse.
- The term 'the effects of second-hand drinking' was not something that they had heard of before.

Raising awareness of the second-hand effects of alcohol

It is apparent that the second-hand effects of alcohol (especially on children and young people) are not currently identified. As stated in the first section of the submission, this means the wide majority of New Zealanders are neither aware of the effects nor how they link in with other issues in New Zealand. It is obvious that the second-hand effects of alcohol need to be communicated.

Suggestions for ways that the second-hand effects of alcohol can be communicated include:

- Putting new laws in place such as raising the price of alcohol and reducing the alcohol limit.
- An awareness campaign funded by the government and facilitated by government organisations.
- Funding educational programs about the second-hand effects of alcohol for primary and secondary schools.
- Distributing media that informs New Zealanders about the effects of second-hand drinking.

To make New Zealanders aware of the second-hand effects of alcohol (especially on children and young people) is the first step to harmful second hand effects becoming socially unacceptable in this country. If people realise how damaging the second-hand effects are, they will share that knowledge with others and that leads to a social change.

The second-hand effects of alcohol need to be openly condemned by the Government

Currently the government has not effectively condemned the reality of the effects of second hand drinking. Whether it is in Parliament, in caucus, as part of the policies of a party or even by individual MPs, we seldom here the words “the effects of second-hand drinking”, or any term similar, openly stated as damaging, or more importantly, linked in with any other issues New Zealand faces (i.e. poverty or domestic violence).

The second-hand effects of alcohol is an important issue that needs to be condemned by the government. This is seen by the opinions of young people who have partaken in our survey on the second-hand effects of alcohol. One participant said that *“as a representative of the nation, [the Government] needs to do what they can to help move the nation forward.”*

Another participant felt that the Government *“needs to talk to those involved and affected (the families and children) as well as experts, and find out why alcohol is such a dominating part of their lives and what their alternatives are, then implement these alternatives.”*

We have seen how effectively the Government addressed the issue of second-hand smoking (which is discussed in the section below) and so we would like to see the Government openly condemn the second-hand effects of alcohol by applying similar strategies.

Second-hand effects of alcohol as a marketing strategy (in relation to second-hand smoking)

In addition to the need for the second-hand effects of alcohol to be identified and condemned, the concept of second-hand drinking can and should be used as a marketing tool against alcohol abuse, as second-hand smoking was. By looking at the second-hand smoking campaign, which would be similar in many aspects to a second-hand effects of drinking campaign, it can give us an example of what works, and what doesn't in terms of a successful marketing strategy.

The second-hand smoking campaign has been in New Zealand since 2003. The key idea of second-hand smoking is that it negatively affects the people around the smoker, such as close friends and family. At the centre of the issue of smoking indoors was the effect that smoking inside a home can have on children and young people. The campaign used television, radio and printed resources as advertisements, and was deemed successful. It was found in both New Zealand and worldwide, the reality of second-hand damage had a more powerful effect than the primary health effects. Therefore, smoking in public places became socially unacceptable.

The reason for looking at the second-hand effects of smoking campaign is that it provides a working example of what can happen when the Government contributes to a campaign about the second-hand effects of a damaging product. The Government supported the *Smokefree* campaign and the Quit group, and played a

significant role in the campaign. Because of the campaign's success, it shows how important is the role the Government plays in alcohol and smoking campaigns. Therefore, if this had the Government's support, it will make the results more successful.

The aim of this suggested campaign is to reduce the second-hand effects of alcohol on children and young people in New Zealand. Any campaign on the effects of second-hand drinking needs to be strong in its presentation towards a social understanding of the second-hand effects of alcohol; and why these are so dangerous to children and young people. The strength of the campaign can be modelled on the *Smokefree Homes* campaign.

Conclusion

We, the YPRG of the Office of the Children's Commissioner, applaud you for providing this opportunity to submit our ideas to the 'Green Paper for Vulnerable Children'. We would appreciate the opportunity to further elaborate on our submission orally – if there is a chance to do so, please let us know.

Should you require any additional information regarding this submission please contact the YPRG co-ordinator Rebecca Blaikie on 04 495 7808.

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