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WHEN YOU NEED TO KNOW NOW

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90% of the alcohol consumed by minors in the United States is consumed during binge drinking. What is happening to America's youth, and what can we do about it?

We see it every year. College students head south for spring break, anxious to shake off academic stress and have a good time. Each year, far too many indulge in heavy alcohol consumption. Spring break is our nation's annual pretext for binge drinking by minors at a rate that we should all deem to be unacceptably high.

Before factoring in spring break, the statistics are chilling. Federal health agency statistics give us a good look at the scope of underage binge drinking. 5.3 million young people had five or more drinks on the same occasion, within a few hours, at least once in the past month. 1.3 million young people had five or more drinks on the same occasion on five or more days over the past month. These are staggering numbers.

Stanford University provides a representative look at what is happening on college campuses across the country. The university's fall 2015 survey revealed that excessive consumption of hard alcohol was implicated in 95 percent of emergency transports for alcohol poisoning. Those transported for emergency medical treatment had consumed an average of eight shots. While only 25% of the university's incoming students indicated in their initial survey responses that they intended to drink hard alcohol, 58%, ultimately succumbed to peer pressure and the shiny object that is alcohol. Students reported feeling pressured into drinking by the prevailing culture.

Spring break, the annual pinnacle for binge drinking among minors, produces frightening statistics. A report from the American College of Health found that, during spring break, the average male consumes 18 alcoholic drinks per day, while the average female consumes up to 10 drinks per day. Many who may choose not to believe this is typical behavior might consider this: during spring break, some 44 percent of college women and 75 percent of college men are intoxicated daily.

Binge drinking among minors is not simply a group of kids having fun. These youngsters do not understand or are not willing to admit the potential consequences, believing the focus on this issue is exaggerated and they are, essentially, bullet-proof. Medical studies show that binge drinking results in higher toxicity levels in the body. Our bodies are not capable of metabolizing excessive amounts of alcohol consumed over a short period. The consequences can be severe and may range from difficulty in breathing or the cessation of breathing, impact to heart function, distorted hearing and vision and many more serious effects. We all know the consequences of impaired driving as we see the results of this crisis every day. I know very few people whose lives have not been affected, in some way, by drunk driving.

Warm weather communities and their attractive beaches are all too familiar with the good and the bad of spring break visitors. A welcome boost to the local economy also brings with it an enormous drain on resources for law enforcement seeking to enforce underage drinking laws, noise ordinances and curb disorderly conduct and property damage. They also must deal with the familiar scenes that result from drinking and driving and other alcohol-related accidents. Emergency responders see greater demands for their services and struggle with the outcomes when young people think they can defy the odds.

The debate continues. Can we fix this? How? How do we counter those who would claim that spring break binge drinking is an inevitable rite of passage? How do we deal with the examples we may have set during our youthful days? There must be a unified effort that includes law enforcement, alcohol vendors, organizations, families and agile age-checking technologies that can stay ahead of and defeat the products of the fake ID industry.

We need to change the culture that associates binge drinking with fun to one that associates binge drinking with serious health and societal issues. Family and parental involvement is essential. Schools, clubs and organizations need more support. The change must begin at home with the foundation that guides, sets rules, and delivers the important messages about right and wrong and behavioral expectations.

Law enforcement is doing its best as are many purveyors of alcohol, but they face tough challenges. Technology has given birth to a new, sophisticated cottage industry that produces high-quality fake IDs. These fakes flooding our country from places like China, Russia and the Philippines, and the proliferation of homegrown websites selling fake IDs at little cost, pose a clear and present danger to our young people and our national security. I speak, almost daily, with people having years of law enforcement experience and retailers who have been checking IDs for years, who admit the quality of today's fake IDs is so good that they are virtually undetectable by the human eye. We must continuously upgrade our fake ID detection tools and provide effective technology solutions to law enforcement and those who sell and serve alcohol. This is a critical first line of defense

We need law enforcement and purveyors of alcohol to adopt the use of anti-counterfeit, age verification technology. We can accomplish this, in part, by expanding cooperation of supporting organizations throughout our communities and by leveraging our resources to maximize positive outcomes. Cooperation from the business community and leveraging their influence remains another important facet in addressing this complicated social challenge.

Binge drinking among minors is not new. We need a concerted effort to affect any measurable change. Working together and engaging our best resources is the only answer. With this effort, we can quickly begin to mitigate the needless tragedies that result from spring break binge drinking.

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