



Americans Drinking Themselves to Death at Highest Rates Since 1980s

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By David Heitz



Michael Scippa isn't surprised by a new report that shows Americans are drinking themselves to death at rates not seen in 35 years.

Scippa is the public affairs director for Alcohol Justice, a San Francisco-based watchdog group that keeps an eye on the alcohol industry. Someone has to do it, Scippa says, because the current system of self-regulation clearly isn't working.

According to the *Washington Post*,¹ a recent CDC report shows that in 2014, nearly 10 people out of 100,000 died from alcohol-related causes such as alcohol

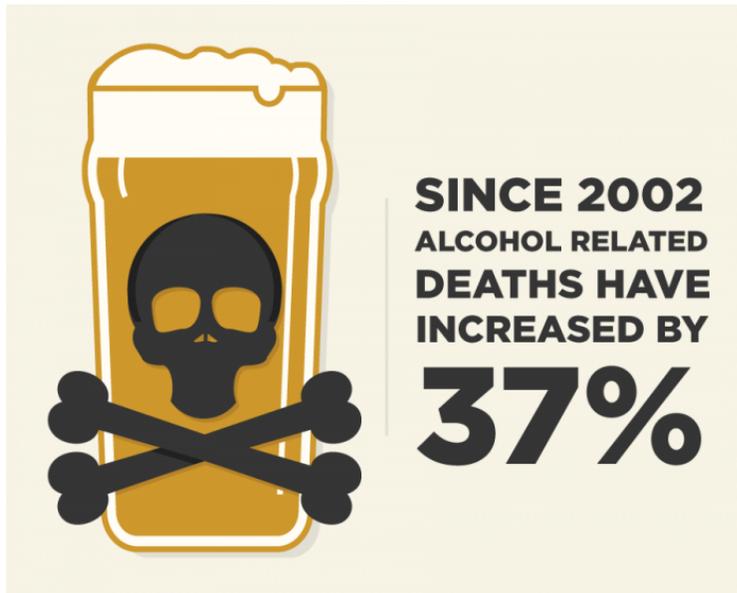
poisoning and cirrhosis – a 37 percent increase since 2002. Women are vulnerable in particular, with the amount of alcohol they consume creeping up steadily from 2002 to 2014.

More than 30,700 people died from cirrhosis and alcohol poisoning in 2014, the *Washington Post* reported.

As reported by Christopher Ingraham in his Wonkblog, “The tally of alcohol-induced fatalities excludes deaths from drunk driving, other accidents and homicides committed under the influence of alcohol. If those numbers were included the annual toll of deaths directly or indirectly caused by alcohol, it would be closer to 90,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”²

In an email to Ingraham, Philip J. Cook, a Duke University professor who studies alcohol consumption, wrote, “Since the prevalence of heavy drinking tends to follow closely with per capita consumption, it is likely that one explanation for the growth in alcohol-related deaths is that more people are drinking more.”

In fact, previous research by Cook reported by Ingraham in the *Washington Post* shows that the top 10 percent of American drinkers consume 74 drinks per week.³



And why not? The alcohol industry tells us that booze will solve all our problems, make us happy and even lead to sexual encounters.

From cute little puppies, to stately horses pulling beer trucks, to poolside parties with sexy men and women downing loads of sauce, television tells us that boozing it up is great fun.

Scippa has heard it all. In 1988, at a high school in the Midwest, female members of the senior class had T-shirts made up that said, “Less filling, tastes great, we’re the girls of ’88!” They wore them during the Powder Puff Tug-of-War contest held during homecoming week.

Spuds MacKenzie Rides Aboard High School Homecoming Float

And that senior class’s parade float that year? It was a giant Spuds MacKenzie, that trendy dog with the black circle around its eye that was Bud Light’s icon for a few years. The float had Spuds urinating on a fire hydrant painted in the colors of the opposing team the school was to play for the homecoming football game.

Was it harmless and cute or full of subliminal messages that ultimately created some of the hardcore drinkers we have today, some of whom have died from alcohol abuse before age 50?

While it is true that millions of Americans drink socially and responsibly and do have a good time, the line between consuming enough drinks to get your buzz on and so many cocktails that you end up dead on the floor is thinner than you may think. Stories of young adults in particular dying of alcohol poisoning during raucous college parties are all too common.

Scippa told Foundations Recovery Network that the alcohol industry has hit a new low with their invention of “alcopops,” sweet-tasting alcoholic drinks packaged in bright colors that resemble labels placed on fruity refreshments for children.

“The industry is really good at being exploitative of situations that are perhaps reflective of deeper problems in our society. Why do people want to get a buzz? Why do they not want to think about reality? There is a deep social injustice going on,” Scippa said. “The way [alcohol] is advertised and promoted, young people are seeing images that say alcohol makes you glamorous and attractive, and everybody is laughing and having a great time. You don’t see the people in the gutter or in an ER somewhere, or dead because of alcohol poisoning. There’s none of that.”

Is It Time to Regulate the Industry and Double the Alcohol Tax?

So what can we do about all of these dangerous messages? For starters, it’s important to understand that the nature of addiction is about relapse, Scippa said. True recovery teaches a person to deal with their

triggers and to differentiate healthy coping mechanisms from unhealthy ones. For a drinker, that means giving yourself a reality check when you see the bikini-clad women and sexy shirtless men playing beach volleyball in an alcohol ad. If you're having a bad day, cocktails at a pool party probably aren't going to make everything better. The beer commercials don't show the person who arrives at the party in a foul mood, tips back a few, and then gets arrested by the cops on his way home (or worse, causes a traffic fatality).

Sharing this common-sense philosophy with your children when alcohol commercials appear on television or on shows that glamorize imbibing is important. If your 12-year-old kid thinks it's cool to wear a Bud Light t-shirt, rest assured there is a problem. Be aware of the power of images. It takes most alcoholics a lot of wasted years to learn it's all a big lie.

"Screening and counseling (for alcohol abuse) has to happen in middle school," Scippa said. "By the time they get to high school, it's too late. The best parenting in the world is no match for big alcohol."

Some public health experts are now arguing that resources be diverted from marijuana prevention messaging, the traditional "gateway drug" assumption, and instead funnel dollars toward anti-alcohol messages among youth.

Scippa would like to see advertising in the alcohol industry regulated by the federal government, even though he isn't optimistic that will happen anytime soon.

"That [alcohol] lobby is and has been since the end of Prohibition so incredibly powerful in DC," Scippa said.

The best way to reduce alcohol-related deaths is to heavily tax alcohol, Scippa said, echoing what the CDC long has said. Some have even suggested that revenue from alcohol tax could be funneled toward alcohol rehabilitation services.

According to statistics cited by Alcohol Justice, doubling the federal alcohol tax in the US would result in 35 percent fewer alcohol-related deaths, 11 percent fewer traffic crash deaths, a six percent dip in sexually transmitted diseases and even small reductions in violence and crime.⁴

While regulation of the alcohol industry may seem unlikely for now, statistics showing that more and more people are drinking themselves to death ultimately will push the nation down that path, Scippa believes. It's easy to forget that we once lived in a nation where tobacco ads proclaimed, "More doctors smoke Camels," with the tobacco industry even running ads during "The Flintstones."

Glamorizing cigarettes now is heresy. "I figure we're about 20 years behind [regulation of the tobacco industry]," Scippa said. "It's what keeps us going."

Bibliography

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