

Alarm at rising abuse of alcohol by minors as young as 12

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THE number of minors abusing alcohol is on the increase, while the age of those drinking is dropping at an alarming rate, say researchers and concern groups.

Children as young as 12 are regularly drinking alcohol in Hongkong, according to the only recent survey published on teenage drinking.

The 1990 survey conducted at the International School showed that 50 per cent of 12-year-olds had tried alcohol at least once and that two per cent

of them drank more than once a week.

By the age of 15, 16 per cent were drinking regularly, and at 17, 25 per cent of the school pupils were drinking at least once a week.

Ninety-two per cent of 17-year-olds had tried alcohol at least once.

While Alcoholics Anonymous reported the number of young people phoning its hotline is rising and Parun's Against Drug Abuse says it is "very concerned" about the use of alcohol among minors, the problem is being swept under the carpet, says the Community

Drug Advisory Council.

The vice-chairman of the council, Dr Jeffrey Day of the University of Hongkong, also said underage drinking was being dismissed as "an expat problem, not a Chinese problem".

"But what we are seeing now clearly is that is an international problem."

"We first raised the issue in 1985 and since then we have been told that Chinese don't use alcohol and that alcohol is a product of Western culture - that is a myth."

Underage drinkers themselves said they had no trouble buying alcohol from conve-

were turned away at any of the establishments they tried or asked to prove their ages.

It is illegal for establishments to serve alcohol to people under 18 and the proprietors face a maximum penalty of \$5,000 and six months in prison.

But there is no law prohibiting minors from buying alcohol over the counter from supermarkets and convenience stores.

Major supermarket chains Wellcome and Park 'N' Shop said they had a strict policy not to sell alcohol to those under 18.

When confronted by the *Post*, a manager of 7-Eleven told us it was the chain's policy

not to sell alcohol to minors.

A spokesperson for the KELLY Support Group yesterday called on the Government to introduce laws banning the sale of alcohol to minors.

"The Government is responsible for producing legislation to prevent people being able to sell alcohol to youngsters," she said.

She said alcohol in stores was too freely available and that shop assistants should require suspect clients to produce their ID cards.

The KELLY Support Group counsellor claimed bars were too willing to serve minors.

"Most of them are not inter-

ested in how old customers are, just in whether they are having a good time."

She added her voice to those warning that underage drinking was an unrecognised problem in the territory. Young drinkers themselves backed this claim.

Unless parents are directly confronted by the sight of their children drunk, some parents did not consider the problem of underage drinking.

"My parents have never said anything to me about alcohol. And I don't think they mind if I drink as long as I don't come home drunk," said 15-year-old Grace.

Dr Day said parents and teachers were "so out of touch" with teenagers and their lifestyles. He urged more education on the dangers of alcohol.

However, a spokesman for the Education Department said there were no guidelines for teachers about the use of alcohol, nor is it specifically included in any school subjects.

One pamphlet on alcohol and its dangers is available to teachers at resource centres. It was put out in 1986 by the Hongkong Council of Social Service.



nience stores or supermarkets and that bars do not ask for proof of age.

Their claims were backed up by a team of schoolboys, aged 16 and 17, who, on a special *South China Morning Post* assignment, were instructed to order alcoholic drinks at every bar and supermarket they visited. None