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Opinion: Growing 'Alcoholification' Ignores The Societal of Costs of Drinking

POSTED BY EDITOR ON APRIL 7, 2018 IN OPINION | 396 VIEWS | 0 COMMENTS | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

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A toast with glasses of whiskey. Photo via Pixabay

By Stacie Perez

Did you know that every time you order a beer, wine or cocktail from a bar or restaurant, you pay an additional \$2.44 per drink? That is the estimated societal cost associated with problems due to excess consumption of alcohol.

These include losses related to workplace productivity, health care, the criminal justice system, and motor vehicle crashes, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). This, however, does not take into account the non-tangible costs such as ignorance at best or acceptance at worst of the harms alcohol can have on our communities.

Over the past few years, we have seen alcohol creep into businesses not ordinarily associated with bar service. For instance, grocery shoppers in North County will soon have the added experience of shopping with a grocery list in one hand and a glass of wine in the

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other. This is indicative of a movement by businesses to enhance their customers' experience by adding more opportunities to drink alcohol — a worrying trend that overlooks the costs of alcohol overconsumption.

Adding more bars, liquor stores, breweries and bar service inside of businesses such as grocery stores, nail salons and bookstores to our neighborhoods may initially seem like a good idea. After all, drinking is often associated with opportunities to socialize with friends, family, co-workers, clients, etc., not to mention the additional benefits of adding jobs and tax revenue to the economy.

But when we normalize the “alcoholification” of our communities — the process in which society becomes more accepting of alcohol from both a spatial (i.e., availability in businesses) and behavioral perspective — we turn a blind eye to inherent risks absorbed by our society. Not only should communities consider public health expenses and cost burdens to law enforcement and emergency departments, we should also consider the erroneous message — that alcohol is not a harmful substance — we are sending, especially to our kids.

As the opportunities to drink increase, the probability of alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes and DUIs also increases. Although the offender pays hefty fines, a large part of the cost is passed on to the rest of us. Our taxpayer money is allotted toward the cost of law enforcement, housing of the offender in jails and prisons, and judicial and administrative costs. We also incur the costs of the responding medical and fire personnel, and preventative measures such as more guardrails and road signs.

Of course, the heftiest cost of “alcoholification” is the cost in human lives. [Mothers Against Drunk Driving](#) estimates that 1,059 people died as a result of drunk driving in California in 2017.

As a society, we collectively bear the burden of living with too much alcohol around us. Its costs are wide-ranging, from the individual to the community level, and go well beyond the sticker price we see at the liquor store or on a bar menu. It is up to community members and policy makers to decide if adding more opportunities for alcohol consumption is ultimately worth the cost.

Stacie Perez is the director of housing and clinical services for [Episcopal Community Services](#) in National City and a member of the [Alcohol Policy Panel](#) of San Diego County.

OPINION: GROWING 'ALCOHOLIFICATION' IGNORES THE SOCIETAL COSTS OF DRINKING was last modified: April 8th, 2018 by Editor

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