

Czech teens, Europe's heaviest underage drinkers

July 11 2012, by Jan Flemr

Shaken awake by police on a park bench, a 12-year-old boy from Prague was so drunk he could neither walk nor talk -- grim evidence of an unparalleled alcohol scourge affecting underage Czechs.

The boy was one of seven whom police found falling-down drunk in the Czech capital on the last day of school in late June.

"In 2011 we had more cases, but this year was worse because the kids were far more drunk," Prague police spokeswoman Jana Prikrylova told AFP.

The bleak trend visible on Czech streets was confirmed in May by the European School Survey Project on [Alcohol](#) and Other Drugs (ESPAD), which singled out Czech 15- and 16-year-olds as the continent's heaviest drinkers.

A jaw-dropping 93 percent of Czech youth, including equal numbers of girls and boys, said they had consumed alcohol over the past year, while nearly 80 percent admitted to drinking within the last month.

Experts blame easy access, lax law enforcement and a tolerant attitude toward alcohol abuse in the beer-loving central European nation, which was second only to Moldova last year on the [World Health Organisation](#)'s worldwide survey of adult [alcohol intake](#).

"It's a big problem, and I think we've been somewhat asleep on it,"

Jindrich Voboril, the government's drug abuse policy coordinator, told AFP.

"Studies have been suggesting a long-term increase, plus there is a visible decrease in age and a change in usage -- the kids now tend to drink spirits," he said, adding that the [legal drinking age](#) of 18 is widely flouted.

Voboril also warned that [drinking alcohol](#) regularly between ages 12 and 16 carries an increased risk of [drug addiction](#) later on, noting that the ESPAD study also identified young Czechs as Europe's top [cannabis users](#).

-- Turning a blind eye --

In years gone by, Czech fathers sent their sons with jars to pubs to fetch beer to help them digest hearty pork-and-dumplings Sunday lunches.

These days, they often share the beer with their kids. Czech youngsters drink in pubs, parks, at home, at discos or summer camps, and even in some cases on holidays with their parents and at school, surveys have shown.

Nearly all of the 15-year-olds in the industrial eastern Czech city of Ostrava have had alcohol, mostly vodka, beer and wine, a recent survey by the DNES broadsheet daily said. One boy said his grandmother gave him beer "to digest lunch."

Bartenders share the laissez-faire attitude, often willing to pour more rounds, even for tweens, on the strength of a good tip.

"I first got really drunk at 16 -- but that age seems OK to me now. When we go to a disco these days, we see 12-year-old girls, makeup and all,

lying under tables totally wasted," Matej, an 18-year-old studying in Prague who gave only his first name, told AFP.

For a little extra cash, random strangers will also buy a bottle for kids at the local shop.

But many shopowners turn a blind eye and sell drinks directly to underage customers.

They can also buy alcohol on the Internet where shops run no identity checks, Matej said.

The ex-communist EU nation of 10.5 million has the world's highest rate of beer guzzling, estimated at 134 litres (35 gallons) per head in 2010.

Although no hard figures are available on the rate of alcoholism in the Czech Republic, last year hospitals treated nearly 27,000 people for [alcohol abuse](#) including more than 500 underage drinkers, health authorities said.

Of 266 million adults in the European Union who drink, an estimated 23 million are addicted, according to a recent EU study on alcohol production and use across the 27-member bloc.

It is the globe's hardest-drinking region, with adults guzzling an annual average of 11 litres of pure alcohol, down from a peak of 15 litres in the mid-1970s.

A quarter of the world's alcoholic beverages and more than half of its wine originates in Europe, and the EU accounts for 70 percent of global export sales.

Czech beer is among the most popular imports.

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