

How Iceland's teens cleaned up their act

March 31 2017

Fifteen-year-old Kristjan Johannesson says he has never had a drop of alcohol or touched a cigarette.

At an age when many teenagers lock themselves in their rooms, Kristjan likes to spend as much time as possible with his parents and the walls of his bedroom are plastered with his proudest exploits in fishing and football.

He helps illustrate how Iceland has nearly eradicated abuse of [alcohol](#), tobacco and drugs among teens in two decades through measures such as curfews, raising the age of majority and promoting sports.

It is a stunning turnaround for a country that discovered rising worrying trends among its youth in the early 1990s, peaking in 1997.

Nearly half of 15- and 16-year-olds surveyed at the time said they drank alcohol the previous month, one in four smoked tobacco and 17 percent said they smoked cannabis.

"(At that time) anybody walking in the streets of Reykjavik would be scared on a Friday or Saturday night," said US psychologist Harvey Milkman, involved in the project since its launch.

"Teenagers were walking around drunk and they were rude, they were loud and boisterous. It seemed even dangerous. So the whole society got concerned, not just the parents," Milkman, professor at the Metropolitan State College of Denver, added.

'A wake-up call'

Helgi Gunnlaugsson, a sociology professor at the University of Iceland, said the high figures came as a "shock" to many.

"It was like a wake-up call," he said.

In 1997, the government launched the "Youth in Iceland" initiative, under the direction of Jon Sigfusson, who heads the Icelandic Centre of Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA).

It used questionnaires to build a credible snapshot of a generation.

Participants, who remained anonymous but gave their age, were asked when they had last had an alcoholic drink, whether they had ever been drunk or tried smoking, and, if so, how often. They were also asked about time spent with their parents.

Within a few years, authorities and social workers felt they knew enough to take concrete action.

A curfew was imposed on 13- to 16-year-olds, who are banned from being outside unaccompanied after 10:00 pm, extended until midnight during Iceland's summer of long days and bright nights.

Lawmakers raised the age of majority by two years to 18, prohibited sales of tobacco to minors and alcohol to anyone under 20.

Cigarettes are not displayed in shops and are among the priciest in Europe: nine euros (nearly \$10) per pack on average.

As in most Nordic countries, alcohol is only sold in state-run stores and taxed at more than 80 percent.

Football, fishing, bowling

The government also promoted sports and a healthy, wholesome lifestyle.

In the capital Reykjavik, each family receives an annual allowance of 35,000 kronur (about 300 euros, \$320) per child between the ages of six and 18 to pay for extra-curricular activities, including sports.

Many Icelanders see the emphasis on sporting activity as a factor behind the rise in popularity of football in the small North Atlantic island, whose national team sent England home in humiliating defeat at the Euro 2016 competition.

"I'm really happy to just play football with my friends and train hard," says Kristjan, who practises five times a week on the artificial turf in Breidholt, a neighbourhood in southern Reykjavik.

With a short ponytail resembling that of his footballing idol Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Kristjan has just been selected to play on Iceland's under-16 squad.

The programme also advocated "more closeness, attention and sharing" within the family, Sigfusson said. As well as raising parental awareness, it encouraged schools to get involved in teens' behaviour too.

"We do more things with our children than (families did) in the past," says Kristjan's mother Asdis Mikaela, who especially enjoys bowling parties with her son.

'Change for the better'

Within eight years of the programme's launch, the figures fell by just over 50 percent, Sigfusson said.

By last year, the percentage of young people, who reported drinking in the previous month, dropped to five percent, regular smokers dropped to three percent, while seven percent said they used cannabis.

Although in line with current trends in Europe—as shown by surveys conducted by the cross-national European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs—Iceland is the only country where the change has been so dramatic.

More than 30 cities in other countries, mostly in Europe, have also experimented with the Icelandic model since 2006.

"It may be technically much more complicated to have a joint effort from the whole community and municipalities, but not impossible," says Gunnlaugsson, noting that Iceland, with only 340,000 inhabitants, has the same population as the French city of Nice.

"There is... also a national mentality (in Iceland) that you can change things for the better."

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Citation: How Iceland's teens cleaned up their act (2017, March 31) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-iceland-teens.html>

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