

The Post-Crescent of Appleton

July 6, 2008

Analysis ranks state No. 1 for alcohol's impact on lives

*By Susan Squires
Gannett Wisconsin Media*

Federal revenue agent Frank Buckley arrived in Wisconsin in 1929 to document Prohibition enforcement. He found more tolerance for drinking than for Prohibition.

"Wisconsin," he wrote in his report to Washington, "is commonly regarded as a Gibraltar of the Wets—sort of a Utopia where everyone drinks their fill and John Barleycorn still holds forth in splendor."

Eighty years later, Wisconsin's reputation is intact. Alcohol goes hand-in-hand with tailgating, snowmobiling, deer hunting, kids' baseball games and even church functions.

"I've been drunker here than anyplace else I've been in my life," comedian Lewis Black told an audience in Madison. "And remember this: You are not, you are not alcoholics. You, and my hat is off, are professionals."

Such is Wisconsin's legend. The state's reputation for drinking was grounded in anecdotes and a loose collection of statistics — until now.

The Appleton Post-Crescent developed a unique methodology that quantifies Wisconsin's well-deserved reputation. The state is unequaled for the depth, breadth and power of the river of booze shaping its cultural landscape — from the boost that booze provides the economy to the human toll it exacts on the state's highways.

The newspaper ranked all 50 states in 10 key areas to provide the best gauge of the culture of drinking in a place. Those key areas measure the price, availability and consumption of alcohol, along with alcohol's related criminal justice, social and health impacts.

The analysis is unique in that it takes into account all 10 indicators to arrive at a composite score for each state.

"Looking at the measures the way you did, Wisconsin is the worst," Traci Toomey, an associate professor and epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota who studies alcohol consumption and abuse, said of the assessment methods.

Richard Yoast, the American Medical Association's lead staff member for alcohol and other drug abuse issues, was not surprised by Wisconsin's top ranking.

"When I got to Wisconsin," said Yoast, who moved to Madison from New York to attend graduate school in 1966, "I could not believe the overwhelming presence of alcohol."

He pursued a graduate degree in political science, but the state's alcohol abuse ultimately shaped his career.

"I remember one student who would drink on average four to five times a week, eight beers each time," recalled Yoast, who founded and headed the state's Clearinghouse and Prevention Resource Center of Alcohol and Other Drugs from 1974 to '91. "I remember asking, 'do you think that is a lot?' He said 'no, all my friends drink that much.'"

A way of life

Wisconsin offers some of the country's cheapest beer and booze, available at some 17,500 bars, taverns and stores statewide. The state also has the nation's highest percentage of binge drinkers and alcoholics.

That cheap liquor and binge drinking are found in the same state is not a coincidence, experts say.

The story of alcohol's unique place in Wisconsin's culture typically is told in terms of shattered bodies and wrecked lives, but the truth is more complicated, more pervasive and more personal than tragic headlines reflect. It's about all of us, even those who never touch a drop.

While beer and alcohol help prop up the economy, they take a corresponding toll in financial and human terms.

On one side of the cost-benefit equation are the more than 200,000 people who work for the state's taverns, restaurants, breweries and liquor distributors. Many of Wisconsin's small towns, with their main street bars, could not stay alive without alcohol.

On the other side are people who could not stay alive with alcohol, including those whose livers gave out or who died in drunken-driving wrecks, which last year claimed more than 320 lives.

After a fatal crash April 25 near Milwaukee in which a pregnant mother and her 10-year-old daughter were killed, a bipartisan group of legislators called for tougher penalties for those repeatedly found guilty of driving while under the influence.

Mark Benson, a former surgeon who faces three counts of homicide by intoxicated use of a vehicle, was under the influence of pills, authorities say. Two days before the accident, Benson stood before a Waukesha County judge on a third drunken-driving offense.

He was sentenced to 75 days in the county's work release jail but was given until May 9 to report there, with orders not to drive in the meantime.

'We're not low-lives'

Over the next month, a series of stories will examine the ways in which alcohol is woven into the fabric of life in Wisconsin.

Stories will explore issues related to each of the 10 measures used to rank the drinking culture of each state. Other stories will go beyond single issues to give the big picture, one shaped by a complicated overlay of factors and issues as they inform or define, ruin or redeem the lives of real people.

All together, they will tell a larger story.

It's about the small towns that depend on taverns to keep their business districts from perishing and the charitable organizations, including churches, that set up beer tents to attract people to their fundraisers.

It's about the Friday night fish fry at the VFW. It's about the taverns that people call home.

It's about the early morning inhabitants of bars like the Hitching Post in Fond du Lac who arrive at 7 a.m. to kill time until the liquor store opens at 9.

It's about third-shift workers who consider stopping off for a beer or two an innocent pastime.

"People think it's weird, drinking in the morning," Ryan Weber says. "But we are just on a different cycle than everybody else." His cohort, John Borkenhagen, adds, "We're not low-lifes."

It's about a culture that would rather believe a serial killer stalked the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse campus than accept the deaths of eight young men in the Mississippi River as the result of binge drinking. For the past many years, Wisconsin, on average, ranks No. 1 in the nation for binge drinking — five or more drinks in a sitting for men and four or more for women — and heavy drinking.

It's about the welder arrested on his way home from a Christmas party last year for first-offense drunken driving.

"The way I look at it," James Pflanzner, 35 said, as he awaited the results of his blood-alcohol test. "I got lucky with it (drunken driving) so many times."

It's about chronic drunken drivers William Gerhartz and Jason Mulroy and their victims — none of whom was as fortunate as Pflanzner. Gerhartz, 52, and Mulroy, 30, are serving prison sentences for the injuries they inflicted.

Gerhartz is responsible for the rods and screws in 21-year-old volunteer firefighter Brandon Bratz's leg and the broad scar over his left eye. Mulroy left Samantha and Brittany Munos with damaged brains. Over the last seven years, drunken drivers have injured more than 44,000 people.

It's about:

- James J. Weber, less fortunate still than Bratz and the Munoz girls. Weber died in a ditch on a county road in the town of Deer Creek, where he landed after Michael Nollenberg's truck hit him. Ironically, they'd been drinking at the same bar before the crash. In 2006, Wisconsin tied for second place with Hawaii for having the highest percentage of fatal crashes involving a driver with a blood-alcohol level of 0.08 or higher. Of the 724 fatalities that year, 319 involved a driver with a BAC of 0.08 or higher.
- The jurors who wrestled with their own attitudes about alcohol to decide Nollenberg's fate.
- Women like Michael Clark's mother, who drank throughout her pregnancy and had a beer the day she gave birth to her son. "You can't know the feeling you have when your child is born, how you wish you hadn't done that," she says.
- Legislators' reluctance to change alcohol-tolerant public policy. In Wisconsin, sobriety checkpoints are unconstitutional, children can drink with their parents in a bar and first-offense drunken drivers get a traffic ticket. Wisconsin was among the last states to lower the standard for drunken driving to 0.08 BAC, and did so only after the federal government threatened to cut off \$154 million in funding.

- Jake Jasurda's right of passage at a Madison bar the night he turned 21. "We had a fishbowl next door, and now I have this," he said, pointing to a Long Island iced tea, "and two shots. I'm kind of planning on drinking a lot." He was a veteran drinker well before he was legal. Based on the National Survey on Drug Use and Health over the past several years, Wisconsin, on average, ranks second in underage drinking. In 2006, about 35 percent of 12- to 20-year-olds reported they had used alcohol in the past month, while 25 percent engaged in binge drinking. Jasurda and his roommate use the revenue from "house parties" they throw for underage kids to pay their utilities. They charge \$5 at the door for a cup and \$1 for a shot.

'Tavern culture'

The story of Wisconsin's drinking culture is about the power of an industry to influence policy makers. Wisconsin's beer tax is less than a penny on a 12-ounce glass — the same as it was in 1969. Meanwhile, cigarette smokers pay \$1.77 in taxes on a single pack. According to the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, the alcohol industry has contributed more than \$1 million to Wisconsin lawmakers and the governor in the last five years.

"This state is so ingrained in the drinking culture that one is not allowed to touch anything that revolves around that culture," says Kari Kinnard, Mothers Against Drunk Driving Wisconsin's executive director.

The story is about immigrants and beer barons. It's about the traditions and customs brought from Germany and Eastern Europe, where the biergarten was considered an appropriate destination for family outings, and how that demographic history helps explain Wisconsin's unusual tolerance for alcohol.

"Wisconsin's so-called 'tavern culture,'" historian Richard H. Zeitlan wrote in 2000, "in which the tavern became a meeting place and social center for a neighborhood, evolved out of this composite and eventually pervaded most of the state."