

Alcohol and crime go hand in hand

In Laramie county, 70.25 percent of arrests involved alcohol.

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CHEYENNE -- Local law enforcement agencies are stepping up their game when it comes to fighting alcohol-related crime, but officials say the root of the problem starts with community social norms.

A report funded by the Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police shows an upward trend in the correlation between alcohol and crime within the state and county.

Of Laramie County's 1,852 total arrests last year, 1,301, or 70.25 percent, involved alcohol.

"These statistics clearly indicate the need for continued education and enforcement in our community," Cheyenne Police Sgt. Rob Dafoe said. "The numbers make it clear that alcohol abuse drives a high percentage of criminal behavior in our city."

The report also showed that about 47 percent of domestic violence arrests and 37.5 percent of assault arrests involved alcohol. Driving under the influence arrests accounted for about 43 percent of the total.

"I think the trends are steady to upward in nature here locally, so we have to become more innovative and change our thought processes and our efforts to make that positive response," Laramie County Sheriff Danny Glick said.

He said the number of DUI arrests in the county is "substantial."

"Anytime somebody gets behind the wheel when they've had too much to drink, it's an issue," Glick said.

The numbers are a good representation of what local and state law enforcement are up against, Dafoe said.

"Cheyenne is no different than any other community," he said. "Alcohol and drugs contribute to approximately 70 percent of our workload."

He said this also has an enormous impact on the department's system and resources. Processing a DUI takes anywhere from one to two hours, taking officers away from possible burglary and domestic dispute calls.

Many times, intoxicated individuals also require medical clearance to enter the jail, and officers are required to stay with them throughout the process, which can take four to six hours.

"These statistics are used to educate our governing bodies, our educators and the general public," Dafoe said. "The report demonstrates the need to increase the resources available to law enforcement agencies to confront this growing problem."

Authorities agree that there is no easy solution to the problem.

"Increased education and enforcement to offenders are high on the list, but each area costs a community (like Cheyenne) more and more to accommodate," Dafoe said. "Just like any business or public provider, law enforcement agencies are expected to keep the same level of service or increase it with fewer resources, such as equipment and staffing."

Shifting manpower and resources to engage a specific alcohol problem, such as drinking under age, can be temporarily effective, Dafoe said, but this common reaction can create a deficit in another area, resulting in different crime trends.

Dafoe and Glick said the statistics in the report are also given as a resource to legislators so they have the ability to make informed decisions.

“If we keep making these numbers available and getting it in front of the people who make the legislative decisions, I think it benefits all of us because then we don’t make a decision without data-based information,” Glick said. “Organizationally, when we look at the numbers, we will identify trends, sites, dates, times when we seem to have the biggest problems of violations concerning alcohol.”

The departments then focus their street operations on area “hot spots” where they will have the greatest effect.

But overall, they said, the best way to combat the problem is to go to the source and change the community’s perceptions of social norms.

“It is imperative that we build strong coalitions that work together to change the social acceptance of binge drinking or driving impaired, which will reduce our call load and ultimately save lives,” Cheyenne Police Chief Brian Kozak said.

Glick added that talking to bar owners and servers, encouraging TIPS training and working with the Wyoming Liquor Commission takes that one step further.

“I don’t think any one thing will solve the issue because it’s too broad-based. But if we can bring everyone together who can make a difference and able to bring monies and data and efforts all together, then we’ve made a positive difference,” he said. “I think between the training that law enforcement officers receive and being able to call on those social agencies is a real plus, but a person’s family, friends are critical in taking care of some of those issues.”

Overall, Dafoe said Cheyenne’s alcohol and crime connection is typical of a community this size.

“That is, our ratio of law enforcement contacts and alcohol-related incidents is probably near the state and national average,” he said. “Every law enforcement agency across the country struggles with drugs and alcohol-related crime.

“While some geographical areas may be slightly higher or lower in the statistical area, the problem persists throughout the world of law enforcement.”

But both Kozak and Glick agree that Cheyenne is making strides and combating the issue with the establishment of the Cheyenne Regional “Make My Night” DUI Task Force.

“The future looks promising for Cheyenne since we are forming multi-agency approaches to reduce the problem,” Kozak said.

“None of us have enough people to go out and effect in the numbers that we’d like to without interagency cooperation,” Glick added.

Both agencies will continue to work together to mitigate the impact of alcohol on the community, especially innocent victims of alcohol-related crime.

Dafoe said they also will continue to take advantage of federal and state grant funding to combat crime in these areas.

“Perhaps the struggling economy could be suspect, but the results are loud and clear: The impact that alcohol has on crime in Cheyenne and across America cannot be ignored,” Dafoe said. “It burdens our police officers, it bogs down our jails/courts, and it challenges our everyday quality of life.”

By the numbers

2009 statewide statistics related to alcohol and crime:

- Alcohol was involved in 72.09 percent of all arrests.
- Alcohol was involved in 75.44 percent of all misdemeanor arrests.
- Arrests for public intoxication accounted for 13.5 percent of all arrests.
- The average blood-alcohol content for persons arrested for public intoxication was .22.
- Driving under the influence arrests accounted for 36.4 percent of all arrests.
- The average BAC for those arrested for DUI statewide was .1525.
- 46 percent of those arrested for DUI had a BAC of more than .16, and 7 percent had a BAC of more than .24.
- 85.4 percent of traffic crashes resulting in an arrest involved alcohol.
- Alcohol was involved in 50 percent of juvenile arrests.
- Underage DUI arrests accounted for 7.6 percent of all DUI arrests.
- Methamphetamine was involved in 2.5 percent of all arrests, and “other drugs” accounted for 9.5 percent.
- Drugs were involved in 17 percent of juvenile arrests.

Laramie County numbers from the report include:

- Laramie County had 1,852 arrests last year.
- 1,301 (70.25 percent) arrests involved alcohol, 197 (10.64 percent) involved drugs.
- 229 (12.37 percent) people were arrested for public intoxication.
- 80.94 percent of arrests were male, 17.3 percent were female.
- 76.08 percent of arrests involved people who live in Laramie County, 2.65 percent were out-of-county visitors, and 10.21 percent were from out of state.
- 76.75 percent of misdemeanor arrests involved alcohol, 8.05 percent involved drugs.
- 15.82 percent of felony arrests involved alcohol, 29.59 percent involved drugs.
- 46.98 percent of domestic violence arrests involved alcohol, 2.33 percent involved drugs.
- 37.5 percent of assault arrests involved alcohol, 6.94 percent involved drugs.

Source: Alcohol & Crime in Wyoming 2009-2010, funded by a federal highways grant to the Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police from the Wyoming Department of Transportation's Highway Safety Program