

1954

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### Recommended Citation

Robert V. Seliger, Alcohol and Crime, 44 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 438 (1953-1954)

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## ALCOHOL AND CRIME

Robert V. Seliger

The author of this posthumously published article was a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, Executive Director of the National Committee on Alcohol Hygiene, Medical Consultant to the Canadian National Committee for Education on Alcoholism, Inc., Chief Psychiatrist in the Neuropsychiatric Institute of Baltimore, and Assistant Neurology, in the Johns Hopkins Medical School and Hospital. Other articles by Dr. Seliger may be found in our Vol. 38, Pages 425ff. and in Vol. 41, Pages 24ff.—EDITOR.

Both alcoholism and crime are today in America serious national social health problems. The problem of criminality is closely associated in the personality field with alcoholism. Both criminals and alcoholics are increasing in numbers in the United States. All facilities for handling and caring for both groups are overtaxed. This report will attempt to point out the inter-relationships between alcohol and crime.

Alcohol presents a peculiar situation. We are dealing with a substance that is held by some to be intermediate between a drug and a harmless pleasure. Drugs such as opium, heroin, cocaine, are absolutely forbidden by law, while, for example, a pleasure such as smoking of tobacco, while habit forming, is not legislated against. Alcohol occupies an intermediate position. Most of the forms of alcohol in most sections of our country are not legislated against, provided, as with tobacco, certain taxes are paid. At the same time, and in the same places, an intoxicated person is subject to arrest. This ambivalent policy is due partially to the fact that an intoxicated individual is dangerous to himself and to his environment.

Many observers have pointed out that drinking and criminal acts or behavior frequently are associated. While certainly *most drinkers are not criminals*, it is felt by some that:

1. Crime is often planned where alcohol is sold.
2. The criminal often seeks accomplices in a tavern.
3. The criminal is seldom courageous and often uses alcohol to depress his inhibitions and allay his fears.
4. The spoils of crime are often divided in a tavern.
5. Alcohol tends to remove the element of self-criticism from the criminal in relation to himself and his acts.

One of the *worst criminal killers of today is the drinking driver*. Because of the more common use of the tests for intoxication, we are acquiring startling information about the deaths caused by drinking drivers. In a ten-year study conducted at Cleveland, Ohio, by Dr. S. R. Gerber, it was determined that for this ten-year period the alcohol in-

cidence for automobile fatalities reached more than 50 percent. More startling still, this study revealed that the greatest number of killers at the wheel belonged to the group of so-called "moderate" drinkers. Don't drive if you drink and don't drink if you drive.

In a study of alcoholic criminals in a state prison (felons)' one report (Banay) states:

1. It is generally known that some drinkers might, in spite of frequent intoxication, go on for the rest of their lives without ever violating more than conventions or civilized conduct, while there are others whose even casual drinking might lead to serious criminal consequences.
2. In alcoholism evidence of psychopathology is more readily discernible than in the history of the average criminal offender. Poorly integrated personality, emotional instability, paranoid traits, conflicts with environment, and frustration of multitudinous nature are the more common findings.
3. Not all inmates, who are included in previous or more recent alcoholic statistics, can be justly classified as such, and their habits run parallel to criminality rather than being etiological. This explains the high percentage given for alcoholic offenders by some institutions *which claim as high as 60 percent of them*. The significant finding of the study is that *in 25 percent of the total offenders alcoholism was closely related to the commission of the crime or was directly responsible for it*. (Some jails and workhouses report a percentage as high as 80 percent alcoholic inmates. Many of these were arrested on minor charges of drunkenness or disturbing the peace.)
4. Though a large majority of all types of alcoholic offenders are passing through many corrective institutions throughout the states, still little is done for the study, understanding, treatment and prevention of this form of delinquency. The temperate offenders live in a state of *suspended alcoholic animation* in prisons, until upon their release they shortly fall back into their previous habits and are sent back to prison because of another sentence or for violation of parole.
5. Most significant with the alcoholic criminal, in contrast with the general offender, *is the higher incidence of assault*, while with the general group crimes against property tend to have precedence. The alcoholic group is characterized by more frequent violence, which necessitates a greater social, economic and medical emphasis.
6. The following types seem to be more prevalent in the alcoholic criminals studied:

*Early Chronic Alcoholics*: (two years or less of chronic alcoholism) : Those who, while intoxicated, commit absurd and irrational crimes, or commit crimes of a sexual nature, or commit crimes of an acquisitive nature and those who, without previous criminal records, after becoming alcoholic commit a series of diversified offenses of a serious nature.

*Old Chronic Alcoholics*: (Over three years of chronic alcoholism) : Those who commit irresponsible acts of no serious criminal significance, or who commit rather foolish and mischievous acts; for instance, stealing a car for a joy ride, or have several arrests for intoxication, finally committing acquisitive crimes, poorly prepared and with very meagre

results, or after confirmed intemperance, commit several diversified crimes, or when intoxicated, commit serious crimes, or those who become highly suggestible and commit atrocious crimes, or those who, while intoxicated, commit crimes of a sexual nature and those who commit violent crimes.

Another study was made of 22 inmates convicted of murder, first degree. Well-supported prison, police and social-service records indicated that ten of these men had used alcohol frequently to excess. Of the others, eight had used alcohol occasionally, but not to excess. Three of the 22 were known to have been totally abstinent. In one case, information was refused. In five of the 22 cases, the use of alcohol had a direct relation to the commission of the crime. In two of the cases, habitual use of narcotics was recorded.

In another study it was observed that one of every nine arrests in Washington is that of a woman, as is one of every ten commitments to prison. Intoxication is the cause of nearly 42 percent of the commitments of women and nearly 56 percent of men. Only about one person out of nine arrested was sent to prison. The licenses of 1,730 drivers were revoked or suspended in one year for driving while under the influence of intoxicants.

Alcohol releases in some individuals aggressive drives and damaging activities against society that result in criminotic behavior. It has been our experience that criminal offenses against society are committed by individuals with poorly integrated personalities, emotional instability, conflicts with the environment and frustration; these are also found in many alcoholic addicts whose drinking is symptomatic of their inability to adjust themselves realistically to the environment and its demands on them.

Alcohol, pharmacologically, acts as a depressant on the nervous system resulting in relaxation (to varying degrees and extents) of judgment and control so that underlying forces—the personality dynamics—find a more direct mode of expression. While such underlying forces may be of a passive, *laissez-faire* nature as well as of an aggressive, disruptive one, the general result of the loosening of conscious control is the release of *id* urgings, in themselves amoral in tenor. Both practically and theoretically the response of the individual to alcohol is the response of the total personality, (comprising the emotional maturity level and intellectual and physical endowment-equipment functioning in a specific environment and stimulated by specific environmental situations that activate internal reaction behavior patterns). This applies just as pertinently to the non-criminal as to the criminal alcoholic addict

but, in contrast to the case of the social drinker, the effects of even slight loss of control is a hazard to the criminal (prison inmate, the parolee or the released convict) which the average social drinker does not face.

The individual who has a criminal record must realize that society rarely accepts legal justice, trial, incarceration and release at the end of the sentence as completely cancelling the initial provocation and crime. It would be most unrealistic to expect such an attitude. The criminal should further definitely come to the blunt realization that he must in the future *expect more of himself* than of others and *not feel that the world is to blame* if he does not do his full part, and more.

Modern students of criminology, in their stress on the part that society plays in crime causation, would seem to be on the wrong track as far as the rehabilitation of the individual criminal is concerned. No matter how right or wrong society is, *the criminal must recognize that the majority of people do not commit crimes* and that his criminal behavior is definitely indicative of serious underlying personality difficulties, characterized in part by emotional immaturity, a sick thinking and by a "sick" approach to life.

The probationer or parolee has simplified the problem of prophylactic treatment of criminosis. In the case of these individuals it may be assumed that they are potentially capable of committing a crime and all preventive measures must be considered from this frame of reference. From this point of view alcohol represents a serious problem, since even in small doses it not only increases the tendency of a person to commit a crime, but under the acute influence of alcohol an individual is dangerous to himself and to the community and affords another opportunity for parole or probation violation if a breach of the peace is committed.

Further permanent dynamic Federal, state and local criminal investigating groups (with competent research staffs) are needed to help each community, through a strong constructive force, correct within itself those situations which in analysis of its criminals, seem definitely to have helped produce these warped and anti-social thinking and behaving individuals.