

## **Editorial: Retailers serve society when they follow underage alcohol sales laws**

Written by OWH Editorial Board

We find it both disheartening and encouraging that 28 Omaha-area businesses were cited on suspicion of selling alcohol to minors in a recent compliance check.

It's disheartening because the 16% violation rate was the highest in a compliance check since 2015.

The encouraging news is that law enforcement, helped by Project Extra Mile, continues to recognize the importance of alcohol regulation, particularly involving underage residents.

This effort matters.

Earlier this year, Gov. Pete Ricketts made national headlines arguing against legalization of medical marijuana, saying, "If you legalize marijuana, you're gonna kill your kids."

The Drug Enforcement Administration says "no deaths from overdose of marijuana have been reported" — though the governor cites studies showing "moderate evidence of a statistical association between cannabis use and the incidence of suicidal ideation" and two cases of young men who completed suicide after using cannabis edibles.

We don't have to look hard, though, to find ample evidence that alcohol is a relentless, pitiless killer of our kids.

Every year in the United States, about 5,000 people younger than 21 die from alcohol-related causes, including roughly 1,900 from traffic crashes, according to the National Institutes of Health. Of course, many innocent folks of all ages also die in those crashes.

Project Extra Mile, which describes itself as a network of community partnerships seeking to build awareness of the dangers of excessive and underage drinking, helps pay for and coordinate compliance checks like the one earlier this month. The organization notes that publicity about its evidence-based initiatives relying on the latest science "raises the issue's profile and provides a deeper understanding of the problem and how to address it."

We thank Project Extra Mile and the law enforcement agencies that work with the group.

When a convenience store clerk or restaurant server ignores the law and sells alcohol to a minor, that person is providing a potentially deadly drug to a vulnerable demographic. When business owners or managers don't adequately train and emphasize the need for legal compliance, they are failing not only legally but socially.

This may seem hopelessly prudish, perhaps more so than the governor's crusade against marijuana.

Alcohol, after all, is legal and deeply ingrained in our culture. Many libertarians support lowering the age to 18. The National Youth Rights Association argues that "the drinking age deprives millions of people of their freedom and leads to hundreds of thousands of arrests each year. ... It's

time to look honestly at the ineffectiveness, the injustice, and the harm that this law causes to our society.”

Studies show, though, that discouraging underage drinking and delaying the start of a person’s drinking can save lives.

A report by the National Institutes of Health found that drinking drivers younger than 21 “are involved in fatal crashes at twice the rate of adult drivers. Moreover, alcohol use among youths is strongly correlated with violence, risky sexual behavior, poor school performance, suicide and other harmful behaviors.”

Just as marijuana foes would argue that using that drug has long-term effects on mental health, more extensive research shows that introducing alcohol to a still-developing adolescent brain can lead to lifelong memory impairment. Teen onset of alcohol use also increases the probability of a person abusing or becoming addicted to alcohol in adulthood.

And make no mistake: Alcohol is the most dangerous drug in our society. For all the appropriate worry and action to combat the proliferation of opioids, alcohol has long killed nearly as many people each year as the record 100,000 who died from overdoses of any drug in the 12-month period ended in April 2021.

We’re not for changing laws related to alcohol. We are for enforcing them, particularly to help young people reach adulthood with as safely as possible.