

Anatomy of a Bust

Cops and Kids: Enforcing Zero Tolerance

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



The hot desert day quickly turned to a cool moonlit night as the Phoenix Youth Alcohol Squad crossed the city in a nondescript dark blue Suburban, its tinted windows obscuring the detectives, and the detection technology, inside.

Easy banter belied the seriousness of the job ahead. This was more than a routine patrol. It was a mission to protect young lives.

Emboldened by spring break, area teens ignored advance notice of a crackdown, choosing instead to cruise in search of the next sixpack, the next party. A corner gas station, mini-mart, and grocery store all posed possibilities of purchase, offered the first arrestee of the evening, an 18-year-old pulled over for erratic, high-speed driving that nearly claimed the life of an innocent motorist right in front of the officers' eyes.

Radioed reports of a house party diverted a planned visit to a girl found to be in possession of alcohol at school, temporarily sparing her (as well as her parents and neighbors) the spectacle of armed officers at the door.

Across town, the upscale neighborhood was choked with vehicles, hastily abandoned by teens no doubt anxious to get to the punch bowl or the beer funnel (a faster – if less elegant – path to intoxication).

About half of the partygoers managed to escape through open doors or windows, but some 40 others, ages 15-18, remained. Huddled together on the living room floor, many appeared dazed, or perhaps just high. Some were confused, some upset, others simply angry. None had planned on getting caught. But, then, who does?

What's your name? How old are you? Where do you go to school? How much have you had to drink? What's the legal age to use alcohol? Rapid-fire questions posed to each teen in advance of a Breathalyzer. Open bottles of vodka and rum sitting nearby suggested the results.

"You're criminalizing behavior that isn't criminal," said one girl. Another confidently asserted, "You can't do this." Budding lawyers, perhaps, but nevertheless completely wrong on these suddenly pertinent points of law.

A few feet away, a 17-year-old boy tried to pass for 21, rather arrogantly and impolitely refusing to participate in the process. He was arrested, handcuffed, and taken to a juvenile detention facility downtown.

Summoned by the police – or in some cases by the teens themselves – bewildered parents began to arrive at the crime scene. "I'm completely stunned," said the unsuspecting mother of a 16-year-old boy, who had no idea he was a drinker. He, on the other hand, was quite incredulous about a suggestion that the five beers he claimed to have consumed were a

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lot. Across the walkway, a girl implored her father to believe that she hadn't been drinking. But, faced with the evidence (a BAC suggestive of six or seven drinks), she offered that she didn't know the punch was spiked. A common defense on this party night gone south.

"This is so unfair. They should have just told us to go home," another teen offered plaintively to no one in particular. Wrong again.

In fact, the Phoenix Police Department has it just right – setting a standard (and model) for community policing that capitalizes on the "It takes a village" approach recommended by the National Academies' Institute of Medicine and National Research Council in *Reducing Underage Drinking, A Collective Responsibility*. Educating teens in school and then monitoring them while out, these officers send a clear and refreshingly unambiguous message that underage drinking is dangerous, illegal, and unacceptable.

Indeed, the risks are high – and wildly underestimated by young adults and their parents.

Impaired driving continues to claim thousands of promising young lives each year, while alcohol-related crimes, including sexual assault, affect many more. A host of other physiological, social, emotional, and legal problems can follow.

As one boy pointed out, "I am going to lose my parents trust, my license, my car, and my job. I can't believe it."

Believe it. Breaking the law is not without consequence. Nor should it be. It's time that those responsible for youth walk the walk by demanding accountability – and that doesn't mean just the police.

These particular teens will appear before a judge, be placed on probation, and pay hefty fines. They even face the possibility of six months of jail time. But, those bright enough to express remorse and responsible enough to commit to remaining drug-free in the future will fare better –having to perform community service or attend an "impact panel" with their parents designed to better educate them about the hazards associated with youth and alcohol. More severe outcomes await those who live to drink another day, including automatic license revocation.

By connecting the dots of education, prevention, and enforcement, unique programs such as that of the Phoenix Police Department do much to eliminate confusion among young people and parents about the advisability and acceptability of underage drinking. Their model deserves replication.

Holding teens accountable for personal behavior is a good start. But not until zero tolerance becomes the siren song of *all* adults will we adequately protect and serve our youth.

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