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Drinking and Drugging

By **FRANK BRUNI**

“CRACK is wack.”

Remember [that phrase](#)? I heard many people repeat it last week as they appraised the waste of Whitney Houston’s later years and flashed back to her [2002 interview with Diane Sawyer](#), when she uttered those immortal words. She was bristling not at rumors that she abused drugs but at insinuations that she turned to cheap ones. With album sales like hers, you didn’t have to suck on a pipe.

Sawyer wanted to know what Houston was on. Everyone wanted to know what Houston was on, and news reports after her death took unconfirmed inventory of the pills in her hotel suite, wondering if they represented the extent of her indulgences.

No. By many accounts, Houston also drank. More than a little. In fact one early, leading theory about the cause of her death, which won’t be known until toxicology tests are finished, was that [a mix of prescription drugs and alcohol](#) did her in.

But while the drugs leapt immediately to the foreground, with questions raised about which doctors and pharmacies had provided them, the alcohol receded from focus, as it too often does. Wrongly, perilously, we tend not to attribute the same destructive powers to it that we do to powders, capsules and vials.

We don’t talk of its abuse in quite the same titillated, scandalized, censorious tone. Vodka isn’t wack. Beer, certainly, isn’t wack. It has adorable mascots — remember Spuds MacKenzie, the Bud Light bull terrier? It’s advertised during the Super Bowl and on the sides of municipal buses. It even comes in cloying fruit flavors and brightly colored cans, with fun names. Four Loko, anyone?

Because drinking is legal for adults, safe in moderation, the rightful font of epicurean reveries and the foundation of a multibillion-dollar industry with lobbyists galore, it gets something of a pass. Many of us like it — no, love it — too much to survey the damage it can do, look at ways in which our society could work to curb that and acknowledge that the effort isn’t so very vigorous.

According to Robert Brewer, the alcohol program leader at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, heavy drinking is the third leading preventable cause of death in this country, after [smoking](#) and a combination of bad diet and inactivity. By conservative estimates, it's directly related to about 80,000 deaths each year, an agent of — or co-conspirator in — [cirrhosis](#), [esophageal cancer](#), overdose, homicide and much, much more. It seeds and squires a broad range of diseases. Multiplies the effects of illicit and prescription drugs. Adds the twitch to a trigger finger. Puts the wobble in legs on a staircase or hands on a steering wheel.

And while 8 percent of Americans ages 12 and over use illicit drugs, 34 percent are addicted to alcohol or indulge in what public health officials consider risky drinking, according to Susan E. Foster, director of policy research and analysis for the [National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse](#) at Columbia University.

As a result, she said, “There are many more deaths due to alcohol. There’s much more violent crime linked to alcohol.”

That’s not to mention all the injuries, emergency-room visits, disabilities and missed work days. Brewer calculates that for those reasons and others, [heavy drinking costs](#) the United States about \$224 billion annually.

“There is a huge societal burden that we’re all bearing,” he said.

But is there a commensurate societal concern?

States have raised the legal drinking age to 21 over recent decades, and there has definitely been extensive public education about drinking and driving.

But I can’t recall much alarm about drinking’s other perils. From antismoking ads, I have pictures of blackened lungs and amputated fingers seared into my memory. From antidrug ads, I remember an [egg in a skillet](#) as a metaphor for a brain on [amphetamines](#). Where’s the analogous image for the ravages of too much booze?

And where are the taxes? Many studies have shown that pricing is a surefire way to control consumption, and taxes on tobacco have risen accordingly, so much so that in New York, a pack of [cigarettes](#) now costs upward of \$10.

But excise taxes on alcohol have gone down over the last few decades, when adjusted for inflation and measured in terms of the percentage they represent of the wholesale and retail price of a bottle or a can. The federal government and many states long ago set those levies in terms of a certain dollar amount per gallon — and then didn’t tweak them much as the cost of

living went up.

Because Congress last revised excise taxes on distilled spirits in 1991, the real value of those taxes has declined more than 35 percent, said Alexander Wagenaar, a professor at the University of Florida's College of Medicine who specializes in alcohol research.

In several states, the situation is even more absurd. According to a national roundup done by [Alcohol Justice](#), an industry watchdog group, Wyoming hasn't raised the excise tax on beer, which is two cents per gallon, since 1935.

Although some states have increased the sales taxes on alcohol over the last few years, they've typically done so in search of badly needed revenue and in the hope that it won't dampen consumption — not as a public health measure aimed at reducing drinking.

"It's amazing," Wagenaar said. "There are scientists and epidemiologists counting all the bodies from alcohol-related problems, but only a few of them are looking at tax rates."

And while some states restrict the marketing and promotion of alcohol, the overall advertising climate remains permissive enough that between 2001 and 2009, the average number of commercials for alcohol seen yearly by a teenager who regularly watched television rose to 366 from 217, according to a study for the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins.

I'm not interested in reanimating Carry Nation, and I'm not about to abandon my white Burgundy or gin martinis. But I'm confused by the paucity of public discussion about all this. I've heard more calls for taxes on sugary soft drinks than for an overdue examination of taxes on booze.

The chatter about [Amy Winehouse](#)'s dalliances with crack cocaine was more derisive than the talk of her boozing, though what [ultimately killed her](#) was alcohol.

What killed Houston is still to be determined. But as we turn her into a cautionary tale and tote up all the places she went wrong, let's not be too quick to edit drinking out of the picture.

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