



UTAH WORLD & NATION POLITICS

New study: Utah has lowest rate of alcohol deaths among 11 states that participated in report

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A new federal study shows Utah had the lowest rate of alcohol-related deaths over a five-year period among 11 states

that participated in the report. | Shutterstock

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah had the lowest rate of alcohol-related deaths over a recent five-year period among 11 states that participated in new federal study released last week.

The findings seem to back the argument made by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and many state legislators who contend Utah's strict liquor laws keep residents safe. But restaurateurs in Utah say the findings aren't a reflection of liquor laws, but rather the low number of people who actually drink alcohol in the state.

Utah averaged 513 deaths per year from excessive drinking from 2006-2010 and had the lowest per capita rate among the states studied — 22.4 annual alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 residents — according to a new report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Virginia and Nebraska were close behind Utah, each with rates of 23 to 24 annual alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 residents. Seven other states are tightly grouped together with rates between 26 and 31 per 100,000 people. New Mexico had by far the highest rate of alcohol deaths, with 51 annual deaths per 100,000 residents.

The study was done by the CDC in conjunction with the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. The 11 states volunteered to participate in the study, which features the most recent data available.

The study is the latest evidence that the state's approach is effective, said Eric Hawkins, spokesman for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Utah's laws strike a balance between making alcohol reasonably available while limiting negative social costs, he said.

"Citizens of the state can be very pleased with the positive outcomes that result from Utah's well-reasoned alcohol laws," Hawkins said.

The majority of Utah legislators are Mormon, and an estimated two-thirds of the

state's residents belong to the faith.

Avoiding alcohol is a fundamental part of being considered a fully practicing member of the Mormon church, and those who drink alcoholic beverages can't worship in temples and face social stigma.

The low rate of alcohol-related deaths is directly linked to there being so few people who drink beer, wine and cocktails in the state, said Melva Sine, president of the Utah Restaurant Association. She disagrees that the study speaks to the effectiveness of the state's liquor laws.

"Liquor laws do not control the number of people who drink or how often they drink," said Sine. "Utah's liquor laws create unnecessary awkward moments for restaurant operators who sell alcoholic beverages and for our patrons who want to enjoy an alcoholic beverage with their meal."

Utah's liquor laws are regularly debated during the legislative session with many tourism, restaurant and bar owners pushing to "normalize" the laws to make the state more friendly to out-of-state visitors.

They've successfully lobbied to change some rules, such as in 2009 when the state did away with a requirement for bars to operate as members-only social clubs, but hit a brick wall in the recent legislative session.

In January, just days before this year's legislative session, the Mormon church issued a sweeping defense of Utah's liquor laws, calling on state lawmakers to leave them alone.

The hefty multimedia policy statement urged lawmakers to uphold rules that church leaders said are "closely tied to the moral culture of the state." The posting featured an explanation of the church's stance, a video interview with one of the faith's top leaders and graphic presentations of supporting statistics such as the fact that Utah had the lowest number of alcohol-related traffic deaths per capita in 2012, according to federal highway statistics.

A measure to get rid of one of Utah's unusual liquor restrictions — that drinks be mixed in a backroom or behind a partition that detractors have come to call a "Zion curtain" — died this year without enough support.

In Utah, liquor licenses are issued to restaurants based on state population quotas, creating a long waiting list. In establishments that do serve alcohol, portion sizes are tightly controlled. And in some restaurants, drinks must be mixed out of view. Other alcohol sales are limited to state-run liquor stores, where beer is not refrigerated and ancillary items such as margarita mix aren't sold.

The new report isn't surprising since Utah has historically registered alcohol use rates much less than other states, said Brent Kelsey, assistant director of the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health.

That can be attributed to the heavy influence of the Mormon church and the state's tight controls on sale, importation and distribution of beer and alcohol, he said.

Kelsey cautioned that the new report is no reason for celebration, pointing out that the 500-plus annual deaths still represent a major public health issue. He said alcohol usage rates are declining faster in other states than Utah, bringing the state back to the pack in many statistical indicators for alcohol abuse.

"Although we had the lowest rate, that's nothing to scoff at and something we need to be concerned about," Kelsey said.

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