

Opinion

Posted: Fri, Feb. 3, 2012, 3:01 AM

Ignore alcohol-sales fairy tale

By Antony Davies

I love the Harry Potter books. A world in which problems can be made to disappear with the flick of a wand is attractive. But adults know that anything worth doing can't simply be waved into existence.

Calling on the government to solve problems usually involves fantasizing. The fairy tale begins with the words "The government should ..." and ends with a litany of wonderful results. How we get from start to finish is anyone's guess.

The latest example of such fantasizing is in the debate about alcohol markets. Binge drinking, underage drinking, and drunken driving are real problems. Alcohol-control proponents in Pennsylvania believe we can make them go away by waving the magic wand of government. The fairy tale is that the state must control alcohol sales to protect the population from the evils of alcohol abuse.

It's an intoxicating message. But adults look at data, and the data are sobering.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that alcohol-related fatality rates are about the same among states with or without alcohol control. Alcohol-related fatality rates among minors are statistically indistinguishable, 0.32 for both control and non-control states. Of the 10 states with the lowest alcohol-related fatality rates, only two are control states, and neither is among the most heavily controlled.

The story for drunken-driving fatalities is even more sobering. DUI fatality rates among non-control states have been lower than among control states. Of the 10 states with the lowest DUI fatality rates in 2008, eight were non-control states.

While Pennsylvania's alcohol markets are among the most controlled, New York's and New Jersey's are among the least controlled. Liquor taxes in New York and Pennsylvania are similar. All three are populous states. But their alcohol-related fatality rates are very different.

From 2001 to 2005, New York's and New Jersey's alcohol-related fatality rates were 4.0 and 4.1 per 100,000 population. Over the same period, Pennsylvania's fatality rate was more than 5.2. Alcohol-related fatality rates for minors were 50 percent higher in Pennsylvania than in New York and New Jersey. In 2008, New York's DUI-related



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fatality rate was the lowest in the country besides Utah's, where most of the population abstains, and New Jersey's was the second-lowest. Pennsylvania's DUI-related fatality rate, in contrast, was more than double New Jersey's.

Now, this could be due to differences in DUI laws. But if it is, then we need to stop wasting time opposing privatization and start reforming our DUI laws.

Nonetheless, some proponents of alcohol control still believe in the magic wand - just let the government handle it, and the problem will go away. Others, like the unions and bureaucrats, may not believe in the magic wand, but they want the rest of us to believe.

Combating the negative effects of alcohol by turning markets over to state control makes for a pleasant fairy tale, but data show that it works about as well as a magic wand.

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