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ALCOHOL ABUSE

The recent news story that there have been at least 24 cases of fetal alcohol syndrome in the last 18 months points up the fact that, while alcohol abuse touches every segment of our society, its impact on some segments is more critical than on others.

Fetal alcohol syndrome is the condition of newborn babies of heavy-drinking mothers characterized by mental retardation and twisted, crippling physical devel opment. According to Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Donald Kennedy, expectant mothers can cause a threat to their unborn children by drinking as little as two drinks per day.

The effect of alcohol on fetal development becomes more important in the face of the Gallup Poll report of the sharp -increase in women drinkers, while the number of men who use liquor, wine or beer is holding constant. This is compounded by other reports that twice as many adult women as men are taking tranquilizers.

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare recently published a booklet called "The Unseen Crisis: Blacks and Alcohol" which quotes black leaders, such as the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, as calling attention to alcoholism as a "severe crisis" in the black community. Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm states bluntly, "The rise of alcoholism and alcohol abuse within black communities is alarming, with consequences that are particularly cruel for both the victims and their families."

How the black communities are being exploited by the alcohol pushers was made clear recently when the LOS ANGELES TIMES published the startling findings of a landmark study made by what is called the California Black Commission on Alcoholism. This study provides the evidence that the black areas of Los Angeles County have many more liquor stores proportionately than integrated or all-white areas, and that there is a definite relationship between the number otiquor stores and the crime rate.

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In white areas of the county, the ratio is one liquor store for every 2,787 people, but in black areas, the ratio is one for every 1,466 people.

The Black Commission study, using police arrest data, reports that "the number of liquor stores per census tract correlates in a significant positive pattern with the number of arrests for robbery, burglary, felony assault, felony theft, misdemeanor theft, auto theft, narcotics, vice, traffic and drunk arrests." Examining the data more closely, we find that the arrest rate is the highest in those black neighborhoods where the number of liquor stores is the highest.

The reason these facts were not evident as the liquor licenses were being issued is that the state Alcoholic Beverage Control agency keeps records on the total number of liquor outlets in the entire county, but doesn't break down the figures to see how the outlets are distributed by neighborhoods.

These startling facts finally came to light with the posting of a notice by one merchant that he intended to open a new liquor store in a black neighborhood, an action which was greeted by protests, picketing, and legal action initiated by the black community condemning the enterprise.

It is unfortunate that some people are exploiting the blacks by making liquor so easily available and by making the liquor store the focus of neighborhood social activity. You can make your own test by driving through a blac;J< neighborhood and counting the liquor stores. If no black neighborhood is nearby, just compare the number of liquor ads in EBONY, the leading black magazine, with those in comparable white magazines. EBONY even tells its liquor advertisers that they w111 f1 nd a higher ,percentage of 11quor drinkers among its readers.

Frank discussion about a problem is the first step to its solution. Black leaders are to be commended for speaking out against the issuance of so many liquor licenses in their neighborhoods. Women leaders and women's magazines should likewise speak out about the alarming increase of alcoholism in the female segment of our society.

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