

Local News

Alcohol hasn't increased crime in four recently wet cities

By Robin Pyle | AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

Sunday, April 26, 2009

Story last updated at 4/26/2009 - 2:19 am

Police in some of the cities that have gone wet say crime hasn't been a big problem since alcohol became more accessible.

Plainview officials reported some increase in alcohol-related incidents, including underage drinking and public intoxication, as well as domestic violence.

However, domestic violence reports have been rising in most places throughout the state since the economic downturn, with many experts saying financial stresses are triggering more abuse among those who already abuse.

In other cities, where alcohol was never that far away to start with, alcohol-related incidents didn't seem to change much.

• Plainview, about 50 miles north of Lubbock

Crime was a major issue in the alcohol election that narrowly made Plainview wet in November 2007. "So far we have not had the major problems that they were projecting for us," Police Chief William Mull said. "We have not really felt an impact from a crime point... everything has remained basically stable." The city of about 23,000 didn't experience a significant rise in crime during its first year being wet in 2008, though some alcohol-related incidents and domestic violence reports did increase, according to police department numbers.

- Alcohol-related incidents involving minors spiked three-fold last year compared to the two previous years, with 63 incidents in 2008.

Mull said between 30 and 40 citations last year stemmed from one big party that police broke up, which may have inflated the numbers because police didn't break up any big parties over the two years prior. But Mull said a historical look at alcohol issues with minors shows the numbers fluctuate over the years.

- Public intoxication arrests nearly doubled in 2008, from 115 to 216.

- Domestic violence reports also nearly doubled in 2008, from 72 to 135. There were 62 cases in 2006.

Other highlights:

- There was little difference in aggravated assault rates compared to the two previous years. There were 63 reports in 2008 compared to 59 in 2007 and 78 in 2006.

DWI rates and the number of alcohol-related traffic wrecks also didn't see big changes.

- DWI

2008: 64

2007: 56

2006: 45

- Alcohol-related traffic wrecks

2008: 14

2007: 14

2006: 13

- There were 52 thefts of alcohol reported by local convenience stores.

Mull said the department hasn't changed law enforcement strategies over the past few years or increased its size. However, when the city went wet, officers were given additional training on alcohol-related issues.

Before going wet, the closest place to buy alcohol over the past few years was about 30 miles away.

And before that, residents had to drive about 45 miles away.

• **Lufkin, located in East Texas**

Police in this 34,000-population city said Lufkin was a "wet-dry town" before voters decided to make it official a couple of years ago. That means alcohol was already fairly accessible because of the city's close proximity to alcohol outlets, much like is the case in Lubbock.

The city had numerous private clubs where alcohol was sold, and residents could drive 10 miles to buy packaged alcohol.

"From a police officers' perspective, going wet pretty much made no noticeable difference to our job," said Lt. David Young, department spokesman. "There was no statistical difference in our alcohol-related crimes."

He said there was no increase in crime overall either, expect police started seeing some beer thefts from stores.

Young said he had some concerns from a law enforcement perspective initially about Lufkin going wet, but has been pleasantly surprised at the non-issues since then.

• **Littlefield, located about 35 miles north west of Lubbock**

This small community of 6,500 has been wet for the past three years, voting yes to alcohol in November 2005. The first alcohol sale came in early January 2006.

And not much has changed since then, Police Lt. Tony Mendez said, despite that the crime rate was one of the major concerns of going wet back then.

"Crime is about the same, we haven't really seen an increase or decrease in crime," he said.

"Everything has been steady."

Here are some of the numbers:

- There were 18 incidents involving minors and alcohol in 2005 (the year before Littlefield went wet); nine in 2006; 16 in 2007; 26 in 2008.
- DWI arrests have decreased some over the years: there were 33 in 2005; 34 in 2006; 19 in 2007; nine in 2008.
- Alcohol-related wrecks decreased from three in 2005 to 0 in 2008. There was one each year in between.
- Domestic violence rates: 224 in 2004; 168 in 2006; 235 in 2006; 200 in 2007; 248 in 2008.

• **Irving, located just west of Dallas**

After several attempts to go wet, the measure succeeded in this city of about 200,000 in November 2008.

The first alcohol sale came early this year.

Police spokesman David Tull said the city hasn't seen a drastic change in crime or alcohol-related incidents in the first quarter of the year.

- For example, there were 249 DWI arrests between Jan. 1 and March 31 this year compared to 227 and 252 during the same time periods in 2007 and 2006, respectively, police records show.
- Public intoxication and alcohol-related incidents involving minors also held steady.
- Domestic violence reports were up some. There were 445 reports this year compared to 338 and 427 during the past two years.

Tull said it's too early to really assess how the alcohol election will affect Irving in the long term.

"It's one of those deals where time will tell," he said. "It's all speculation."