



## Minimum Drinking Age: Does Evidence Support Lowering it from Age 21?

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Legislatures in seven states have recently introduced bills that would lower the legal drinking age from 21 to 18.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a group of college and university presidents recently called for a reconsideration of the 21 year old drinking age.<sup>2,3</sup> The probable effects of such a change have sparked considerable debate. Supporters argue that a lower drinking age would encourage responsible consumption.<sup>4</sup> Critics anticipate higher rates of consumption, risky drinking and drinking and driving.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the potential effect on drinking among young people, the debate involves other practical and ideological issues. Proponents of a lower age question the legality of denying the right to drink to legal adults—especially to those who serve in the military.<sup>4</sup> Yet it would be difficult for states to lower their drinking ages below 21, as they would lose 10% of their federal highway funds.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, prominent public dialogue has renewed the need to consider whether current policy serves our public health goals and citizenship rights.

### Why is the Age 21?

Individual states have set their own minimum drinking ages since the end of Prohibition in 1933. Most states initially chose 21, though several set it at 18. During the Vietnam War, however, nearly every state embraced the principle that a person old enough to serve in the military should have the full rights of citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Most states lowered the age of legal adulthood from 21 to 18, and 30 states lowered the legal drinking age along with it.<sup>8</sup>

Following this change, a number of studies demonstrated high rates of risky drinking and related harms among young people.<sup>9,10</sup> Lobbying groups, most notably Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), formed to petition for a higher minimum age. The

National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 passed, requiring all states to raise the drinking age to 21 or lose 10% of their federal highway funds.<sup>8</sup> By 1987, all 50 states had adopted a minimum age of 21.<sup>11</sup> In Wisconsin, an underage person is prohibited from consuming an alcoholic beverage unless accompanied by a parent, guardian or spouse who has attained the legal drinking age.

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### Current Impetus for Change

Longstanding evidence suggests that alcohol consumption and related harms declined sharply following the National Minimum Drinking Age Act. But, recently the strength of the evidence has been called into question.<sup>12</sup> High rates of drinking-related harm persist among young people, and this has led to questions about whether the current policy comes with unintended negative consequences.<sup>13</sup>

The current movement for change is fueled by ideological questions. Choose Responsibility, a non-profit organization founded in 2007, points out that the drinking age is the only exception to the legal age of adulthood, and argues that 18-year-olds, as U.S. citizens, should be given full rights.<sup>2</sup> These advocates call for regulation by parents and guardians rather than the government. Particular concerns persist about limiting the rights of members of the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> This concept is not new: military bases abroad or within 50 miles of Mexico or Canada may adopt drinking ages lower than 21.

Recent proposals in South Dakota, Missouri, Vermont and Minnesota would reduce the drinking to age 18 for all state

residents, while in Kentucky, Wisconsin and South Carolina they would reduce the age only for members of the military. Other discussion now focuses on harm reduction strategies and on other countries' policies that do not rely on alcohol abstinence for young people.<sup>13,15</sup>

### Evidence for Current Policy

Extensive research shows, and leading health organizations agree, that both drinking and drinking-related harm among young people declined significantly following the National Minimum Drinking Age Act.<sup>16</sup> A New York survey found as much as a 25% decrease in alcohol consumption among 18, 19 and 20 year olds.<sup>17</sup> The National Highway and Traffic Institute estimates that, after raising the minimum drinking age, drivers under age 21 experienced 12% fewer fatal crashes.<sup>18</sup> Studies conducted in European countries have reinforced these US findings.<sup>19</sup>

Some recent analyses, however, suggest that minimum age laws may have had substantially less impact than previously believed. The statistical decline in drinking-related fatalities represents the cumulative effect of many changes. These include safety improvements such as seat belt laws and safer vehicle design, along with increased law enforcement and public education.<sup>20</sup> The higher drinking age did separate the experiential learning period (including higher collision and fatality rates) for newly licensed drivers from that of newly legal drinkers, though the importance of separating these two acculturation periods is not clear.<sup>21</sup> Later drinking age, and later acculturation to legal drinking, may simply shift the attendant mortality risks to later young adulthood.<sup>22</sup>

### Evidence for a Lower Drinking Age

High rates of drinking-related harm persist among young people, and this has led to



questions about whether the current policy comes with unintended negative consequences.<sup>23</sup> Traffic fatalities are the leading cause of teen deaths, over 20% of which involved alcohol over the past decade.<sup>24</sup> Current U.S. policy, critics argue, drives alcohol consumption underground with no regulation; underage drinkers drink in private rather than in bars, with no parental or other adult supervision. Some suggest that teens' quest for covert drinking venues may compel them to drive,<sup>13</sup> and encourages teens to consume more per drinking occasion than do adults.<sup>25</sup> Over 90% of alcohol consumed by underage drinkers is consumed in an episode of binge drinking,<sup>26</sup> a danger particularly apparent among college students.<sup>3</sup>

Still, very little evidence<sup>27</sup> suggests that lower minimum drinking age would reduce overall consumption, risky drinking among youths, or drinking related harms. The oft-cited lower rate of alcohol-related traffic fatalities among young people in Europe—countries with more permissive laws—is likely due to lower rates of driving among European youth in general.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, although there are lower binge drinking rates among youth in some European countries, European youth overall both drink more and drink more heavily than in the US.<sup>28</sup>

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### What's Next?

Advocacy groups have rallied on both sides of this issue. Last year, MADD, along with the American Medical Association, the National Transportation Safety Board and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety formed Support 21 to maintain the current drinking age.<sup>29</sup> On the other side of the debate, the National Youth Rights Association and Choose Responsibility argue for lowering the minimum age.

A 2007 Gallup Poll found that 77% of Americans oppose lowering the drinking age to 18.<sup>30</sup> Some suggest that the choice be left to states. But the uniform federal standard, as defined by the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, prevails over individual state choice in order to prevent

the likelihood that underage drinkers would purchase alcohol in neighboring states,<sup>8</sup> and compound the risk of harm by driving to do so.

It will always be a challenge to enforce a minimum age in a culture where alcohol is so widely marketed and consumed.<sup>31</sup> There may be an unavoidable tradeoff between telling young people that they cannot drink and keeping them safe when they do so anyway. Yet the Institute of Medicine has concluded that "the effectiveness of laws to restrict access to alcohol by youths can be increased by closing gaps in coverage, promoting compliance, and strengthening enforcement."<sup>32</sup> Given the current evidence, policymakers might more effectively address not whether a change in the legal age is warranted but, rather, what measures will make current policy more effective.<sup>33</sup>

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