

## **Lower the Drinking Age?**

Questions have recently been raised about whether lowering the minimum legal drinking age to 18 would help reduce the amount of binge drinking among people under age 21.

The evidence from recent history and research do not support this change.

### **A minimum drinking age of 21 saves lives**

Congress mandated in 1984 that states establish 21 as the drinking age in return for federal highway funding. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that the 21 drinking age has reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and saves approximately 900 lives a year. Overall, the number of U.S. teenagers involved in fatal drunk-driving accidents has declined 11 percent because of laws that raised the legal drinking age to 21.<sup>1</sup>

### **Delaying the age of first drink reduces problems**

Studies by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) indicate that delaying the initiation of drinking by youth contributes to reductions in future alcohol problems, including alcohol dependence, binge drinking and alcohol-associated traffic crashes, injuries and fatalities and violence.<sup>4,5</sup> Additional NIH research has shown that lifetime alcohol dependence decreased steeply as a function of increasing age at the onset of drinking.<sup>4</sup>

### **The younger a person starts drinking, the more problems occur**

According to the American Medical Association Web site on college drinking,<sup>2</sup> research suggests that lowering the drinking age will make alcohol more available to an even younger population. The practices and behaviors of 18 year-olds are particularly influential on 15 to 17 year-olds.<sup>3</sup>

Young people who begin drinking before age 15 are:

- 4 times more likely to develop alcoholism and 2 times as likely to develop alcohol abuse as those who begin drinking at age 21.<sup>4</sup>
- 12 times more likely to be unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol,
- 7 times more likely to be in a motor vehicle crash after drinking, and
- 10 times more likely to have been in a physical fight after drinking.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the earlier a person begins drinking alcohol, the more likely they are to have ever used other drugs illicitly.<sup>6</sup>

A drinking age of 18 is associated with adverse outcomes among births to young mothers -- including higher incidences of low birth weight and premature birth.<sup>7</sup>

### **Responses to the arguments for lower drinking age**

#### **1. Drinking is a rite of passage. “We drank when we were young, everyone does it.”**

Many adults refer to their own experiences and do not realize that youth and young adults may be drinking quite differently from when they were young. The drinking environment

is different than it was two to three decades ago. Based on internet postings, news reports and anecdotal reports, drinking games, marketing, paraphernalia and a drink-as-much-as-you-can-as-quickly-as-you-can attitude pervade youth drinking today. Passing out and/or throwing up is considered admirable among many young drinkers today. Finally, too many young people are not making the passage into adulthood because of the consequences of their alcohol use. Since the fall of 2007, there have been at least eight alcohol-related deaths among young people ages 16-22 in Minnesota.

**2. Adults under 21 are deemed capable of voting, signing contracts, serving on juries and enlisting in the military, but are told they are not mature enough to have a beer.**

Not everything changes at 18. One can drive in Minnesota at 16, smoke at 18, rent a car at 25 and you must be 35 to run for president.

When age 21 was challenged in Louisiana's State Supreme Court, the Court upheld the law, ruling that "...statutes establishing the minimum drinking age at a higher level than the age of majority are not arbitrary because they substantially further the appropriate governmental purpose of improving highway safety, and thus are constitutional."<sup>8</sup>

Scientists now know that the human brain does not fully develop until the mid 20s. The last part of the brain to develop is the pre-frontal cortex, which controls judgment. This may be less important for some things than others. For example, the military needs people to follow orders unquestioningly. To be healthy, young people need to question the wisdom of drinking excessively and following others.

At Fort Bliss Texas Army post, authorities recently raised the legal drinking age to 21 because of problems of alcohol abuse. Due to the base's proximity to Mexico, the drinking age had been 18 for many years.

Recent research into alcohol use and binge drinking after deployment by combat troops in Afghanistan and Iraq found that younger service members were the most likely to show continued or new problems with alcohol after deployment.<sup>9</sup>

**3. Lowering the drinking age will reduce the allure of alcohol as a "forbidden fruit" for minors.**

According to the American Medical Association Web site on college drinking,<sup>10</sup> research suggests that lowering the drinking age will make alcohol more available to an even younger population, replacing "forbidden fruit" with "low-hanging fruit." The practices and behaviors of 18 year-olds are particularly influential on 15 to 17 year-olds.<sup>11</sup> If 18 year-olds get the OK to drink, they will be modeling drinking for younger teens. Legal access to alcohol for 18 year-olds will provide more opportunities for younger teens to obtain it illegally from older peers, making enforcement that much more difficult among high school students.

**4. Laws emphasizing abstinence have not worked.**

Based on comparisons of data since the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) was established at age 21 in all states in the 1980s, increasing the drinking age *has* worked.

As mentioned above, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that the 21 minimum legal drinking age has reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and saves approximately 900 lives a year. Overall, the number of U.S. teenagers involved in fatal drunk-driving accidents has declined 11 percent because of laws that raised the legal drinking age to 21.<sup>12</sup>

Fewer college students reported drinking in the past month in 2006 (65.4 percent) than in 1980 (82 percent), when younger drinking ages were the norm.<sup>13</sup> Annual alcohol use by high school seniors dropped from 87 percent in 1983 (before passage of the national MLDA law) to 72.2 percent in 2007.<sup>14</sup>

Among other changes from lowering the drinking age in the 1970-80s cited by the American Medical Association:

- In Arizona, lowering the drinking age increased the incidence of fatal accidents by more than 25 percent and traffic fatalities by more than 35 percent.<sup>15</sup>
- Lowering the drinking age in Massachusetts caused an increase in total fatal crashes, alcohol-related fatal crashes, and alcohol-related property damage crashes among 18 to 20 year-old drivers.<sup>16</sup>
- From 1979 to 1984, the suicide rate was 9.7 percent greater among young people who could legally drink alcohol than among their peers who could not.<sup>17</sup>

##### **5. Widespread use of fake IDs tends to erode respect for the law.**

There is no reason to believe that lowering the drinking age will decrease the use of fake IDs. Rather it will lower the age of those using fake IDs.

##### **6. Young people will learn to drink responsibly and learn their tolerance for alcohol in a supervised setting like a bar rather than at uncontrolled parties.**

Of the eight people who have died from alcohol-related problems in Minnesota since the fall of 2007, at least two were drinking in bars. Several other young people who died in Minnesota, La Crosse, Wisconsin and other states were drinking in bars.

Cheap drink specials like “bottomless cups,” games like beer pong, and 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations—all promoting downing as many drinks as possible—do not teach young people to drink responsibly and to learn their tolerance for alcohol.

Youth who reported that a parent or a friend’s parent had provided alcohol at a party within the past year reported drinking more on their last drinking occasion and were twice as likely to have consumed alcohol within the past 30 days and to have engaged in binge drinking.<sup>18</sup>

##### **7. Most other countries allow youth to drink and they don’t have problems like the U.S.**

Research comparing drinking among European countries with lower drinking ages does not support the argument.

A 2003 study comparing drinking by 15 and 16-year-olds in the U.S. and 35 European nations found that:<sup>19</sup>

- Youth from 34 European nations drank more and binged more than the U.S. Only youth from Turkey drank less and binged less than U.S. youth.
- 75 percent of the European nations had a higher proportion of youth who drank to intoxication than U.S. youth.

Another study, which ranked drinking of U.S. 15-year olds to 15-year olds from 40 other European and North American countries, found that:<sup>20</sup>

- Fewer U.S. 15-year olds reported drinking at least once/week than those from 32 of the nations.
- Fewer U.S. 15-year olds reported having been drunk at least twice than those from 35 of the nations.

Raising either the minimum legal drinking age and/or the age to legally purchase alcohol are being or have been considered in several countries, including Australia, France, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

France has seen a 50 percent increase in the number of 15-to-24-year-olds hospitalized for excessive alcohol use between 2004 and 2007. Alcohol is now the leading factor in deaths among young French people. In response, the French Health Minister is proposing legislation banning alcohol sales to minors by 2009.<sup>21</sup>

Alcohol also is related to half of the violent crimes and one-third of domestic violence incidents in the U.K. Research shows that Britons are drinking at an earlier age and are drinking more than ever.<sup>18</sup>

### **Public opinion does not support lowering the drinking age**

Public opinion does not seem to support lowering the drinking age. An opinion survey conducted by Nationwide Insurance and released in August 2008 showed that 72 percent of adults think lowering the drinking age will make alcohol more accessible to kids and nearly half believe it would increase binge drinking among teens. More than half even say they are less likely to vote for a state representative who supports lowering the legal limit or send their children to colleges or universities with "party school" reputations.

### **U.S Surgeon General is against lowering the drinking age**

Finally, the following is a response from U.S. Surgeon General RADM Steven K. Galson, about lowering the drinking age.

"We all should be very concerned about the extent and consequences of underage drinking. The fact is when youth drink, they tend to drink heavily. Today, we know more about the effects of underage alcohol use on health than ever before. For example, the science tells us that underage drinking can have serious health and safety consequences, such as motor vehicle crashes and sexual assaults. New research is also emerging on the potential harm alcohol may have on the developing

brain which continues to mature well into the 20s. So based on the most recent research and the information contained in the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking, I believe that drinking under the age of 21 is not worth the risk.”

### Why is youth drinking a problem?

Alcohol use by youth and young adults causes numerous problems including:

- Motor vehicle crashes
- Violence and sexual assaults
- Unsafe sex, unplanned pregnancies and fetal alcohol-exposed babies
- Trouble at work, school and with friends, family, and police
- Developing alcohol dependence or abuse later in life
- Engaging in current and adult drug use
- Potential harm on the developing brain which continues to mature well into the 20s.
- Increased risk of chronic diseases including liver disease, heart disease and cancer death<sup>22</sup>

According to news articles, since the fall of 2007 there have been at least eight young people in Minnesota ages 16-22 who died from alcohol-related causes. One was hit by a car, the others died because they had too much to drink.

According to an Associated Press analysis of federal records , the number of youth who died from alcohol poisoning in the U.S. has nearly doubled in seven years. They found that 157 college-age people, 18 to 23, drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005 (the most recent year for which figures are available). The number of alcohol-poisoning deaths per year rose from 18 in 1999 to 35 in 2005. Over the seven-year span, 83 of the college-age victims were under the drinking age of 21.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Accident Analysis and Prevention, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 2008

<sup>2</sup> A Matter of Degree: Addressing the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) in College Communities, American Medical Association, [http://www.alcoholpolicymd.com/alcohol\\_and\\_health/study\\_legal\\_age.htm](http://www.alcoholpolicymd.com/alcohol_and_health/study_legal_age.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie, RJ, "Discouraging Unhealthy Personal Choices through Government Regulation: Some Thoughts About the Minimum Drinking Age," In Minimum-Drinking-Age Laws, Wechsler, H (Ed.), Lexington, MA: DC Heath Co., p39-58, 1980.)

<sup>4</sup> National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Social and Health Consequences of Underage Drinking. *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, Background Papers* (The National Academies Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Minimum Drinking Age and Infant Health Outcomes, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008

<sup>8</sup> *Manuel v State of Louisiana*, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Alcohol Use and Alcohol-Related Problems Before and After Military Combat Deployment Isabel G. Jacobson; Margaret A. K. Ryan; Tomoko I. Hooper; Tyler C. Smith; Paul J. Amoroso; Edward J. Boyko; Gary D. Gackstetter; Timothy S. Wells; Nicole S. Bell JAMA. 2008;300(6):663-675.

<sup>10</sup> A Matter of Degree: Addressing the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) in College Communities, American Medical Association, [http://www.alcoholpolicymd.com/alcohol\\_and\\_health/study\\_legal\\_age.htm](http://www.alcoholpolicymd.com/alcohol_and_health/study_legal_age.htm)

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- <sup>11</sup> Bonnie, RJ, "Discouraging Unhealthy Personal Choices through Government Regulation: Some Thoughts About the Minimum Drinking Age," In *Minimum-Drinking-Age Laws*, Wechsler, H (Ed.), Lexington, MA: DC Heath Co., p39-58, 1980.)
- <sup>12</sup> Accident Analysis and Prevention, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 2008
- <sup>13</sup> *Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975-2006. Volume II: College Students & Adults, Ages 19-45*. NIH Publication No. 07-6206. Bethesda, MD.
- <sup>14</sup> *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2006. Volume I: Secondary school students* (NIH Publication No. 07-6205). Bethesda, MD.
- <sup>15</sup> Arizona Department of Public Safety, "An Impact Assessment of Arizona's Lowered Legal Drinking Age and a Review of Previous Research," Statistical Center, 1981.
- <sup>16</sup> Cucchiaro, S, et al., "The Effects of the 18-year old Drinking Age on Auto Accidents," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Operations Research Center, 1974.
- <sup>17</sup> Jones, NE, et al., "The Effect of Legal Drinking Age on Fatal Injuries of Adolescents and Young Adults," *American Journal of Public Health*, 82(1):112-115, 1992.
- <sup>18</sup> Foley, Kristie, et al. "Adults' Approval and Adolescents' Alcohol Use." *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 35, No. 4, (2004).
- <sup>19</sup> Youth Drinking Rates and Problems: A Comparison of European Countries and the United States, U.S. Department of Justice, 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> Inequalities in Young People's Health: Health Behaviours in School -aged Children, World Health Organization, 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> French Combat Youth Binge-Drinking, Time Magazine, July 16, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> *Epidemiology in Alcohol Research*, Vo. 27, No. 1, 2003, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism .
- <sup>23</sup> Drinking games prove deadly to college students, AMY FORLITI Associated Press Writer July 7, 2008