

Maintaining the Legal Drinking Age of 21 Curbs Underage Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol Abuse, 2012

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Many people wonder why we do not lower the legal drinking age to eighteen, if teens and twenty-year-olds are drinking alcohol despite the fact that it is against the law. There are many compelling reasons to maintain the legal drinking age at twenty-one: raising the drinking age to twenty-one is credited with saving thousands of young drivers' lives; lowering the drinking age would merely make alcohol available to even younger teens; alcohol can seriously damage the brain of an adolescent; and the earlier youth begin drinking alcohol, the more likely they are to become addicted. Yes, many teens ignore the law and drink alcohol, but studies show that the problems would be much worse if the drinking age were lowered.

"We can't stop kids from drinking, so why don't we just lower the drinking age back down to 18? They are adults for all other purposes. Eighteen-year-olds can vote, smoke, marry, drive, fly, pay taxes, take out loans, hold public office, serve on a jury and fight for their country, so what's the big deal? Let's stop spending all this tax money and law enforcement officer time fighting a losing battle!"

I often hear this refrain as I speak to adults in our community. In fact, many Kansas parents today grew up in an era in Kansas when they could drink 3.2% beer when they were 18. Why did that change and should it be changed back? Some believe that allowing drinking at younger ages would mitigate youthful desire for alcohol as a "forbidden fruit" Before I share my "top five" reasons we should keep the drinking age at 21, let's take a little trip back in time and examine how the current law came to be.

The History Behind the Current Law

After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the decision as to what the legal drinking age should be was left up to each individual state. Until 1970, the minimum drinking age in most states was 21. As part of the war protests of the 1960's, youth started lobbying for a lowered voting age and a lowered drinking age. *"Old Enough to Fight ... Old Enough to Vote"* was on popular bumper stickers and buttons of the era. In 1971, the 26th Amendment was adopted, lowering the voting age to 18 and drinking ages likewise started to be lowered around the country. Between 1970 and 1976, 21 states reduced the minimum drinking age to 18. Another 8 reduced it to 19 or 20. However, these states immediately noticed sharp increases in alcohol-related fatalities among teenagers and young adults. As a result, of the 29 states that had lowered their drinking age, 24 raised the age again between 1976 and 1984. By 1984, only three states allowed 18-year-olds to drink all types of alcoholic liquor. The others adopted some sort of stair-step age requirement based on the type of liquor being consumed.

Federal transportation authorities viewed this hodge-podge of state laws as a real highway traffic safety problem. Alcohol-related traffic injuries and fatalities were increasing and some of this was as a result of kids traveling from their home states to neighboring states that had lower drinking ages and then becoming injured or killed as they returned to their home states. These became known as "blood borders." In 1984, Congress enacted the *National Minimum Drinking Age Act* which had been recommended by President Reagan's Commission on Drunk Driving. States were threatened with the loss of 10% of their federal highway funds if they did not raise the

minimum drinking age in their state to 21 for all alcoholic beverages. All states eventually complied so that now all 50 states have a minimum drinking age of 21. So, that brings us immediately to reason number one.

Increasing the minimum drinking age to 21 is credited with having saved 18,220 lives on the nation's highways between 1975 and 1998.

Reasons to Keep the Drinking Age at 21

1. 21 Saves Lives.

There is now a substantial body of scientific evidence showing that raising the minimum drinking age in 1984 directly resulted in reduced alcohol-related crashes and fatalities among young people as well as deaths from suicide, homicide, and non-vehicle unintentional injuries. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, increasing the minimum drinking age to 21 is credited with having saved 18,220 lives on the nation's highways between 1975 and 1998. Other studies have found that it is responsible for a 19% net decrease in fatal crashes involving young drivers, and is currently responsible for saving approximately 1,000 young lives each year.

2. The Brain Does Not Fully Develop until At Least 21.

More and more research has been released in recent years concerning the stages of brain development. We have learned that the brain does not finish developing until a person is in their early twenties. It appears that it is not coincidental that fatalities increase as the drinking age is lowered. Brain maturation culminates in the prefrontal cortex. This is the area that controls judgments and weighing risks and consequences. Previously, this area was thought to be fully mature by the age of 18. Studies now suggest that this area is not fully developed until around the age of 25. What does this mean? Those under the age of 25 are more likely to engage in thrill seeking activity, and less able to appreciate the consequences of risky behavior. This new research has legislators around the country examining things like raising the driving age and raising the age at which a person can be executed for a crime committed during these "formative" years. Alcohol impairs judgment and heightens risk-taking behavior as well as slowing perceptual and motor skills, so given to a person who has an immature brain function in these areas already, research shows that the effects are even more exaggerated. And finally, the research indicates that alcohol or drug use during these formative years can cause long term, irreversible damage.

The explicit aim of existing policy is to delay underage alcohol use as long as possible.

3. The Longer We Can Delay Alcohol Use, the Better the Chance that a Person Will Never Have a Problem with Alcohol.

Alcoholism is a serious medical and social problem in this country. Criminal justice experts estimate that at least 75-80% of defendants involved in felony crimes or serious misdemeanors were either under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they committed their crime or committed their crime to obtain money to obtain alcohol or drugs or to survive because they have lost their financial resources due to their addiction. Decrease in work productivity due to absenteeism, divorce, suicide, increased medical problems, school dropout rates and traffic collisions are just a few of the costs associated with alcoholism. Drug addiction rarely begins as such, but often begins as early onset alcohol use as the gateway for further experimentation. For every year we delay the onset of drinking, studies have shown we substantially increase the likelihood that our child will never have a problem

with alcohol or drugs. Never. We know that alcohol use affects an adolescent brain differently than it does an adult. We know that because of this addiction onset can occur much sooner in a teenager (6-18 months) than an adult (5 years). The explicit aim of existing policy is to delay underage alcohol use as long as possible and, even if use begins, to reduce its frequency and quantity as much as possible.

10th-12th graders in states with lower drinking ages drank significantly more, were drunk more often, and were less likely to abstain from alcohol.

4. The Policy Does Work, Preventing "Low-Hanging Fruit."

Allowing drinking at younger ages would not mitigate youthful desire for alcohol as a "forbidden fruit" it would merely 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 15-17 year-olds. 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.

We do have the benefit of some studies that were done before the drinking age was raised nationwide in 1984. The 1978 *National Study of Adolescent Drinking Behavior* found that 10th-12th graders in states with lower drinking ages drank significantly more, were drunk more often, and were less likely to abstain from alcohol. Additionally, national data show that high school seniors who could not legally drink until age 21 drank less before age 21 and between ages 21-25 than did students in states with lower drinking ages. Countries with lower drinking ages suffer from alcohol-related problems similar to, and in some cases worse than, those in the U.S.

Certainly, the large numbers of current underage drinkers breeds frustration, but the studies show that the numbers would be much worse if the drinking age were lowered.

5. Department of Defense Regulations Allow Members of the Active Military Who Are Under 21 to Consume Alcohol in Controlled Situations.

And what about this "*Old Enough to Fight ... Old Enough to Drink*" argument? Well, the fact is, if your child has volunteered to serve in the military, when the going gets tough, there is a good chance he or she will be allowed to have a drink.

In the "old days" anyone on active military duty could consume alcohol on military installations, regardless of the legal drinking age off-base. However, in the mid-80's federal law was changed requiring military installation commanders to adopt the same drinking age as the state the military base is located in. At all overseas military installations, the drinking age is 18 unless international treaties or agreements mandate a higher age. So if your child is risking his or her life overseas, and there is no treaty prohibiting alcohol on base, he or she may drink at 18.

In addition, the commander of a military installation may waive the drinking age requirements state-side, if such commander determines that the exemption is justified by special circumstances. Special circumstances are those infrequent, non-routine military occasions when an entire unit, as a group, marks at a military installation a uniquely military occasion such as the conclusion of arduous military duty or the anniversary of the establishment of a military service or organization. The event must be held on a military installation. The commander is required to ensure that appropriate controls are in place to prevent endangering military service members or the surrounding community.

Therefore, the fact that an 18-year-old can serve in the military does not negate all the other reasons the drinking age should remain at 21 for those who choose not to volunteer for such a dangerous assignment.

In conclusion, ages of initiation vary in this country—one may vote at 18, drink at 21, visit the local casino at 21, rent a car at 25, and run for president at 35. These ages may appear arbitrary, but they take into account the requirements, risks, and benefits of each act. The national minimum legal drinking age of 21 has survived the test of time and is firmly supported by current scientific research. The lives and futures of our children depend on its continued support.

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