The Minimum Legal Drinking Age Should Be Lowered

Teens at Risk, 2009

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The authors at Choose Responsibility, a nonprofit organization founded in 2007, discuss in the following viewpoint several issues concerning the debate over lowering the legal drinking age from twenty-one to eighteen. For example, the authors point out that eighteen-year-olds in America are legally allowed to buy cigarettes, purchase property, vote, and serve on a jury—yet are not legally allowed to purchase or drink alcoholic beverages. The organization also maintains that education programs about using alcohol safely are effective at reducing high-risk drinking.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Choose Responsibility, at what age do Americans become legally responsible for their actions?
2. Alcohol education programs can generally be grouped into what two categories, according to the organization?
3. Does H.S. Swartzwelder believe that the brain of an adolescent has finished developing by the age of eighteen?

Debating the Issues ...

- If a person can go to war, shouldn't he or she be able to have a beer?
- Many youth under age 21 still drink, despite the current legal drinking age. Doesn't that prove the policy is ineffective?
- Youth in other countries are exposed to alcohol at earlier ages and engage in less alcohol abuse and have healthier attitudes toward alcohol. Don't those countries have fewer alcohol-related problems than we do?
- I've read that if we educate teens about using alcohol safely starting at age 18, that will encourage responsible drinking. Is that true?
- I've read that the adolescent brain continues to develop through the early 20s. What are the long-term effects of alcohol use on a developing brain?
- There seems to be support for lowering the drinking age—is this true?
- So what strategies are effective for reducing high-risk alcohol use?...

Old Enough for War, Old Enough for Alcohol

For better or worse, American society has determined that upon turning 18 teenagers become adults. This means they can enlist [in the military], serve, fight and potentially die for their country. And while the "fight for your country" argument is a powerful one, it only begins to capture the essence of adulthood. Most importantly, at age 18 you become legally responsible for your actions. You can buy and smoke cigarettes even though you
know that, in time, they will probably give you lung cancer. You may even purchase property, strike binding legal contracts, take out a loan, vote, hold office, serve on a jury, or adopt a child. But strangely at 18, one cannot buy a beer. While that may be an injustice to those choosing to serve their country, the more serious consequence is the postponement of legal culpability. In most other countries, the age of majority coincides with the legal drinking or purchasing age.

Critics are quick to point out that 18 is not an age of majority, but one step amongst many that together mark the gradual path to adulthood. This argument notes that young adults cannot drink until 21, rent cars until 25, run for the U.S. Senate until they are 30, and run for President until 35. This is, the critics suggest, evidence of a graduated legal adulthood. But this argument falls flat. First, rental car companies are not legally prevented from renting cars to those under 25; this is a decision made by insurance companies. In fact, some rental companies do rent to those under 25, and the associated higher rates compensate for that potential liability. Second, age requirements for these high public offices are more appropriately seen as exceptions to full adulthood, rather than benchmarks of adulthood. Finally, and most importantly, the Constitution speaks to the legal age of majority only once and that is in the 26th Amendment to the Constitution where, "The right of citizens of the US, who are 18 years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged ... on account of age."

Minors Drink Alcohol Despite Policies

Many young people under the age of 21 consume alcohol, and continue to do so despite nearly 25 years worth of prohibition of that behavior. The trend over the past decade has had a polarizing effect of sorts—fewer 12-20-year-olds are drinking, but those who choose to drink are drinking more. Between 1993 and 2001, the rate of 12-20-year-olds who reported consuming alcohol in the past 30 days decreased from 33.4% to 29.3%, while rates of binge drinking increased among that age group over those same years, from 15.2% to 18.9%. Data specific to college and university students also indicate this polarization of drinking behaviors over time. A decade's worth of research in the College Alcohol Study found both the proportion of students abstaining and the proportion of students engaging in frequent binge drinking had increased. Furthermore, as compared to 1993, more 18-24-year-old students who chose to drink in 2001 were drinking excessively—defined by frequency of drinking occasions, frequency of drunkenness, and drinking to get drunk.

There is evidence that the decline in alcohol consumption by those under the age of 21 seen throughout the 1980s and 1990s was not the result of the 21-year-old drinking age, but of a larger societal trend. "Nationwide per capita consumption peaked around 1980 and dropped steeply during the 1980s. Drinking by youths followed this same pattern. The predominant reason was not changes in state MLDA [minimum legal drinking age] but rather a close link between youthful and adult alcohol consumption.... Increasing the MLDA did make some difference but not as much as might be guessed from a simple 'before and after' comparison." Even the 1993 source so frequently cited in support of the 21-year-old drinking age acknowledges that "... [survey-based research from the 1970s] has shown that increased minimum age both does and does not covary with decreased youth drinking." This evidence suggests that the 21-year-old drinking age is not an unqualified success, but rather a well-intentioned social policy whose 25-year history has led to several unintended consequences, including but not limited to an increase in the prevalence of abusive drinking amongst young people.

Europeans Drink Alcohol at Younger Ages

Any generalizations of the behavior of "European" youth should be scrutinized. The drinking cultures of northern
and southern European nations vary markedly; history and an extensive body of cross cultural research would suggest that cultural attitudes towards alcohol use play a far more influential role than minimum age legislation. Recent research published by the World Health Organization found that while 15- and 16-year-old teens in many European states, where the drinking age is 18 or younger (and often unenforced), have more drinking occasions per month, they have fewer dangerous, intoxication occasions than their American counterparts. For example, in southern European nations ratios of all drinking occasions to intoxication occasions were quite low—roughly one in ten—while in the United States, almost half of all drinking occasions involving 15- and 16-year-olds resulted in intoxication.

Though its legal drinking age is highest among all the countries surveyed, the United States has a higher rate of dangerous intoxication occasions than many countries that not only have drinking ages that are lower or nonexistent, but also have much higher levels of per capita consumption.

Research also notes that the 15- and 16-year-olds who are most at risk for alcohol problems (defined as those who consume alcohol 10 times or more in 30 days and drink to intoxication three times or more in 30 days) are not those who live in countries where overall per capita consumption is highest, but rather from the countries where it is lower. For example, though France and Portugal have the highest per capita consumption in Europe, 15- and 16-year-olds in both countries show very moderate consumption. By contrast, Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, where per capita consumption is comparatively low, have the highest number of at-risk 15- and 16-year-olds. Per capita consumption and the degree of risk for serious alcohol problems, therefore, are inversely proportional....

### Alcohol Education Courses Teach Responsible Drinking

The effectiveness of alcohol education continues to be widely debated. Various approaches to alcohol education have been developed and can generally be grouped into those that support abstinence and those that view abstinence as unrealistic, and must therefore work to equip individuals with decision-making skills for safe alcohol use. There are both formal education, through schools and institutions, and informal education through the family and peers. While alcohol education programs that advocate abstinence have been proven ineffective, interactive education programs have had greater success in their ability not only to educate drinkers, but also to alter their drinking habits.

Australia has successfully implemented alcohol education programs that focus on reducing risk and promoting responsible drinking. Rethinking Drunking, and its counterpart aimed at a younger crowd, School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project, include role playing and interactive teaching and build skills so students may safely handle risky situations involving alcohol. These programs have shown some effectiveness in influencing young adults' drinking behaviors.

Recently in the United States, Outside the Classroom has produced AlcoholEDU, an interactive online prevention program used by 450 colleges and universities throughout the country. AlcoholEDU increases practical knowledge, motivates students to change their behavior, and decreases students' risk of negative personal and academic consequences as a result of alcohol use. In 2004, students who completed AlcoholEDU were 20% less likely to be heavy-episodic drinkers and 30% less likely to be problematic drinkers, numbers that prove that alcohol education can be a useful tool in altering students' drinking habits.

Upon finding a lack of thorough research regarding the effects of alcohol education, Andrew F. Wall, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign began his study of the effectiveness of AlcoholEDU. He describes
his research as aiming to "determine whether an online prevention program would change behavior and consequences." His research provides evidence for the first time that "... an interactive educational experience can substantially reduce the negative consequences of high-risk drinking."...

The Manner in Which Alcohol Affects a Teen's Brain

[Author's Note:] We asked Dr. H.S. Swartzwelder, frequently cited expert on adolescent brain development and substance abuse, MADD [Mothers Against Drunk Driving] consultant, and Choose Responsibility board member to respond to this question.

"It is true that the brain continues to develop into a person's 20s, particularly the frontal lobes which are critical for many of the higher cognitive functions that are so important for success in the adult world—such as problem solving, mental flexibility, and planning.

"It is also clear that alcohol affects the adolescent brain differently than the adult brain, but the story is not simple and the data should be interpreted cautiously as this complex science continues to evolve. Although alcohol affects some brain functions more powerfully during adolescence, it affects other functions less powerfully during the same period. For example, studies in animals clearly indicate that a single dose of alcohol can impair learning (and learning-related brain activity) more powerfully in adolescent animals than in adults. But on the other hand a somewhat higher dose will produce far greater sedation (and sedation-related brain activity) in adult animals than in adolescents. So, in terms of single doses of alcohol, the adolescent brain is not uniformly more or less sensitive to alcohol—it depends on the brain function that is being measured. Importantly, there has been little direct study of the effects of acute doses of alcohol on adolescent humans, compared to adults. One study found that a single dose of alcohol resulting in blood alcohol levels near 80mg/dl (the legal limit) impaired learning more powerfully among people in their early 20s than it did in people in their late 20s, but it will take more research to answer this question with authority in human subjects.

"Since the effects of single doses of alcohol can have markedly different effects on adolescents than on adults, it makes sense to ask whether this means that the adolescent brain is more or less sensitive to the effects of repeated doses of alcohol over time. In my view, the jury remains out on this question, but there are some studies in animals which suggest that the adolescent brain may be more vulnerable to long-term damage by alcohol than the adult brain. Similarly, there are some studies of humans who consumed large quantities of alcohol over extended periods of time during adolescence, and have relatively small hippocampi (a brain region critical for certain types of learning). All of these studies need to be fleshed out before the issue is settled, but, if nothing else, they give teens a very good reason to think carefully about drinking to excess ... and this is probably the pivotal issue—how much is too much?

"Most studies of the effects of chronic alcohol exposure in adolescence, compared to adulthood, have focused on relatively high doses. Studies of lower doses, and less severe chronic dosing regimens, will be needed to determine whether the adolescent brain is more sensitive to the long-term effects of mild to moderate drinking. There are plenty of studies indicating that early, unsupervised drinking can lead to trouble for teens—both immediately and down the road. But this does not mean that an 18-year-old who has a beer or two every couple of weeks is doing irreparable damage to her brain. It is the 18-year-old (or 30-year old, for that matter!) who downs five or six drinks in a row on his way to a dance that worries me." ...
There is support for lowering the drinking age, though polling data suggests this remains a minority view. Since the Supreme Court decision in *South Dakota v. Dole* in 1987, however (South Dakota, joined by the states of Colorado, Hawaii, Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, and Wyoming had challenged the constitutionality of the 1984 legislation), there has been virtually no public discussion or debate over the 21-year-old drinking age. Twenty years have passed, during which time data have been gathered and the practical effects of the law have been experienced. National (*Chronicle of Higher Education; US News and World Report; Newsweek; Fox News*) media interest in the issue, perhaps or perhaps not reflecting a change in public opinion, has surfaced repeatedly during the first half of 2007. This would suggest a desire to reopen debate.

Certain Approaches Are Effective in Reducing High-Risk Alcohol Use

Strategies based on harm reduction and environmental management have been successful in reducing underage alcohol abuse. While research has shown that abstinence-based education programs alone have little to no effect on preventing use or abuse of alcohol among underage drinkers, harm reduction strategies that address the complex psychological expectancies that lead to excessive drinking amongst young people are effective in reducing rates and incidences of alcohol abuse. Environmental strategies such as alcohol advertising bans, keg registration, responsible server training, social norms marketing and community interventions are viable options for managing high-risk drinking, especially on college campuses. Furthermore, evidence would suggest that a policy based on strengthening enforcement may be of limited success; for every 1,000 incidences of underage alcohol consumption, only two result in arrest or citation. Advocates of enforcement should be required to demonstrate the level of incremental expense they would recommend in order to achieve a significantly better result. Under the 21-year-old drinking age, fewer underage individuals are drinking, but those who do choose to drink are drinking more, are drinking in ways that are harmful to their health, and [are] engaging in behaviors that have a negative impact on the community.

Further Readings

**Books**


**Periodicals**


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