

# The Minimum Legal Drinking Age Should Be Lowered

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*Teens at Risk, 2013*

"An individual legally enjoys nearly all other rights of adulthood upon turning 18.... It is time to reduce the [drinking](#) age for all Americans."

In the following viewpoint, Michelle Minton contends that the current minimum legal drinking age of twenty-one is discriminatory and counterproductive, and leads to widespread disrespect for the law. She argues that the drinking age of twenty-one pushes drinking underground where dangerous and unhealthy practices such as binge drinking predominate. Minton compares US practices to those of European countries where a lower drinking age has not led to harmful results. Minton is the director of insurance studies at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the viewpoint, what percent of graduating high school seniors have broken the law by consuming alcohol?
2. In the viewpoint, the author contends that the [drinking age](#) of twenty-one promotes what unhealthy activity?
3. The viewpoint argues that the reduction in traffic fatalities since the establishment of the drinking age of twenty-one is actually more accurately attributed to what factors?

Alaska state representative Bob Lynn (R., Anchorage) is asking the long overdue question: Why do we consider 18-year-olds old enough to join the military, to fight and die for our country, but not to have a drink with their friends before they ship out or while they're home on leave? Lynn has introduced a bill [in March 2011] that would allow anyone 18 years and older with a military ID to drink alcohol in Alaska.

The bill is already facing strong opposition from self-styled public-health advocates. However, the data indicate that the 21-minimum drinking age has not only done zero good, it may actually have done harm. In addition, an individual legally enjoys nearly all other rights of adulthood upon turning 18—including the rights to vote, get married, and sign contracts. It is time to reduce the drinking age for all Americans.

## How Twenty-One Became the Legal Drinking Age

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In the early 1970s, with the passage of the 26th amendment (which lowered the voting age to 18), 29 states lowered their minimum legal drinking age to 18, 19, or 20 years old. Other states already allowed those as young as 18 to buy alcohol, such as Louisiana, New York, and Colorado. However, after some reports showed an increase in teenage traffic fatalities, some advocacy groups pushed for a higher drinking age. They eventually gained passage of the 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which lets Congress withhold 10 percent of a state's federal highway funds if it sets its minimum

legal drinking age below 21. (Alaska would reportedly lose up to \$50 million a year if Lynn's bill passes.)

By 1988, all states had raised their drinking age to 21. In the years since, the idea of lowering the drinking age has periodically returned to the public debate, but groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) have been able to fight back attempts to change the law. (Louisiana briefly lowered its age limit in back to 18 in 1996, after the state Supreme Court ruled that the 21 limit was a form of age discrimination, but the court reversed that decision a few months later.)

## A Culture of Underground Drinking

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It's true that America has a problem with drinking: The rates of [alcoholism](#) and teenage problem drinking are far greater here than in Europe. Yet in most European countries, the drinking age is far lower than 21. Some, such as Italy, have no drinking age at all. The likely reason for the disparity is the way in which American teens are introduced to alcohol versus their European counterparts. While French or Italian children learn to think of alcohol as part of a meal, American teens learn to drink in the unmonitored environment of a basement or the backwoods with their friends. A 2009 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institute of Health, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concluded that 72 percent of graduating high-school seniors had already consumed alcohol.

The problem is even worse on college campuses, where there is an unspoken understanding between students, administrators, local [law enforcement](#), and parents that renders drinking-age restrictions effectively moot as students drink alcohol at frat or house parties and in their dorm rooms. The result is dangerous, secret binge drinking. This unspoken agreement and the problems it creates led a group of college chancellors and presidents from around the nation to form the Amethyst Initiative, which proposes a reconsideration of the current drinking age.

Middlebury College president emeritus John M. McCardell, who is also a charter member of Presidents Against Drunk Driving, came out in favor of lowering the drinking age to 18 years old in a 2004 *New York Times* opinion article. "Our latter-day prohibitionists have driven drinking behind closed doors and underground," he wrote. "Colleges should be given the chance to educate students, who in all other respects are adults, in the appropriate use of alcohol, within campus boundaries and out in the open."

## The Link Between Traffic Fatalities and the Drinking Age

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The most powerful argument, at least emotionally, for leaving the drinking age at 21 is that the higher age limit has prevented alcohol-related traffic fatalities. Such fatalities indeed decreased about 33 percent from 1988 to 1998—but the trend is not restricted to the [United States](#). In Germany, for example, where the drinking age is 16, alcohol-related fatalities decreased by 57 percent between 1975 and 1990. The most likely cause for the decrease in traffic fatalities is a combination of law

enforcement, education, and advances in automobile-safety technologies such as airbags and roll cages.

In addition, statistics indicate that these fatalities may not even have been prevented but rather *displaced* by three years, and that fatalities might even have increased over the long run because of the reduced drinking age. In an award-winning study in 2010, University of Notre Dame undergraduate Dan Dirscherl found that banning the purchase of alcohol between the ages of 18 and 21 actually *increased* traffic fatalities of those between the ages of 18 and 24 by 3 percent. Dirscherl's findings lend credence to the "experienced drinker" hypothesis, which holds that when people begin driving at 16 and gain confidence for five years before they are legally able to drink, they are more likely to overestimate their driving ability and have less understanding of how alcohol consumption affects their ability to drive.

Statistics aside, the drinking age in the U.S. is difficult to enforce and discriminatory toward adults between 18 and 21 years old. The current age limit has created a culture of hidden drinking and disrespect for the law. Regardless of whether an adult is in the military or a civilian, she ought to be treated as just that: an adult. If you are old and responsible enough to go to war, get married, vote, or sign a contract, then you are old and responsible enough to buy a bottle of beer and toast to living in a country that respects and protects individual rights. It is long past time the law caught up with that reality.

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## Further Readings

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