



Jeffrey Levy says the college binge-drinking problem is the result of the college environment, not of laws regulating the minimum legal drinking age.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has declared the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 (commonly referred to as MLDA21) the most effective law ever passed in reducing alcohol-related death and injury on America's highways. The National Institute for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, Surgeon General, the Departments of Justice, Education and Defense, and Centers for Disease Control all support 21, as does the American Medical Association. MLDA21 has saved more than 900 lives every year since it was passed.

The suggestion that MLDA21 is simply age-restricted prohibition is false. Would a drinking age of 18 be any less a form of prohibition? Effective age restrictions apply, for example, to service in public office and gun ownership.

After the national age of majority was lowered to 18 in 1970, 29 states lowered their drinking age below 21. In these states, the death rate due to drunk driving among the affected age group increased by approximately 15 percent. As a result, MLDA21 was passed in 1984. It may not be as effective as we would like, but it saves lives.

The argument that if you can serve in the military at 18 you ought to be able to drink at that age in college is likewise flawed. Serving in the military has nothing to do with drinking. Even where underage military personnel are allowed to drink on special occasions, commanders are held strictly accountable for behavior of those under their command. The military does not condone underage drinking.

It is argued that European countries with lower or no drinking-age restriction do not experience the youthful drinking problems we do. A 2005 government report concluded, however, that among 15-to-16 year olds in 37 countries, including all major countries in Europe, the only country experiencing lower rates of drinking and prevalence of heavy drinking than the U.S. was Turkey. Many countries, including the UK, Germany, and Denmark, experienced twice and in some cases more than three times the prevalence of intoxication.

Alcohol-abuse statistics are likewise revealing. For every two years under the age of 21 at which regular drinking begins, prospects of long-term adverse health effects associated with alcohol almost double. While most parents are justifiably concerned about their teen's potential involvement in drugs, they seem unaware of

risks linked to alcohol. Alcohol, however, kills more youth than do all other illicit drugs combined.

The science of human development also supports 21. The human brain normally matures between ages 21 and 25. Among the last areas of the brain to mature are those that affect impulse control, inhibitions, and judgment. Where students under age 21 are allowed to drink, binge drinking, drunk driving, and other unacceptable behaviors are a natural and predictable consequence. Almost half of underage college students acknowledge binge drinking, while close to a quarter acknowledge regularly driving after drinking. *There is, in my judgment, no such thing as responsible drinking by underage students.*

To solve the college drinking problem, we need to change the social environment at many schools. Certainly alcohol education, reducing access to alcohol, and expanding alcohol-free activities are called for, but these alone will not solve the problem. *Declaring that binge drinking, drunk driving, and underage drinking are unacceptable behaviors that will not be tolerated is the most important step in making this transition.* Establishing serious meaningful consequences for those who repeatedly fail to comply is also essential. And as allowed by federal law, we need parental notification for violations of law and school policy related to drugs and alcohol. Parents do have influence and can play a key role, but not unless they are made aware of the problem.

Ten years ago my college-student son died as a result of a binge drinking episode. Parents like myself and those of the 1,700 college students who die annually in alcohol-related incidents, the 600,000 who are injured annually, the 700,000 who are assaulted annually by another student who had been drinking, and the 100,000 who are sexually assaulted each year do not accept that our kids are just statistics.

The missing element in solving this problem is not a change to the law making it easier for kids to drink and further relieving you of responsibility for the problem—it is leadership. *21 makes sense and needs to be enforced, not eliminated.*

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