

How to Fight Binge Drinking

Would lowering the legal age help colleges curb alcohol abuse?

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College presidents like to picture happy scholars thinking deep thoughts in seats of higher learning. They don't like to think about students projectile vomiting and occasionally dying. But in the last twenty years, a surge of binge drinking by mostly underage students has spawned a growing number of date rapes and trips to the emergency room. For years, many colleges turned a half-blind eye to underage drinking. But as the casualties pile up, state legislatures are passing tougher liability laws. Colleges have been forced to try to crack down on drinking in the dorms and frats, but bingeing has hardly gone away. Mostly, it's moved underground--kids secretly gathering to "pre-game," to down shots before going to supposedly "dry" college events, or off campus, where there's even less control. Angry neighbors complain about vomit in the streets and late-night noise, and city cops are generally less indulgent than campus cops.

Increasingly, it seems, frustrated college presidents are trying to fight back. About 150 of them--including the presidents of Duke and Dartmouth--have signed a letter pushing for "public debate" over reducing the drinking age to 18. The theory is that, combined with better education and increased supervision, lower drinking ages will get kids to drink responsibly.

It's true that forbidden fruit tastes better to 19-year-olds, and some of the bingeing is caused by the need to sneak around and drink fast and hard when you can. But that's only part of the reason for the increase in binge drinking. (A series of studies since the early '90s show that ever-larger numbers of 15- to 21-year-olds are consuming more than five drinks in a single session.) Another reason is sex. Coeducation has brought boys and girls together on elite college campuses in the last thirty years, just as the old formalities of courtship and dating have gone by the wayside. Now it's just awkward boys and girls looking for a way to get together. Liquor helps this no-holds-barred mating ritual. Of course, some of the heaviest drinking occurred at single-sex schools where there was nothing else to do (see Dartmouth, home of the original Animal House, Alpha Delta Phi, in the 1960s). So sex and subversion aren't the only causes. There's the bonding ritual of getting blasted.

Today's students at elite schools are an intense bunch. They study hard, play hard, as the saying goes. With just a few hours set aside for fun, they need to cram it with getting wasted. Drinking games like "Beirut" (charmingly named after the shelling of the capital of Lebanon in the 1980s) have proliferated in part because the kids are competitive and like the intensity of vying to get high. The drinking games don't go on just at elite schools, of course. State universities have just as big a problem with bingeing as the Ivies, if not bigger.

Lowering the drinking age might help take the edge off the wildness. But in England and Germany, where the drinking age is already 18, bingeing is also a growing problem. (Young people in other European countries seem to consume a lot, just not so quickly or violently.) The university presidents who signed the letter calling for a lower drinking age have a good argument: that tougher laws have forced them to try to ban drinking altogether, when reality suggests they should be looking for ways to keep the kids from harming themselves and each other. (In the 1920s, Prohibition didn't work either, except to feed profits to the underworld.) Still, they are running into stiff resistance from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which successfully lobbied to raise the drinking age to 21 in the early '80s when statistics showed that age-18 drinking led to more highway deaths.

John McCardle, the former president of Middlebury College, who started the "Choose

Responsibility" movement a couple years ago, argues that other factors, like wearing seat belts, had more to do with the reduction in highway deaths. The numbers are hard to quantify and subject to interpretation. The likelihood is that binge drinking will not appreciably decrease until more kids realize that drinking leads to sexual liaisons they will regret (with the risk of STDs and pregnancies), and that a kid who is throwing-up drunk looks and acts like a disgusting fool. There was a time when it was manly to be able to "hold your liquor." Now the goal seems to be able to expel it. Women, with lower tolerances, are even quicker to get sick. Maybe the most immediate step the college presidents could take is to exempt dormitory janitors from cleaning up the messes. Make the kids do it.

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