

Legal Age 21 has pushed alcohol consumption out of safe, public spaces and into dorm rooms, off-campus houses, and underground locales.

Well over 1,000 18-24 year-olds die each year of alcohol-related causes other than traffic accidents. In recent years these alcohol-related fatalities occurring off the roads have increased at rates outpacing the size of the population (Hingson, et al, 2005).

Between 1993 and 2001, there was a significant increase in the number of students attending off-campus parties (Wechsler et al 2002). Alcohol consumption is directed away from law enforcement, which is ineffective at best. For every 1,000 incidences of underage alcohol consumption, only two result in arrest or citation (Wolfson, et al, 1995).

Legal Age 21 has created an environment of excess consumption and goal-oriented drinking. While fewer individuals aged 18-20 are drinking, those who choose to drink are doing so at dangerous and alarming rates.

Ninety-six percent of the alcohol consumed by 15-20 year-olds is consumed when the drinker is having five or more drinks at a time. Between 1993 and 2001, 18- to 20- year-old drinkers showed the largest increase (56%) in binge-drinking episodes among American adults. This group of underage drinkers also had the second-highest rate of binge drinking, outstripped only by young adults aged 21 to 25 (Naimi, et al. 2003).

“The increase in alcohol-impaired driving episodes [in recent years] is probably due, at least in part, to the substantial increase in binge drinking episodes” (Quinlan, 2005).

Indeed, heavy episodic or “binge” drinking significantly impairs one’s ability to make safe decisions, including the choice to get behind the wheel of an automobile. Binge drinking indicates a positive correlation with drunken driving, thereby leading to a greater number of fatalities.

Assertions that Legal Age 21 has saved more lives than unrelated, external safety factors are simply untrue.

Research suggests that Legal Age 21 was only one of many factors contributing to the decline in alcohol-related traffic fatalities (NHTSA, Sept. 2001). According to NHTSA estimates, safety belts and airbags have combined to save 206,287 lives between 1975 and 2004 (NHTSA, 2005). By comparison, NHTSA estimates the 21 MLDA saved 23,733 lives in the same period (Kindelberger, J. 2005) No known study has been undertaken to study the effects of the “designated driver” and of increased public awareness of the dangers of drunken driving—both factors that have, without question, contributed to the decline in alcohol-related traffic fatalities.

Only half of the 102 studies of the effectiveness of Legal Age 21 found significant effects, and of those 35% of the analyses found no association between the legal age and indicators of traffic crashes (Wagenaar and Toomey, 2002). It is simply not possible to say that the “science” demonstrates the effectiveness of Legal Age 21.

Brain development is complete around age 25; therefore, 21 is not a magic number. What puts individuals at greater cognitive risk is binge drinking, whose rates have only climbed.

“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” (H. Scott Swartzwelder, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University).

Legal Age 21 perpetuates a climate in which drinking to intoxication has become the norm for young people under the age of 21. The evolving body of adolescent brain research indicates that this pattern is the most detrimental to developing brains.