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Can't Water This Down: Drinking Age of 21 Isn't Working

Spare me the sympathy and the recipes for two.

Yes, my kids are both now in college. No, I'm not rattling around the house, suffering from empty-nest syndrome.

Shoot, I can't even relax these days.

Like many parents, I'm concerned that in addition to psych, lit and sociology, my kids may be dabbling – against my wishes – in hops, grapes and mash.

I'm just going to say it: I suspect my kids, and all of their underage friends, drink at college.

Every stern dinner-table discussion about underage drinking seemed to end the same way, with one of my kids reminding me that when I was their age, it was perfectly legal – in most places – for 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds to drink.

They had a point.

Anyone who believes the 21-year-old limit made milk the drink of choice on college campuses isn't paying attention.

Drinking Age 101: In 1984, the federal government bullied states into increasing the drinking age to 21.

The result? Overnight, common beer drinking on campus was criminalized and underage college kids became outlaws.

It also turned their parents into don't-ask-don't-tell hypocrites and college administrators into keg cops.

It's been a quarter of a century, and the law isn't working. Yes, alcohol-related traffic fatalities are down, but that might be a coincidence.

"The trend started downward in 1982, two years before the law changed," said Nick DeSantis, a staffer with Choose Responsibility, a D.C.-based organization that supports lowering the drinking age.

"And it dropped in all age groups, not just the 18- to 21-year-olds."

There also were other life-saving factors at work during those years, DeSantis noted, including stricter DUI enforcement, mandatory seat belt laws and safer car technology.

In the past year, 135 college presidents, including Charles Steger of Virginia Tech, boldly signed on to a movement called the Amethyst Initiative, which points out that the higher drinking age has created its own set of problems.

I've written about it before. These educators want the country to engage in a discussion about the drinking age. They claim that the over-21 mandate has bred a "culture of dangerous, clandestine binge-drinking" on campuses.

Amen. My first encounter with modern deadly drinking styles came at my daughter's college orientation last year.

"How many parents know what pre-gaming is?" the dean of students asked a packed auditorium.

Pre-gaming?

A few hands went up.

"Take a minute and ask your children," the dean said with a sigh .

"It's when you do a bunch of shots in your room before you go out," my kid whispered.

Terrific.

We can thank the higher drinking age for this little twist on getting twisted. Seems those who are too young to legally drink in bars chug alcohol in private before stumbling out into the night.

Or they get fake IDs and commit another, more serious, crime.

Drinking on college campuses is a fact of life. It's time for a sober look at the laws that turned drinking a beer at a fraternity party into a crime.

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