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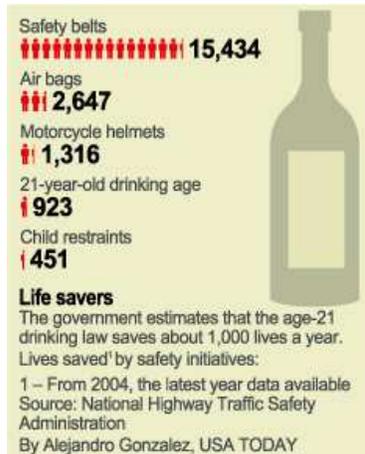
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■ Debate



Our view on legal drinking age: Would an age 18 minimum curb alcohol abuse?

Idea gains traction on campus, but evidence shows 21 law saves

lives.

On most college campuses, only seniors and some juniors are old enough to consume alcohol legally. But you'd never notice that distinction on a Saturday night. Or, for that matter, Thursday night or Friday night.

Despite the minimum drinking age of 21, students of all ages imbibe, many to excess. The [American Medical Association links drinking](#) to 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries and 70,000 sexual assault cases on campuses every year.

This all suggests that the age 21 law has been about as successful at preventing underage drinking as Prohibition was at banning alcohol from society as a whole. So does that mean it's time to revert to 18? Supporters of the idea, which is gaining traction, make a number of logical arguments. But what sounds logical isn't necessarily prudent public policy.

The drinking age is a hot topic on campuses and beyond. In the past five years, four states have considered lowering the age, set at 21 in 1984 by Congress. Former college president John McCardell created an advocacy group, [Choose Responsibility](#), that is pushing for age 18, coupled with an education and licensing program. Not surprisingly, more than 30,000 students have signed a [pro-18 online petition](#).

The pro-18 argument goes like this: If 18-year-olds are allowed to vote and serve in the military, they ought to be able to drink. The age 21 minimum simply undermines respect for the law and prevents young people from learning to drink responsibly at home before they get to college. Once they arrive, the 21 law prevents them from imbibing sociably in restaurants or bars. Instead, students huddle in dorm rooms or fraternity and sorority houses, where they tend to binge on "forbidden fruit" and harm themselves or others.

These arguments are not without merit. The pro-18 case, however, runs aground over the inconvenient truth about highway deaths. In the early 1970s, many states lowered the drinking age to

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18 to accommodate Vietnam War veterans, but when alcohol-related highway deaths rose, states went back to 21.

About 50 major studies point to the same conclusion: On average, traffic deaths drop by 16% when the drinking age goes from 18 to 21. Since 1984, about **25,000 lives have been saved**, federal highway authorities estimate. While it's true that other safety measures, such as seat belts, save even more lives, that's not a reason for giving up the gains attributable to the drinking age.

Lowering the legal drinking age would undoubtedly make even more alcohol, purchased legally by 18-year-olds, available to younger teens, some of whom are just learning to drive. Inexperienced drivers and alcohol are a particularly dangerous mix.

Choose Responsibility's argument that 18-year-olds could be issued "drinking licenses" after completing alcohol education courses is also unconvincing. Would fake drinking licenses be any less rampant than fake IDs are now?

Rather than try to poke holes in leak-proof research, groups such as Choose Responsibility would be better off advising colleges how to deal effectively with a difficult issue, without either turning a blind eye or transforming campuses into police states.

Americans are entering a holiday season, Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve, during which 1,773 people — 247 of them under 21 — were killed in alcohol-related crashes a year ago. To be sure, the problem is far more complex than an arbitrary age limit, be it 18 or 21. But based on the best available evidence, lowering the drinking age would only increase the carnage.

Posted at 12:22 AM/ET, November 26, 2007 in [Drug abuse - Editorial](#), [Lifestyle issues - Editorial](#), [Medical Issues - Editorial](#), [Politics, Government - Editorial](#), [USA TODAY editorial](#) | [Permalink](#)

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AlsoNewman wrote: 11/26/2007 4:34:44 AM

How about increasing the age that young Americans can sign up for military service?

The paradox is that we assume that its fine if an 18 year old puts on the uniform of his or her country and dies in Iraq but can't have a been for another three years.

Sixteen year olds can hurtle down the highway at 65 miles but can't have a glass of wine for another 5 years.

I've seen 40 year olds who shouldn't drink and 19 year olds who are very responsible. Age is only a number, not a guarantee of maturity,

Historically most 18 year olds were married and living as adults with job and family. Decide: Are people between 17-21 young adults or still children.?

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Duane Boda wrote: 11/26/2007 5:47:13 AM

Young adults will die and make mistakes centering on the use of alcohol regardless of whether the age is 21 or 18. For that reason only I say that they should lower the age. It would lessen the overall burden upon our judicial system and jails. If they want to drink they will find a way just in the same way that they will die by mistakes that are made throughout life. Sure...the statistics say that 25,000 lives have been saved but their is a postive side. Taxes collected by the sale of alcohol and lowered cost of

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or elimination of putting young adults through the court system. Youth of this age will stay make mistakes the alcohol only serves to accelerate that rate and yes...even their death if they choose.

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anonymous wrote: 11/26/2007 7:44:45 AM

Research has shown that the area of the brain that controls logic and reasoning is not fully developed until the early- to mid-twenties. I say raise the minimum age to 25.

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The wizard of az wrote: 11/26/2007 8:09:31 AM

It should have never been raised. Most other countries around the world...that don't ban alcohol altogether...have a drinking age of 18...or lower...or none at all...and don't have a major problem with it.

At a minimum...the card carrying (military ID) heroes that we have serving in our armed forces should be the first to have the right!

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foldnll wrote: 11/26/2007 8:12:53 AM

The paradox that always gets me in this argument is this: we are going to charge the 18-21 public with a criminal offense for drinking alcohol and you will be treated as an adult in the court system.... the crime? not being an adult!

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meg9 wrote: 11/26/2007 8:58:06 AM

18 is reasonable. Think about the # of under 21 soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and tell me why they are old enough to get killed in the military, but too young to order a beer?

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Toicat wrote: 11/26/2007 9:03:00 AM

I also agree that age is no guaranty of maturity. Maybe it's time to include an educational course in alcohol and substance abuse as an additional pre-requisite to obtaining a driver permit.

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Thomas Tschinkel wrote: 11/26/2007 9:11:24 AM

I say raise the drivers license age to 18. (I'd allow a grandfathers clause). Too many bad road habits are picked up at an early age. Drinking age could remain at 21 or lower it to 18. Makes no diff to me. It was 18 when I was 18, but I waited to be 18 before I would drink. I also wound up getting my drivers license when I was almost 19. I think the key is road responsibility and that in itself will keep down the drinking even if permitted.

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Film at 11 wrote: 11/26/2007 9:15:28 AM

MSM advocates nanny state, ignores inconvenient truth that lower drinking ages work in EU.

Film at -11.

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