

Underage drinking is a dangerous problem. Some experts are taking a new look at what to do.

Should The Drinking Age Be Lowered?

By Sean Flynn

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If a woman is old enough to sign a contract, buy a house and get married, isn't she also old enough to sip champagne at her wedding? If a man is mature enough to serve on a jury or risk his life in a war halfway around the world, isn't he also mature enough to drink a beer?

And didn't we have this debate almost 40 years ago?

Yes, we did. Back in the 1970s, when young men were conscripted to fight in Vietnam, 29 states lowered their drinking ages to 18, 19 or 20. But in the following decade—when neither war nor the draft were issues but young drunk drivers were—the debate was revived. Faced with a loss of federal highway funds, every state by 1988 had raised its drinking age to 21 (with exceptions in certain situations).

Now, some researchers, educators and lawmakers say it's time to have that debate all over again. Partly, there is a historical echo, as soldiers considered old enough to kill and be killed in Iraq and Afghanistan can't have a farewell toast legally at their hometown watering hole. More broadly, however, many question whether a drinking age of 21 is a good idea at all—whether, in simple terms, it creates more problems than it purports to solve.

"It's bad social policy and bad law," says John McCardell, the former president of Vermont's Middlebury College, who in January launched an organization called Choose Responsibility to urge lower drinking ages in conjunction with education and heavy regulation of 18- to 20-year-olds. "Prohibition does not work. Those [under 21] who are choosing to drink are drinking much more recklessly, and it's gone behind closed doors and underground and off-campus."

No one is suggesting that 18-year-olds should drink themselves into a stupor. Rather, critics of the current drinking laws point out that a sizable minority of 18- to 20-year-olds, and roughly a fifth of 16- and 17-year-olds, already drink heavily often or on occasion.

Indeed, the 21 drinking age isn't so much a law as a slogan: Even supporters concede it is widely flouted and often not enforced. Yet, because 18-year-olds—adults in most other senses—generally can't drink legally in bars and restaurants, they tend to drink in dorm rooms, on isolated fields and at unsupervised house parties, where adults can't watch them. And in those environments, the drinking can be dangerous—especially among young people who have no practical experience with alcohol yet years of exposure to a social and advertising culture that encourages drinking.

“They don't drink the way we drank a generation ago,” says Cynthia Kuhn of Duke University, an expert on the effects of drugs and alcohol. “There's an increasing minority who establish blood-alcohol levels that are nearly lethal.” A practice known as “front-loading”—getting drunk on cheap liquor before a night out—is common, and alcoholic blackouts are no longer rare. “It used to happen to the weird, stupid kid who couldn't hold his liquor, and he did it once,” says Kuhn, who teaches alcohol education to student groups. “Now, it's typical.”

At the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., front-loading is called “pre-gaming,” explains Melissa, a senior who drank illegally for three years. “We'd sit in our dorm rooms—18- and 19-year-olds—and try to drink as much as possible before going out. I think it goes on at every college. No one cares, even when they get caught. They think a speeding ticket is worse.”

Drunkenness also spawns other problems—from assaults and rapes to accidents and alcohol poisonings, both fatal and nearly so. Young adults who are drinking illegally are reluctant to summon help when things go wrong. “If a student passes out, in the old days there was usually someone around to check,” says Alan Marlatt, a psychology professor at the University of Washington who helped develop a widely used alcohol-screening program called BASICS. “Now everyone's afraid of getting caught.”

Critics of the 21-year-old drinking age contend that it is almost universally ignored and breeds a cynical disrespect for the law. About 80% of people have tried alcohol by age 20. Fairness aside, though, perhaps there is another pressing concern. “How can we reduce the harm?” asks David J. Hanson, an alcohol researcher and professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Potsdam. “I think we should teach young people how to drink as well as how not to drink.”

That's the idea behind Choose Responsibility: The group promotes intensive education and drinking licenses for 18-year-olds, akin to learner's permits for young drivers. Get caught drinking before 18 or break any of the strict rules after that, and the license is gone.

“We're never going to get rid of underage drinking,” says John McCardell. “But if a kid knows he has to stay clean in order to get a license at 18, that's a pretty powerful incentive.”

It's not a radical notion. The rest of the world would likely find it rather cautious: Only three other countries—Mongolia, Palau and Indonesia—restrict purchasing drinks to those 21 or older. (Of course, some countries restrict alcohol for all citizens.) But the idea is far from mainstream in America. A 2005 *ABC News* poll, taken on the 21st anniversary of the 1984 federal law that forced states to raise their drinking ages, found that 78% of the public opposed a lower age; at the same time, 75% also said underage drinking was a “serious problem.” In the last three years, legislators in Vermont, New Hampshire and Wisconsin have introduced bills to lower the age (though only for military personnel in Wisconsin and New Hampshire), all of which have quietly withered.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving was the main force behind that 1984 law. It now dismisses McCardell as a dangerous gadfly. “Holy cow, this literally involves life and death,” says Charles A. Hurley, MADD's chief executive officer. “Life-and-death issues of kids are really too important for off-the-cuff musings.”

MADD and other supporters of the 21 law—who far outnumber the critics—point to, among other things, a ream of studies showing a strong correlation between a higher drinking age and a reduction in drunk-driving wrecks involving teenagers. Indeed, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that nearly 25,000 fewer Americans have died on the road because of the higher age. “We already did the experiment of lowering the drinking age [in the 1970s], and traffic crashes went up,” says Ralph Hingson of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, a former MADD vice president. “I don't think it's a good idea to go back and repeat a policy that made things worse.”

In response, McCardell and others say they suspect that various factors contributed to the reduction in fatal alcohol-related wrecks: More people today use seat belts, air bags have become standard, police checkpoints and zero-tolerance laws are more common, and MADD has done a tremendous job of stigmatizing drunk driving. And if the goal is to reduce drunk driving among those under 21, some suggest that the driving age should be raised. “The fact that driving is 16 here and drinking is 21 is the wrong way around,” says Alan Marlatt.

Meanwhile, what about the young adults who are drinking themselves to death off the highways?

On the night of Sept. 16, 2004, Gordie Bailey and 26 other young men gathered in a forest outside Boulder, Colo., as part of an initiation ritual. Between them, they drank seven liters of whiskey and nine liters of wine in less than an hour. When the bottles were empty, they returned to a fraternity house at the University of Colorado. Gordie's fraternity brothers found him dead in the morning.

“Changing the drinking law may not have saved Gordie,” says his stepfather, Michael Lanahan, who helps run a family foundation focused on hazing and reckless drinking. “The total environment has to be looked at. The worst thing is to drive these kids underground.”

What Else Is Being Tried

Holding Parents responsible.

More towns now are holding parents criminally responsible when teens drink under their roofs. A string of such cases has been brought against parents in Westchester County, N.Y. Other towns pursue civil penalties like the \$3,000 double citation brought against Montgomery County, Md., parents.

Targeting purchasers.

If you buy a keg of beer in Arkansas, you must provide your name and pledge that you won't offer it to an underage drinker, which is a misdemeanor. Each keg has a tag that can be traced back to the purchaser. More than 25 states have similar laws.

Educating.

Some universities, aided by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, have found that teaching students the difference between moderate drinking and high-risk consumption reduces dangerous bingeing.

What do you think? Should the drinking age be lowered? Cast your vote in our poll above and share your thoughts in the comments section below.

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Adult should be adult

By kscvann on 8/13/2007 10:07:AM

Isn't it so very ironic that we can send our sons and daughters into a war where they have to make life and death decisions every day, yet we say they are not mature enough to drink? They can use a lethal weapon (the car) in some states as early as 14, yet we say they are not mature enough to drink alcohol at 18? Surely the fact that kids like to drink more simply because it is forbidden must have entered the minds of those staunch anti-alcohol proponents. The difference in the number of alcohol related death is likely related to improved safety as well as a change in the way we think about drunk driving as a society. Thirty years ago it was much more acceptable to drive drunk than it is now. And why is it automatically assumed that the kids that drink will also drive under the influence? I think if

we insist they are mature enough to go to war, marry, have kids of their own, and drive, they must be mature enough to decide on their own if they want to drink alcohol. Otherwise, please do not allow our kids to be sent to war as immature 17 year olds or have children of their own.

A lesson we should be learning from Britain

By drapermsw on 8/13/2007 10:04:AM

The following article "Special report: Under-age drinking" in Britain (see http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/this_britain/article2281387.ece) explains the problems that arise when the legal drinking age is lowered. Keep in mind that in England 18-year-olds can purchase alcohol and 16-year-olds can drink alcohol in a restaurant, if the alcohol is purchased by a parent. The ages of children admitted to hospital for alcohol-related problems are getting lower. The number of eight-year-old-boys who drink has doubled from 5% in 1995 to 10% in 2005. The number of 11-year-old girls who drink has increased from 15% in 1995 to 25% in 2005. A recent government report on alcohol-related deaths showed that the biggest group was men and women aged 35-54 - which is far younger than ever before. Clearly it's beginning to catch up at an earlier stage, which is very worrying. The most serious of these health problems is liver cirrhosis. People in their 20s and 30s are now ending up with serious liver problems which, until recently, were normally seen in people twice those ages. I don't know why anyone would think that under-age drinking problems would go away by making drinking permissible at a younger age. Call me crazy, but with people dying younger because they started drinking younger, I think we shouldn't be lowering the age.

Yes, but(part I)

By renman on 8/13/2007 9:48:AM

Once again America stick it's collective head in the sand and refuses to learn from others instead preferring to criminalize the behavior of parents seeking to teach their children responsible use of alcohol. In many states it is now a crime for parents to serve their own under-aged children any type of alcohol, even a small glass of wine with supper. They can be charged not only with breaking the laws regarding serving a minor but also with child abuse. How moronic. Travel to Europe and witness children learning from an early age the proper use of alcohol as they have it severed to them as part of a normal family meal. Even the Bible says "train up a child" not "wait until they are an adult." Training to NOT abuse, but to properly use and respect the power of alcohol must start early. Doubly funny -- how the medical establishment out one side of the mouth decries alcohol abuse but out the other side tells as, as Paul did Timothy in the Bible, that a little alcohol taken with a meal is good for you. Further, don't under estimate the "forbidden fruit factor." What you can't have, you want even more.

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