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The Status Quo Has Bombed

The 21 drinking age has fostered a secret culture of binge-drinking

By *John McCardell*

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It is time to rethink the drinking age. That's the message of nearly 130 college and university presidents who have signed on to the Amethyst Initiative, which declares that the 21 drinking age does not work and has created a culture of binge drinking on campus. While the initiative intentionally does not prescribe a specific new policy, it seeks a debate that acknowledges the current law's failure. (As a former college president, I am not a signatory, but I have helped spearhead the effort.)



Effective laws reflect social and cultural reality, not abstract ideals.

The National Minimum Legal Drinking Age Act could not, constitutionally, mandate a national drinking age. Instead, it allowed the states to set the age as they chose. If, however, the age was lower than 21, the state would forfeit 10 percent of its federal highway appropriation.

End of debate. Until now.

As the discussion renews in earnest throughout the media and society, "science" will be used to support the status quo. Yet any survey of the evidence at hand shows that the data are peskily inconsistent. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, a respected authority, believes that the 21-year-old drinking age works. Yet its website reveals that of 5,000 Americans under the age of 21 who die of alcohol-related causes each year, only 1,900 are traffic fatalities, meaning the remaining 3,100 occur *off* the highways. Drunk teens behind the wheel are less of a problem than those drinking in private.

And drinking continues to be widespread among adolescents: The institute says that 75 percent of 12th graders, two thirds of 10th graders, and two fifths of eighth graders have consumed alcohol. Not surprisingly, the institute concludes that we have an "enormous public health issue." The Institute of Medicine notes that "more youth drink than smoke tobacco or use illegal drugs." The estimated annual social cost of underage drinking is \$53 billion. These statistics will most likely not be offered in support of the current law.

Moreover, the evidence that raising the drinking age has been primarily responsible for the decline in alcohol-related traffic fatalities (a trend that effectively stopped in the mid-1990s and has been inching upward) is underwhelming. One survey of research on this subject revealed that about half of the studies looked at found a cause-and-effect relationship between the 21 drinking age and diminishing alcohol-related traffic fatalities—and half showed no relationship whatsoever.

Hidden drinking. Yet college presidents are pilloried for daring to question our current laws. Even though many students who enter their institutions have already consumed alcohol, the presidents are labeled "shirkers" and "lawbreakers" for not enforcing an unenforceable law. The more they crack down on campus drinking, the more they simply force that behavior into clandestine locations, often off campus, beyond their sight and their authority.

Where, after all, does "binge drinking" take place? Not in public places, from which the law has effectively banned alcohol consumption, but in locked dorm rooms, off-campus apartments, farmers' fields, and other risky environments.

The "abstinence" message—the only one legally permissible—is failing, as prohibition has always failed. Presidents looking for a solution find such remarkable documents as the 2002 "Call to Action," written by a National Institutes of Health task force, which advises presidents to, in effect, break the law. It describes programs to "reduce," not eliminate, alcohol consumption. It recommends teaching "students basic principles of moderate drinking." In short, it advises what others have condemned.

Effective laws reflect not abstract, unattainable ideals but rather social and cultural reality. The reality in this case is that one is a legal adult at age 18; that alcohol is present in the lives of young adults ages 18 to 20; that most of the rest of the world has come out in a very different place on this issue; and that the 21-year-old drinking age is routinely evaded. Either we are a nation of lawbreakers, or this is a bad law.

What do you think? Should the U.S. drinking age stay at 21? Or should it be changed? You can join the debate at usnews.com/drinkingage.

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