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Prohibition's lessons on the drinking age

[Print Page](#)

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CHOOSE RESPONSIBILITY

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Seventy-five years ago on Sept. 26, the citizens of Colorado voted overwhelmingly to ratify the 21st Amendment, which withdrew the constitutional authority for Prohibition.

By this historic vote, Colorado joined 23 other states whose previous pro-ratification votes expressed a collective disgust with more than a decade of mayhem and destruction that accompanied our nation's bold but misguided attempt to prevent adult citizens from consuming alcohol. On Dec. 5, 1933, Utah became the 36th state to ratify the amendment, thus driving the final nail into Prohibition's coffin, and laying it to rest.

Until 1984.

That year a self-appointed moral majority led by Mothers Against Drunk Driving persuaded Congress to enact the National Legal Drinking Age Act, which, by stipulating that any state with a legal drinking age lower than 21 risked the loss of 10 percent of its federal highway funds, made 21 the national legal drinking age.

After nearly a quarter-century, it is fair to ask how this modern reprise of Prohibition has worked out. The answer, I'm afraid, is very badly.

In the same way that speakeasies during Prohibition functioned as havens where alcohol could be consumed out of the sight of enforcement officials, today's young adults frequent fraternity house basements and other hideaways where they engage in furtive binge drinking. Private homes and college dorm rooms serve as venues for "pre-gaming," in which young people under the legal drinking age consume large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time in order to become and remain sufficiently intoxicated to spend a night moving from party to party.

It is no surprise that substantial numbers of these young adults become the victims of alcohol poisoning, serious bodily injury, sexual abuse and death.

Legal Age 21 has had the predictable effect of worsening the problem it was intended to solve. Prohibition's abject failure should have taught us that trying to eliminate an ingrained social behavior by legislative fiat simply does not work. Such ill-advised policies simply drive the consumption of alcohol from public view, significantly increasing the hazards that irresponsible drinking imposes on the health and safety of us all.

In most other respects adults between the ages of 18-21 are deemed to have reached the age of majority. They

can legally drive, sign contracts, serve on a jury and join the military. But they can't buy a beer in a restaurant.

Young adults should be treated as such, even when it comes to alcohol. If we devise ways to educate them about alcohol consumption in a broad way that goes beyond temperance lectures and scary messages about brain damage, we can certify that they have reached a level of understanding that qualifies them to exercise adult judgment.

We should reconsider the bad law and poor social policy that allow these problems to fester in the shadows. Prohibition demonstrated conclusively that relegating drinking by any age group to the dark corners of society, where the effects of risky behaviors remain unobserved and unaddressed, is both destructive and ineffective.

[«] Return to Home | [x] Close Window