



# Should 21 be the legal drinking age?

RECENTLY, SOME 120 chancellors and presidents of universities and colleges across the country called for debate on the current drinking laws. They say the 21-year-old drinking age is not working, that it has created a culture of dangerous binge drinking on campuses and should be replaced with education, certification and provisional licensing for 18- to 20 year-old high school graduates who choose to consume alcohol. Critics of this initiative argue that countless lives have been saved since Congress raised the national minimum drinking age to 21. Also, they say that it is impossible to ignore the scientific evidence demonstrating the dangers of underage drinking and that lowering the drinking age is irresponsible. What do you think?



**Find out more about this topic on the Web:**

- [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/24/opinion/lweb24binge.html?\\_r=2&oref=slogin&ref=opinion&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/24/opinion/lweb24binge.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&ref=opinion&pagewanted=print)
- <http://why21.org/>
- [www.amethystinitiative.org/](http://www.amethystinitiative.org/)
- <http://inst.sfcc.edu/~hfl/speech/drinkage.htm>

## YES

**from members:**

**Lisa DeJesus**  
Stamford, CT



Although today's 18-year-olds appear to be more mature, they still are not truly responsible when alcohol comes into play.

**Marvin West**  
Jacksonville, FL



I have a problem with the 18-year-old, cell-phone in one hand, alcohol in the other, attempting to drive.

**Paula Dunmire**  
Meridian, ID



With age is supposed to come wisdom.

## NO

**from members:**

**Kayvan Khatami**  
Leesburg, VA



If we can send 18- to 21-year-olds to war and expect them to make the right decisions, we can expect them to be responsible with drinking.

**Judy Krzan**  
Richland, WA



Twenty-one should be the minimum age; 25 should be the new legal drinking age.

**Daniel Negrete**  
Union City, CA



There will always be drunk drivers, regardless of age. It all depends on the person.

**from experts in the field:**



**Laura Dean-Mooney** is the national president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving ([www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org)).

AS THE MOTHER of a 17-year-old daughter going to college next fall, I know that underage drinking can be a tough subject for parents and school leaders. The solution to preventing college binge drinking starts with keeping the minimum legal drinking age at 21.

This law saves lives by reducing the number of fatal drunk-driving crashes caused by young drivers. Since states started passing the age-21 law—well before 1984—more than 25,000 lives have been saved, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In fact, more than 50 peer-reviewed studies show that the age-21 law saves lives.

Parents support the age-21 law. According to an August 2008 Nationwide Insurance poll, 72 percent of adults think lowering the drinking age would make alcohol more accessible to kids and nearly half think it would increase binge drinking among teenagers. The younger youths are when they drink, the more likely it is that they will become dependent on alcohol and drive drunk later in life. I know the problems that high school leaders face on this issue, and it does not make sense to make this problem worse by increasing teenagers' access to alcohol.

MADD and our health, safety and law-enforcement partners would like to see the same energy spent on the so-called 21 debate channeled into solutions that we know work to reduce college binge drinking. These solutions include changing the environment in and around campuses to discourage crazy binge-drinking games and limiting access to alcohol by enforcing the age-21 law.

These solutions have been suggested for years, yet some universities and colleges have failed to implement them. This failure has resulted in misinformation, continued lack of enforcement and such tragic headlines as "COLLEGE STUDENT KILLED DUE TO ALCOHOL POISONING" or "COLLEGE STUDENT KILLED DUE TO DRINKING AND DRIVING CRASH" or "COLLEGE STUDENT KILLED DUE TO DRINKING AND FALLING FROM A DORM WINDOW."

We welcome discussion with college and university presidents who want to encourage responsible drinking behavior among their students. But lowering the age-21 law is nonnegotiable.

**from experts in the field:**



**John M. McCardell Jr.**, former president of Middlebury College, is the founder of Choose Responsibility, formed to promote informed public debate about the effects of the 21-year-old legal drinking age ([www.chooseresponsibility.org](http://www.chooseresponsibility.org)).

THE VAST MAJORITY of young adults, whether in college or not, consume alcohol before they turn 21. Yet the United States is one of only four countries with a legal drinking age as old as 21.

For 18- to 20-year-olds, the drinking age has effectively banished alcohol from public places and public view, but has done little to reduce excessive drinking. If you were to design the ideal location for binge drinking, it would be a locked dorm room, an off-campus apartment, a farmer's field—all places conducive to clandestine behavior. And that is exactly where binge drinking is taking place, in the most risky of environments.

Paradoxically, the more successful a college is in enforcing the law—carding underage drinkers, limiting quantities, posting campus security—the greater the likelihood that alcohol consumption will move out of campus sight and often beyond campus boundaries, effectively placing that behavior out of reach of campus authority.

The result? More than 5,000 lives are lost to alcohol each year by those under 21—more than 60 percent of these off the highways. To these grim numbers must be added the assaults, date rapes, emergency room visits, all of which are increasing despite the 21 legal limit.

Instead of treating young adults like criminals, what if we instead encouraged responsible drinking by acknowledging students' adulthood and the reality of the presence of alcohol in their lives? What if we developed an education program that went beyond temperance lectures and scare tactics to help young adults make responsible decisions about alcohol? And then, what if, once they completed this curriculum, completed high school and demonstrated that they had never violated the alcohol laws in their state of residence, they were to receive a license that would allow them, so long as they continued to observe the law, to consume alcohol like the adults the law says, in every other respect, they are? Might this create both an incentive not to drink before turning 18 and a much safer, public and manageable environment for alcohol consumption for those who reach the age of majority?

**NOVEMBER DEBATE UPDATE:**  
Should photo identification be required for voting?



Percentage reflects votes received by November 12, 2008.



**OCTOBER DEBATE RESULTS:**  
Should there be a national speed limit?

**YES: 22% NO: 78%**

Percentage reflects votes received by October 31, 2008.



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