You Must Be 21 to Drink?

Dartmouth College has decided to ban hard liquor from campus. But is that the best way to deal with underage drinking?

Return the Drinking Age to 18, and Enforce It

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Return the drinking age to 18 -- and then enforce the law. The current system, which forbids alcohol to Americans under 21, is widely flouted, with disastrous consequences. Teaching people to drink responsibly before they turn 21 would enormously enhance public health. Now, high school and college kids view dangerous binge drinking as a rite of passage.

The current law, passed in all 50 states in the 1980s, was intended to diminish the number of traffic deaths caused by young drunk drivers. It has succeeded in that -- but tougher seatbelt and D.U.I. rules have contributed to the decrease, too. Raising the drinking age hasn't reduced drinking -- it’s merely driven it underground, to the riskiest of settings: unsupervised high school blowouts and fraternity parties that make "Animal House" look quaint. This age segregation leads the drinking away from adults, who could model moderation.

The roots of this extreme drinking lie in our own history. Prohibition, which banned most alcohol in the United States from 1920 to 1933, normalized the frenzied sort of drinking that occurs today at college parties. In speakeasies and blind pigs, the goal was to drink as much and as soon as possible, because you never knew when the feds would show up. Today's law, likewise, encourages young people to dodge the system. Like Prohibition -- and abstinence-only sex education -- it’s been a dismal failure.

A 2009 study published in The Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs found that between 1998 and 2005, the number of cases of alcohol poisoning deaths among 18- to 24-year-olds nearly tripled, jumping from 779 cases to 2,290. The study also tracks a rise in fatalities from hypothermia and falls. Some reports link excess drinking to sexual assault.

American 18-year-olds have the right to vote, marry, buy guns and join the military. They're astute enough to defend their country, decide elected officials and serve on a jury -- but not regulate their own appetites? They deserve the chance to learn.

We don't hand teenagers car keys without first educating them about how to drive. Why expect 21-year-olds to learn how to drink responsibly without learning from moderate models, at home and in alcohol education programs?

Keep the Drinking Age High

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Alcohol use in the United States i++s a serious public health concern, particularly among teenagers and young adults.

Recent results from a national survey found that by eighth grade, approximately 27 percent had used alcohol, which increased to 66 percent by 12th grade. Additionally, a second national survey indicated that among high school seniors, about 20 percent binge drank, consuming more than 5 drinks in one occasion, during the two-week period preceding the survey. Heavy drinking is associated with negative social, mental and physical health outcomes -- including risk of violent behavior, sexual assault, accidents that cause injury, additional drug use, poor academics, legal troubles, and family and interpersonal problems. Those most likely to experience harm from heavy drinking are young people, particularly those of college age.

Thus lowering the drinking age would be harmful in two ways. First, young people, those most likely to be harmed from drinking, will have greater access to alcohol. Second, lowering the drinking age may lead to lowered perception of risk. When perception of risk from a particular substance decreases, prevalence rates tend to increase.

If the perception of risk is increased, then drinking quantity and frequency may decrease. For example, my colleagues and I found that compared to Caucasians, African-Americans tend to report later initiation to alcohol, lower rates of use, engage in less heavy drinking and show slower increases in rates of drinking across adolescence and young adulthood. These racial differences may be in part because perception of risk is stronger among African-American parents and peers, and they consider alcohol more harmful than their white counterparts.

Studies have shown that African-Americans are less likely to endorse permissive attitudes about drinking compared to their white peers. African-American college students report less heavy drinking because they anticipate more criticism for drinking heavily by their non-white university peers.

We can learn a lot from these findings about the importance of communicating the risk, harm and disapproval of substance and alcohol use among young people to help decrease its use. By decreasing the drinking age these efforts may be threatened.

Lower the Drinking Age to 19

*Laurence Steinberg, a professor of psychology at Temple University, is the author of “Age of Opportunity: Lessons From the New Science of Adolescence.”*

The United States is one of a handful of countries that uses 21 as the minimum legal drinking age. Pretty much the rest of the developed world sets the minimum drinking age at 18.

As a college professor who studies adolescent brain development, I’m pulled in two directions on this issue. The chief argument in favor of a higher drinking age is that it saves lives by reducing automobile crashes, but I’m not persuaded by this reasoning. If highway safety really is the main concern, we’d accomplish much more by raising the driving age. Moreover, countries that use 18 for both the drinking and driving age generally have safer highways than the United States.

A stronger argument for keeping 21 as the minimum drinking age comes from neuroscience: It helps keep legal drinkers out of high school social networks, which is important, because alcohol is especially damaging to the adolescent brain, and because beginning to drink during high school is relatively more likely to lead to later abuse and addiction than delaying drinking until adulthood.

On the other hand, having a drinking age of 21 has put colleges and universities in the difficult position of having to police a population of drinkers, half of whom are legally permitted to drink, and half of whom are not. This leads to an enormous amount of illegal drinking on campus, which in turn leads to drinking in unregulated and unmonitored settings, where problem drinking is all too easy. A fraternity president can look the other way when someone funnels a bottle of vodka; a bartender will not -- or if he does, he won’t be in business very long.

In the end, I favor lowering the drinking age to 19, which would help solve the problem of illegal drinking on campus -- although some undergrads are younger than 19, the vast majority are not -- while still making it illegal for high school students to drink, thereby limiting the flow of legally (and easily) purchased alcohol into younger adolescents’ social networks.

Lowering the Drinking Age Has Serious Consequences

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There are some good arguments for lowering the drinking age from 21: It is unpopular among most young adults; it arguably encourages underground binge drinking; enforcement is a complete failure on college campuses. And it is notable, of course, that an 18-year-old is considered an adult in almost every context -- including in the voting booth -- except when ordering a beer.

But research has shown that a drinking age of 21 does reduce alcohol use by those under 21, including high school students. Alcohol consumption by young adults has demonstrable and serious costs: for example, a lower drinking age leads to more traffic fatalities. Indeed, traffic accidents are a primary reason why Vietnam-era experimentation with lower drinking ages was abandoned. Other impacts of lowering the drinking age may be less obvious, but no less costly.

My research with Angela Fertig examined the impact of the drinking age by looking back at the 1980s, when many states moved from a minimum of 18 to 21. Our study found that a lower drinking age was associated with a statistically higher risk of unintended pregnancy and, largely as a result, worse infant health.

Research by economists Christopher Carpenter and Carlos Dobkin shows that arrest rates for violent and nuisance crimes rise sharply at age 21 and persist through at least age 23. A lower drinking age would likely cause this period of alcohol-related criminal activity to start earlier and last longer. Evidence also suggests that a lower drinking age leads to higher levels of binge drinking later in life among men.

Any move toward increasing alcohol availability to young adults must consider its adverse effects, including traffic fatalities, unplanned pregnancy and crime. Policies like increased public transit availability, access to birth control and educational initiatives focused on harm reduction rather than abstinence have been shown to mitigate the detrimental effects of alcohol use by young adults. Lowering the drinking age will only succeed as part of a comprehensive set of policies that address the unintended consequences.

Raising the Drinking Age to 21 Has Been a Disastrous 30-Year Experiment

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As a former college president, I have joined with many of my colleagues to advocate lowering the minimum drinking age from 21 to 18, because we believe the 21-year-old limit has created, rather than solved, problems. America’s earlier experiment with prohibition was a notorious failure. Yet in 1984, America again enacted prohibition on a more limited scale, becoming one of only a handful of nations in the world with a minimum drinking age of 21. I believe that our 30 years of experience with prohibition for young people has been a serious failure as well.

There are a number of arguments against the 21-year minimum age. Foremost, in my mind, is the dramatic rise in binge drinking among young people since the 1984 change — with its consequent danger to health and safety. When it is legal for an 18-year-old to drive, marry or serve in the military but illegal for him or her to drink a beer, the illogic of the situation is patent. As a result, the overwhelming response of young people has been, not compliance, but contempt for the law. By outlawing moderate use of alcohol in appropriate social contexts and with adult oversight, we have driven more drinking underground, where it has taken the very dangerous form of “pre-gaming.” The “under-age” drinker, no longer permitted the occasional beer during a dance party, is now more likely to chug high-octane alcohol in dangerous quantities before heading off to that party. As a result, alcohol use has become more, not less, dangerous.

There are other negative consequences for our society as well. The ubiquity of non-compliance has led to a more generalized diffidence toward the law — both a sense that it may be selectively obeyed and a perception that one is powerless to change it. Evaluation of this 30-year legal experiment could and should be informed by research from cognitive science, physiology, anthropology and sociology, data on traffic accidents and automobile construction, etc. But powerful lobbies block dispassionate and informed debate on the topic.

As an educator, I hope to encourage our young people to reach rational decisions, based on reasoned argument. In the case of the minimum drinking age, they can hardly look to their elders to find that kind of behavior modeled.

Current Drinking Age of 21 Is Working

*Christopher S. Carpenter is a professor of economics at Vanderbilt University.*

Critics of the current minimum legal drinking age argue that 21 is not working. The data, however, suggest otherwise.

In a series of studies, my colleague Carlos Dobkin and I examined millions of young people age 19 to 22 using data from public health surveys, death certificates, arrest records and discharge reports from hospitals and emergency rooms across the country. The results are striking and confirm that a minimum legal drinking age of 21 is working. Alcohol consumption jumps sharply exactly at age 21 and remains elevated (i.e., more than a one-time birthday-related drinking celebration). Deaths jump sharply exactly at age 21 by about 9 percent and remain elevated. Arrests jump sharply exactly at age 21 and remain elevated. And hospitalizations jump sharply exactly at age 21 and remain elevated.

While some of these effects are due to the "usual suspects" (for example, motor vehicle accidents), we also find clear evidence that physical assaults increase sharply exactly at age 21, confirming a causal chain between alcohol access and physical violence. Others have used this same approach to show that psychological distress and academic performance also worsen exactly at age 21.

Numerous policies and proposals have been put forth to address the troubling profile of excessive alcohol use by young people. Many of these need more research to demonstrate their effectiveness on a broad population-wide scale, but a minimum legal drinking age of 21 is not one of them.