

Minimum Legal Drinking Age Saves Lives



After Prohibition, nearly every state designated 21 as the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA). In the 1970s, 29 states lowered their drinking age to 18, 19 or 20, which led to increases in alcohol sales and consumption, as well as alcohol-related traffic injuries and fatalities, among youth.¹ By 1983, 16 states raised their MLDA back to 21 to address the increased drinking and driving traffic fatalities among youth.

In 1984, the federal government enacted the Uniform Drinking Age Act, which reduced federal transportation funds for those states that did not raise their MLDA to 21. By 1988, all states had set the minimum legal drinking age at 21.² This policy's goal is to curb youth drinking and reduce its associated problems, especially traffic injuries and fatalities.³

- Alcohol is the number one drug of choice among America's youth.⁴
- Every day in the U.S., 7,000 youth under age 16 have their first drink of alcohol.⁵
- Approximately 5,000 youth under age 21 die annually as a result of alcohol-related injuries; 38% of those deaths involve car accidents, 32% result from homicides, and about 6% (300 deaths) are suicides.⁴
- The highest prevalence of alcohol dependence among U.S. drinkers is people 18-20 years old.⁴
- A stunning 25.9% of underage drinkers meet the clinical criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence, compared to 9.6% of adult drinkers.⁶
- In countries with lower minimum legal drinking ages, youth 15 to 16 years old engage in binge drinking⁷ more than double the rate of the U.S.^{4, 8, 9}
- The total national cost of underage drinking was estimated at \$61.9 billion in 2001.¹⁰
- A review of 49 studies examining the effect of MLDA changes from 18 to 21 years or vice versa found that when the MLDA was lowered, fatalities increased by 10%. When the MLDA was increased, fatalities decreased by 16%.¹¹
- There is no evidence that a lower minimum legal drinking age is associated with fewer traffic crashes.³
- A review of 132 studies (published over a 40-year period) found strong evidence that changes in minimum drinking age laws had substantial effects on youth drinking and alcohol-related harm, particularly road traffic accidents, often for years after young people reach the legal drinking age.³
- Establishing 21 as the minimum legal drinking age has:
 - saved 1000 lives per year,¹² including more than 800 lives among young adults aged 18-20.^{12, 13}
 - led to decreases in the number of teen DWI arrests, marijuana use, vandalism, crime, and alcohol consumption among youth.^{15, 16}
 - reduced the likelihood that students binge drink at colleges where the 21 MLDA laws were strongly enforced.¹⁷
 - decreased traffic crashes, traffic fatalities, suicide, and consumption by those under age 21.¹⁸
 - reduced alcohol-related traffic deaths by 59% among youth ages 15 - 20 in 2000.¹⁹

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- decreased the number of alcohol-related traffic deaths among 16 - 20 year-olds from 5,244 in 1982 to 2,115 in 2004.²⁰

- Maintaining the minimum legal drinking age at 21, as well as strengthening enforcement and developing policies that enhance the MLDA, are effective measures to lower alcohol consumption and related harm among young people.²¹

- Agencies that support the MLDA of 21 years include: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of the US Surgeon General, Governors Highway Safety Association, and American Public Health Association.^{21, 22, 23}

Bottom Line: It's difficult to find a more successful (or more widely studied) public health intervention than keeping the minimum drinking age at 21. Anyone who argues to the contrary ignores the overwhelming scientific evidence.

- For more information, please visit www.why21.org

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