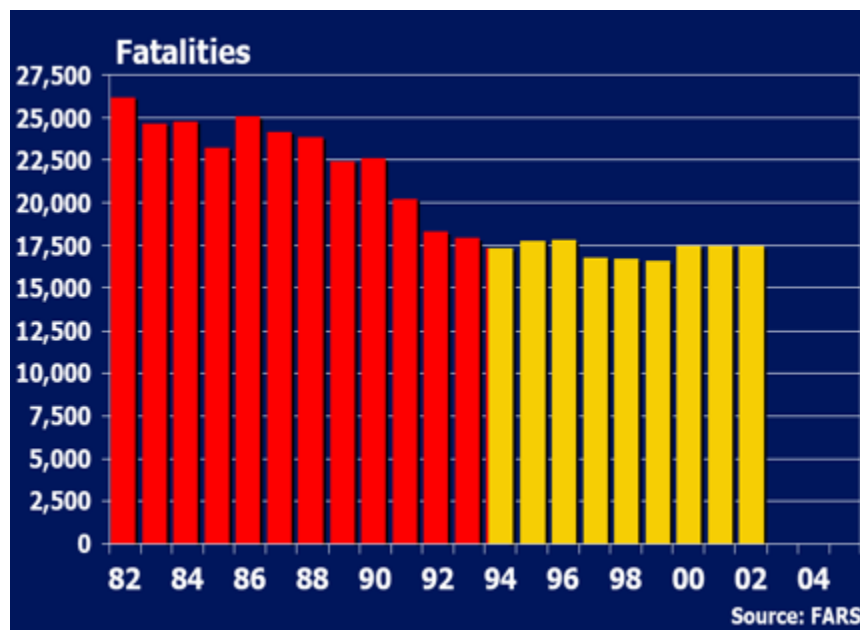


Safety Concerns Related to a Lower Drinking Age for Active Duty Military

Drunken Driving Fatalities

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines a fatal crash as alcohol-related if either a driver or a non-motorist had a measurable or estimated blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.01 or above.¹ Alcohol-related traffic fatalities, better known as drunken driving fatalities, were the key factor behind the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984.² As the graph shows alcohol-related traffic fatalities have decreased over the years.³ Advocates of the 21 year-old drinking age have long argued that the decrease in fatalities was a result of the higher drinking age.⁴

Number of alcohol-related fatalities from 1982-2002



There is little disputing that this statistical decline represents the cumulative effect of a great many changes not limited to the 21 year-old drinking age. Motor vehicles are in general much safer now than they were in 1982, when, for example, air bags were rare and crash-worthiness was an unknown term.⁵ Drivers are in general better protected, owing not only to these safety features but also to mandatory seatbelt laws.⁶ Law enforcement is much more vigorous now than in 1982, with advances in radar and breathalyzer technology, airbag and anti-lock brake requirements, the increased use of sobriety checkpoints, advent of zero tolerance laws in all 50 states, growth in use of ignition interlock devices, and a lower minimum BAC.⁷ Finally, the “designated driver,” a term virtually unknown in 1982, has now become commonplace. Indeed, research showing a 25% reduction in the tendency to drink and drive would seem to suggest designated driving is the norm and not the exception.⁸

1 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2002). *Traffic safety facts 2001: A compilation of motor vehicle crash data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System and the General Estimates System* (DOT HS 809 484). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation.

2 Presidential Commission Recommendations. Retrieved January 20, 2005, from:
http://www.ncadd.com/pc_recommendations.cfm

3 Runge, J.W. (2003, October 21). *Impaired driving in the US: Progress and research needs*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Transportation Safety Administration. Retrieved May 1, 2006, from:
http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/nhtsa/announce/speeches/0310211Runge/ABMRF_Present.pdf

4 Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). *Why 21?* Retrieved November 8, 2005, from:
<http://madd.com/under21/4847>

5 Kindelberger, J. (2005). Calculating lives saved due to minimum drinking age law. *Research Note*, March, 1-4.

6 Glassbrenner, D. (2005). Safety Belt Use in 2005 – Use Rates in the States and Territories. *NHTSA Research Note*.

7 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2004). *Traffic safety facts: Laws*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation. Retrieved July 17, 2006, from:
<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/new-fact-sheet03/VehicleLicensePlate.pdf>

8 Levitt, S.D. & Porter, J. (2001). How Dangerous are Drinking Drivers? *Journal of Political Economy*, 109(6), 1198-1237.

Washington DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

- [Drunk Driving Fatalities](#)
- [Drunk Driving Fatalities and Population Change](#)

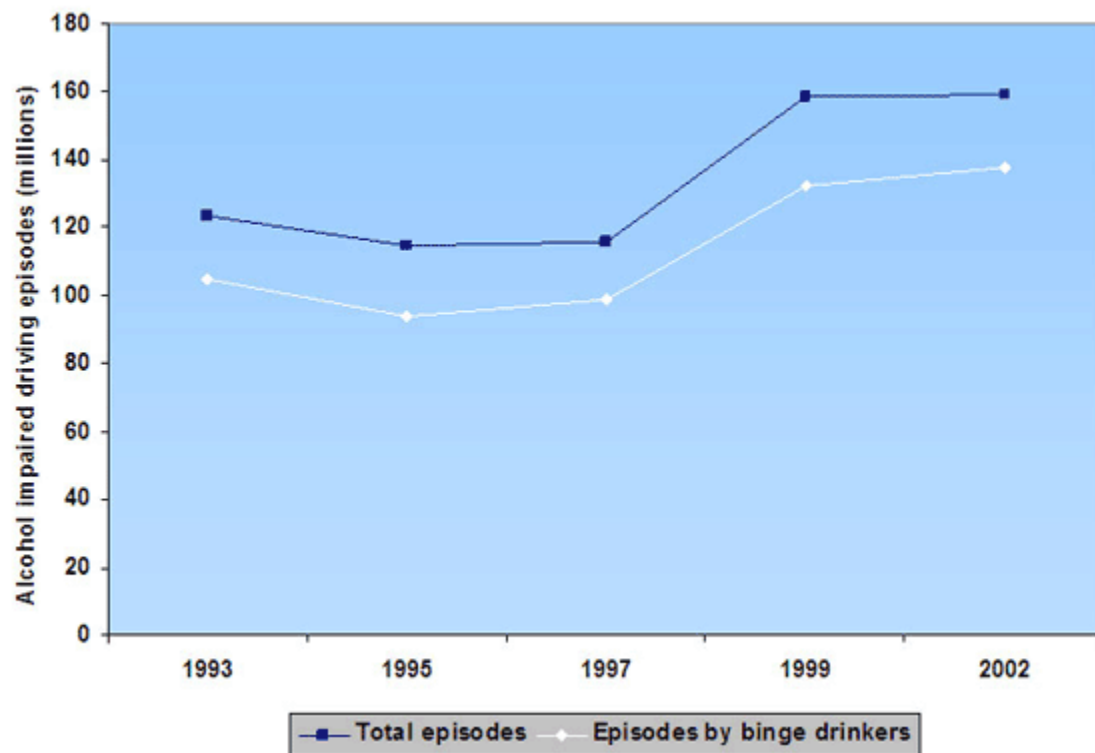
Binge Drinking

We are facing a growing public health crisis with binge drinking. The roots of this problem are deeper than any one cause or policy—they are cultural. In order to address binge drinking, we need to consider both our laws and our societal attitudes about alcohol use. Drinking to get drunk, for anyone at any age, is unacceptable.

Over the last 25 years, some drinking laws were intended to help alleviate alcohol-related problems among young people, but may have had the unintended effect of increasing reckless drinking behavior. Under Legal Age 21, for example, we have seen a movement away from moderate consumption and towards drinking to get drunk. While there is little in the research to indicate that moderate consumption represents harm to young people, abusive consumption – binge drinking – spells trouble for our nation’s youth and for the public at large.

Binge Drinking and Drunken Driving (citations)

While binge drinking itself is cause for concern, a new study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggests that a rise in drunken driving in the 18-34 age group is traceable to the growth of binge drinking in that population. [1](#) “The increase in alcohol-impaired driving episodes,” the lead author Kyran Quinlan concludes, “is probably due, at least in part, to the substantial increase in binge drinking episodes.... Indeed, prevention efforts in the United States are likely to be of limited success unless they are coupled with efforts to also reduce the prevalence of binge drinking.” [2](#) Despite increased prevention efforts the number of alcohol-impaired driving episodes is greater than before.



The conclusion drawn is that the recent spike in drunken driving, after years of declining fatalities may be the result of increased binge drinking. It logically follows that the tendency to drive after drinking remains high in the 18-34 age group because binge drinking is disproportionately common amongst that population.

1 Quinlan, K.P., Brewer, R.D., Siegel, P., Sleet, D.A., Mokdad, A.H., Shults, R.A. & Flower, N. (2005). Alcohol-impaired driving among U.S. adults, 1993-2002. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28(4), 346-350.

2 *ibid.*

Binge Drinking by the Numbers

Despite the 21 year-old drinking age law, large numbers of young people under 21 are drinking, and often they are drinking heavily.

- 18-20 year olds experienced a 56% increase in binge drinking between 1993 and 2001.[1](#)
- More than 90% of all alcohol consumed by underage drinkers is consumed during binge drinking.[2](#)
- College students experienced a nearly 10% increase in the rate of drinking to get drunk between 1993 and 2001, which corresponded to an increase in consequences like injuries and assaults, and treatment for alcohol overdose.[3](#)

These alarming rates have serious and even life-threatening implications for young people and the rest of society

- Over 1,000 lives of 18-24 year-olds are lost annually to alcohol **off the highways**, a figure that has been increasing since 1998.[4](#)
- Approximately one in six teenagers has experienced ‘black out’ spells where they could not remember what happened the previous evening as a result of heavy alcohol use.[5](#)
- Among college students specifically, alcohol annually contributes to some 1,700 deaths, 599,000 injuries, and 97,000 cases of sexual assault.[6](#)
- Sixty percent of the deaths that occur as a result of underage drinking happen off the highways.[7](#)

All of this is happening in the face of a law that says until you’re 21, you may not drink. The 21 year-old drinking age has been in place for nearly 25 years, and we are still facing an environment where drinking by people under 21 is the norm. These disturbing rates of law breaking and binge drinking should serve as a call to action for parents, educators, and lawmakers. We must work together to revisit this law and all the issues that have created this destructive culture.

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- 1 Naimi, T.S., Brewer, R.D., Mokdad, A., Denny, C., Serdula, M., & Marks, J.S. (2003). Binge drinking among U.S. Adults. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 289(1), 70-75.
 - 2 Institutes of Medicine. (2003). *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*. Washington: National Academies Press.
 - 3 Wechsler, H., Lee, J.E., Kuo, M., Seibring, M., Nelson, T.F. & Lee, H. (2002). Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from 4 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study surveys 1993-2001. *Journal of American College Health*, 50(5), 203-217.
 - 4 Hingson, R., Hereen, T., Winter, M., Weschler, H. (2005). Magnitude of alcohol related mortality and morbidity among US college students ages 18-24: Changes from 1998 to 2001. *Annual Review of Public Health*, (26), 259-279.
 - 5 American Academy of Pediatrics, AAP Releases New Findings on Teens and Underage Drinking, Washington, D.C., 1998.
 - 6 Hingson, R., Hereen, T., Winter, M., Weschler, H. (2005). Magnitude of alcohol related mortality and morbidity among US college students ages 18-24: Changes from 1998 to 2001. *Annual Review of Public Health*, (26), 259-279.
 - 7 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2006). Alcohol Alert #67: Why do adolescents drink, what are the risks, and how can underage drinking be prevented . Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Drinking and Culture: International Comparisons (citations)

Because the United States is among an extremely small minority of countries with a drinking age of 21 (Mongolia, Indonesia and Palau are the others), drinking by 18-20 year-old adults is not as intensely scrutinized in other parts of the world as it is in America. Drinking by younger adolescents, especially when excessive or risky in nature, however, is a concern widely shared by parents, public health officials, and governments throughout the world.

Recent research published by the World Health Organization found that in many European countries where the drinking age is 18 or younger (and often not enforced), 15 and 16 year-old teens have more drinking occasions per month, but fewer occasions of dangerous intoxication than their American counterparts. In many southern European countries roughly one in ten of all drinking occasions results in intoxication, while in the United States almost half of all drinking occasions result in intoxication. In these countries the introduction of alcohol typically comes from parents. In the United States, where the drinking age is 21, parents are not legally afforded that opportunity, and as a result initiation to alcohol consumption is not responsibly controlled.^{[1](#)}

1 Babor, T., Caetano, R., Casswell, S., Edwards, G., Giesbrecht, N., Graham, K., Grube, J., Gruenewald, P., Hill, L., Holder, H., Homel, R., Osterberg, E., Rehm, J., Room, R. & Rossow, I. (2003). *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Repeal of National Prohibition

2008 marked an important milestone: the 75th Anniversary of the repeal of Prohibition. Enacted by a Constitutional amendment in 1919, Prohibition was the law of the land for thirteen years. After only a few years, it was clear to many Americans that Prohibition was a failed law. Liquor smuggling was rampant, illicit alcohol production became a serious health problem, and in many cases, alcohol consumption became more secretive and excessive than ever before. It was hardly a surprise, then, when an overwhelming majority of the American public—including many former dry advocates—pushed for repeal of Prohibition and successfully overturned the flawed amendment in 1933.

Parallels between Legal Age 21 and Prohibition

In many ways, Legal Age 21 can be considered latter-day prohibition. It denies legal alcohol purchase and consumption to a specific group of adults who are allowed all other rights of citizenship.

· ***Excessive, reckless use of alcohol becomes norm as a law forces drinking underground and out of public settings.*** In much the same way that Prohibition removed alcohol from public settings, Legal Age 21 has forced drinking underground, behind closed doors, and far away from supervised public settings. While the Anti-Saloon League sought to shutter saloons, speakeasies sprung up in their wake, serving illegal liquor and operating outside of the law. The lessons of Prohibition hold firm today: banishing drinking from one location does not eliminate it, and may even increase the amount consumed per occasion. Drinking that is not out in the open, and drinking that requires one to find a dark corner or travel to a remote location, is drinking that puts not only the drinker, but the innocent citizen at greater risk.

· ***Disrespect for law:*** Both enactments created a situation where ordinary behavior was criminalized, where ordinary citizens were placed at odds with the law of the land. Anti-Prohibition organizations cited disrespect for law as their primary argument against the 18th Amendment. Prohibition criminalized normative adult behavior and in so doing, turned many upstanding citizens into lawbreakers. Further frustration came from the fact that Prohibition was not a mere statute; instead it was a Constitutional Amendment and therefore ensconced in the law of the land. By banning an entire group of young adults from engaging in a behavior that is universally understood as a symbol of adulthood, Legal Age 21 also fosters rampant violation of and disrespect for law.

· ***Enacted on a moralistic impulse to change behavior, but frustrated ultimately by failure of law to bring about the desired change.*** Inherent in both enactments was a desire to not only change individual behavior, but to legislate morality. While the campaign for prohibition in the early decades of the twentieth century was arguably more emotionally charged and laden with hyperbolic statements about the evils of drink, supporters of both movements operated on a basic assumption that alcohol has only negative effects on the body and mind.

· ***Impossibility of enforcement.*** Soon after Prohibition was enacted, it became clear that the resources and manpower initially allocated would come far short of eradicating, or even making much of a dent in, alcohol manufacture, purchase and consumption. Even after a doubling of funding, violations and arrests were more numerous in each passing year, leading to increasing dissatisfaction among the general public. Under Legal Age 21, only two out of every 1,000 violations results in arrest or citation. Those who call for increased enforcement of the policy need to be reminded of the embarrassingly low rate of enforcement and also to consider the costs necessary to merely double the rate. Prohibition and Legal Age 21 are both out of step with the social reality of alcohol in American society, which history has shown that no amount of enforcement can eliminate.

· ***Creative lawbreaking.*** The images of Prohibition, of men and women descending into speakeasies, of inventing cocktails so as to mask the taste of homemade spirits with fruit juice and soda, of sleek wooden rum runners unloading their contraband cargo in beaches and coves are echoed clearly today in the images of binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined today by a clear set of images and a vocabulary that recalls that of Prohibition: of young people suspended above a keg, tap in mouth, feet in the air, chugging beer amidst the cheers of fellow partygoers; of games with names like Beer Pong, Kings, Flip Cup, and Beirut whose foremost purpose is to get contestants drunk as quickly as possible. In both cases, a subculture defined by creative law breaking has sprung up around a policy out of step with general societal attitudes about alcohol use.

Facts and Figures furnished by:

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