

Should Governments Reduce the Legal Drinking Age?

The trend of alcohol consumption within Americans has been increasing, prompting discourse from health officials, researchers, policy makers, libertarians and industry representatives to question whether governments should reduce the legal drinking age to discourage drinking, especially amongst young people¹. This paper will explore the history of alcohol consumption as a whole, varied audiences affected by the drinking age limitations, and evaluate viewpoints of experts and individuals regarding whether governments should ultimately lower the legal drinking age. Contributing to expert debates of determining the optimal legal drinking age to minimize and prevent excessive drinking and abuse at a younger age, these viewpoints underscore the fear of people abusing alcohol and whether “drinking low or moderate amounts of alcohol damages one’s health,” which in turn outlines whether the focus of the government should be reducing the legal drinking age or “limit adolescents’ exposure to alcohol advertising².” Thus, the government should not reduce the legal drinking age; but rather, focus on limiting the exposure and educating individuals of the negative consequences – especially younger generations – to reduce alcohol-related accidents and abuse.

The Federal Uniform Drinking Age Act of 1984 states that the minimum legal drinking age is 21 – including any public possession – which all states must act in accordance with that standard³. The general policy specifies that the Federal government “can withhold ten percent of Federal funding for highways from States” that do not abide by the standards⁴. However, the loose definition of public possession permits states to determine whether certain individuals under 21 can drink such as for medical purposes, accompanied by a parent or guardian over 21, or etc⁵. Alcoholic beverages include “beer, distilled spirits and wine containing one-half of one percent or more of alcohol by volume⁶.”

The Alcohol Policy Information System (APIS) underlies that underage drinking is a major public health issue, as it is a popular choice of drug among adolescents and youths⁷. Historically, restricting and limiting access purchases and consumptions of alcohol were first set in the early 20th century, which has become gradually more restrictive as time progresses. In fact, the 18th Amendment (1919) prohibited the purchase of alcoholic beverages as a whole in the United States, which was later repealed in 1933 due to the “rise to organized crime that trafficked in illegal alcohol,” which illustrates that completely abolishing an issue does not immediately resolve the issue in the long-term⁸. In the span of 1970 to 1975, “29 States lowered their minimum drinking ages from 21 to 18, 19, or 20, following the enactment of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution” and by “the 1980s, States began to return the minimum drinking age to 21,” ultimately due to the research showing a direct correlation between alcohol accidents to lower minimum drinking ages. The National Minimum Drinking Act still remains to this day, requiring that “States prohibit persons under 21

¹ Lyons, Christina L. "Alcohol Abuse." CQ Researcher, 15 May 2020, pp. 1-30, library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrr2020051500.

² Lyons, Christina L. "Alcohol Abuse." CQ Researcher, 15 May 2020, pp. 1-30, library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrr2020051500.

³ “Alcohol Policy.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-policy#:~:text=The%20Federal%20Uniform%20Drinking%20Age,State%20abides%20by%20that%20standard.>

⁴ “Alcohol Policy.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-policy#:~:text=The%20Federal%20Uniform%20Drinking%20Age,State%20abides%20by%20that%20standard.>

⁵ “The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/the-1984-national-minimum-drinking-age-act>.

⁶ “The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/the-1984-national-minimum-drinking-age-act>.

⁷ “The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/the-1984-national-minimum-drinking-age-act>.

⁸ Alcohol History It’s likely that alcohol production started when early farmers noted the fermentation that took place in fallen fruit. They may have found the fizzy flavor and sharp aroma pleasing. Trial and error using different fruits and grains finally . “Alcohol History.” *Narconon International*, <https://www.narconon.org/drug-information/alcohol-history.html#:~:text=The%20first%20distillery%20in%20America%20was%20established%20on,a%20rum%20distillery%20C%20started%20in%201657%20in%20Boston.>

years of age from purchasing or publicly possessing alcoholic beverages as a condition of receiving State highway funds” with loose interpretation of public possession⁹. Today, alcohol remains as a useful yet often misused drug today ranging from its positive health benefits such as in medical practices as “powerful antimicrobial, astringent, sedative, and rubefacient properties” to its use as a “good polar solvent used to extract active ingredients from raw materials,” which must be addressed in order to promote safe handling and usage of alcohol¹⁰.

Authors Toomey, Rosenfeld, and Wagenaar of the journal “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age” assert how research should be focused on determining the effectiveness of the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) and its ratio causing alcohol related problems rather than simply measuring the consumption. Based on results from their research evaluating the correlation between alcohol and alcohol-related accidents to MLDA, “the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that in 1987... 1,071 traffic crash fatalities were prevented” due to the newly set MLDA of 21¹¹. Thus, a higher MLDA directly correlates with lower alcohol abuse and issues for younger individuals. Furthermore, “the New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (1984) researched that 16-percent decrease in rates of vandalism in four States that raised the MLDA,” which indicates that crime rates related to alcohol decreases as states raise the MLDA. The research quintessentially summarizes that a “higher MLDA results in fewer alcohol-related problems among use and that the MLDA of 21 saves the lives of well over 1,000 youth each year,”¹² which should be continued to be enforced by the government. However, these authors underlie crucial issues regarding the history of setting the MLDA, which has been centered and controlled majorly by the states themselves rather than the federal government. While it is federal rule to have states set their minimum drinking age to 21, this restriction has not stopped teen drinking due to the lack of enforcement, state law consistency, and lack of accountability. In fact, enforcement almost plays an equally important role in limiting alcohol consumption by limiting potential young individuals and those purchasing alcohol for minors to do so freely and as conveniently. Regarding enforcement, the lack of accountability – the fact that “only a tiny proportion of incidents of minors’ drinking results in fines or other penalties for establishments that sell alcohol” – is not severe enough to discourage vendors or individuals from illegally granting access to alcohol to minors. Therefore, the lack of enforcement agencies that cite or take legal action against illegal suppliers displays that society points underage drinking and alcohol consumption being normalized and acceptable. According to these authors, in some studies, the age limitation of 21 has “pushed underage binge drinking into private and less controlled environments,” which can be fatalistic¹³. This correlates to the “rubber band effect:” youths consuming more alcoholic beverages once they turn 21 to “make up for lost time,” causing these individuals to “drink at higher rates” in comparison to those that were allowed to drink at a younger age¹⁴. The “rubber band effect” contributes to those in favor of lowering the drinking age, arguing that teens should have the right and ability to drink responsibly as “18 is the age of legal majority in the United States”¹⁵. This is because the responsibility of reaching 18 years of age or legal majority includes voting in the local, state and federal elections, marriage “without parental consent,” serving on juries, legally binding contracts, and the possibility

⁹“The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act.” *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/the-1984-national-minimum-drinking-age-act>.

¹⁰ Ranga.n.r. “25 Uses of Alcohol: Important Role in Medicine Industry and Daily Life.” *Study Read*, 18 Nov. 2020, <https://www.studyread.com/uses-of-alcohol-in-medicine-industry-and-daily-life/#:~:text=Uses%20of%20alcohol%20in%20daily%20life%3A%201%201>.

¹¹ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

¹² Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

¹³ “Should the Drinking Age Be Lowered in the US? 13 Pros and Cons.” *Drinking Age*, 8 Sept. 2022, <https://drinkingage.procon.org/>.

¹⁴ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

¹⁵ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

of being drafted into service. Due to these conflicting studies, the authors strongly recommend to increase the stakes of those who are “illegally selling or providing alcohol to youth,” by encouraging “ABC and local law enforcement agencies to increase enforcement against illegal providers” – which studies have shown to greatly reduce in alcohol sales “from 59 percent at baseline to 26 percent” after a year¹⁶. Along with funding stronger enforcement, the authors emphasize updating the effectiveness of current “procedures and policies” such as training employees the importance of identification checking to ensure that individuals understand the negative consequences and the importance of MLDA laws. Ultimately, the studies point out that the government should maintain the current 21 minimum drinking age as it is scientifically proven that “early legal access to alcohol (i.e., at age 18) is associated with higher rates of drinking later in life” and “research shows that when the MLDA is 21, people under age 21 drink less and continue to do so through their early twenties. Those who are inclined to drink do not “make up for lost time” after turning 21¹⁷.” Thus, it is unnecessary to alter the MLDA.

According to the “Public Policy and Alcohol Use” by Richard A. Grucza and Andrew D. Plunk and research “Commentary on Fitzpatrick and Colleagues (2012): Forecasting the Effect of the Amethyst Initiative on College Drinking” by Rober B. Voas and James C. Fell, the government should focus on raising the alcohol tax, discouraging and censoring alcoholic advertisements, and producing more media/public service announcements focusing on raising awareness rather than targeting the legal age itself. Furthermore, while drinking age is relevant and necessary to discourage drinking at a young age, this federal standard is often disregarded amongst adolescents who do not understand the health and social consequences. The authors discuss the amethyst initiative, which proposes that drinking is heavily engraved and often encouraged in American culture, particularly underage drinking. While there are substantial evidence that depict heavy episodic drinking (HED) within adolescence – particularly college students – in unsupervised and private areas, causing misconceptions “regarding the normative level of student drinking” has raised a major source of concern¹⁸. The study conducted by Fitzpatrick and his copartners also known as the Amethyst Initiative concludes that reducing the minimum drinking age is not effective to reduce college and or adolescent binge drinking; but rather, it increases the possibility of alcohol-related issues encountered even by younger audiences¹⁹. According to the Grucza and Plunk, aiding individuals to recognize the adverse effects of alcohol rather than lowering the number itself is crucial to advocating for equitable and long-term effective alcohol policy. For instance, the authors suggest that government can modify and improve policies that “influence price (i.e. imposition of excise taxes), policies that influence availability (i.e. policies on density of outlets), traffic policies (i.e. enforcing legal blood alcohol content), and youth access policies (i.e. prohibiting the use or sale of false IDs)²⁰. The authors recognize that alcohol misuse is a serious issue and suggest that rather than reducing or altering the legal drinking age majorly, focus should be targeting on rewriting social expectations and norms towards alcoholic beverage consumption.

Regardless of the research that indicates that lowered minimum legal drinking age correlates to greater probability of accidents among younger individuals, the National Youth Rights Association, the drinking standards set by the federal government promotes “unsafe drinking habits and fails to teach moderate use,” ultimately depriving young adults of their newly granted freedom to adulthood but also depicts the ineffectiveness of age injustices that should simply be removed as a whole. The NYRA outlines that punishment is clear within the underage community through school expulsion, community service, driver’s

¹⁶ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

¹⁷ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

¹⁸ *Commentary on Fitzpatrick and Colleagues (2012): Forecasting the Effect ...* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1530-0277.2012.01914.x>.

¹⁹ *Commentary on Fitzpatrick and Colleagues (2012): Forecasting the Effect ...* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1530-0277.2012.01914.x>.

²⁰ *Academic.oup.com*, <https://academic.oup.com/book/24381/chapter-abstract/187298582?redirectedFrom=fulltext#no-access-message>.

license revocation, and other legal consequences²¹. In fact, it is now widespread that employees and bartenders face major consequences for not checking individual identifications and serving minors. According to “The Drinking Age and Traffic Safety” by Peter Asch and David Levy, increasing the minimum legal drinking case to 21 simply “transferred drunk driving deaths from the 18-20 age group to the 21-24 age group,” confirming that consequences related to drinking and driving is caused by the improper education regarding responsible drinking rather than the number limit of 21 itself²². Therefore, NYRA conclude that reducing the legal drinking age can teach younger individuals to start drinking responsibility rather than continually increasing the drinking age – as it simply shifts the affected age group within that range – and studies has shown that “countries with stricter alcohol prohibition” exhibit long-term alcohol problems²³.

Despite the ongoing debate whether governments should lower the legal drinking age, authors Toomey, Rosenfeld, and Wagenaar of the journal “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age” evaluates alcohol-related accidents and issues as a majorly preventable one based on the research that shows “effectiveness of a higher MLDA in preventing alcohol-related injuries and deaths among youth²⁴.” As a solution, they conclude and suggest to require stricter enforcement policies with greater consequences such as “(1) requiring all alcohol servers to receive responsible service training on how to check age identification and refuse sales to teenagers, (2) establishing systems to monitor servers to prevent illegal sales to youths, and (3) posting warning signs²⁵.” The focus of their research was to predominantly determine whether the drinking age of 21 positively benefits and reduces the number of alcohol-related accidents and to determine an effective and cost-friendly solution to continue to reduce the number of alcohol-related issues. The authors ultimately comment on how the government should focus on implementing varied strategies to change the environment and social standards to create lasting impact and long-term transformation in adolescent drinking issues. The approach begins with questioning of current standards, challenging enforcements to become stricter, and for individuals to practice being ethical – which includes not purchasing alcoholic beverages for minors, not purchasing alcohol utilizing false identification cards, and becoming responsible drinkers. The government should ultimately maintain the 21 minimum legal drinking age and increase funding to implement tighter regulations and consequences for those who do not follow the federal law.

In contrast, “Public Policy and Alcohol Use” by Richard A. Grucza and Andrew D. Plunk and research “Commentary on Fitzpatrick and Colleagues (2012): Forecasting the Effect of the Amethyst Initiative on College Drinking” by Rober B. Voas and James C. Fell claims that lowering or maintaining the minimum legal drinking age is not as effective as directing government focus towards changing social beliefs and targeting the American culture at its roots. Because alcohol is associated and normalized in diverse – typically entertaining – settings, discouraging or warning individuals of such environments at an early age is an optimal solution to reducing drinking issues and accidents. Furthermore, because the Amethyst Initiative concludes that reducing the minimum drinking age is not effective but rather increases binge drinking or craving something that is prohibited, enforcing stricter or increased drinking minimum ages may increase. The authors are concerned more about drinking responsibly rather than the age itself. Thus, to promote responsible drinking they suggest raising the alcohol tax – to discourage individuals from over splurging on alcoholic beverages or consuming too many drinks in a single session. The authors additionally highlight promoting regulations on censoring alcoholic advertisements to younger audiences that either market alcohol as an exciting, sexual, or

²¹ Meyer, Tay Arrow & Margaret, et al. “Reasons to Challenge the Drinking Age.” *NYRA*, 6 Apr. 2022, <https://www.youthrights.org/issues/drinking-age/reasons-to-challenge-the-drinking-age/>.

²² <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/regulation/1987/7/v11n2-8.pdf>

²³ Meyer, Tay Arrow & Margaret, et al. “Reasons to Challenge the Drinking Age.” *NYRA*, 6 Apr. 2022, <https://www.youthrights.org/issues/drinking-age/reasons-to-challenge-the-drinking-age/>.

²⁴ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

²⁵ Toomey, Traci L, et al. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age: History, Effectiveness, and Ongoing Debate.” *Alcohol Health and Research World*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6876521/#b20-arhw-20-4-213>.

festive product for personal enjoyment. This is problematic as younger individuals are exposed to misleading information which should be countered or balanced with public service announcements and advertisements that focus on raising awareness of the negative health effects and consequences that comes with drinking. Therefore, contributing to expert debates on determining the optimal legal drinking age to minimize and prevent excessive drinking and abuse at a younger age, the government should focus on promoting responsible drinking rather than focusing on the number on which they should set. Further research should be conducted to determine whether drinking moderate amounts damages one's health at a younger age versus binge drinking at a higher age.

The government should implement the following policies to ensure long-term effective alcohol abuse prevention. (1) Policy on redefining the punishment and procedure for sellers and providers regarding selling alcoholic beverages to minors. This can include a certain warning followed up by an increasing fine for those who do not adhere to the law. The policy should be enforced by police or legal enforcements which must be accounted for through a system of the government monitoring the enforcement officials to meet a certain quota or reward those who capture and take legal actions against those who are not complying with the law. However, this will not be possible without government funding and close interaction with the enforcement. (2) The second policy should be to increase public service announcements and warnings to counter the misinformation regarding alcoholic beverages. This can range from promoting warnings on the negative health effects that come along with drinking to promoting first hand experiences with alcohol-related accidents. While this may be disturbing to some individuals, promoting such strong images with a clear message and intent promotes individuals to better understand that alcohol is not simply for entertainment but a drug that is illegal for those who are under 21. (3) The final policy should focus on educating young audiences the historical context, contents, and precisely what alcohol is, its harmfulness, and how to utilize it responsibly. This is because completely practicing not drinking alcohol is realistically impossible for curious adolescents and the American social culture in general. Instead, the government should teach individuals how to drink responsibly, avoid binge drinking, and exactly what the consequences are when it comes to drinking. Drinking is quintessentially an ongoing debatable issue of whether or not it should be limited to a certain age range, however, it is crucial that the government continues to utilize scientific evidence along with just judgment on how to reduce irresponsible drinking and alcohol-related accidents by funding programs to help advocate alcohol issues, stronger enforcements, and ultimately to establish a long-term effective solution for the rising younger generation to redefine the American culture of drinking responsibly.