

Lowering the Minimum Drinking Age

Fact Sheet

The debate around lowering the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) has likely caused inquiry from parents, students, and other staff on your campus. Below are some facts and statistics to help you navigate this issue.

There is no single cut-off point at which a person assumes all of the rights and privileges of adulthood.

In each policy area, the age of majority depends on an assessment of relative benefits and risks. Policymakers need to strike a balance between fairness and individual freedom, collective security, economics, health, and safety. The chosen age is usually 18, but not always. Take the following examples:

Handgun purchase	Age 21 (federal law)
Tobacco purchase	Age 19 (in AL, AK, NJ, and UT)
Gambling	Ages 18-21, by type (state law)
Termination of minor trust	Ages 18-21 (state law)
Renting a car	Age 25 (for most US car rental agencies)

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that the US age 21 law is protective and saves lives.

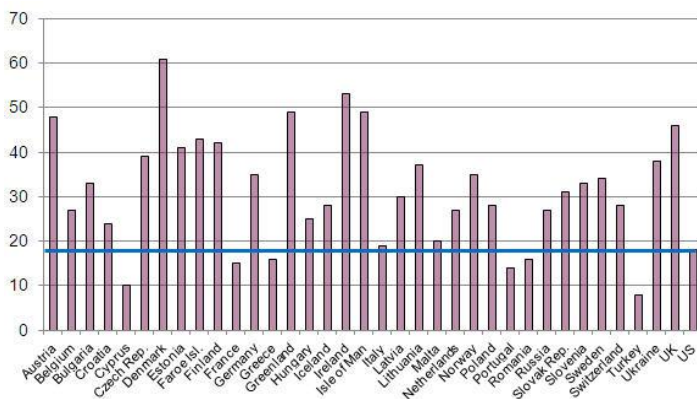
In 1984, President Reagan signed the federal law that pushed every state to have an age 21 law. Between 1982 and 2007, the rate of alcohol-related traffic fatalities for people ages 18-20 dropped 60%, whereas the rate for people ages 21-24 dropped only 44%. Importantly, the trend lines for these two groups began to diverge in 1988, by which time all 50 states had an age 21 law. Further evidence is provided by research studies that examined the impact of first decreasing and then increasing the legal drinking age in various states. When reviewing this research, Alex Wagenaar and Traci Toomey found that all 46 high-quality studies that showed an effect demonstrated that the age 21 drinking law saves lives. New Zealand also conducted this public policy experiment, recently lowering their legal drinking age from 20 to 18 years. Afterward, a 2006 study showed significantly more alcohol-related crashes among 15- to 19-year olds than would have occurred had the law not been changed.

There is strong public support for the age 21 law.

Americans continue to reject overwhelmingly the push to lower the legal drinking age. According to a 2008 Nationwide Insurance survey of more than 2000 households, 72% of adults think lowering the drinking age will make alcohol more accessible to kids and nearly half believe it would increase binge drinking among teens. More than half said they are less likely to vote for a state representative who supports lowering the legal limit or to send their children to colleges or universities with "party school" reputations.

Drinking rates among European youth are actually higher than in the U.S.

This figure below depicts the prevalence of intoxication in the past 30 days among American and European youth. It is clear that lower drinking ages and more liberal drinking cultures alone are not protective factors for heavy drinking among this demographic. To the contrary, young people from the U.S. report much lower rates of intoxication than youth from the vast majority of European countries. In fact, the U.S. is among the countries showing the lowest rates of intoxication. As has been noted elsewhere (Cook, 2007), the reduction in availability of alcohol associated with a higher MLDA apparently outweighs any increase in alcohol's appeal to youth that the law might cause.



Source:
US Monitoring the Future Survey
10th graders, national sample of schools, N ≈ 16,200

European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD)
15-16 year olds, 35 European countries, N ≈ 100,000