

Research Findings on Underage Drinking and the Minimum Legal Drinking Age

The extent and consequences of alcohol consumption by our Nation's youth are matters of growing concern. Not only do most young people drink alcohol, but they often drink heavily, putting themselves and those around them at risk. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and other Federal agencies continue to conduct and support research on how best to address underage drinking. In addition, adults in communities across the country are wrestling with how to change the culture around underage drinking. Although some have suggested that lowering the drinking age would lead to more responsible alcohol consumption among young people, the preponderance of research indicates that the legal drinking age of 21 has had positive effects on health and safety.¹⁻³

❖ Both Federal and State laws determine what constitutes underage drinking (under age 21)

The **Federal Uniform Drinking Age Act**, signed into law in 1984, provides for withholding 10% of Federal highway funds from States that do not prohibit the purchase or public possession of any alcoholic beverage by a person who is less than 21 years of age. This Act effectively raised the national minimum legal drinking age to 21, as all States ultimately complied. While it is illegal to sell alcohol to persons under 21 in all States, State laws vary widely with respect to specifics about possession and conditions under which consumption might be permissible (e.g. with parents).⁴

❖ In spite of these laws, we know underage drinking is widespread and is associated with a wide range of negative consequences.

The number of young people who drink and the way they drink results in harm to self and others including: risky sexual behavior; physical and sexual assaults; potential deleterious effects on the developing brain; problems in school, at work, and with the

legal system; various types of injury; car crashes; homicide and suicide; and death from alcohol poisoning.⁵

❖ **Minimum legal drinking age laws have had positive effects on health and safety.**

The preponderance of research shows minimum legal drinking age laws have had positive effects primarily in decreasing traffic crashes and fatalities, suicide, and decreased consumption by those under age 21.⁶⁻¹³

❖ **Minimum legal drinking ages vary by country but underage drinking is a problem around the world.**

While it has been suggested that lower legal drinking ages and different cultural norms in other countries (e.g. France and Italy) may lead to better outcomes, survey data indicate this is generally not the case. Data from the 2003 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) show that rates of binge drinking (5 drinks or more in a row) and drunkenness among 15-16 year old students in the United States, France, and Italy are similar, with the United States lower on some measures and France and Italy lower on others.¹⁴

Solving the problem of underage drinking will require a broad-based, long-term commitment. As we move forward, we need to pay attention to what history and research have taught us and build on this knowledge base including what we know about the relationship between minimum legal drinking age laws and underage drinking and its consequences.

Notes/Additional Resources

- ¹ *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking* provides a framework for understanding and addressing underage drinking. It can be found at: <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf>
- ² *Surgeon General's Call to Action: Guides for families, educators, and communities:*
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/FamilyGuide.pdf>
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/EducatorGuide.pdf>
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/CommunityGuide.pdf>
- ³ Statistics and other information about underage drinking can be found on NIAAA's website at: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/AboutNIAAA/NIAAASponsoredPrograms/underage.htm>
- ⁴ The 1984 National Minimum Drinking Age Act
<http://www.alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/index.asp?SEC=%7B9937ACFC-DB3A-4159-B068-A302CEEE0EDF%>
State Profiles of Underage Drinking Laws
<http://www.alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/stateprofiles//index.asp>
- ⁵ NIH fact sheet *Underage Drinking*
<http://www.nih.gov/about/researchresultsforthepublic/UnderageDrinking.pdf>
- ⁶ NIH fact sheet *Alcohol-Related Traffic Deaths* <http://www.nih.gov/about/researchresultsforthepublic/AlcoholRelatedTrafficDeaths.pdf>
- ⁷ Wagenaar, AC and Toomey TL. Effects of minimum drinking age laws: review and analyses of the literature from 1960 to 2000. *J. Stud. Alcohol, Supplement* No. 14: 206-225, 2002.
- ⁸ Voas RB, Tippetts AS, Fell JC. Assessing the effectiveness of minimum legal drinking age and zero tolerance laws in the United States. *Accid Anal Prev.* 35(4):579-87, 2003.
- ⁹ Shults RA, et al. Reviews of evidence regarding interventions to reduce alcohol-impaired driving. *Am J Prev Med* 21(4S):66-88, 2001.
- ¹⁰ Brent DA. Risk factors for adolescent suicide and suicidal behavior: mental and substance abuse disorders, family environmental factors, and life stress. *Suicide Life Threat Behav.* 25(suppl): 52-63, 1995.
- ¹¹ Birckmayer J. and Hemenway D. Minimum-Age Drinking Laws and Youth Suicide, 1970-1990. *Am J Pub.Hlth* 89, 1365-8, 1999.
- ¹² Fell JC, et al. The relationship of underage drinking laws to reductions in

drinking drivers in fatal crashes in the United States. *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 40, 1430–1440, 2008.

¹³ O'Malley, PM, and Wagenaar, AC. Effects of minimum drinking age laws on alcohol use, related behaviors and traffic crash involvement among american youth: 1976-1987. *J Studies Alcohol*, 52:5, 478-491, 1991.

¹⁴ The ESPAD Report 2003: Alcohol and Other Drug Use Among Students in 35 European Countries available online at <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/espadusa2003.pdf>