



21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age Questions and Answers

Q. What's the history of the 21 law?

A. For almost 40 years after the repeal of Prohibition, most states voluntarily set their minimum drinking age law at 21. In the 1970's, 29 states lowered their drinking age, which led to an increase in alcohol traffic fatalities and injuries. So much so that by 1983, 16 states had raised their drinking age back to 21 – a move that brought about an immediate decrease in drinking and driving traffic fatalities in those states. On July 17, 1984, President Reagan signed into law the Uniform Drinking Age Act mandating all states to adopt 21 as the legal drinking age within five years. By 1988, all states had set 21 as the minimum drinking age, which is where it should remain.

Q. Why does MADD support the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age law?

A. MADD supports the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) law because it saves young lives and protects young minds. By 2005, MLDA had saved an estimated 25,000 Americans, translating to nearly 1,000 lives every year. Before the minimum legal drinking age was set at 21, the majority of all fatal crashes involving 18 to 20-year-old drivers involved alcohol. Soon after the Minimum Legal Drinking Age law was passed, alcohol-related traffic deaths dropped significantly – up to 28 percent in many states. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) looked at over 50 studies from states and countries that changed their drinking ages. They found that increasing the drinking age decreases fatalities and crashes by 16 percent and that lowering the drinking age increases fatalities and crashes by 10 percent.

Additionally, since the passage of 21, research clearly suggests that excessive alcohol use during the teen years negatively impacts memory and attention, abilities necessary for negotiating the tasks of adolescence and successfully making the transition into adulthood.

Q. There are proposals to lower the legal drinking age to 18. Should this happen?

A. Absolutely not. It's bad public policy. Research shows that the 21 law saves about 1,000 lives every year. Before the passage of the Minimum Legal Drinking Age law, the majority of all fatal crashes involving 18 to 20-year-old drivers involved alcohol. Once the law was passed, alcohol-related traffic deaths dropped significantly. The CDC looked at over 50 studies from states and countries that changed their drinking ages. They found that increasing the drinking age decreases fatalities and crashes by 16 percent and that lowering the drinking age increases fatalities and crashes by 10 percent.

Q. Does the Minimum Legal Drinking Age law just affect teen drunk driving death rates?

A. No. Underage drinking consequences are not limited to car crashes. More than 6,000 youth die annually due to alcohol-related causes including homicides, suicides and unintentional injuries such as traffic crashes, drownings or falls. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, alcohol use among teens is linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes, as well as increased violence, alcohol poisonings, black outs and many other terrible consequences of drinking underage.

Q. Do France and other European countries, where alcohol is part of their culture and youth can drink at younger ages, have fewer problems?

A. No. In fact, a U.S. Department of Justice study concluded that European youth drink more and binge drink more often than their American counterparts. Since they have lower drinking ages, they have higher rates of binge drinking among young people of all ages. European youth may be at less risk of alcohol-related

traffic crashes because they drive less frequently, have better public transportation, and stricter laws and penalties.

Q. How has underage drinking changed since the federal Minimum Legal Drinking Age law was passed in 1984?

A. Between 1975 - 2005, the Minimum Legal Drinking Age law saved nearly 25,000 young lives. In 1984, there were more than 8,000 deaths annually due to underage drinking. Now there are approximately 6,000 deaths annually due to alcohol, according to researchers, which is a 25 percent drop. In the early 80's, more than 5,000 young people were killed annually in crashes involving under 21 drinking drivers and that number has been cut in more than half to nearly 2,000 in 2005. This is due in large part to the 21 law. Despite these successes, we have a long road ahead of us. We know today that youth are drinking to get drunk and drinking at earlier ages. MADD works to reach young people sooner—starting in elementary school and continuing through college. Research tells us that youth must be reached at least five years before peer pressure begins to delay the onset of drinking alcohol. It's time that parents, adults and communities realize underage drinking is not a rite of passage but rather a path to possible death, injury and long-term diminished potential.

Q. About how many young people die each year in alcohol-related traffic crashes?

A. In 2005, 2,035 youth ages 15 to 20 were killed in alcohol-related traffic crashes, which is 33 percent of all traffic fatalities for that age group. Those deaths account for 12 percent of all alcohol-related traffic fatalities.

Q. How does underage drinking affect society?

A. Underage drinking costs American taxpayers approximately \$61.9 billion annually, according to the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. In fiscal year 2000, only \$71 million of the federal budget was allocated for underage drinking prevention. This pales in comparison with the \$1.8 billion spent on drug abuse prevention for other drugs and the billions spent on alcohol advertising and promotion.

A 2005 Gallup Study conducted by MADD shows that:

- the public ranked drugs as the number one greatest problem facing today's youth, despite the fact research shows that alcohol kills more youth than all other illicit drugs combined;
- in the same poll, when alcohol was grouped with other types of illicit drugs, alcohol topped the list, demonstrating that the public forgets alcohol is a drug – an illicit drug under 21 – unless reminded.

We need to continue to remind and educate the public about the dangers and consequences of underage drinking.

Q. Why has the progress on underage drinking over the past decade remained relatively flat?

A. Preventing underage drinking is a complex problem that needs a comprehensive solution. Youth are not solely to blame for underage drinking. Society views underage drinking as a rite of passage and often encourages it by adults and parents providing or purchasing alcohol for those under 21. We need to close loopholes in 21 laws, enact new underage drinking laws, increase enforcement of all underage drinking laws and implement stronger penalties against providing alcohol to minors to keep alcohol out of the hands of young people.

Q. If we have graduated driver's licenses or permits as an introduction to an adult privilege, why can't this concept work for drinking? How do we help young people be responsible when they turn 21?

A. While MADD supports graduated licensing, underage drinking is a health issue, not a learned behavior. There is no such thing as safe underage drinking. Adults and parents should model responsible drinking behavior and never drive after drinking in order to help guide young people to be responsible when they are 21 and older.

Q. What has been the most common age of drunk driving over the years?

A. Before the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age law, it used to be that 16 to 20-year-olds were the most common drunk drivers. When the law was enacted, the drunk driving rate fell so much among this group that the most common age now is 21 to 24-year-olds.

Q. If students can't get alcohol, won't they just switch to other, perhaps even more dangerous, drugs?

A. Research shows that the opposite is true. Alcohol is a drug and often the "gateway drug" to other illicit drug use. Preventing youth from using alcohol reduces the chance that they will try other illegal drugs. When the drinking age was raised to 21 and teen drinking declined, there was no evidence of a related increase in other drug use.

Q. Have education efforts, tougher enforcement and penalties been more effective at lowering the rate of alcohol-related crashes among youth than the 21 law?

A. No. When the Minimum Legal Drinking Age law was enacted, alcohol-related crashes declined immediately among the 18 to 20-year-old population. Careful research has shown the decline was not due to DUI enforcement or tougher DUI penalties, but as a direct result of the law. Studies have also shown that education alone is not effective in reducing youth drinking. Achieving long-term reductions in youth drinking problems require an environmental change so that alcohol is less accessible to teens.