



## **Underage Drinking and the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) Law**

*In July 1984, Congress and President Ronald Reagan enacted legislation that set the national minimum legal drinking age of 21. For those states that failed to adopt the 21 minimum drinking age as required by the new law, federal highway construction funds were withheld. By 1988, all states had adopted the new minimum drinking age. Since that time, the law has proven to be one of the nation's most important and lifesaving laws to protect youth.*

### **The 21 Law Saves Lives**

- By the end of 2005, the 21 minimum drinking age law had saved nearly 25,000 American lives.<sup>i</sup> In fact, the law saves approximately 1,000 lives a year.<sup>ii</sup>
- Since the early 1980s, the number of young people killed annually in crashes involving drunk drivers under 21 has been cut in half, from more than 5,000 young people in the early 1980s to nearly 2,000 in 2005.<sup>iii</sup>
- In 2005, 2,035 youth ages 15 to 20 were killed in alcohol-related traffic crashes, translating to 33 percent of all traffic fatalities in that age group.<sup>iv</sup>
- Research indicates that when the minimum legal drinking age is 21, people under age 21 drink less overall and continue to do so through their early twenties.<sup>v</sup> When the drinking age has been lowered, injury and death rates significantly increase.<sup>vi</sup>
- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has reviewed nearly 50 peer-reviewed studies of countries that had changed their drinking age and found that lowering the minimum drinking age to 18 increases fatalities by 10 percent.<sup>vii</sup>

### **The Public Supports 21**

- According to a July 2007 Gallup poll, more than three in four Americans (77 percent) say they would oppose a federal law that would lower the drinking age in all states to 18. Six in ten Americans support stricter penalties for underage drinking.<sup>viii</sup>
- American's views about lowering the drinking age and the strictness of penalties for underage drinking are essentially the same now as they were when Gallup last asked these questions in 2001.

### **Underage Drinking in America**

- In 2006, about 10.8 million young people aged 12 to 20 (28.3 percent) reported drinking alcohol in the past month. Approximately 7.2 million (19.0 percent) were binge drinkers and 2.4 million (6.2 percent) were heavy drinkers. These numbers have essentially stayed the same since 2002.<sup>ix</sup>
- Traffic crashes are the number one killer of teens<sup>x</sup> and 28 percent of fatal traffic crashes involving teen drivers are alcohol-related.<sup>xi</sup>
- Alcohol is the number one youth drug problem<sup>xii</sup> in America and more young people die from alcohol-related incidents than from all other illicit drugs combined.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Parents are the most common supplier of alcohol to those under 21 and parents are the primary influencer of teens.<sup>xiv</sup>

- Alcohol use during the teen years, particularly when such use is heavy enough to result in withdrawal symptoms upon cessation of drinking, negatively impacts memory and attention, abilities necessary for negotiating the tasks of adolescence and successfully making the transition into adulthood.<sup>xv</sup>
- While a myth exists that European teens have less alcohol-related problems than American teens, even though they start drinking earlier, studies have found that that is not the case. In most European countries, young people have higher intoxication rates than their U.S. counterparts, and a greater percentage of young people in a majority of European countries report binge drinking at higher rates than U.S. youths.<sup>xvi,xvii</sup>
- Underage drinking costs American taxpayers approximately \$61.9 billion annually.<sup>xviii</sup>

## The Consequences of Underage Drinking

- A person's brain does not stop developing until his or her early to mid-20s. During this development, alcohol negatively affects all parts of the brain, including coordination, motional control, thinking, decision-making, hand-eye movement, speech and memory.<sup>xix</sup>
- Adolescent drinkers perform worse in school, are more likely to fall behind and have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence.<sup>xx</sup>
- Those who start drinking before age 15 were 12 times more likely to be unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol, 7 times more likely to be in a motor vehicle crash after drinking and 10 times more likely to have been in a physical fight after drinking.<sup>xxi</sup>
- Among drinkers, those who had their first drink before the age of 13 were twice as likely to have unplanned sex, and more than twice as likely to have unprotected sex.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Individuals who began drinking in their early teens are not only at greater risk for developing alcoholism sometime in their lives, they are also at greater risk for developing alcoholism more quickly and at younger ages, especially chronic, relapsing alcoholism.<sup>xxiii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> National Center for Statistics and Analysis. "Traffic Safety Facts 2004: A Compilation of Motor Vehicle Crash Data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System and the General Estimates System." NHTSA (2004) DOT HS 809 919, Washington DC.

<sup>ii</sup> The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "The Impact of Minimum Drinking Age Laws on Fatal Crash Involvement: An Update of the NHTSA Analyses." NHTSA Technical Report No. DOT HS 807 349, Washington, DC (1989).

<sup>iii</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2005 FARS data.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> O'Malley PM and A.C. Wagenaar. "Effects of Minimum Drinking Age Laws on Alcohol Use, Related Behaviors and Traffic Crash Involvement Among American Youth: 1976 – 1987." *J Stud Alcohol* (1991): 238-259.

<sup>vi</sup> Wagenaar AC. *Minimum Drinking Age and Alcohol Availability to Youth: Issues and research needs*. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) Research Monograph No. 25, NIH Publication Number 93-3513. Bethesda, MD: NIAAA; 1993: 175-200.

<sup>vii</sup> Ruth A. Shults, et al. "Reviews of Evidence Regarding Interventions to Reduce Alcohol-Impaired Driving." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2001: 20 (2S); 66-84.

<sup>viii</sup> The Gallup Organization. "Most Americans Oppose Lowering Legal Drinking Age to 18 Nationwide." *The Gallup Poll* (July 27, 2007).

<sup>ix</sup> The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). *2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (2006).

<sup>x</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "Traffic Safety Facts 2005: Overview". DOT 810 623.

Washington DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2006.

<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/TSF2005/OverviewTSF05.pdf>

<sup>xi</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2005 FARS data.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>xiii</sup> National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2000.

<sup>xiv</sup> Teenage Research Unlimited. *Online Teen Omnibus Survey* (April, 2005). Key findings available online at:

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/388/keyfindings.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> White, Aaron. "Long-term effects of alcohol abuse during adolescence." *Alcohol and the Adolescent Brain* (2004) <<http://www.duke.edu/~amwhite/Adolescence/adolescent6.html>>.

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- <sup>xvi</sup> Hibell, Bjorn et al. "The ESPAD Report 2003." *The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs* (2003).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Johnston, L.D., P.M. O'Malley, & J.G. Bachman. *Monitoring the Future national survey results on adolescent drug use: Overview of key findings, 2002* (NIH Publication No. 03-5374). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse, 56 pp.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Miller, Levy, Spicer & Taylor. "Societal Costs of Underage Drinking" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* (2006).
- <sup>xix</sup> Narcotic Education Foundation of America, Drug Abuse Education Provider of the California Narcotic Officers' Association (2002). Alcohol-a Potent Drug. Available online at <http://www.cnoa.org/N-02.pdf>.
- <sup>xx</sup> American Medical Association (AMA) (2002). *Fact Sheet from an AMA Report on Alcohol's Adverse Effects on the Brains of Children, Adolescents and College Students*. Available online at <http://www.alcoholpolicysolutions.net/pdf/brain3.pdf>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Hingson, R.W., and Kenkel, D. (2004). "Social, health, and economic consequences of underage drinking." *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309089352/html>
- <sup>xxii</sup> Hingson, R. et al. "Early Age of First Drunkenness as a Factor in College Students' Unplanned and Unprotected Sex Attributable to Drinking," *Pediatrics* 111 (2003): 34-41.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, Volume 106, July 2006, pages 739-746.