

Responding to Critics of Alcohol Regulation

Below are research-based responses to a few of the most common arguments against alcohol regulation to use as an additional resource in the development and implementation of effective alcohol policies.

Argument: “If I’m old enough to go to war, I should be old enough to drink”

Many rights have different ages of initiation: 16 to drive, 18 to vote, 25 to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives, 35 to serve as U.S. President. The minimum age for initiation is based on the specific behaviors involved and must take into account the dangers and benefits of that behavior at a given age and is also based on physical development, including brain function. The military recruits 18 year olds fresh out of high school (and 17 year olds with parental permission) because they are young, impressionable and highly trainable. This does not mean 18 year olds are ready for alcohol use. Alcohol actually affects teens differently than adults. A teenager may look like an adult physically and may even appear more physically fit, but the teenager’s body is still developing. **According to the American Medical Association (AMA) it actually takes less alcohol for a teenager to get drunk than it does for an adult in his/her twenties.** The minimum legal drinking age 21 law takes into account that underage drinking is related to numerous health problems including injuries and death resulting from alcohol poisoning, car crashes, suicide, homicide, assaults, drowning, and recreational mishaps. In fact, the leading cause of death among teens is car crashes, and alcohol is involved in close to one-third of these fatalities.

There is mounting evidence that repeated exposure to alcohol during adolescence leads to long-lasting deficits in cognitive abilities, including learning and memory in humans. Early onset of drinking by youth has also been shown to significantly increase the risk of future alcohol-related problems (e.g. addiction, getting into fights, drinking driver crashes, other unintentional injuries). The part of the brain responsible for judgment, decision making, and predicting consequences of our actions, is not fully matured until about the age of 25 which means that people under the age of 25 are more likely to engage in dangerous behavior without an accurate sense of risk. Alcohol further impairs judgment; putting adolescents who drink at even greater risk for drinking too much and experiencing problems. Giving alcohol to a young soldier is not a way to honor their service because alcohol use at their age places them at greater risk for health and impairment problems. There are much better ways to honor their service to our country.

Argument: “Making it illegal to drink until 21 just increases the desire for the ‘forbidden fruit’. When teens turn 21, they’ll drink even more.”

Research shows the opposite is true. **In fact, early legal access (at age 18) is associated with higher rates of drinking later in life.** Research shows that when the drinking age is 21, those younger than 21 drink less and continue to drink less through their early twenties. Research also suggests that lowering the drinking age to 18 will make alcohol more available to an even younger population. **The earlier young people start drinking, the greater their likelihood for experiencing alcohol-related problems compared to those who start drinking at age 21 including car crashes, unintentional injuries, sexual assault, having unprotected sex leading to STD’s and unintended pregnancies, vandalism and property damage, and the development of alcoholism.** Researchers consider the 21 minimum drinking age one of the most successful public safety & public health policies in U.S. history. Since the minimum drinking age was changed to 21 in 1984, deaths from drinking and driving accidents have decreased by thousands, saving an estimated 20,000 lives.

Argument: “Europeans let their kids drink from an early age, yet they do not have the alcohol related problems we do. What we need are fewer restrictions, not more.”

This is called the *European Myth*. European countries are held up as examples of where more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes may foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. It is often asserted that alcohol is more integrated into European (especially southern European) culture and that young people there learn to drink at earlier ages within the context of the family. As a result, it is said that young Europeans learn to drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States. However, research does not support this commonly held belief. **According to data collected from 15 and 16-year-olds in 35 European countries, European youth actually drink more often, drink more heavily and get drunk more often than American teens. Only in Turkey are teen drinking and intoxication rates lower than in the U.S.** European countries are now looking to the United States for the research and experience regarding the 21 law.

Source:

Answering the Critics of the Minimum Legal Drinking Age 21 in the United States. Updated by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. May 1, 2007. The full report can be found at: http://parentsempowered.org/resources/mla21_pirepub.pdf.