

Arguments Against Lowering the Drinking Age From a Prevention Standpoint

Background

The Amethyst Initiative, founded by John McCardell, President Emeritus of Middlebury College and Founder of Choose Responsibility, seeks to revisit the debate on the legal drinking age, and encourages law makers to lower it. To date, more than 100 college presidents have signed on to the Initiative. Lowering the drinking age would have detrimental consequences for youth and in communities throughout the country. Underage drinking, particularly on college campuses, is pervasive and has major repercussions, but lowering the drinking age is not the solution.

More High School Seniors Abstain From Drinking Now Than They Did When the Drinking Age Was Lower

- In 1984 when the drinking age was still 18, only 8% of high school seniors had never used alcohol in their lifetime.¹
- The 2007 *Monitoring the Future* results reveal that now 28% of high school seniors have never used alcohol in their lifetime.²
- This means that more than three times as many 18 year olds are NOT consuming any alcohol since the drinking age was raised to 21.³
- Clearly this is a societal prevention success that we should not undermine by lowering the drinking age back to 18.

Prevention Has Been Successful

- Comprehensive, community-wide strategies involving all sectors of the community have proven effective in reducing underage drinking.⁴ Such efforts can include, but are not limited to:
 - Addressing access and availability of alcohol;
 - Changing community norms;
 - Community organizing and mobilization;
 - Environmental policy changes;
 - Heightened enforcement;
 - Media advocacy and messaging; and
 - School-community partnerships
- These prevention efforts have contributed to an increase in the percentage of 12th grade students reporting they have NEVER been drunk, from 34.6% in 1991, when the question was first asked, to 44.9% in 2007.⁵
- Since the implementation of the 21 year old drinking age, approximately 25,000 lives have been saved.⁶

Science Confirms That Teen Drinking Has Long Term Consequences

- The adolescent brain is not fully developed until the early to mid-20s.⁷
- As a result, alcohol use prior to age 21 can hamper brain development and function.
- Studies in humans have detected cognitive impairments in adolescent alcohol users weeks after they stopped drinking, and a different pattern of brain response to memory tests than among non-abusers.⁸
- The effects of repeated alcohol consumption during adolescence may be long-lasting. The National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol Related Conditions (NESARC) indicates that of the people diagnosed with alcohol dependence ever in their lives, 47% met the criteria before age 21.⁹

Lowering the Drinking Age Would Further Normalize Potentially Addictive Behavior

- Studies illustrate that the decline in the use of any drug, including alcohol, is directly related to its perception of harm or risk by the user.
- "Students are influenced by perceptions, whether right or wrong, and tend to behave according to what they perceive to be normal."¹⁰
- Lowering the drinking age sends the wrong message to America's youth, and will further normalize behavior that has the potential to be both dangerous and addictive.

Delaying the Age of Onset Is In the Best Interest of Youth

- Youth who begin drinking before the age of 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence as an adult than those who wait until age 21.¹¹

The prevention field has made major strides in reducing underage drinking in recent years. Now is not the time to retreat; instead, prevention efforts need to be redoubled. Colleges and universities throughout the country should focus their efforts on implementing comprehensive, community-wide strategies rather than lowering the drinking age.

Footnotes

¹Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G. & Schulenberg, J. E. (December 11, 2007). *Overall, illicit drug use by American teens continues gradual decline in 2007*. University of Michigan News and Information Services: Ann Arbor, MI. Available: www.monitoringthefuture.org

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Treno, A.J.; Gruenewald, P.J.; Lee, J.P.; et al.(2007) "The Sacramento neighborhood alcohol prevention project: outcomes from a community prevention trial." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. (68)197–207. Wagenaar, A.C.; Erickson, D.J.; Harwood, E.M.; et al. (2006). "Effects of state coalitions to reduce underage drinking: A national evaluation." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 31(4)307–315. Weitzman, E.R.; Nelson, T.F.; Lee, H.; and Wechsler, H.(2004). „Reducing drinking and related harms in college: Evaluation of the "A Matter of Degree" program." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 27:187–196. Holder HD, Gruenewald PJ, Ponicki WR, Treno AJ, Grube JW, Saltz RF, Voas RB, Reynolds R, Davis J, Sanchez L, Gaumont G, Roeper P. (2000). "Effect of community-based interventions on high-risk drinking and alcohol-related injuries." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 284(18):2341–2347. Hingson, R.W.; Zakocs, R.C.; Heeren, T.; et al. (2005). „Effects on alcohol related fatal crashes of a community based initiative to increase substance abuse treatment and reduce alcohol availability." *Injury Prevention*. 11(2):84–90.

⁵Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G. & Schulenberg, J. E. (December 11, 2007). *Overall, illicit drug use by American teens continues gradual decline in 2007*. University of Michigan News and Information Services: Ann Arbor, MI. Available: www.monitoringthefuture.org

⁶U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2007). *Traffic safety facts 2006: A compilation of motor vehicle crash data from the fatality analysis reporting system and the general estimates system*. Washington: DC. Available: <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/TSF2006FE.PDF>

⁷Winters, Ken. (2008). *Adolescent brain development and drug abuse: Research indicates that brain development is still in progress during adolescence; immature brain regions may place teenagers at elevated risk to effects of drugs*. Philadelphia: PA. Available: http://www.tresearch.org/headlines/2008Jan_TeenBrain.pdf

⁸National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2008). *Alcohol and the developing adolescent brain*. Bethesda: MD. Available: http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/NR/rdonlyres/87033E59-822F-4491-B0B5-F08C7C955588/0/NIAAA_Brain_Fact_Sheet_508.pdf.

⁹Hingson, R.; Heeren, T; Winter, M. (2006) "Age at drinking onset and alcohol dependence. Age at onset, duration, and severity." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. (160)739-746. Available: <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/160/7/739>.

¹⁰UVA Today. (2008) *New study shows reductions in serious alcohol-related consequences among college students*. Charlottesville: VA. Available: <http://www.virginia.edu/uvatoday/newsRelease.php?id=6014>.

¹¹Grant, B. F. (1998). *Alcohol Health and Research World*. "The impact of a family history of alcoholism on the relationship between age at onset of alcohol use and DSM-IV alcohol dependence: Results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey." Volume 22, Issue 2. Bethesda: MD.