

SAMPLE OP-ED

Drinking Age Debate Ignores the Facts

Recently, the issue of lowering the drinking age has received significant media attention. A group called Choose Responsibility has enlisted over 100 university and college presidents to sign on in support of a debate on the merits of the 21 year-old drinking age. For thousands of public health professionals, researchers and community and youth advocates, this announcement, dubbed the Amethyst Initiative, is troubling. Many of the arguments seem quite rational. *If one can fight for his country, why not be able to drink a beer? If we could make drinking alcohol less of a “rite of passage” maybe kids would drink less?* However, these arguments ignore the complex issues surrounding alcohol abuse and addiction.

National organizations like MADD and Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) are mobilizing to provide the facts surrounding the 21 drinking age laws. Locally, this debate provides (YOUR COALITION NAME HERE) with a golden opportunity for education. Here’s the truth. Lowering the drinking age would have detrimental consequences for youth and communities throughout the country.

Without a doubt, underage drinking, particularly on college campuses is pervasive and has major repercussions. While lowering the drinking age will remove the immediate enforcement issue on college campuses and shift this responsibility to society at large, it will not alleviate the major costs and consequences associated with alcohol abuse.

Delaying the onset of first-use of alcohol is a critical public health strategy. Science confirms that the adolescent brain is not fully developed until the early to mid-20s. In fact, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, even a “single, moderate dose of alcohol can disrupt learning more powerfully in people in their early twenties, compared to those in their late twenties.” The effects of repeated alcohol consumption during adolescence may also be long-lasting. 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.

Studies also 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. Lowering the drinking age sends the wrong message to America’s youth, and will further normalize behavior that clearly has the potential to be both dangerous and addictive.

Here’s the good news: fewer young people are drinking. In fact, in 1984 when the drinking age was 18, only 8 percent of high school seniors had never used alcohol in their lifetime. Over time, that percent of seniors has risen to 28 percent, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse’s 2007 Monitoring the Future survey.

Comprehensive, community-wide strategies are working. Coalitions are reducing underage drinking by addressing the access and availability of alcohol; changing community norms; supporting heightened enforcement; developing social marketing campaigns; and building school-community partnerships. These prevention efforts have contributed to a 21.7 percent decrease in the number of 12th grade students reporting lifetime prevalence of alcohol use between 1984 and 2007.

Many university officials are not in support of lowering the drinking age. University of Miami President and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Administration, Donna Shalala, for one, refused and questioned the rationale, citing progress has been made and lowering the drinking age would only transfer the problem to our nation's high schools. Some college leaders that signed up with Amethyst are now suggesting they were only supporting increased debate, not specific policies to reduce the drinking age.

Advocates in support of the 21 drinking age are not prohibitionists. However, we know too well that alcohol abuse and addiction endangers lives, fractures families and damages communities. In an effort to strike a reasonable balance between our culture and these realities, community and public health advocates remain strongly in support of keeping the legal age at 21.

The prevention field has made major strides in reducing underage drinking in recent years. The 21 drinking age is part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce traffic fatalities, delay the onset of initial drinking and make communities safer. Now is not the time to retreat; instead, prevention efforts need to be redoubled.