



## State Minimum Legal Drinking Age Laws and Impaired Driving Policies Save Lives

Enacting and enforcing state minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) laws and impaired-driving policies reduces alcohol-related fatal crashes among young drivers. A study published in *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* provides support for all states to implement such laws. The research also underscores the continued need for community coalitions to focus efforts on advocating and enforcing state MLDA laws, to enact local related policy and to strengthen existing state laws.

### How did they do it?

Researchers used data gathered from 1982 to 2004 by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Westlaw database and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety database on licensing systems. They analyzed the effects of 10 laws—six specific to underage drinking and four general impaired-driving and traffic safety law—on alcohol-related fatal crashes among people age 20 and younger in the United States. A model was created and tested to determine the relationship between the laws and reported fatal crash incidence rates in each state for those age 20 and younger.

### What did they find?

Among the six underage drinking laws, the researchers found that four types of laws (possession, purchase, use and lose and zero tolerance) save a substantial number of lives among those age 20 and younger each year. This finding indicates such laws help to decrease the percentage of young drivers who lose their lives on the road while under the influence of alcohol.

More specifically, possession and purchase laws led to 16 percent reductions, and use and lose and zero tolerance laws each resulted in a 5 percent reduction of fatal crashes among young drivers. The researchers estimated that, used in combination, these laws save approximately 864 young lives each year.

In addition to the positive effects of the underage drinking laws, three of the four impaired-driving and traffic safety laws that apply to all drivers also significantly reduced traffic crash fatalities among young people. Seat belt laws, administrative license revocation and 0.08 Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) per se laws all contributed to saving young lives each year.

**Source:** Fell JC, Fisher DA, Voas RB, Blackman K, Tippetts AS (2009) The impact of underage drinking laws on alcohol-related fatal crashes of young drivers. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 33(7): 1208-1219.

### What Coalitions Can Do

- ✓ **Work closely with and support your local law enforcement to enforce the MLDA laws in your community—** While the core MLDA laws (purchase and possession) exist in all states, additional laws have not been adopted universally and when they are enacted, their strength and enforcement vary. This and past research continues to demonstrate that a variety of MLDA laws are proven effective in reducing young alcohol-related vehicle fatalities and therefore must be enforced. Research the MLDA laws in your state as well as any supporting laws enacted at the local level and determine if they are being enforced effectively. Work in partnership with law enforcement to close any gaps. Enforcement needs to be consistent and highly visible to be effective.
- ✓ **Increase awareness about the MLDA laws for young people in your community—** Many young people may not be aware of all of the laws related to underage drinking in their state and community. Coalitions can work with young people as well as local media to create and sustain awareness of the community laws and regulations and publicize and make visible the enforcement around the issue. It is important to create the norm among young people that penalties are certain if they break the law.
- ✓ **Work to enact policy locally to address loopholes in your state laws—** Advocate for ordinances that limit access and availability of alcohol to young people in your community. For example, some might include creating noise ordinances to address underage drinking parties or limit the hours establishments can sell alcohol when they have consistently sold to minors and failed compliance checks. Find out what other communities have done and use their ordinances to help inform policy change in your local jurisdiction.

#### Additional Resources:

Visit the Alcohol Policy Information System (APIS) Web site (<http://www.alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/>) to get detailed information on a wide variety of alcohol-related policies in the United States at both state and federal levels.

For more information about alcohol control policy, visit the Alcohol Epidemiology Program (AEP) Web site ([www.epi.umn.edu/alcohol](http://www.epi.umn.edu/alcohol)). Its mission is to discover effective community and policy interventions to reduce alcohol-related social and health problems.