

The legal drinking age: science vs. ideology essay sample

[Food & Diet](#), [Alcohol](#)



Underlying minimum age legislation are the assumptions of American prohibitionism: alcohol consumption is undesirable and dangerous; it typically results in problem behavior; and drinking in any degree is equally undesirable because moderate social drinking is the forerunner of chronic inebriation. Naturally, young people, if not everyone, should be protected from alcohol, according to this view.

However, following the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933, prohibition efforts have largely been age-specific. While repeal abolished Prohibition in general, prohibitionists have tried to maintain their hold over young people. “ The youngest age group is . . . chosen as a symbolic gesture because of its political impotence and because . . . there are not major economic consequences . . .” And there have been no political consequences; young people tend not to vote or otherwise hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Neo-prohibitionists of today typically argue that raising the drinking age to 21 has been beneficial. However, the evidence suggests a different story. For example, a study of a large sample of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 in Massachusetts and New York after Massachusetts raised its drinking age revealed that the average, self-reported daily alcohol consumption in Massachusetts did not decline in comparison with New York.

Comparison of college students attending schools in states that had maintained, for a period of at least ten years, a minimum drinking age of 21 with those in states that had similarly maintained minimum drinking ages below 21 revealed few differences in drinking problems. A study of all 50

states and the District of Columbia found “ a positive relationship between the purchase age and single-vehicle fatalities.” Thus, single-vehicle fatalities were found to be more frequent in those states with high purchase ages.

Comparisons of drinking before and after the passage of raised minimum age legislation have generally revealed little impact upon behavior. For example, a study that examined college students’ drinking behavior before and after an increase in the minimum legal drinking age from 18 to 19 in New York State found the law to have no impact on under-age students’ consumption rates, intoxication, drinking attitudes or drinking problems.

These findings were corroborated by other researchers at a different college in the same state. A similar study at Texas A & M University examined the impact of an increase in consumption or alcohol problems among under-age students. However, there was a significant increase among such students in attendance at events where alcohol was present. There were also significant increases in the frequency of their requests to legal-age students to provide alcohol and in their receipt of illicit alcohol from legal-age students.

A longitudinal study of the effect of a one-year increase of the drinking age in the province of Ontario found that it had a minimum effect on consumption among 18-and 19-year-old high school students and none among those who drank once a week or more. A similar study was conducted among college students in the State University System of Florida to examine their behavior before and after an increase in the drinking age from 19 to 21. While there was a general trend toward reduced consumption of alcohol

after the change in law, alcohol-related problems increased significantly. Surveys at Arizona State University before and after that state raised the legal drinking age from 19 to 21 found no reduction in alcohol consumption.

Finally, an examination of East Carolina University students' intentions regarding their behavior following passage of the 21-year-age drinking law revealed that only 6% intended to stop drinking, 70% planned to change their drinking location, 21% expected to use a false or borrowed identification to obtain alcohol and 22% intended to use other drugs. Anecdotal statements by students indicated the belief of some that it " might be easier to hide a little pot in my room than a six pack of beer."

Over the past four decades it has been demonstrated that the proportion of collegiate drinkers increases with age. However, in July of 1987, the minimum purchase age became 21 in all states. Because drinking tends to be highly valued among collegians and because it is now illegal for those under 21 to purchase alcohol, Dr. Ruth Engs and I hypothesized that reactance motivation would be stimulated among such students, leading more of them to drink. The data from 3, 375 students at 56 colleges across the country revealed that, after the legislation, significantly more under-age students drank compared to those of legal age. Thus, the increase in purchase age appears to have been not only ineffective but actually counter-productive, at least in the short run.

The prohibitionists and their current neo-prohibitionists counterparts are clearly wrong in their assumptions. Drinking in moderation is neither

undesirable nor dangerous but is actually associated with better health and greater longevity than is either abstention or heavy drinking. In short it is not bad but good and healthful. And drinking does not typically result in problem behavior. Similarly, moderate drinking is clearly not a forerunner of inebriation. To the contrary, the vast majority of drinkers enjoy the benefits of alcohol and never become problem drinkers.

People become responsible by being properly taught, given responsibility, and then held accountable for their actions. We don't tell young people to "just say no" to driving, fail to teach them to drive, and then on their 18th birthday give them drivers licenses and turn them loose on the road. But this is the logic we follow for beverage alcohol because neo-prohibitionism underlies our alcohol policy. Its time for our alcohol policy to be based on science rather than ideology.