

Lowering the Minimum Legal Drinking Age

By Matthew Gever and Melissa Savage

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Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers; nearly 3,500 teens between the ages of 15 and 20 died and approximately 272,000 were injured in 2006. Nearly one-third of the teenagers involved in these fatal crashes had been drinking, despite the fact that the minimum legal drinking age in all states is 21. Twenty-five percent had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08 or higher, and another 6 percent had a BAC of between 0.01 and 0.07. These percentages were even higher, however, during the 1970s and 1980s, when the minimum legal drinking age in many states was lower than age 21.

In 1984, Congress enacted the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, requiring states to adopt 21 as the minimum legal drinking age or have certain federal highway construction funding withheld. Since 1988, the minimum legal drinking age has been 21 in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Some states have considered lowering the minimum legal drinking age.

State Action During the last few years, some state legislatures have considered legislation to lower the minimum legal drinking age. In 2007, New Hampshire considered a bill to lower the drinking age to 18. In 2008, the Minnesota Legislature debated a bill that would have allowed those over age 18 to consume alcohol in bars and restaurants. Kentucky, South Carolina and Wisconsin considered legislation that would have allowed military personnel over age 18 to drink alcohol. Vermont established a special committee to study the issue.

Proponents of lowering the minimum legal drinking age argue that the 21 legal drinking age is not followed and is unenforceable. Some also believe its unintended consequences include an increase in binge drinking among those under age 21, especially college students.

Minimum legal drinking age laws save lives.

In July 2008, a group of college presidents joined a campaign—the Amethyst Initiative—to spur conversation about the minimum legal drinking age. The campaign seeks to start a national discussion about whether setting 21 as the minimum age is the best way to reduce alcohol misuse and binge drinking that many colleges and

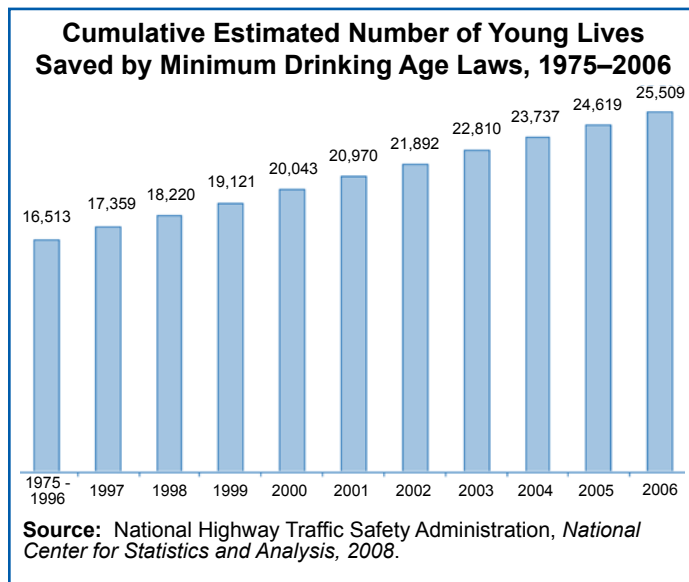
Young Driver Involvement in Fatal Crashes in 2005, Ages 15 to 20

Young drivers:

- Represented 6 percent of all licensed drivers;
- Accounted for 13 percent of all drivers involved in fatal crashes; and
- Accounted for 11 percent of all alcohol-involved drivers in fatal crashes.

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Traffic Safety Facts, Young Drivers*, 2005.

universities face and whether maintaining the minimum legal drinking age at 21 helps or hinders responsible drinking.



The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) maintains that minimum drinking age laws have saved more than 25,000 lives by reducing the number of impaired teen driving crashes. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s showed significant increases in alcohol-related crashes involving drivers between the ages of 18 and 20 in states that lowered their drinking age after the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971. Following enactment of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act in 1984 and nationwide adoption of the minimum legal

Minimum drinking age laws delay early alcohol use.

drinking age, alcohol-related crashes among young drivers again declined. Studies by the Centers for Disease Control and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety support these findings.

Between 1982 and 1998, fatal crashes involving impaired drivers age 20 and younger decreased by 59 percent, and minimum legal drinking age laws correlated with this decline. Moreover, these laws have continued to save lives, in part because they delay the early onset of alcohol use. According to NHTSA estimates, minimum legal drinking age laws save approximately 900 lives each year in traffic fatalities.

Some argue the minimum legal drinking age should be lowered, since those over age 18 no longer are considered minors, can smoke tobacco, vote and serve in the military. Opponents say other rights and privileges are not granted until later, with good reason. A candidate for Congress, for example, must be age 25.

Some rights and privileges are not granted at age 18.

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