



## Debate on lower drinking age bubbling up

Proponents say current restriction drives teen alcohol use underground

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**MSNBC**

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Over the strong objection of federal safety officials, a quiet movement to lower the legal drinking age to 18 is taking root as advocates argue that teenagers who are allowed to vote and fight for their country should also be able to enjoy a beer or two.

The proposal, which is the subject of a national petition drive by the National Youth Rights Association, has been studied in a handful of states in recent years, including Florida, Wisconsin, Vermont and Missouri, where supporters are pushing a ballot initiative.

Opponents of the idea point to a reported rise in binge drinking as [teenagers increasingly turn to hard liquor](#) as proof that minors should not be allowed to drink, but proponents look at the same data and draw the opposite conclusion.

"Raising the drinking age to 21 was passed with the very best of intentions, but it's had the very worst of outcomes," said David J. Hanson, an alcohol policy expert at the State University of New York-Potsdam. "Just like during national Prohibition, the law has pushed and forced underage drinking and youthful drinking underground, where we have no control over it."

But Mark Rosenker, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, countered: "Why would we repeal or weaken laws that save lives? It doesn't make sense."

### Different laws in different states

As it happens, there is no such thing as a "federal legal drinking age." Many states allow minors to drink alcohol — some of them without restriction, others under certain circumstances, such as the presence of a parent or other guardian.

The phrase refers instead to a patchwork of state laws adopted in the mid-1980s under pressure from Congress, which threatened in 1984 to withhold 10 percent of federal highway funds from states that did not prohibit selling alcohol to those under the age of 21. By 1988, all 50 states had complied.

Libertarian groups and some conservative economic foundations, seeing the age limits as having been extorted by Washington, have long championed lowering the drinking age. But in recent years, many academics and non-partisan policy groups have joined their cause for a different reason: The age restriction does not work, they say. Drinking has gone on behind closed doors and underground, where responsible adults cannot keep an eye on it.

"It does not reduce drinking. It has simply put young adults at greater risk," said John M. McCardell, former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, who this year set up a non-profit organization called Choose Responsibility to push for a lower drinking age.

McCardell offers what he calls a simple challenge:

"The law was changed in 1984, and the law had a very specific purpose, and that was to prohibit drinking among those under the age of 21," he said. "The only way to measure the success of that law is to ask ourselves whether, 23 years later, those under 21 are not drinking."

So are they?

The federal government's National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that in 2005, the most recent year for which complete figures are available, 85 percent of 20-year-old Americans reported that they had used alcohol. Two out of five said they had binged — that is, consumed five or more drinks at one time — within the previous month.

"The evidence is very clear," McCardell said. "It has had no effect."

James C. Fell, a former federal highway safety administrator who is a senior researcher on alcohol policy with the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, acknowledged that "it's not a perfect law. It doesn't totally prevent underage drinking."

But Fell said the age restriction “does save lives. We have the evidence.”

### **Lower deaths rates disputed**

The evidence, widely touted by Rosenker of the NTSB, Mothers Against Drunk Driving and other activist groups, rests in a study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA, which estimated that from 1975 to 2003, higher drinking ages saved 22,798 lives on America’s roadways.

“Twenty-five thousand lives is a lot of people to set aside when you’re looking at a current problem,” said Brian Demers, a 20-year-old student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is a member of MADD’s board of directors.

That figure is disputed by proponents of lowering the drinking age. They have questioned the NHTSA study, which did not explain how it arrived at its estimate. Moreover, it counted any accident as “alcohol-related” if any participant was legally drunk — including victims who may not have been responsible for the accident.

“The methodology used has been widely criticized by scholars,” said Hanson, of SUNY-Potsdam, who called the report “really more of a guesstimate” that showed only a correlation of numbers, not a causal relationship. In fact, he said, alcohol-related traffic fatalities among minor drivers were already declining before 1984, when the drinking-age measure was passed.

Barrett Seaman, author of “Binge: What Your College Student Won’t Tell You,” echoed Hanson’s assessment, saying, “Those statistics are a little suspicious.”

Even so, Rosenker said Tuesday, alcohol is still the leading cause of death among teenagers in highway crashes.

“The data show that when teens drink and drive they are highly unlikely to use seat belts,” he said. “These are the facts, and it would be a serious mistake and a national tragedy to weaken existing drinking age laws.”

### **Adults ‘written out of the equation’**

To McCardell, however, the real problem is that we are not teaching teenagers how to drink responsibly.

Choose Responsibility proposes lowering the drinking age to 18, but only in conjunction with “drinking licenses,” similar to driver’s licenses, mandating alcohol education for those ages 18 to 21.

“Education works,” McCardell said, but “it’s never been tried. Now it’s mandatory only after you’ve been convicted of DUI. That is not an act of genius.”

Choose Responsibility and its allies face a tough task convincing the public. In a Gallup poll released last week, 77 percent of Americans opposed lowering the drinking age to 18. But Seaman argued that it was the wisdom of the drinker that mattered, not his or her age.

“The problem we have is that since the 21-year-old age limit has been in effect, we have effectively written adults out of the equation, so that they really have nothing to do with young people who are drinking alcohol furtively, viewing alcohol as a forbidden fruit and drinking to excesses that I don’t think were evident back in the years before the law was passed,” said Seaman, who lived on the campuses of 12 U.S. and Canadian colleges while researching his book.

“If you lower that drinking age — make drinking no longer a forbidden fruit but rather something that younger adults do with older adults who have learned how to handle alcohol responsibly — then you reduce those behaviors rather than increase them,” he said.

*Ron Allen of NBC News and Tamron Hall and Monica Novotny of MSNBC contributed to this report.*

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MSNBC.com's Alex Johnson reports. Making the American drinking age 18. 10 November 2009 Â·

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